

Why Nebraskans Are The Way They Are

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Nebraska is located on the North American steppe – the largest prairie on earth. The state begins at the west bank of the Missouri River, and fills the space between the Black Hills of South Dakota and the geographical center of the contiguous states, near Smith Center, Kansas. It was at the very heart of the 19th Century Frontier of the Cowboy and Indians Days. This is United States Senator J. Benjamin Nelson's home.

Suddenly thrust into the spotlight by Senator Nelson's Senatorial manipulations over the proposed Health-care Bill, Nebraska is a hot topic even among those who have no idea where it is. At this writing, thirteen Republican State Attorney Generals have threatened to sue the Federal Government over the constitutionality of Nelson's Pork Barrel gift to Nebraska bought at the expense of Public Option and Women's Health. Who are these Americans that voted Senator Nelson into office?

They came from northern Europe in the first waves of immigration during the late 19th century. North America called them Pioneers or Settlers as if they were a single group, but in reality the immigrants were from many different ethnic cultures. Sixty percent of them were German – 40% of Nebraskans claim German descent today. There were others as well: Bohemian, British, Dutch, French, Irish, Jews, Norwegian, Scots, Spanish and Swedish to name a few; southern Europeans arrived during the early 20th century with the second wave of immigration.

These northern Europeans found refuge in America for different reasons. Some were looking for freedom of religion; others were avoiding punitive military drafts, while the majority were simply seeking their fortunes. Most had no choice as Europe dumped their unwanted people – thieves, beggars, poor and abandoned women and children – onto the New World, along with their Second Sons, who would not be inheriting their family fortune. The greater mass came from the cities, the smaller number of emigrant farmers knew nothing about the ecological systems of the prairies of America. All – except the Jews – were Christian; most were Protestants. The immigrants settled in isolating clumps of different cultures so that today, towns all across the plains including those in Nebraska can yet be identified by their country of origin, although few, if any, of their citizens still speak the mother tongue. Both single women and orphans were shipped out by the trainloads to the prairies to help populate this sparse land.

History reports that many settlers committed suicide in reaction to the wide-open, endless horizon that characterizes the prairie. The men declared these diverse grass and wetlands a desert, but in truth, because of its ecological symbiosis and fragility the steppe is the “Rainforest of North America.” The women came in covered wagons with two books: The Holy Bible and Pilgrims Progress (a Biblical study guide), and if they could, they brought a parlor pump organ. These women wrote an awful lot of diaries.

It was an unfriendly environment for them all. Not only did the immigrants have to contend with angry, hostile and starving Indians who, with U.S. approval, were being robbed and then systematically exterminated or forced into assimilation by the Federal Government with enthusiastic cooperation from the Christian churches, but also there was the land itself. Feast or famine for the novice, the weather brought hail, floods, tornadoes, drought, blizzards and endless winds. Then there were the Rocky Mountain Locusts, misidentified as Grasshoppers by these predominately uneducated Europeans with little farming experience. The first dust storm in Nebraska occurred in 1875, a quarter-century after the prairie was massively plowed. Many people starved to death.

This is abuse. Physically, emotionally and intellectually, the immigrants were first cheated by European-derived, American “free market” speculators then battered by their new environment which they sought to subdue and control, citing Scriptural references as justification for their own abusive actions in return. Almost all of Euro-America started this way in the New World.

The High Plains is called the Heartland for a reason. Isolated by distance from the coasts, the western prairie has been the least affected by the changes that swept the birthing of the new nation and the influx of many different cultures. Slavery touched it briefly until the Kansas/Nebraska Act of 1854, when Nebraska was apportioned as a non-slave and Kansas a slave territory; but Nebraska had sold slaves in 1860, and tolerated the Klu Klux Klan after the Civil War, publicly lynching, in 1919, a black man *and the mayor* of Omaha in the state’s largest city. The Southern influence still touches the edges of local speech, while “Midwestern Nice” is second only to Southern Hospitality in its ability to put a mask upon reality. The Heartland reflects the epitome of the American Dream as well as the national tragedies.

Nebraska has always prided itself on education. It set aside vast acreage in each county for school lands, so much so that the political manipulation over unused school lands was hotly debated for years. The actual courses of instruction that followed were as four-squared as the prairie’s church hymns and social dances. Starting with the fabled McGuffey Readers, Nebraska children learned “their ABC’s” by rote, with classical literature, mythology and Bible verses thrown in for good measure, selected portions to be memorized. Strict discipline was enforced, as corporal punishment was not abolished in the public schools until 1988; for generations, one learned to read and become a true believer in both the Christian god and the American political system to the tune of the Hickory Stick.

Nebraska elections produced Illinois-born Democrat William Jennings Bryan, Congressman and Senator, who served as Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson and ran for President three times. Bryan became famous with his 1896 “Cross of Gold” speech against the gold standard and the 1925 Scopes “Monkey Trial” against evolution. It is not the first time an outsider became more native than the natives. From the beginning, Nebraska was making a name for itself by mixing religion and politics.

In a region that had always been forced by its location to “make do until the parts came,” Nebraskans were austere in their approach to life. It is the only state that has a non-partisan, Unicameral Legislature instead of the Federalism model of the U.S. Constitution, adopted because it saves money and makes leg-

islative proceedings a bit more transparent by focusing on individuals rather than a party. Another example of saving money is Nebraska's rejection of high tech voting: it has always used paper ballots.

Nebraska's Governors and Congressional delegations reflect the historic right-centrist bipartisanship of both Democrats and Republicans that has prevailed in the U.S. since World War II. Everyday Republican, Nebraska voters insist on representation of the minority voice. During the early 1980's both the Governor and the two U.S. Senators were Democrats while the House Representatives were all Republican, and since 1992 Nebraska's Unicameral has allowed the state's five electoral votes to be split, which occurred for the first time in 2008 when Nebraska's most populous Congressional district (Omaha), represented by a re-elected Republican, voted for Barack Obama.

In a state where farmers and ranchers habitually never have a good year – some bad years are worse than others – money is always tight. Minimal funds were spent in fundamental construction and little on repairs, but unlike Missouri and other Southern states, both sides of the roads were paved, many originally with bricks. Most of the state's early buildings crumbled under poor design, cheap structure and hard weathering. Yet Nebraska is the only state with 100% public power – yes, socialist ownership – fueled by Wyoming coal, hydroelectric generation and two nuclear power plants, because Nebraska's consumer/voters, ever frugal and pragmatic, sometimes recognize that collectivism is cheaper than capitalism.

Nebraskans pride themselves on the myth of the “self-made individual” and condemn those who ask for help as frauds and cheats. The local bureaucrats are notorious for guarding the state's monies as if their own. One town even boasted about giving back monies to the state appropriated to them for cultural arts, since they did not need all of it.

The dust storms of the 1930s hit Nebraska hard. Those that could fled to California. The rest hunkered down and waited out the disaster as best they could. Poverty was severe. Economic abuse leaves lasting scars for generations.

After World War II the economy grew rapidly in the Heartlands, and with it came big industry, transportation (Union Pacific) and agribusiness (Cargill, the nation's largest), insurance (Physicians and Mutual of Omaha) and telecommunications. Omaha is the nation's sixth largest health care training center, much of it provided by the land-grant University of Nebraska and the Jesuit Creighton University, one of the nation's top Catholic schools. Omaha, where President Bush took cover during 9-11, is the home of Offutt Air Force Base and Stratcom, the former Strategic Air Command of the Cold War era.

Eventually the corporations took away the family farms, leaving the land to be mined of what nutrients were left. Chemicals were poured on clay – during the 1930's the topsoil was whisked to the Atlantic Ocean – to grow genetically engineered mono-crops, that were not nutritious enough to feed people but could be fed to cows and hogs. This was followed with the boom of industrial agriculture, as industrial soy and corn for ethanol took over the land. More petro-chemicals to kill the weeds were dumped on the earth, polluting the ground water even further. Trees planted to counteract the dust storms were plowed under so that the huge industrial combines could harvest even more. Feed lots came about as cattle and pigs were overcrowded into unsanitary conditions, literally living in their own urine and feces and then shot full of antibiotics so they could be sold as food for people.

Still, Nebraska is the nation's #1 beef state, and also #1 in pivot irrigation, which shoots water into the air, 90% of which never reaches the ground – cheaper than installing irrigation pipes to bring water to a land that never should have been plowed.

Democratic U.S. Senator Ben Nelson comes from McCook, situated in southwest Nebraska on the Republican River, population 7,436 as of July, 2008. A lawyer by profession, he was the State Insurance Commissioner before becoming, like Democrat Robert Kerry before him, a two-term Governor and presently a two-term Senator. Polls show that Nebraskans favor Single Payer Health Care by a healthy majority. Yet Senator Nelson has embarrassed Nebraskans by seeking special favors for them in order to get his vote, which endorsed a plan most Nebraskans do not want.

Nelson also played “kingpin” with the Obama economic stimulus package, again claiming, as he did with healthcare, that it cost too much, something that Nebraskans care deeply about. However, Nelson didn’t raise the issue of cost regarding either the Afghanistan or Iraq wars, which he has embraced. During Nelson’s earlier terms as Democratic Governor he did not object to secrecy – a trait he shares with George W. Bush’s later Republican Administration. The erosion of civil liberties and loss of Habeas Corpus through Nelson’s support of the Patriot Act was accepted by Nebraskans, whether Democratic or Republican, because they “support our troops” yet have left many voters deeply troubled.

Nelson’s official behavior and voting record demonstrates his vanity and opportunism as well as his political savvy at exploiting Nebraska’s reluctance to challenge authority. Unlike former U.S. Senator Chuck Hagel, a Republican (and former co-owner of the Diebold voting machines company) who became so disenchanted with Congress and the wars that he retired from public life, J. Benjamin Nelson relishes the role. Nelson deals both in front of the press and apparently, under the table, seemingly without regard to either principle or consequence. A Heartland state that prizes individualism and “being nice” does not like to be embarrassed nationally. Senator Nelson was re-elected by 64% of the voters in 2006. A December 2009 poll, however, found his approval rating dropping to 40%; Nelson may very well find Nebraskans care more about their own healthcare over his potentially unconstitutional favors to the state’s coffers.

This overview of Nebraskan history is the kind not mentioned in history books; the other 49 states have similar histories. The abusive behavior brought by (and done to) the immigrants was practiced first upon their own Euro-American family members, and then upon everyone else including the Aborigines of the “new” land. It is this “original sin” of abuse that causes Americans to vote such rigid, money-grubbing scoundrels continually into public office. It is also the basis of the United States foreign policy from Colonial days to 2010. Until we, as a nation, are willing to face up to the true history of our country, we are fated to repeat our mistakes and then victimize and punish our citizenry for making them. It is time to break the hickory stick mentality and tell the truth to each other. If South Africans can do it, so can Americans. Perhaps then, we can learn to bite the bullet, elect young educated men and women who are willing to take the risk of change to resolve the potentially crushing problems of the 21st century. It is a far better use of our youth than sending them endlessly overseas to die in unwanted wars for oil.

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The Omaha Tribal Historical Research Project, Inc. (OTHRP) is a multicultural, non-profit organization that serves the Omaha Tribe of Nebraska and Iowa as the cultural authority of the tribe in perpetuity by Tribal Council Resolution. OTHRP helped write the Nebraska Law on Repatriation of Sacred Artifacts and Human Remains (Nebraska Unmarked Burial Sites and Skeletal Remains Protection Act, 1989), which became the basis for the Federal Law known as NAGPRA, (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990). OTHRP is situated upon the Omaha Indian Reservation in both rural Walthill and Rosalie, Nebraska. OTHRP can be found at <<http://www.jackalopearts.org>>.