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A JOURNEY THROUGH THE GREAT PLAINS

In the well-known patriotic song, *America the Beautiful*, we sing of the gifts God lavished on the United States of America. The first stanza of that famous tune says:

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!

What are these “amber waves of grain” beneath “spacious skies”? To what does the song refer when it speaks of the “fruited plain” spreading out beneath “purple mountain majesties”?

These familiar lines refer to a vast section of the North American continent known as the Great Plains. How vast are the Great Plains? In the United States, they stretch about 2,000 miles from south to north, running from central Texas up into Canada. East to west, they are about 800 miles wide, from the Mississippi Valley westward to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. All told, the Great Plains cover more than 500,000 square miles of our country.

And what is this **vast** plain like? Like any region, there is great variety. In the east, near the Mississippi River, it is rolling and forested. But as we move west of the Mississippi, the land widens and begins to climb steadily upward in a broad, seemingly endless **plateau** of grassy flatlands. It is hard to describe the vastness of these grasslands. They are truly immense, like a gigantic ocean of grass.

vast: very large in size or amount

plateau: a large, flat or rolling land that rises higher than the land near it

The Konza Prairie in north-eastern Kansas



erode: to gradually destroy or be destroyed by natural forces, such as wind, water, or ice

But that's not all there is to the region. Up in the Dakotas, the grassy plains are broken up by rocky, **eroded** mountain slopes. Southward, the terrain is low and covered in trees. To the west, the land gradually rises until we reach the Rocky Mountains that stretch north and south like a great spine running up the western half of the continent.

How the Great Plains Came to Be

Where did this huge, grassy plain come from? The Osage Indians say that, long ago, water covered the entire land, and there was no dry land for anyone to live upon. All the people and all the animals were just floating aimlessly in the air above the waters. The Osage people asked the elk for help, for he was the finest and noblest of all the animals. The elk dropped down into the water and called the four winds to blow upon him. The winds blew from all directions until dry land was uncovered. The elk was so happy at the sight of the land that he rolled around on the earth. His loose hairs clung to the soil. They took root, sprouted up, and became the various plants, trees, and the grasses of the plains. After this, the land was fit for the Osage to dwell upon upon.

geologist: a scientist who studies rocks, land, soil, and similar things to learn about the history of Earth
sediment: sand and dirt that settles at the bottom of water

glacier: a large area of ice that moves slowly through a valley, down a slope, or over a plain

prairie: a large area that is mostly flat, with few trees and covered in grass

Interestingly enough, modern **geologists** agree with the Osage legend on one point: the Great Plains region was once covered by water. Geologists believe that long ago the Great Plains region was at the bottom of a very shallow inland sea. **Sediment** was carried into this sea from rivers flowing out of the Rocky Mountains to the west. The sea later dried up, and **glaciers** came, flattening the land into the broad plains we see today. When the glaciers melted, we were left with the Great Plains.

The first American settlers who came to live in the plains had no idea about glaciers or ancient seas. They simply looked upon the seemingly endless **prairie** lands and thanked God for providing them with such a bountiful place to farm, raise their families, and worship God.

In this book we will be learning about the eight states that are at the heart of the Great Plains: Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma. The Great Plains extend into other states as well—they form parts of Wyoming, Texas, Colorado, and Montana. We shall, however, look only at those eight states that form the heartland of the Great Plains.

Long ago, the Great Plains region was an immense wilderness, covered by hundreds of thousands of miles of grasslands. This land was home to Native American tribes, who lived alongside the coyotes, foxes, deer, and millions of bison that once roamed the Great Plains. Let's take a moment to learn about what the Great Plains region was like long ago and the natives who lived there. Let us look back at central North America around the year A.D. 1400. This is 92 years before Christopher Columbus came to the Americas. What would we find in the Great Plains states in the year 1400?

What is a Bison?

The American bison—commonly known as the buffalo—is a large, hump-backed, shaggy ox that once roamed the plains in the millions. Native Americans who lived on the plains depended upon the bison for meat to eat, hides for their tents, and fur for their clothing. The American bison were nearly hunted to extinction in the 19th century.

Fortunately, today there are many efforts to preserve the bison. Today almost half a million bison still graze upon the Great Plains.



A 1911 lithograph depicting buffalo on the plains

Land of the Clear Blue Water

Imagine standing at the mouth of a long and winding freshwater bay. Looking east, this bay opens up into the deep, cold waters of Lake Superior, one of the Great Lakes. Beside us is a **meandering** river which empties into the bay. This is the St. Louis River, though the Ojibwe Indians who later lived here called it *Gitchigami-ziibi*, the “Great Lake River.” This bay, also named St. Louis, is at the northeastern edge of Minnesota.

It might seem odd that Minnesota should be a Great Plains state. After all, it touches Lake Superior, is heavily forested, and is known as the “Land of Ten Thousand Lakes.” The Indians called it *Mní sóta*, which means “land

meandering: following a winding course or path



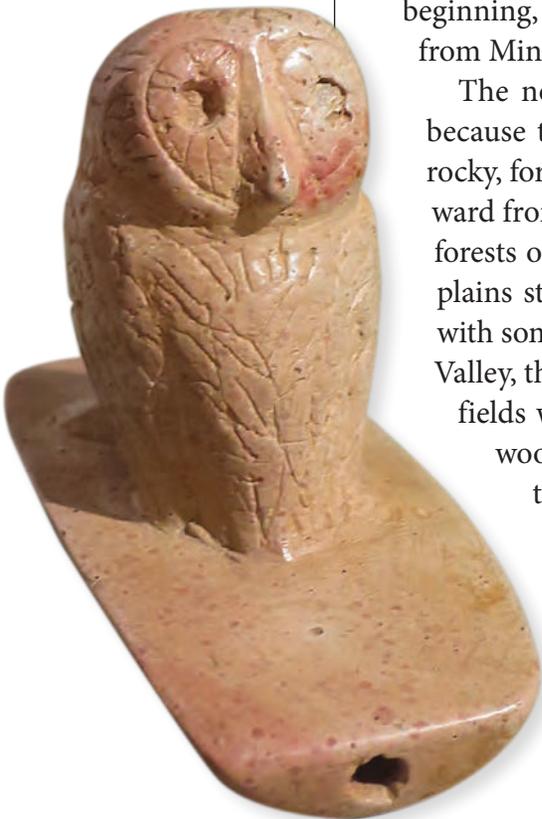
Oberg Mountain and Oberg Lake in northern Minnesota, near Lake Superior

**Headwaters of the
Mississippi River, with
Lake Itasca beyond**



fertile: producing many plants or crops

**An owl artifact, made by
the Hopewell culture
(ca. A.D. 900–1300)**



of the sky-colored water.” Like they did with the Great Lakes, glaciers carved out Minnesota’s lakes thousands of years ago. One of these lakes, Lake Itasca, is a very important lake. Why? Its name gives you a clue. “Itasca” comes from two Latin words, *veritas* (“truth”) and *caput* (“head”). Lake Itasca is the beginning, or “true head,” of the great Mississippi River, which flows south from Minnesota about 2,350 miles to the Gulf of Mexico.

The northeast corner of Minnesota is known as the “arrowhead,” because the land juts out towards Lake Superior like an arrow. It is a rocky, forested region. We, however, are not traveling that way, but westward from the mouth of the St. Louis. As we pass through the lakes and forests of Minnesota, we soon see why Minnesota can be considered a plains state. The western portion of the state is a vast, rich grassland with some of the most **fertile** soil in the world. Known as the Red River Valley, this area was once an ancient sea. In 1400, it was full of sweeping fields where native tribes farmed corn or hunted buffalo. Pockets of woods dotted the prairie, providing shelter for the buffalo during the harsh Minnesota winters.

Long ago, this place was home to the Hopewell people, a large collection of native tribes who lived all over the eastern United States from around A.D. 500–1000. They were peaceful people who lived in small farming villages. But by 1400, the Hopewell were long gone. Only their burial mounds remain. These are huge structures that were formed by heaping dirt, rocks, ash, and other materials into a large

pile. Grand Mound (near present day International Falls, Minnesota) is 140 feet long and 25 feet high.

Instead of the Hopewell, by 1400, the Cree people were hunting and fishing in the cool northern forests. Along the Mississippi, another tribe, the Cheyenne, farmed and hunted. These were peaceful tribes.

The dominant people, however, were the Dakota, a powerful and populous tribe who controlled most of the region. The Dakota fished Minnesota's lakes and trapped beaver and muskrat and hunted the plentiful deer. The Dakota were known for carving a soft rock called pipestone into pipes and jewelry for religious ceremonies. They believed this rock was sacred. The Dakota walked hundreds of miles to the pipestone quarries in southern Minnesota to dig for the precious rock.

Many years later, another tribe, the Ojibwe, moved into Minnesota from the east. The Ojibwe and the Dakota bitterly fought each other for decades. The Ojibwe eventually pushed the Dakota out of the northern woods and west onto Minnesota's plains. There, the Dakota learned to hunt buffalo and survive on the Great Plains.

Wild, Rugged Prairie Lands

If we move west into the plains, we come to the land named after the Dakota—the Dakotas. In the year 1400, the eastern part of the region is a wild, rugged prairie land. Further west are the “Badlands.” The Badlands are full of rocky hills eroded by centuries of wind. They are dry, stony, and desolate, but also ruggedly beautiful.



A view of the prairie's edge, the Badlands, and the Black Hills beyond

The Dakotas are crossed by the great and muddy Missouri River. From its source high in the Rocky Mountains to the west, the Missouri flows eastward, slicing the Dakotas in two until it empties into the great Mississippi.

Various native tribes could be found throughout the Dakotas in 1400. The Mandan and Hidatsa farmed along the Missouri and spent their summers hunting deer and bison on the plains. Then there were the Dakota, a very large alliance of several smaller tribes (the word *Dakota* means “allies”). The major tribes of the Dakota were the Lakota, Santee, Yankton, and Yanktonai. Europeans later called them the *Sioux* (the name we shall call them from now on). Further south were the Arikara, peaceful traders who lived in villages along the southern Missouri River. Other tribes, such as the Cheyenne, Pawnee, and Crow, were **nomadic**.

Yes, the Dakotas were full of Indian tribes. Even so, in 1400, the Indians were outnumbered here by the bison, prairie dogs, and rabbits, all of which thronged the broad plains and rolling hills of the Dakotas in numbers uncountable.

nomadic: a word that signifies people who do not live in fixed villages but move from place to place, usually following the yearly migrations of the bison herds.

Flat Water

If we follow the Missouri River, we would go eastward, back towards the Mississippi River. But such is not our route. Rather, we will continue due south from the Dakotas into our next state, Nebraska.

The Missouri River borders Nebraska on the east. In Nebraska, large chalkstone bluffs flank the Missouri, its winding waters dotted with islands and sandbars. Eastern Nebraska is a gentle land full of rolling hills and pleasant valleys. Long ago, thick glaciers covered this part of Nebraska. As the glaciers moved across the land, they tore up the soil, leaving hills and valleys behind.

A springtime view of
Scotts Bluff and beyond in
western Nebraska



Sioux: soo

Further west, the hills and valleys flatten out into broad, flat plains that cover most of Nebraska. With short, hardy prairie grass, like an endless green ocean, these plains stretch into Wyoming and Colorado. In northwestern Nebraska, the plains are studded with towering rock formations known as **buttes** and **mesas**. Covered in clusters of evergreen trees, the pine ridges of this part of Nebraska are breathtakingly beautiful.

Stretching out before us in north-central Nebraska is a vast desert of sand dunes. These “Sandhills” (as they are called) are covered in short prairie grass. Occasionally, harsh winds tear away the grass revealing the sand beneath. It’s hard to say how this area was formed, but scientists think that, long ago, fierce winds swept across the plains, carrying particles of sand and depositing them here.

The western part of the state, known as the Panhandle, is a land full of bluffs, gigantic slabs of sandstone, and bizarre formations known as “toadstools”—huge boulders of sandstone perched atop narrow “stems” of clay. Their strange appearance is the result of thousands of years of wind and water eroding the clay bases faster than the sandstone caps.

The Pawnee have been one of the tribes that lived in the region. They dwelt in lodges made of stacked poles covered with brush and packed with mud. Their many villages tended to cluster around the many rivers here. All of Nebraska’s rivers ultimately flow into the Missouri. The name Nebraska comes from the Indian words, *Ni Brasgi*, which mean “flat water.”

The Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Sioux have roamed the wilds of Nebraska. In the 1700s, the Omaha, Ponca, and Oto tribes migrated in from the east. By the time Europeans arrived here, Nebraska was home to tens of thousands of Native Americans.

buttes and mesas: isolated, rocky hills with steep sides and flat tops. A butte is taller than it is wide, while a mesa is wider than it is tall. The high plains of Nebraska and the Badlands of the Dakotas both contain buttes and mesas.

The Sand Hills in Nebraska



Land of the Kansa

Traveling south from Nebraska, we reach a land of wild grasses stretching in every direction across a flat, treeless landscape. All we see is the deep blue sky and the wild green prairie. This is the land of Kansas.

A curious “toadstool” rock formation in Nebraska’s Panhandle



Kansas is named for the Kansas River, which slices through the northern part of the state. The river takes its name from the Kansa people, who once lived along its banks. Further south another river, the Arkansas, flows east through gently sloping hills that break up the endless flatlands.

The hills and flatlands of Kansas are excellent for farming. But in 1400, no farmers were **tilling** the plains. Herds of bison grazed the wilds. The peoples who lived here stayed clustered around the major rivers, fishing for bass, trout, bluegill, and catfish. Near their homes, they grew corn, beans, and squash. They did not live on the plains but often ventured into them to hunt deer, elk, and bison.

till: to prepare soil for growing crops

Land of the Red People

Passing south out of Kansas we come into a place the Indians called *okla humma* (“red people”)—from which comes the name “Oklahoma.” This “Land of the Red People” was full of native tribes. But the tribes we will find here were certainly not the first arrivals. Native peoples had been living here as far back as 9000 B.C. From around A.D. 500 to 1300, a culture of mound building natives made Oklahoma their home.

Much of Oklahoma is made up of rolling plains that slope downward towards the southeast. The far northwest strip of Oklahoma, known as the

“Panhandle,” is much higher, full of rocky hills and the 4,973-foot high Black Mesa, Oklahoma’s highest point. The high plains of western Oklahoma were the home of the Comanche and Apache, nomadic tribes who followed the **migrations** of the bison.

To the east, central Oklahoma is crossed by several rivers, as well as a small mountain chain called the Arbuckles. The Wichita Indians lived here in simple grass houses along the river banks. The Wichita were peace loving but wary of strangers. The Osage, who lived further north, frequently raided Wichita villages.

If we travel further east, the land becomes a mixture of fertile fields and low hills. Many rivers meet here, making eastern Oklahoma a **verdant**, lush land full of forests and excellent soil for farming. The Ouachitas, a small mountain chain in the southeastern corner of the state, is covered in dense pine, oak, and hickory. This area was once the domain of the Caddo Indians, but by 1400 tribes such as the Cheyenne and Arapaho moved in and began to displace them. These tribes were warrior peoples who followed the bison and raided other tribes’ villages for food. The Kiowa and Pawnee also settled in Oklahoma.

If we pass northeast through Oklahoma’s rolling hills, we at last come into a country fed by cool rivers. These rivers flow down from the Ozark Mountains that bound this land on the northeast.

migration: movement from place to place

verdant: green with growing plants

A view of the Ouachita Mountains in Oklahoma



Black Mesa, the highest point in Oklahoma



Where the Rivers Meet

In crossing the Ozarks, we have finally changed course. From North Dakota we have gone almost 1,200 miles south. Now we turn east and north into the land of Missouri, which takes its name from the Missouri River, which we have encountered in the Dakotas and Nebraska. Here the Missouri River's muddy waters enter the mighty Mississippi.

Missouri is quite mountainous and rugged in the southern, Ozark region, but as we pass north, the land flattens out. In the south, vast forests cover the region, but these thin out as we move northward.

To the east, the land slopes gently downward into the Mississippi Valley. The southeastern part of Missouri, known as the Bootheel, is so low that its plains are sometimes completely flooded by the waters of the Mississippi. The soil here is very rich with nutrients brought by the floods, making it excellent farmland.

Native peoples have been in Missouri for a very long time, perhaps since 10,000 B.C.. Pottery, stone tools, and farming implements found here date back to 3000 B.C. The Mound Builders lived here, and Missouri may have been the center of their culture. Over 100 mounds have been discovered here.

The Osage have lived in the south and west of the state, in cone shaped huts. They hunted the plentiful deer, bison, and bear found in Missouri's



southern woods, and farmed pumpkins, squash, corn, and beans. The Osage shared the region with the Otoe and the Missouri Indians.

A bend of the Missouri River in Missouri

The Land of Iowa

Moving north along the western Mississippi Valley, we notice the land becoming flatter and less forested. We are passing into the land of Iowa, which takes its name from the Iowa tribe.

Iowa is covered in very flat grasslands and fertile fields, where Indians farmed and reaped rich harvests. Around 90 percent of Iowa is very flat, though the region also has areas of bluffs, valleys, and rolling hills, mostly in the northwest. It is crossed by several major rivers and dotted with lakes.

We find evidence of the Mound Builders here, as well. Near modern day Marquette, Iowa are the Effigy Mounds, a group of about 200 Indian burial mounds. Many mounds are shaped like animals, such as birds or bears. Iowa has been home to many smaller tribes besides the Iowa: the Omaha, Oto, Missouri, Lakota Sioux, and Illini. So many Native American tribes have lived here that wars frequently broke out among them over rights to farm and hunt certain lands. However, most of the tribes of Iowa preferred to live in peace, farming corn, beans, and squash on the rich soils of the Iowa plain.

As we continue our trek north out of Iowa, we pass into the grasslands of southern Minnesota, the state from where we began our long journey.



A view of the prairie in eastern Iowa

Climate of the Great Plains

The climate of the Great Plains differs from place to place. For example, the Ozarks and the heavily forested lowlands of southern Oklahoma can become extremely hot and humid, especially in the summer. The wind-swept prairies of the Dakotas get very little rain and are among the driest places in the United States. In winter, Oklahoma averages only seven inches of snow per year, while North and South Dakota average around 50 inches a year. Minnesota tops the list with a whopping 54 inches of snow per year on average.

But in other ways, the Great Plains states have a similar climate. For example, all the Great Plains states have lots of wind and cold winters.

It is almost always windy on the Great Plains. Some of these winds, especially tornadoes, can be very violent. Coming in the summer months, a tornado is a violently rotating column of air that touches the ground and is usually attached to the base of a thunderstorm. Tornadoes can be extremely destructive, killing people and destroying towns in a matter of minutes. The Great Plains are prone to powerful tornadoes. Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, and Oklahoma are sometimes referred to as “Tornado Alley.”

Except for Alaska, Minnesota and North Dakota have the coldest winters in the United States. Winter temperatures in Minnesota and North Dakota can reach as low as -60°F . The plains of Iowa can reach as low as -47°F . Even milder Oklahoma can get down to -31°F .

Why are the winters so cold here? One reason is the air fronts that move through the Great Plains from the Arctic. Another reason is the plains lack barriers like mountains or forests to break the movement of the wind. Winds thus can travel very fast and cause chillier temperatures.

Though the Great Plains can be cold, summers there bring abundant sunshine and rains, making the Great Plains one of the most fertile regions on earth. For over a century, wheat has grown on the Great Plains in great abundance. Other crops include corn, sorghum, sugar beets, and barley. The Great Plains are truly the breadbasket of America, the “fruited plain” sung of in *America the Beautiful*.

Chapter 1 Review

Summary

- The Great Plains states display a great variety in their landscape. Modern geologists say the Great Plains region was once at the bottom of a very shallow inland sea. When the sea later dried up, glaciers came, flattening the land into broad plains.
- The American bison or buffalo once roamed the plains in the millions. Native Americans who lived on the plains depended upon the bison for meat to eat, hides for their tents, and fur for their clothing.
- Minnesota touches Lake Superior, and much of the state is heavily forested. The western portion of the state is a vast, rich grassland with some of the most fertile soil in the world.
- Minnesota was home to the Hopewell people, a large collection of native tribes who lived all over the eastern United States from around A.D. 500–1000. The Hopewell left behind burial mounds, huge structures that were formed by heaping dirt, rocks, ash, and other materials into large piles.
- Indian tribes in Minnesota lived by hunting and fishing, or by farming as well. For a long time, the Dakota dominated Minnesota, but eventually the Ojibwe drove them out of Minnesota’s forests into the plains.
- West of Minnesota lie the lands called the Dakotas. The eastern part of the region was a wild, rugged prairie land. Further west, the “Badlands” are a country full of rocky hills eroded by centuries of wind. The Missouri River crosses the Dakotas.
- Various native tribes once lived in the Dakotas. Some farmed along the Missouri and spent their summers hunting deer and bison on the plains. Others were peaceful traders and village dwellers. Other tribes were nomadic.
- The Missouri River borders Nebraska on the east. Eastern Nebraska is a gentle and rolling land. Further west lie flat plains that cover most of Nebraska. In northwestern Nebraska, the plains are studded with buttes and mesas, and the north-central part of the state has the Sandhills. The western part of the state is a land full of bluffs, gigantic slabs of sandstone, and bizarre formations known as “toadstools.” Nebraska was once home to tens of thousands of Native Americans.
- Kansas is named for the Kansas River, which flows through the northern part of the state. Further south, the Arkansas River flows east through gently sloping hills that break up the endless flatlands.
- Kansas was once the home for many Indian tribes that lived along the major rivers, where they fished. They also grew corn, beans, and squash and hunted deer, elk, and bison on the plains.
- Much of Oklahoma is made up of rolling plains. The far northwest strip of Oklahoma is full of rocky hills and the 4,973-foot high Black Mesa. Central Oklahoma is crossed by several rivers, as well as a small mountain chain called the

Chapter 1 Review (continued)

Arbuckles. Further east, the land is a mixture of fertile fields and low hills. The Ouachitas mountain chain in the southeast is covered in dense forests.

- Missouri is quite mountainous and rugged in the southern, Ozark region, but the land flattens out to the north. In the south, vast forests cover the region but thin out toward the north. To the east, the land slopes gently downward into the Mississippi Valley. The Mound Builder culture was present in Missouri. Later, the Osage shared the region with the Missouri and Otoe Indians. The Osage were both hunters and farmers.
- Iowa is covered in very flat grasslands. Indians farmed its fertile fields. Though most of Iowa is very flat, the region also has areas of bluffs, valleys, and rolling hills, mostly in the northwest. Iowa is crossed by several major rivers and dotted with lakes. The Mound Builders lived in Iowa. Later, the region was filled with many small tribes.

Chapter Checkpoint

1. What do geologists say originally covered the area we call the Great Plains?
2. What made the Great Plains so flat?
3. What are the Great Plains states studied in this book?
4. Are the Great Plains naturally covered by forest? Please explain.
5. How is the landscape in Minnesota like and unlike the landscape in other Great Plains states?
6. What is the name for the ancient Indian culture that was found in what are now Minnesota, Oklahoma, Missouri, and all over the eastern United States? What did they build?
7. What is the name of the Indian tribe that originally lived in the Minnesota forests but was pushed out into the plains of Minnesota and the Dakotas? What is another name for the tribe?
8. Why can winters be very cold in the Great Plains states?

Geography Challenge

Use the map on the page facing page 1 and the text in Chapter 1 to answer the following.

1. What is the mountain range that borders the Great Plains in the West?
2. What do we call the lands full of rocky hills eroded by centuries of wind in the western Dakotas near the Black Hills?
3. What is the name for the desert of sand dunes covered by prairie grass in north-central Nebraska?
4. What river flows through the Dakotas, along the eastern border of Nebraska, across Missouri, and into the Mississippi River?
5. What is the small mountain range near where the Caddo tribe lived? (This mountain range lies between the Arkansas River and the Red River in the South.)
6. Name the plateau that lies north of the Boston Mountains and near where the Osage tribe once lived.
7. What is the lake in Minnesota from where the Mississippi River rises?

Vocabulary and Important Names

Give the proper definition to match the following vocabulary terms:

1. prairie
2. nomadic
3. sediment
4. erode