

Andrew Graybill
“What’s So Great about The Great Plains?”
September 27, 2023

I. PREFACE

- Let me begin with thanks to Kurt Kinbacher for the very kind invitation to give the Pilster Lecture; known KK for a couple of decades since we overlapped at UNL (remember even when he had a ponytail that dangled well down his back)
- Thanks also to other folks who have helped make visit possible, especially Elizabeth Chase and Courtney Kouba; very grateful for the hospitality
- Thanks, too, to the MSHS board and administrators
- Terrific to be here: visited Chadron once before, in fall 2008, on the weekend that deer season opened; but never to the Sandoz Conference, despite teaching UNL 2003-11
- Poignant to be here less than a month after Wunder memorial in Lincoln ... (not far from my mind tonight)
- Caveat: PowerPoint guru unavailable to help me; illustrate with words (like Webb)

- How many of you are familiar with Webb’s book?
- Tiny bit of background: while writing diss, adviser told me, “Look, like it or not you are a historian of the Plains. What do you have to add to WPW, DW, or EW?” Slight thrill to be mentioned in such company, even if it was challenge not compliment
- Felt affinity for Webb ever after, perhaps especially as a fellow Texan, but long wrestled with his legacy, which—as I’ll explain—is complex and alloyed
- Drawn from a retrospective I published in 2021, doubling as into to new edition from Nebraska which CCSW supported

II. INTRODUCTION

- TGP published to sweeping acclaim in 1931; NYT glowing assessment, hailing book as “one of the most original and significant” contributions to study of American West
- Scholars loved it, too: Henry Steele Commager wrote: “both its technique and its conclusions should find application to the whole field of American history”
- TGP won the 1933 Loubat Prize, presented every five years by Columbia University to best book in social sciences published during that span
- And in 1950, as US historians took stock of their field at mid-century, many marked TGP among handful of the most important books published since 1900
- Not aged well in academy; more cited than read, given its conceptual and methodological limitations, and especially its racism (about which I’ve much to say)
- Notwithstanding those considerable caveats, I’d like to make case for its continued relevance as closes in on its 100th birthday ...

III. THE BOOK ITSELF

- Famous origin story: cold rainy night in Feb. 1922 “moment of synthesis” as storm pounded on roof of modest home shared with wife while in MA program at UT
- Six-shooter, not rifle, won the West; other realizations quickly followed, leading to conclusion that distinctive environmental conditions of the Plains, so different than in the East, “have bent and molded Anglo-American life, have destroyed traditions, and have influenced institutions in a most singular manner”

- As he conceded in his memoir: “I had no proof, but I knew I was right, I had to be ... All the investigation remained to be done, but that was as nothing”
- Went to U Chicago to “seek the accursed PhD” but it was a debacle because he was so stubborn; failed first-year exams and headed home to Texas, broke and broken
- Said later he learned but one lesson in the Windy City: “don’t take an original idea into a graduate school” (he was *still* bitter about this more than two decades later; this was in a speech he delivered as the AHA President in 1955)
- Returned to UT, where he would spend the rest of his career, as grad student and prof
- Back in Austin, he resolved to “Write history as I saw it from Texas, and not as it appeared in some distant center of learning.”
- Finished a draft in five months; he recalled that he wrote the book “in a state of suppressed emotion,” since his central actors—white settlers—“had long been my people, and I sought to explain them to others”
- He remembered decades later that it was “the happiest half-year of my life” (to which I say: get a hobby, dude)
- Texas awarded him the PhD in 1932; bit like Cronon with *Nature’s Metropolis*
- Argument is simple and elegant: namely, the 98th meridian (which runs through Texas, just east of Austin) is an institutional fault line, and Anglo-Americans who settled there adapted through ingenious technological invention (six-shooter, barbed wire, windmill)
- At times, the book reads like a love letter to his forbears

IV. PROBLEMS

- Despite the lavish praise at time of publication, Webb expected criticism, and wow, did he get it, infamously
- SSRC chose Webb’s book as subject of a conference featuring a single, highly influential work (his was the third); august gathering—Harvard historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. presided; luminaries in cognate fields
- Legendary affair: SSRC commissioned review from historian Fred Shannon, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian of the Civil War; modest background (prairies of IL)
- Shannon delivered a blistering, 109(!)pp. critique (extraordinary read)
- Webb incensed; had to be reeled back in by AMS, but declared “I would not prostitute TGP by accepting the Shannon manuscript as an appraisal”
- Shannon’s critique blueprint for later critics of the book
- For one thing, FS insisted that it was derivative of secondary sources, and Webb had neglected to consult much primary material himself; Webb answered that he skimmed on the scholarly apparatus so as not to “clutter up the text”
- More than that, Shannon hated the sweeping generalizations Webb made based on intuition and experience
- Webb’s answer was coy: he said, “I have never asserted that *The Great Plains* is history ... To me it is a work of art.”
- Close friend, the folklorist J., Frank Dobie put it another way: “Webb sure doesn’t let the facts get in the way of the truth”
- Years later, insulated by all sorts of professional honors (two visits to UK, two Guggenheims) Webb confessed that he thought of the book as “an extension and explanation of what I had known firsthand in miniature, in a sense an autobiography with scholarly trimmings”
- Second major critique: what RW later termed “crude environmental determinism,”
- In other words, no room for culture or contingency

- Stiffest challenge lying in plain sight: innovations that allowed Anglo-Americans to conquer nation's midsection were pioneered elsewhere: six-shooter (Samuel Colt ... at sea); windmill in antebellum Connecticut; barbed wire ten degrees east of 98th
- Shannon less to say about most distressing matter to modern reader: racism
- Though he described Native peoples of the Plains as "by nature more ferocious, implacable, and cruel" than other tribes, embedded within that assessment was a grudging admiration for groups like the Comanches
- Much less respect for others; in book's most notorious passage, Webb—noting Pueblo Indian origins of mestizo population of the modern Southwest—writes that their blood "when compared with that of the Plains Indians, was as ditch water"
- Apologists point to his upbringing in Texas by parents who had fled Reconstruction-era Mississippi, but even some of his friends conceded the point
- One associate explained his anti-Mexican bigotry this way: "Subconsciously, [Webb] still had the Alamo-Texas Ranger myth deeply engraved," this showed up most notably in his 1935 study of the Rangers, which even Webb later admitted was wildly imbalanced
- But Webb's own protégé, Joe B. Frantz, put it most damningly: "[Webb] showed strong nativist tendencies and his views on racial matters were not exactly progressive, [and] were even a bit barbaric"
- One last bit of evidence: the prominent Mexican-American UT folklorist Americo Paredes made his peace with Dobie, but never made time for Webb (understandably)

V. STRENGTHS

- So, can this book be saved? Or as a friend who read an early draft of this essay, asked, "Why would you even bother?"
- In brief: yes, I think this book can be redeemed (... although I can surely understand how some might disagree)
- Three key attributes that underpin book's enduring reputation, starting with its sheer ambition
- As remembered by *Harper's* EIC, who commissioned many pieces from Webb: "Webb wasn't afraid to tackle big subjects. Now and then he would talk—with a mixture of sorrow, amusement, and contempt—about fledgling historians who would devote years of labor to some safe, respectable little theme ... Dr. Webb preferred subjects that offered plenty of elbow room"
- Story of the Great Plains and their absorption into the United States was spacious indeed, and even if he generalized, such was the cost of painting on so large a canvas
- He was a "big ideas" historian, in sharp contrast to Fred Shannon's "nuts and bolts" approach
- Book is truly interdisciplinary, and Webb read widely across multiple disciplines: chiefly anthropology and geography, but in the hard sciences, too, including biology and geology
- Might expect that such a book—lengthy, capacious, erudite—would be off-putting to the lay reader, but Webb wrote with such an audience in mind
- As a colleague explained: Webb wrote primarily for one person: "an imaginary Bostonian who was not a professional historian, writer, or critic, but a man of wide culture ... who could be interested in a slice of non-Bostonian history."
- Had always dreamed of being a writer; tell story of 1904 letter to *Sunny South* and William Ellery Hinds

- Had much to say about writing; in a piece for *Harper's* lamented rise of what he called "scientific history," out of which "arose the idea that a great gulf exists between truth and beauty," such that the "real scholar must choose truth, and somehow it is better if it is made so ugly that nobody could doubt its virginity" (that article wasn't published ...)
- Divided university-based historians into two camps: "those can't write, and those who can but don't"; Webb third group: "those who do," and consider writing an art
- TGP replete with sentences like these: "East of the MS civilization stood on three legs—land, water, and timber; west of the MS not one but two of those legs were withdrawn—water and timber—and civilization was left on one leg—land. It is small wonder that it toppled over in temporary failure."
- Most important: defined West in terms of aridity—settled on 98th meridian as eastern edge of the region
- Such precision in contrast to FJT, who had defined the West in 1893 as a process, a frontier that slowly moved across the continent from East to West
- Finer point in *Harper's* in 1957 article, "The American West: Perpetual Mirage" which was loathed by Westerners who took offense at "deficiency"

VI: VERDICT

- Came to see it as deeply flawed masterpiece (rare these days: GGS?)
- DW: "I know in my bones, if not always through my education, that Webb was right"
- But also Jacques Barzun and William S. McNeill
- Sells an average of 575 copies a year (more with a new cover and intro?)
- Speaks to the present: wrote against backdrop of what bonanza of 1920s, but grasped that American approach to region spelled trouble; predicted conflict over water
- Understood that the environment imposed limitations; so true in Anthropocene

Happy to take your questions ...