
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



Athens on the Plains

Vachel Lindsay was a poet who, a hundred years ago, gave us a book about walking across Kansas. I introduced you to Lindsay in my last column. Now, I'd like to tell you about the central idea in this walking poet's philosophy, something he called "The New Localism."

Lindsay walked from Illinois to New Mexico, and all along the way he handed out a one-page tract that summed up his philosophy. Even though he had temporarily taken up life on the road, Lindsay said that eventually we should return to our homes and use the lessons we had learned to improve our lot — and that of our neighbors.

"The things most worthwhile are one's own hearth and neighborhood," Lindsay's tract proclaims.

We should make our own homes and neighborhoods "the most democratic, the most beautiful," Lindsay urged. "The children now growing up should become devout gardeners or architects or park architects or teachers of dancing in the Greek spirit or musicians or novelists or poets or story-writers or craftsmen or wood-carvers or dramatists or actors or singers. They should find their talent and nurse it industriously."

The italics are mine, for this is what I believe as well.

In his 1914 book, Lindsay described Emporia as the "Athens of America," a place of education and art and democracy. I rather like the phrase — and can imagine our brand of learning spreading, like a prairie fire, across the plains.

Now, I haven't walked across Kansas — at least not yet — but I think I know the state and her people well. Like many, I'm not a native Kansan, but I did go to school at Pittsburg State and the University of Kansas, and I've always been captivated by the variety and beauty of our landscape.

Lindsay, too, knew Kansas.

"I have mounted a little hill on what was otherwise a level and seemingly uninhabited universe," Lindsay wrote, "and traced, away to the left, the creeping Arkansas, its course marked by the cottonwoods, that became like tufts of grass on its far borders."

One of my favorite Kansas landscapes is the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve near Strong City, known locally as the Z-Bar Ranch. The 11,000-acre preserve protects one of the last remnants

of the North American tallgrass prairie, which was all but plowed under by the time Lindsay made his walk. The preserve is also one of the few places where you can see bison — the American buffalo, the state animal — in their natural habitat.

Here, looking at vistas so broad and so removed from modern civilization, one can imagine the first Kansans — paleo indians whose names are unknown to us, but who left their calling cards all across the state in the form of stone projectile points — staring in awe at similar landscapes.

A few years before the preserve was established, another writer I admire came to the Flint Hills. His name is William Least Heat-Moon and he lived and wrote and sometimes walked in Chase County.

"There are several ways not to walk in the prairie, and one of them is with your eye on a far goal, because you then begin to believe you're not closing the distance any more than you would with a mirage," Heat-Moon wrote. "I was hiking in a chamber of absences where the near was the same as the far... Before me lay the Kansas of popular conception from Coronado on — that place you have to get through, that purgatory of mileage."

But Heat-Moon kept his eyes on the far goal and, in 1991, produced a book (of which only a small part is about walking) called "PrairyErth." It's a masterpiece of personal observation, history and culture.

Lindsay and Heat-Moon are wildly different writers, and were Kansans only temporarily — Lindsay returned to Illinois and Heat-Moon to his native Missouri — but both have enriched the Kansas experience by finding their talent and nursing it industriously.

The Kansas landscape produces people of a unique character — modest, hard-working, but sometimes afraid to keep an eye on the horizon for fear, perhaps, of suffering from the purgatory of mileage. But we must sometimes look up from our feet to glimpse the far blue rim of the horizon, if only to get our bearings.

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