

HISTORIC GROUND

The Ongoing Enterprise of Kansas Territorial History

by Craig Miner

Governor Lyman Humphrey of Kansas in his inaugural address in 1889 made some salient points about the continuing significance to his state and to the nation of the tumultuous history of Kansas Territory (1854–1861). Kansas, the governor said, “beautifully exemplifies in her present conditions the philosophy of De Tocqueville that the growth of states bears some marks of their origin; that the circumstances of their birth and rise affect the whole term of their being.” The events of the territorial era and how historians and the public interpreted them, he said, “have dominated and propelled [Kansas] with the gathering momentum of a falling body.” Kansas, to Humphrey, represented the “triumph of an idea.” The idealism that marked its first years was “an influence that runs like a golden thread throughout our later experience, at once charming, fascinating, and yet powerful—to which Kansas owes more than has ever been duly acknowledged.” Territorial history, he thought, “has become classic, and reads like an epic poem.”¹

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1. Lyman Humphrey, inaugural address, January 14, 1889, “Lyman Humphrey” clippings, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas, Lawrence.

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That was a mouthful, but not untypical of early and late recognition of the special significance of those initial years. Historian Leverett Spring wrote in his book *Kansas: The Prelude to the War For the Union* (1885),

An exceptional, brilliant past demands a present and a future that shall not be out of harmony or fall into anti-climax. Kansas has a significant and memorable history; the territorial struggle converted a wilderness, which had little claim upon the interest of mankind, into historic ground.²

Professional historians agreed that the territorial era had massive significance to the state, although they varied on just what it provided. Carl Becker referred to this importance of the territorial era in his oft-quoted 1910 essay “Kansas.” Like Becker, Allan Nevins, speaking at the territorial centennial conference in 1954, made Kansas a place uniquely American and therefore uniquely significant. But he saw in its history an unattractive side and warned that Kansas culture would have to mature without allowing its “rebel” regionalism to be wholly absorbed by centralist modernism. That might require especially a new spin on territorial history.³ But any rethinking would have to account for the legend that was there. University of Kansas

2. Leverett Spring, *Kansas: The Prelude to the War For the Union* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1885), 306.

3. Allan Nevins, “Ad Astra Per Aspera,” in *Kansas: The First Century*, ed. John D. Bright (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1956), 2: 503–15.

professor James C. Malin observed while reflecting on Kansas culture in 1961, "in dealing with the facts of history as differentiated from the legends about them, the observation has often been made that the legends, even though false, may themselves become causes. In the present connection, the argument would run, that although Kansas is not a child of New England, the legend about it being such operated as though the legend was true."⁴

Kansas "never wore swaddling clothes," observed the *Topeka Daily Capital* in 1882,

but kicked energetically around from the day she was born. . . . It is true she was an uncommonly robust infant, and it may be allowable to further say she sprang, Minerva-like, into existence fully armed and equipped, ready to do battle and defend herself. Certain it is that her babyhood was a rough experience, yet there are none who can say she was not benefited by it. . . . By no fault and no calculation of her own, she was thrust into the foreground, to take desperate chances. . . . In more than a figurative sense, she was the child of fate, the sport of destiny. But she was the favorite of justice, also, and truth, and righteousness; and the victory, though delayed, came to her at last.⁵

Possibly, however, we honor our territorial forebears too much and in doing so ourselves too little. Wichita, the state's largest city, in the mind of some is not truly Kansas because proslavery raiders never attacked it. Lawrence, on the other hand, smaller and not geographically or industrially central, becomes in that logic quintessential Kansas. It is as though a certain ten years of history is expanded forever. A recent news story told of experimenters who tested the proposition that Kansas is as flat as a pancake. When they expanded the pancake to the size of the state, they found ten-mile-deep chuckholes and discovered that by such logic Nepal was flatter than the pancake when the breakfast staple was bloated out of all proportion.⁶ We might well do something like that with our regional history and

4. James C. Malin, "Kansas: Some Reflections on Culture Inheritance and Originality," *Journal of the Central Mississippi Valley American Studies Association* 2 (Fall 1961): 18.

5. *Topeka Daily Capital*, January 29, 1882.

6. Mark Fonstad, William Pugatch, and Brandon Vogt, "Kansas Is Flatter Than a Pancake," *Annals of Improbable Research*, <http://www.improb.com/airchives/paperair/volume9/v9i3/kansas.html>. See also, among other newspaper accounts, Terry Rombeck, "Holy hotcakes! Study Finds Kansas Flatter than Pancake," *Lawrence Journal-World*, July 27, 2003.

thus, while seemingly studying the accurate facts, get entirely the wrong perspective.

On behalf of all subsequent academic historians of territorial Kansas, Oswald Garrison Villard wrote in the *Lawrence Journal-World* in 1914,

The modern historian is not merely a eulogist, nor is the eulogist of the past necessarily a historian. The historian is expected to enter into a subject with no preconceived ideas and no briefs for this leader or that chieftain. Calmly, quietly and logically, writing long after the event, when the white of passion had faded out, he examines all sources and applies the true historical tests, those established yardsticks by which men, their characters, their motives and their achievements must ever be measured.

History cannot be written well for payment of a fee, nor can it be a way "to bang your neighbor over the head, metaphorically speaking, with the heaviest club in your possession." The true historian, Villard said, "is but a swimmer borne along by the current of facts as he finds them, letting it take him to whatever destination it will." It was, he wrote, "the keenest intellectual joy and satisfaction" to "dig into it with all the ardor of the explorer into unknown lands."⁷ That, unquestionably, has been what the essayists in this special issue of *Kansas History* have done.

To revisit the "historic ground" of Kansas's territorial past in the twenty-first century is to discover what transformations may occur when resources of historical research and analysis of remarkable power and sophistication are applied to the seemingly well-worn topic. It is to find that however much has been written, there remains opportunity for deeply original contributions. Historians not only offer new interpretations but find new and compelling quotations, highlight previously neglected figures, track interesting lines of thought, drawing all the while from a font of primary sources that is mind-boggling if not actually inexhaustible. The sources exist partly because the era was early seen to be so important, and therefore archival repositories were especially diligent in the collection of materials while the paper trail of the pioneers was fresh.⁸ And

7. *Lawrence Journal-World*, May 13, 1914.

8. See Craig Miner, "Administering History: The Maturing of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1881-1886," *Tallgrass Essays: Papers from the Symposium in Honor of Dr. Ramon Powers*, ed. Michael H. Hoeflich, Gayle R. Davis, and Jim Hoy (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 2003), 133-44.

During territorial times Kansas was viewed by contemporaries as a hotbed of violence, “the theater of strife and tumult.” Events such as the 1856 sack of Lawrence (right) supported this theory. Although the passionate players on the Kansas stage maintained a strong sense that what was happening here was “history,” they assigned a range of meanings to these events that, as a whole, lacked the boundaries, coordination, and dignity afforded to historians today by time and hindsight. This sketch, Ruins of the Free State Hotel in Lawrence, appeared in Sara Robinson’s Kansas, Its Interior and Exterior Life.



of course the perennial issues that the study of Kansas Territory has raised—such as the proper balance between freedom and authority; the relative claims of law and morality; the place of civil disobedience; the proper uses of violence, if any; the appropriate uses of the military in domestic political disputes; the right relationship between the federal government and the territories or states; the stakes of guerrilla war; the strategies and results of terrorism; the meaning of the popular will and the mechanisms through which it is best expressed; the role of race in America; the strengths and weaknesses of democracy—are intensely relevant in our own era. Many new parallels occur to us, and many new applications arise for whatever lessons the history may teach. And it is ever more important that the lessons be authentic ones based on the best contemporary understanding of what happened and not what we wish had.

That kind of study results in complexity. This is not because scholars are making things complex. On the contrary, the best academics now are masters of responsible clarification. For the same reasons modern physicians tend to be specialists, today’s historians tend either to dive deeply into a piece of the era or some of its personalities, or to swing wider but stick closely to illuminating a single aspect, a stratum, of the historical landscape. The reason modern historical essays are complex is that reality is complex. Researchers are getting closer to it both in their col-

lection and selection of data across gender, race, politics, class, and all the other filters that once so limited perspective, and in their deft touch at communicating it with a minimum of dilution or distortion.

Territorial Kansas as it was happening was regarded by contemporaries as a welter of dangers, the “cockpit of the nation,” a “graveyard of governors,” a nursery of weird and manic figures, “the theater of strife and tumult.” Passionate players on that stage assigned a range of meanings to events, but the whole lacked the boundaries, coordination, and dignity that hindsight and time provided. There was, however, a strong sense, not equally present in any random set of passing years, that this was “history.” One reason for the strong archival documentation, in addition to materials having been saved, is that an unusual amount of material was created from a range of recorders. People who were there used letters home, diaries, or newspaper articles to record their impressions of the events and the place about which everyone was speaking.

And so in our own time are combined several factors—the passage of time that Governor Charles Robinson once said would be necessary to lend clarity to the vision of the historian; the collection, organization, and unparalleled accessibility of a rich documentary horde; interest in the regional history of Kansas, especially in its founding era, by consummate professionals, not just in the state, but around the world; and an audience of increasing sophisti-

cation, first perhaps merely on matters of “authenticity” but increasingly on the products, if not the trappings, of academic scholarship—that make this a kind of “golden age” for the writing of Kansas history. As a Plains state without obvious differentiation, this potential for a deeper understanding of state history, and consequently for a better and more realistic appreciation of the regional culture that evolved with and from it, is especially important. Regional history written at the highest level, as in this special issue of *Kansas History*, informs and stimulates in many ways beyond the organization and presentation of facts.

Doubtless the overriding intellectual and constitutional question of continued significance that the study of territorial Kansas centrally addresses is whether a republican form of government combined with a capitalist economy ultimately is appropriate and viable for humankind. “What is government itself,” wrote James Madison in *Federalist* #51, “but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?” Among the articles appearing in subsequent pages of this special issue, the essay by Nichole Etcheson, “The Great Principle of Self-Government,” addresses this question most directly, but overtones of it are found in every application of the ground covered by the other authors. It is as implicit in Mark Delahay’s attempts through his Leavenworth newspaper to teach people to accept the processes and results of democracy in an emotional and extremist atmosphere as it proved to be when officials in Washington tried to control a federal military unit attempting to break up an “illegal” rump legislature in a divided territory. These events are the focus of Rita G. Napier’s “The Hidden History of Bleeding Kansas: Leavenworth and the Formation of the Free-State Movement” and Tony R. Mullis’s “The Dispersal of the Kansas Legislature: A Look at Command and Control (C2) During Bleeding Kansas,” respectively. The Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854, the “organic” legislation for Kansas Territory, suggested that the difficult question of the existence of slavery in the new territory, as well as other knotty issues including the removal of the Indian tribes and distribution of their lands, could be solved by “popular sovereignty.” What could be simpler?

Certainly the old idea that the cure for the problems of democracy is more democracy went by the boards among historians looking at territorial Kansas at least as long ago as Roy Nichols’s classic 1948 study *The Disruption of Amer-*

ican Democracy. “The incessant procession of artificially ordered electoral conflicts,” he wrote,

frequently mean nothing more than the routine of pleasurable electioneering excitement; but in the 1850s it had become dangerous. The campaigns of that critical decade focused public attention too sharply upon conflicting attitudes, exaggerating them to perilous proportions, and generated dangerous power conflicts in the course of the political maneuvering. They aroused passion to such a pitch that only blood letting . . . could relieve the tension.⁹

Etcheson well documents that popular sovereignty, however attractive as a political talking point, was problematic in application. The Democratic administration in Washington not only could not deal with a territorial situation over which it had full legal authority, but presidents could not be sure of the stances of the governors they dispatched to the region, as the article by Pearl T. Ponce, “Pledges and Principles: Buchanan, Walker, and Kansas in 1857,” on the relationship between President James Buchanan and Governor Robert J. Walker during the critical year 1857 so vividly illustrates. In *The Nebraska Question* Malin wrote,

One thing that emerges clearly from a study of the 1850s is the power of fanatical propaganda—unending repetition of unscrupulous falsehoods—syllogizing in semantic confusion—intolerance masked under moral and religious symbolism—all leading the public to frustration and defeatism, which at long last found escape from stalemate in Civil War.¹⁰

The U.S. Constitution, which was so threatened in the 1850s in Kansas, was a document produced in the Deist, rationalist Enlightenment. Those thinkers imagined a “machine that would run of itself,” a fundamentally amoral system based on the rule of law and separated from the violent passions endemic to religion or any sort of value system. This would create predictability and constancy as well as wealth and the kind of reasonable freedom a loco-

9. Roy Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948), 5.

10. James Malin, *The Nebraska Question, 1852–1954* (Lawrence, Kans.: 1953), 15.

"One thing," wrote historian James C. Malin, "that emerges clearly from a study of the 1850s is the power of fanatical propaganda." Voices from both proslavery and antislavery proponents stirred the emotions of the public with inflammatory declaration, as is illustrated here in a column from the April 3, 1855, *Squatter Sovereign*, published by rabid proslavery editors J.H. Stringfellow and R. S. Kelley.

motive on its track has.¹¹ What it doubtless took too little account of, in its dream of a science of human behavior built into institutions, was the force of culture, the drive of subconscious psychology and the central importance to people of nonrational, or one might say metarational or even supernatural, factors. Kansas proved that people would abandon their seeming self-interest for a cause and that their real interest or hierarchy of needs was not so straightforward as eighteenth-century philosophers thought.


Naturally, however, it was not just institutions and issues, but individuals, their character, the force of their personalities, and their fit with the times and its social psychology, that shaped the outcome in Kansas. Modern history is acquainting us with the important role of characters that once were relegated far in the background of the drama. But it is also reinterpreting those titanic figures we thought we certainly knew but might have encountered as much as legends, partly of their own making, as the real people they were.

Territorial Kansas was a drama, and the *dramatis personae* were a cast like no other. A bevy of extraordinary people's names rolls off the tongue of anyone even casually acquainted with the history of the region. There was John Brown and Jim Lane and Samuel Pomeroy, Charles and Sara Robinson, Clarina Nichols and Julia Lovejoy and Sam Wood and John Ingalls and George Brown, Charles Jennison and James Montgomery. Every one was multidimensional, passionate, articulate, and of monumental nerve and presence. Each, too, also was full of the ambigui-

11. See Albert Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

KANSAS ELECTION.

Out with the Gun.



"We have met the Enemy, and they are Ours!!"

The entire forces of Abolitionism, Reederism, Free-Soilism, and other isms combined, completely Routed. Kansas declared in favor of Slavery.

We have the satisfaction and pleasure of recording one of the most brilliant political victories ever accomplished by any party. Kansas has spoken in thunder-tones, and repudiated our Free-soil Governor, and his allies. She has taken a noble stand in the Pro-Slavery ranks, and there she will remain forever! The combined forces of Abolitionism, Free-soilism, and Reederism made a desperate effort to carry the Territorial Legislature, but their exertions proved unavailing, against the true men of the South. We have battered down all oppo-

ities, even contradictions, of deep thinking and feeling people learning and growing amid changing circumstances variously perceived and understood by them and others. Were Brown the hanged man and Lane the suicide zealot martyrs to a cause—visionary prophets bringing down a righteous future—or were they maladjusted aggressors, dragging the uncertain along, whose monomania found an outlet in the chaos of dangerous times? Or is that an artificial question to which only a grossly simplified character can respond?

Analyzing these characters as persons requires more than a collection of anecdotes, and it is into this deeper biography—life and times to be sure, but subtle beyond the old style—that modern scholars fare. Governor Walker, as portrayed by Pearl Ponce, is hardly a standard bureaucrat slavishly implementing the policy of his Washington boss. Mark Delahay, as revealed by Rita Napier, is doing a great deal in and through the *Kansas Territorial Register* other



Territorial Kansas was a drama, and the dramatis personae were a cast like no other. James Lane, John Brown, Charles Robinson, and James Montgomery are but a few of the better known players, and along side were hundreds of others whose impact may be less known but whose roles were equally important. Analyzing these characters, digging deeper into their biographies, is the fodder of the modern scholar, whose efforts shed new light on the well-worn topic of territorial Kansas. Pictured here are two of the important characters of Kansas: Samuel N. Wood, who was active in free-state politics and advocated equal rights for women, and Sara Robinson, whose antislavery views were meticulously recorded in her Kansas, Its Interior and Exterior Life.

than trying to make a living. James Montgomery in his practice of “redemptive violence” is, in Brian Dirck’s analytical essay “By the Hand of God: James Montgomery and Redemptive Violence,” hardly the pasteboard stereotype of a “jayhawker” that he often has been in previous historical writing. His confidence and singleness of purpose, an asset in a time of doubt and disorder, could, Dirck points out, degenerate into simple bullheaded arrogance in other circumstances. There was a fine line in troubled times between a bandit and a hero, and those that in hindsight became Kansas heroes often in the flux of their own days regularly crossed back and forth over that line. The primary sources included in this special issue well illustrate how different it is when people are quoted extensively and in context than when a line from here and there becomes a headline in history as propaganda. The racist as free-state hero is only one of the contradictions that the “figures of earth” of territorial days, realistically portrayed, encompass.

Territorial history has been subject to what might be called a “Manichean syndrome.” Historian Roy Nichols noted in 1957 that in the minds of those creating the Kansas legend out of the materials of territorial history, “the children of light had been beset by the children of darkness, but

righteousness had triumphed.”¹² Charles Darwin’s shocker was in the future as was Oliver Wendell Holmes’s reinterpretation of the common law as less than absolute or William James’s essays on pragmatism. The 1850s was maybe the last time in America to stage a crusade where both sides quoted the Bible and the law as an absolute. The “heroes of the faith” were enshrined in a sort of pantheon in the emotions of Kansans over the years.

But the reality was otherwise, just as exciting, far more meaningful in the end, more deeply human, but less pat, less cinematic in its bold and clear moral battles between patient and tolerant Puritans and feral “ruffians” with bloodshot eyes and poor dental health. Kansas, Dirck writes, was not simple, however much “extremists on both sides of the issue wanted . . . a stark, good versus evil sort of clarity to pervade their efforts.” The essay by Rusty Monhollon and Kristen Oertel, “From Brown to *Brown*: A Century of Struggle for Equality in Kansas,” illustrates perfectly that the line between John Brown and *Brown v Topeka*

12. Roy Nichols, “Kansas Historiography: The Technique of Cultural Analysis,” *American Quarterly* 9 (Spring 1957): 85.

Board of Education is anything but direct. Kansas, they write, was a “paradox for blacks; seeking to escape Jim Crow and racism in the South they often confronted both—albeit less virulently and in different forms—in the land of John Brown.” It is well that the ambiguity inherent in the history rightly understood is growing clear. For if history is to be more than a laundry list or an encyclopedia or an annals, or training for trivia bowl, the student must penetrate beyond the surface.

It is time certainly to re-create the atmosphere and the arguments of the times, the conditions of uncertainty, the advancement of now “politically incorrect” arguments that were the rush and welter of history in process. Combatants in causes do not think of themselves as misguided “special interests” but as the oppressed righteous. The proslavery people did not call themselves Border Ruffians but rather the Law and Order Party. Technically the free-state heroes were very close to being guilty of treason, and should events have taken a subtle turn in another direction they might very well have been imprisoned or executed as criminals. To reconstruct the past to suit the present is to learn nothing.

A hero and villain mentality led to two other phenomena central to the territorial Kansas story—political polarization and media hype. Aristotle said that a person who tries to live outside a state is either “a God or a beast.” Politics is supposed to build community through compromise, but often it does not. Instead, the adversarial technique of the courtroom, never admitting that any truth might reside with the other side, creates conflict by distorting reality. Nichols noted that the “tatterdemalion tyros of the territory” escalated selfish interest by irresponsible oratory.¹³ One does wonder how much so-called leaders were listening to the sound of their own eloquence and waiting for the applause of a faceless public transmitted back through a growing profit-making media rather than considering the real interests of Kansas or the nation.

There are many thousands of pages of speeches on Kansas recorded in the vast national and international newspaper coverage and the endless debates in Congress. It was language of a type that can create an atmosphere of behavior independent of the events to which it refers. In

several books, notably *Politics, Language and Time*, J. G. A. Pocock has addressed the question of how political movements develop their own versions of the language, which in turn strongly inform assumptions and motivate action. This “language of political conceptualization” can range from a simple slogan to an entire vocabulary, and the effective use of it is akin to the craft of acting.¹⁴

When one looks at territorial leadership, one identifies two basic types, divided on the question of the “higher law” and civil disobedience. One school of thought was represented by Abraham Lincoln, who was in Kansas in 1859 at the time John Brown was hanged for the Harpers Ferry raid. The other approach was best exemplified by Brown himself. Brown spoke of Gideon and how the Lord would provide power for a just cause. The press circulated his justifications. But was serial murder, such as Brown had aided and abetted in Kansas, the more sound for an eloquent and certain perpetrator? Kansans asked Lincoln about that. Lincoln’s answer was that Brown had the right idea but the wrong method. Lincoln could appreciate the romantic and utopian point of view of Kansan James H. Lane, who told him war was based on passion, not on law, and that troops must have an antislavery “shibboleth for their banners.”¹⁵ But fundamentally Lincoln was a lawyer who believed in a Union based as much on the restraints of the Constitution on human behavior as on the ideals about equality in the Declaration of Independence. And slavery was legal. If the Union were to fall, Lincoln thought, and the rule of law with it, it would be a greater tragedy than the continuance of slavery.¹⁶ Brown disagreed. If a system can and does include such an abomination as slavery, he said, it is just as well that the system disappear. An immoral system, however otherwise seemingly fair and elegant, was to him unsalvageable. That also was the view of Henry David Thoreau and many other “closet revolutionaries” who had their eyes on Kansas.

Another important aspect of politics in territorial Kansas was the question of what constitutes the will of the

13. Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, 102.

14. J. G. A. Pocock, “Working on Ideas in Time,” in *The Historian’s Workshop: Original Essays by Sixteen Historians*, ed. L. Perry Curtis (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 153–65.

15. For the relationship with Lane, see Craig Miner, “Lane and Lincoln: A Mysterious Connection,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 24 (Autumn 2001): 186–99.

16. These ideas are fully developed in Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

We find the papers are full of dreadful things about your horrid abolitionists in Kansas. How do you expect to live under this Missouri laws? Can you set them at defiance or do you undertake to keep them? What will you do with your elected to Congress Mr. Whitefield? Can you in any way dispose of this election? Is he not properly elected according to the laws of Congress and must not the House of Representatives accept him whether or not?

The media frequently exaggerated the events in territorial Kansas and so sold newspapers to frightened and emotional readers. (Left) In an October 11, 1855, letter to his friend Isaac Goodnow in Kansas, Robert Allyn writes from Rhode Island, "We find the papers are full of dreadful things about you horrid abolitionists in Kansas." The portrait (below) is of abolitionist James Redpath, a journalist for the New York Tribune, whose coverage of territorial events in Kansas was widely disseminated to readers in the East.



revolutionary, step of ignoring the laws of the duly elected legislature, boycotting the elections held under its auspices, and refusing to accept the result. As the Lecompton Constitution for Kansas was debated in 1858, a U.S. senator from Pennsylvania said,

Kansas has been the theater of strife and tumult. With everything to make her people happy and comfortable, with a richness of soil and purity of climate almost unequalled, it has been the scene of discord, of riot, of violence, and of bloodshed. . . . I contend for the right by *regular process*. I want to put down the exercise of these revolutionary rights in Kansas.¹⁸

Nevertheless, such "discord" and "riot" were well calculated to disrupt the inertia of the establishment, shine light in dusty corners, and advance social change in the direction of moral values—all Kansas specialties.

The media exaggerated all this in the reporting of it, and so sold papers to frightened and emotional readers. One could argue that one reason for free-state victory was that Boston, not Atlanta, was the center of the publishing world. The most quotable journalism is the most irresponsible. Historians have reproduced the wildest of this journalism for some of the same reasons it was promulgated in the first place. This has colored scholarship, sometimes unconsciously, with ancient partisanship, but it is time now to move beyond that.

A tendency to look for a golden age is natural. Robert Smith Bader, speaking of the inferiority complex of Kansas, says that for Kansans "to look back is to look up." There is

people. The Law and Order Party held that popular sovereignty had to be expressed through constitutional processes. The free states argued that these processes and the very government itself could be corrupted, "prostituted and polluted," and become bogus.¹⁷ They took the radical, even

17. Quotation in *Appendix to Congressional Globe*, 35th Cong., 1st sess., 1858, 174.

18. *Ibid.*, 71, 73.

John J. Ingalls, who arrived in the territory in 1858 and later was elected a U.S. senator from Kansas, perhaps best summed up not only the importance of territorial times but its ongoing influence throughout our history. He recorded in A Collection of the Writings of John James Ingalls, "No time was ever so minutely and so indelibly photographed upon the public retina."

the suggestion that the farther back the look the higher the moral and intellectual plane.¹⁹

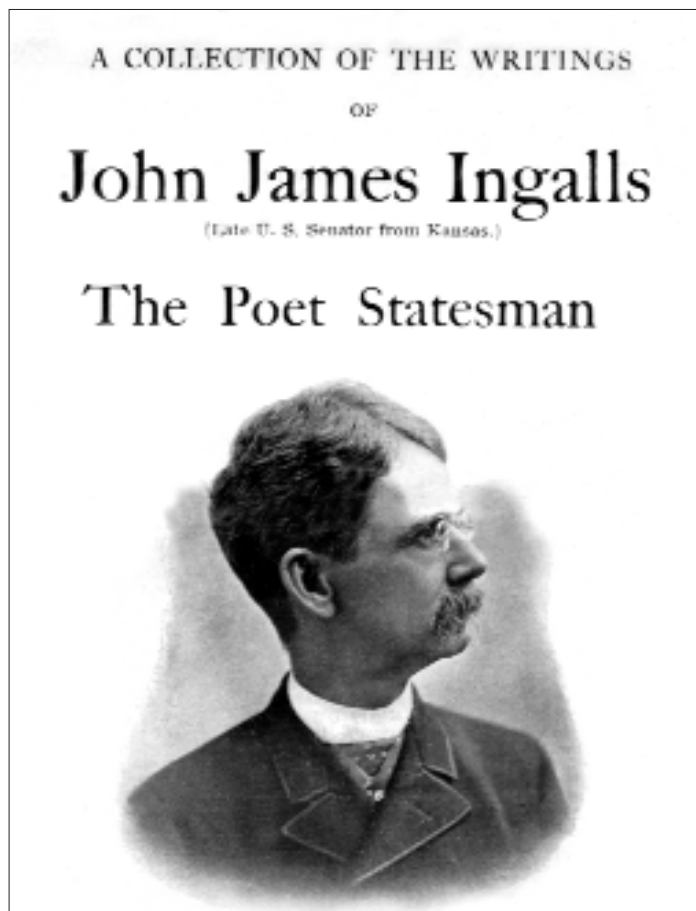
However confused we are by the reality of the Kansas territorial era, it has been a pivot for Kansas identity. No period in Kansas history has been more written about, nor loaded with more emotion and local patriotism than this one. "No time," John J. Ingalls wrote, "was ever so minutely and so indelibly photographed upon the public retina."²⁰ Kansans have had an interest in making both the processes and the outcome look favorable. They like to think of themselves as the new Hebraic nation favored of God, the light to lighten the Gentiles through such innovations as absolute prohibition of liquor. And they found their credentials for moralism and for national leadership in their view of this first era in their regional history. Territorial history, said Governor Humphrey, is "a living, energizing force in all our moral, social, and material progress."²¹

The more important it is to know the truth, the more psychic barriers there are to finding it, particularly among

19. Robert Smith Bader, *Hayseeds, Moralizers, & Methodists: The Twentieth-Century Image of Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 112.

20. John J. Ingalls, "Kansas: 1541–1891," in *A Collection of the Writings of John James Ingalls: Essays, Addresses, and Orations* (Kansas City, Mo.: Hudson–Kimberly Publishing Co., 1902), 456.

21. Humphrey, inaugural address.



those who are in the best position to know and who need most to know. The process of the transformation of Kansas from wilderness to "historic ground" was as much mental and spiritual as physical and political. It happened over time as well as in time. All along it was a drama peopled by complex actors playing to a diverse audience. Nichols says that the real problem of the antebellum era was not political federalism but cultural federalism—namely how to hold people with fundamentally different outlooks together in one polity. That is more significant now in Kansas and the nation than ever. We need storytelling, but of a deeper kind, to well employ our regional heritage to create in us the informed spirit Kansas will need for a future that will be in no way simpler than its variegated past.

