

The Big Empty

John C. Hudson

The “ends of the Earth” sometimes are right in the middle of things. Isolated, interior places like Tombouctou (more commonly known as Timbuktu) in Africa and Alice Springs in Australia attract tourists from all over the world who wish to see what a genuine outpost looks like. Lying roughly in the center of the continent, the Missouri Plateau is North America’s counterpart. The “Big Empty,” as the Missouri Plateau sometimes is called, has remained as exotic as any part of the forty-eight states. Although normally neglected by the public and by government policymakers, the Missouri Plateau also has been the scene of controversy, conflict, and bloodshed. As one of the largest regions included within the historic Louisiana Purchase, the Missouri Plateau has played a significant role in our interpretations of the American West.

Like most regions, the Missouri Plateau does have a few “firsts” to its credit. It contains the world’s largest coal mine (Black Thunder, near the hamlet of Wright, Wyoming) and it has some of the nation’s most popular tourist destinations (i.e., Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills). True to the “Big Empty” nickname, however, one can observe pronghorns grazing near the few stores in downtown Wright. Fifty miles away from the Black Hills, tourists are evident only when they speed past on their way to the next scenic attraction.

The first week of August is an exception to the “empty” rule. Every year at this time motorcycle aficionados from all parts of the United States converge on Sturgis, South Dakota, creating a roar that can be heard down the highways for hundreds of miles in every direction. Motel owners double their rates. Restaurants advertise “Welcome Bikers” and oblige by hiking prices and offering less-than-friendly service to the leather-clad couples, threesomes, and groups who seem oblivious to the presence of anyone who does not arrive on a Harley. The odd, lemming-like frenzy continues until the invaders, finally sated, part company with one another and noisily decamp in all directions. Local business owners tally the proceeds, knowing it will happen all over again in another year.

Most of the time, however, the Missouri Plateau is a quiet place, a land of blue skies and sunshine. Its surface is a carpet of short grass, punctuated by broken plateaus and steep slopes formed on the resistant rock formations. The scattered buttes and tablelands support a growth of ponderosa pine that offers a welcome respite from the empty look. The land surface is creased by muddy, meandering rivers of surprisingly large size—the Yellowstone, the Musselshell, the White, the Big Horn, and the Powder, as well as the Missouri itself. The “Big Muddy,” as the Missouri River has been called, winds more than a thousand miles through the plateau that bears its name.

Underground are the fossilized remains of perhaps the most interesting creatures ever to have roamed the earth—the dinosaurs, whose bones rest comfortably in the Missouri Plateau’s soft rock formations. A good dinosaur find can be worth millions of dollars to the commercial paleontologists who now work the beds constantly, searching for what some far-off group of museum sponsors will pay handsomely to acquire. Dinosaur exhibits and theme parks offering fun for children are found near the Black Hills and in scattered localities throughout the Missouri Plateau, but museums portraying more recent pasts are few and the interpretations they offer reveal as much in omission as in what they portray.

Human history in the Missouri Plateau has been the subject of nearly constant revision and debate. The most important event ever to have taken place there—as measured by the number of books written about it—was “Custer’s Last Stand.” On June 24, 1876, U.S. Army General George Armstrong Custer and some 250 of his men fell at the Battle of the Little Big Horn on what is now the Crow Indian Reservation in Big Horn County, Montana. All of the whites died in the conflict, hence no “historian” survived to relate events from the army’s perspective. Among the natives present, White Bull, Rain-in-the-Face, Flat Hip, and Big Bear all claimed they killed Custer. Nevertheless, a year after it was over, the great chief Sitting Bull stated in an interview that he never saw Custer at the battle.¹ Book after book, each telling the “true” story, has spun theories about what happened, but there is no agreement. Each new theory invites another in rebuttal.

Several years ago, I served as consultant to one of the states whose borders overlap a significant portion of the Missouri Plateau, meeting as part of a group to review the state’s history for purposes of creating a new museum display. Space had been allocated to the “twentieth century” in a new museum building in the state’s capital and our task was to select themes that should be included in the exhibit, so that anyone who visited the museum could see and appreciate significant facets of the state’s recent history.

Among the consultants were academics, cattle ranchers, public officials, Native Americans, and representatives of various business and industry groups. Most of the academics held a view of the state’s history that

came out of the textbooks they used in the classroom. Political figures (especially colorful ones), the Great Depression, farmers movements, advent of the automobile, and Prohibition were the kinds of themes they stressed. Ranchers were concerned mainly with getting their many struggles—with the land, the weather, the Indians, and the federal government—on the record. Spokespersons for the Chamber of Commerce faction urged that a positive, forward-looking view of the state's business climate should be presented. The Native Americans in the group offered dissenting opinions on all of these suggestions, although they could not agree—even among themselves—on a definite alternative.

Disagreement over what was important in history is not uncommon today, of course. In our group, the Native Americans were perhaps most up-to-date in their thinking. They insisted on examining all proposals from multiple viewpoints and questioned the meaning of even commonly accepted interpretations of the past. What happened in the Missouri Plateau during past centuries is open to the retelling by those who live there—or by anyone else. Interpretations of the past artfully displayed in the luxuriously appointed Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, contrast sharply with the meager collection of blurry photographs with hand-lettered captions offered in the one-room museum at Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

Why should there be so much disagreement over such a seemingly unimportant section of the country? Custer's Last Stand is one answer; Wounded Knee is another. Those were military battles—one victory apiece for natives and whites—and it is not surprising that opinions differ about the significance of each. But that is only the beginning of the controversies surrounding the Missouri Plateau. In 1987, Deborah Epstein Popper and Frank J. Popper published what became known as their "Buffalo Commons thesis," a sharp indictment of recent land-use history in the western Great Plains that drew heavily on the Missouri Plateau for examples of what had gone wrong. Their concluding paragraph conveys the flavor of the entire article: "By creating the Buffalo Commons, the federal government will, however belatedly, turn the social costs of space—the curse of the shortgrass immensity—to more social benefit than the unsuccessfully privatized Plains have ever offered."²

The essence of the Buffalo Commons thesis is a logical *non sequitur*—the region's population is too small; therefore it should be reduced. The "curse of the shortgrass immensity" is a salient feature of the Big Empty idea, but with the added perspective that emptiness itself is a problem. Although the Poppers' article appeared in a journal that does not cite sources, one paper they might have mentioned was A.H. Anderson's "Space as a Social Cost."³ Anderson, a rural sociologist, was one of more than a dozen rural community experts employed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, beginning in the 1930s, who conducted in-depth studies of farming communities across the country. The government's interest in

the rural community was to reveal its internal social structure—how influential leaders emerged, what kinds of voluntary organizations they favored, and how the local population responded to those leaders.

The Great Plains region was too sparsely populated for many of these community institutions to thrive. People lived so far apart that innovations such as rural electrification and telephones, then just emerging, were very expensive on a per capita basis. There were too few people to support neighborhood-sized school districts or effective township governments. Anderson, who worked on county studies in rural North Dakota and Nebraska, came to see space itself as a social cost. Or, more accurately, he believed that very low population densities require excessively high per-capita expenditures to support an infrastructure of social, economic, and political institutions.

Because they were government employees, men like Anderson carefully hedged their conclusions so as not to offend local leaders (or congressmen). Even as they wrote, the social cost of space was increasing. Population densities were declining to lower levels, local trade centers were losing their former function, and rural schools were being consolidated. The government's underlying interest in this process was to understand (and, most likely, to manipulate) the "rural community," the neighborhood-scale locality groupings of farmers and townspeople.

While it was the U.S. Department of Agriculture that most directly promoted its programs through access to rural communities, beginning with the New Deal other federal agencies had taken an interest in community-based institutions as well. The Resettlement Administration of the late 1930s promoted land-settlement schemes of farmers supposedly organized into communities. The organization of community irrigation districts in the West had a similar underlying theme. The idea that "community" was an essential part of effective land settlement is traceable to the most influential social-science theories of the time, including Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis.⁴

The Big Empty flunked the community test. Only in the early years of white settlement was there an adequate population to support all of the institutions that the local people seemed to want. Decline began within a decade of the first settlement boom in many areas, and it has continued ever since. Despite decades of population loss, the 1990s were witness to even more dramatic population decreases in parts of the Big Empty than had been seen before.

The Poppers bolstered their thesis with familiar references to ecological mistakes. The Great Plains is "an austere monument to American self-delusion." We should "treat the Plains as a distinct region and recognize its unsuitability for agriculture." Continuing in the tradition of Walter Prescott Webb, the Poppers regarded crop farmers as the worst abusers: "responding to nationally based market imperatives, they have overgrazed and overplowed the land and overdrawn the water" and "never created a

stable agriculture.” The Buffalo Commons, in contrast, would create “what all of the United States once was—a vast land mass, largely empty and unexploited.”⁵

The environmental rhetoric cannot be taken as seriously as the “empty” indictment. If the Big Empty is an abused land from the misapplication of an alien cultural and economic system, then will not the abuse be self-correcting as the aliens depart? Not in the Poppers’ assessment, because land ownership would remain in private hands. Establishment of a vast, public, land-grazing district for buffalo would not be possible under private ownership. To make the “commons” meaningful, it must be restored to the public domain. People now living there, farming and ranching on their own land (or government land), would have to be compensated and, in effect, paid to leave.

The idea is not as radical as it first appears. A similar approach was tried in Newfoundland where fishing families in the remote outports were subsidized if they moved to larger centers where new employment opportunities were envisioned. Native peoples in the Far North have been subject to depopulation policies designed to move the entire population into government-administered service centers. In the Buffalo Commons, this strategy was to be applied in reverse. Noting the native land-claims issues still pending in South Dakota, for example, the Poppers proposed that “the federal government might settle these . . . by giving or selling the tribes chunks of the new commons.”⁶

Is there any other section of the U.S. where outsiders so freely suggest that those who live there should leave? Having inhabited the shortgrass immensity for now perhaps four generations, the few tens of thousands of remaining Euro-American residents of the Big Empty are viewed as an impediment to establishing a preferable landscape that does not include them, their crops, or their livestock. They are leaving—not for the reasons the Poppers suggested they should leave, but at a faster rate than most people predicted prior to the 1990s. Of the fourteen U.S. counties that lost more than 20 percent of their population during the 1990s, six are in western North Dakota (Figure 1). More than one-third of U.S. counties experiencing a population loss in excess of 15 percent are in the Missouri Plateau. The Big Empty is living up to its name.

This latest depopulation cycle can be attributed to all of the familiar reasons, including increased size of farms, growth of off-farm employment opportunities, and the general trend toward aggregating businesses into larger units. Federal policy also has played a role. Substantial acreages of former Missouri Plateau wheat lands have been placed in the conservation reserve category. Although the farmers directly affected have been compensated for the loss in productive assets, lower land-use intensity brings changes to service-center towns, in the form of reduced demands for farm machinery, repairs, and labor. Even though the Missouri Plateau’s wheat, barley, and durum crops remain the mainstay of local

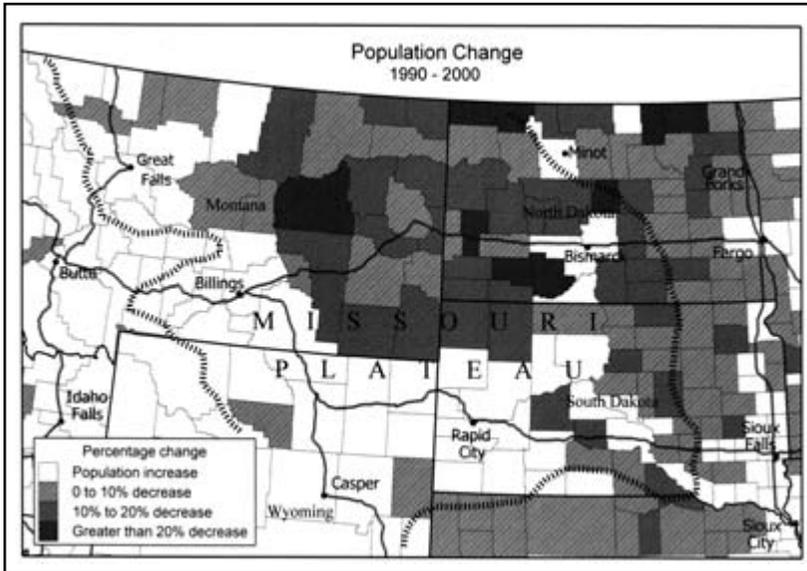


Figure 1. Population change during the decade between 1990 and 2000.

economies, they have been reduced because of federal policy changes that no longer favor the accumulation of crop surpluses.

Buying power of the American dollar versus the Canadian dollar has made it economical for American grain millers to resume their once-common practice of importing quantities of wheat from Canada. This has placed the relatively higher-cost American producers, such as those in remote areas of the Missouri Plateau, at a competitive disadvantage. Population losses accompanying these trends have affected all of the major wheat-producing areas of the Northern Great Plains. The pattern of population decline by county is thus projected eastward from the Missouri Plateau into the Red River Valley.

Just the same, three types of Missouri Plateau counties experienced population growth during the 1990s. The region's major urban centers, especially Bismarck-Mandan, Rapid City, and Billings had at least modest growth rates. Nearly all counties with mining employment (coal, oil, and gas) also experienced growth as did nearly all counties containing Indian reservations and/or significant numbers of Native Americans. Most of the other gaining counties were on the western fringes of the Missouri Plateau, where the shortgrass plains give way to mountain forests and their associated recreational amenities.

Do the recent population losses confirm the Buffalo Commons thesis? Some who left, and thus made the Big Empty even emptier, no doubt had grown tired of life on the fringes of settled territory, although perhaps no more so than those who have remained. The Missouri Plateau received most of its Euro-American population in one or two population booms,

associated with agricultural expansion in the 1880-90 or 1900-10 decades. There were no waves of urbanization or industrialization that attracted new population groups after the initial farming population had established itself. Many of those who remain today thus are the direct descendants of the only non-native people ever to have lived there and their ties to locality and region are uncommonly strong.

One thing is certain—Euro-American cultures did not forever obliterate those of the native peoples already living in the Missouri Plateau. Outside urban areas, the ratio of native people to non-natives has been rebounding steadily now for more than a generation. Dacotah/Lakota (Sioux) inhabitants of the western Dakotas have quietly observed these trends and some are now cautiously optimistic that much of the land may eventually revert to them once more, not from legal action so much as by default. Once the whites have all but deserted the place, the land will be theirs again. While this scenario is no more than a possibility today, it is a more likely future for the Big Empty than a massive federal land-buyout program to establish a grazing commons for bison.

The truths of Western history include the view that whites were victorious over the Indians. Custer—who felt the “curse of the shortgrass immensity” as keenly as any white man—was defeated, but his fame comes from just a battle and not the war. Some 125 years after Little Big Horn, the Big Empty continues to experience the long-term population decline that began in the 1920s. It is still too early to tell who won the war.

Notes

1. Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971): 282.
2. Deborah Epstein Popper and Frank J. Popper, “The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust,” *Planning* 53:12 (1987): 12-18. Also see Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper, “The Buffalo Commons: Metaphor as Method,” *Geographical Review* 89 (1999): 491-510.
3. A.H. Anderson, “Space as a Social Cost,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 32 (1950): 411-30.
4. Richard Hofstadter and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Turner and the Sociology of the Frontier* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).
5. Popper and Popper, “The Great Plains,” 18.
6. Popper and Popper, “The Great Plains,” 18.



Bayou Cocodrie National Wildlife Refuge, Louisiana. Courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.