

What Kansas Means to Me: Themes for discussion

Kansas is iconic as a state of the union, whether seen positively or negatively, it is SEEN. What other state has “Home on the Range,” with America’s plaintive cry: “Oh, give me a home ...” What other state has a citizen as loyal as Dorothy Gale, who tells the scarecrow, “There is no place like home.” We are America’s home. We are also part of Flyover Country, we are seen as “flat,” the home of hate preachers, book banners and a Board of Education that de-emphasizes the teaching of evolution. But whether for positive or negative, Kansas is one of those states that conjure up an image. The others are probably Massachusetts (liberal), Virginia (founders), Texas (big) and California (loose screws and experiments). Over time, and now we celebrate our 150th year of Statehood, we have tried to define why Kansas has this place in the nation and this place in our hearts. *What Kansas Means to Me* is an attempt to gather together what 20th Century writers have for answers for “Why?”.

History of my interest in Kansas: growing up in the 1950s, a good time to be a Kansan between the Centennials—of Territory (1854/1954) and Statehood (1861/1961). Little House on the Prairie (reissued in 1950s), Wizard of Oz copyright expired (1956), same year as film shown on TV, Inge on Broadway, Eisenhower in the White House, first Interstate Highway laid here—the best of the old Frontier.

Question: What Kansas did you grow up in--geographical, time-frame, cultural and other factors.

Start by listing our own What Kansas Means to Me. That’s what I do in the introduction to the book.

Mine: interesting history, incredible and diverse landscape, friendly people, a future based on natural resources of wind, sun, earth and water.

Introduction to WKMTM, p. 10—sets the themes of the book

Themes and passages that elucidate them:

I. Environment/Landscape:

- Davis, p. 170-172, Sky Watchers
- Ward, p. 84, Sky Mountain
- Inge, p. 157. Mountains in the way
- Wherry, p. 186, Significance among enormity
- Low, p. 234, Vastness of scale

II. Our Destiny:

- Haywood, p. 3, Identification
- Becker, p. 36, Founded for a cause
- Nevins, p. 131, Cause and determination
- Least Heat-Moon, p. 196, Kansas as test of self
p. 205, The truth of Kansas

III. Idealism: related to destiny:

Ingalls, p. 17, Essential Kansas
Goodtimes, p. 177, Inspiration
Becker, p. 31, Idealism and p. 23, Faith, idealism, equality

IV. Community, commonalities:

Eisenhower, p. 105, Hybrid vigor

V. Egalitarianism and equal opportunity:

White, p. 59, Average Kansas
White, p. 55, Social good
Clugston, p. 67, Common people
Becker, p. 24, Individualism
Day, p. 213, Banger as common man

VI. Historical moments/movements: Sense of glorious past

Eisenhower quoting White, p. 111

VII. The future of Kansas and America:

Clugston, p. 82, Call to action/inspiration
Eisenhower, p. 119, Call to action/inspiration
Menninger, p. 95, Need for Art
Nevins, p. 148, Need for Kansas

VIII. Survival:

Kenneth Porter, “Address to Kansans,” p. 101

A thematic essay using text from the final category, the future:

Next year Kansas celebrates its sesquicentennial—150 years of statehood. We’ll hold forth on the rich cultures of Prairie and Plains Indian tribes. The lore of trails: Overland Dispatch, Santa Fe, Oregon. The territorial struggles: John Brown and Abolition. The Civil War: Quantrill and Lawrence. Our blizzards, droughts, grasshoppers, fires and dust. Our railroads. Our cattle towns. Our three P’s: Prohibition, Populism and Progressivism. Our industries: agriculture, gas, oil and ranching. Our accomplishments in the air—Beech, Cessna, Amelia Earhart—and our strength on land—that first stretch of Interstate ever laid. We’ll be boasting.

But what of our future? Many writers have said that Kansas is an important state to the nation. Listen to W.G. Clugston, writing in the 1920s: “I cannot prophesy as to the ability of Kansans to solve their present economic problems and use their energies ... intelligently ... All I can say is that no people are striving more energetically, or with more confidence in themselves and their ideals; ... the histories of our era will say: *As Kansas went, so went Democracy.*”

This Kansas/America link is reflected first in a 1910 essay by Carl Becker, who wrote: “The Kansas spirit is the American spirit double distilled.” Milton Eisenhower, Dwight’s brother, then President of Kansas State University, wrote: “We are that happy mixture of town and country, agriculture and industry, which seems best suited to the maintenance of democratic attitudes. We have a state spirit which is a unique mingling of Puritan morality, Southern chivalry and Western individualism. No state is more accurately representative of America as a whole than Kansas, and none is placed in a more decisive ... center of creative compromise.” Allan Nevins wrote in 1954: “For the ordeal ahead of us we need the adventurousness and devotion to freedom that marked Kansas history ... and the toughness and courage bred by the later conflicts between an agrarian State and an industrialized nation; and ... idealism and vision ...”

These historical calls to the future are critical. They expect Kansas to remain small “d” democratic, idealistic, courageous and balanced. To be adventurous and dedicated to freedom. To rise to challenges. Kansas at its best has indeed been forward-looking, a place of moderation, compromise, equality and tolerance.

Our politicians may rail against each other, but at the end of each year’s contentious session, our legislature must unite into a single voice, what I’ve called the

“Republi-modo-crat middle,” and most often they’ve done right by the state. I hope we can celebrate forward-looking centrism in 2011. If we do, all of America will be better off learning about Kansas and the history of our future.

Another option: use the book to look at current events.

Governor Parkinson held forth in his welcome to the Symphony in the Flint Hills last June. Our admirable Governor was a bit over the top. But his invocations actually put him squarely in the tradition of honorable Kansas rhetoric.

“... tonight is no ordinary, boring night,” he began. “Tonight is a night that I can only describe as a ‘pure Kansas night.’ So, I’ve decided to do something ... different. Because I’d rather you think that I was a little crazy, than to think I was boring on a night as special as tonight.”

True, he was not boring. But he was also not different. Like many before him, he invoked our uniqueness, the “synergy that can’t exist anywhere else in the world.” He invoked diety, noting the combination of “the best of what man has to offer—talented musicians, and you pair them with the best that God has given us—the Flint Hills.” He invoked our obscurity and our pride in our obscurity: “... it’s about people on the East or West coasts not even knowing about the Flint Hills.”

In invoking our storied past, he set us against our neighbors: “It’s about the fact that 150 years ago Quantrill really did invade Lawrence and really did kill 183 innocent men, women and children because Missouri wanted us to be a slave state. ... and the Free Staters pushed them back ... It’s about the fact that ... no one here will ever forget those

raids and many of us avoid going to Missouri at all cost, if for no other reason the fear that we might accidentally spend some money there.” Luckily, the musicians from Kansas City, Missouri, played in spite of the bombast.

So how is all this rhetoric traditional? Here’s Columbia University history professor Allan Nevins, writing in 1954 about our storied past: “... the moral elements bound up in the struggle along the Kaw and the Missouri strengthened the vein of Puritanism in the Kansas character, just as the violence of the contest nurtured traits of bellicosity and extremism.” Or here’s William Least Heat-Moon: “... the two states have gotten along like the Hatfields and the McCoys, Popeye and Bluto ...”

Here’s Fran Grace, from her biography of Carry A. Nation, on our connection to diety: “Kansas had a religious culture that was steeped in a sense of divine chosenness. Kansans believed themselves morally superior to other states ...” Here’s William Allen White: “Abolitionism was more than a conviction; it was a temperamental habit.” And our uniqueness? In 1902, E.H. Abbot explained us in *The New York Outlook*: “It is the quality of piety in Kansas to thank God that you are not as other men are, beer-drinkers, shiftless, habitual lynchers, or even as these Missourians.” As for our grounding in place, Abbot ends his essay: “Even the most talkative Kansas idealist can always be found to have his idealism firmly fastened to a peg driven deep into the earth.”

Our current Governor is an idealist. He said, “It’s a night about our progressive past and knowing that whatever difficulties we have in the future we will make it to the stars.” Mark Parkinson is also as grounded as the pegs driven into the Flint Hills to

stabilize the tents where food, education, rhetoric, and finally music were brought to us
by the Symphony in the Flint Hills one “pure Kansas night” in June 2010.