
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



A Landscape of Character

There's something about the Kansas landscape that shapes character. Just take a walk in the Flint Hills, and you'll see what I mean.

Depending on the time of year, you might be comforted by rolling waves of grass; humbled by the stark beauty of a winter landscape; or inspired by the spring burn, when tongues of fire writhe across the hillsides, making possible a season of rebirth.

Because it's the month we set aside to celebrate the birth of Kansas, I've been thinking a lot lately about how we change the land — and the land changes us. Kansas became a state on Jan. 29, 1861, but the natural forces that have shaped our state have been at work for geologic ages, and have resulted in a landscape that is unique in all the world.

I live and work at the edge of the Flint Hills, an area that was first named by explorer Zebulon Pike in 1806. It is a rugged landscape and a favorite of artists and poets, and I'd like to tell you about one of them.

A hundred years ago, a 32-year-old poet and self-proclaimed foolish mendicant named Vachel Lindsay walked across Kansas and published a book about the adventure. Lindsay walked across several other states as well during his journey, which started in his Illinois hometown and finished up in the deserts of central New Mexico. But it was Kansas that stirred his imagination like no other state, and to which much of the book is devoted.

Lindsay came to know Kansas as only those who have sweated beneath her summer sun know her, or sought shelter from a sudden thunderstorm, or have with aching feet walked her dusty roads. He describes these and other familiar scenes in his 1914 book, "Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty."

"Kansas is not Kansas till we march day after day, away from the sunrise, under the blistering noon sky ... over a straight west-going road toward the sunset," Lindsay wrote. "Then we begin to have our spirits stirred by the sight of the tremendous clouds looming over the most interminable plain that ever expanded and made glorious the heart of man."

It was Lindsay who, upon nearing the Flint Hills, proclaimed, "Emporia, the Athens of America, is just ahead."

Lindsay felt that Kansas in general, and Emporia in particular,

represented the ideal America as imagined by the framers of the Constitution — a center for art and learning and a beacon for democracy. It was the kind of place, he said, where hard work went hand-in-hand with the ideals of equality, learning and spiritual growth. But, having walked from Illinois to get here, Lindsay's mind was also on practical matters.

"Oh, for a hot bath and a clean shirt!" he wrote.

He got the bath and washed his clothes at the home of Willis H. Kerr, a librarian at the Kansas State Normal School (now Emporia State University). The 1912 yearbook describes Kerr as "a rather tall, angular man ... a Scotchman by descent, A Missourian by adoption, but a Jayhawker by choice."

"He took my sudden appearance most kindly, and pardoned my battered attire and the mud to the knees," Lindsay wrote. "After a day in his house I am ready to go on, dry and feasted and warm and clean. The professor's help seemed to come in just in time. I was a most weary creature."

But Lindsay, though weary, had been walking with a purpose.

Along the way, he handed out a one-page tract that urged something he called "the New Localism." Although he had taken up a penniless life on the road, at least temporarily, he said that we shouldn't remain a gypsy forever. One should eventually return home and, having learned the lessons of the road, use them to build a better community.

Lindsay's book is remarkable in that it foreshadows by decades other books that would spring to life in American culture, from "On the Road" to "Into the Wild." But what I find most inspiring is his vision, sustained by the people and landscape of Kansas, of what the future could hold.

In my next column, continuing this Kansas theme, I'll tell you about what Lindsay called "The New Localism" — and we'll visit an author from our time who has lessons for us as well.

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