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Author(s): S. Ray Kaufman.

Source: *Pacific Journal* 16 (2021): 27-47.

Publisher: Fresno Pacific University.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/1360>

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# Elegy For The Land

**S. ROY KAUFMAN**

The land has shaped my life! To be sure, we are all formed “from the dust of the ground,” *adam* from *adamah*, the human from the humus (Gen 2:7). More to the point, our lives depend on all the green plants that grow on the land, as Genesis 1:29-30 reminds us. The plants not only provide the energy we need to live, but also the oxygen upon which our lives depend, through the process of photosynthesis.

But my life is shaped also by the specific landscape in which I was born and lived through my youth, and which has again been my home for the past twenty years. From the front yard of the farm on which I grew up, six miles east of Freeman, South Dakota, where I still have a garden, one can see Turkey Ridge, the most prominent geological feature of southeast South Dakota, rising some 400 feet above the surrounding prairie. This ancient geological feature composed of rock from the Cretaceous Period begins just south of Freeman and runs southeast to Spirit Mound just north of Vermillion.<sup>1</sup> While I cannot see the bottom of the Turkey Ridge Creek valley from our front yard, Turkey Ridge itself rises abruptly on the southern horizon, displaying the farms of the neighborhood. The ridge forms a natural boundary for the Freeman Anabaptist community to the south, with the James and Vermillion Rivers forming its boundaries to the west and east.

For many years, I lived in Indiana, Iowa, and Illinois, and on drives back to see family in South Dakota, I watched Turkey Ridge take shape on the southern horizon some 20 miles east of Freeman, and I knew I was close to home. There is something spiritually comforting and rooting about being in the landscape one is born into and nourished in.

I grieve now for how this landscape has changed with the industrialization of agriculture. I grieve the loss of agrarian cultures (congregations) whose faith values and heritage have been undermined by the values of the dominant American culture. I walk or bike in the countryside around Freeman nearly every day in every season, and I see the soil eroding and the loss of biological diversity. I look in vain for the hedgerows of wild plums and chokecherries, fruit that I like to use to make jams and jellies every summer. I see inert, hard soil incapable of absorbing water or sustaining the

rich biological life of prairie soil. I look every spring for increasingly rare Pasque flowers (the South Dakota state flower) in local pastures that are overgrazed and eroding, and I wonder if I'll find any Pasques next year! I also grieve for the prairie as it was before farmers moved in---for the prairie I never knew.

I have lived nearly all my life on or near the Great Plains. My first pastorates were in southeast Iowa and northern Illinois, both near the eastern edge of the Great Plains.<sup>2</sup> Then came a pastorate on the northern fringe of the Great Plains, in central Saskatchewan (where I experienced the Great Plains climate and geography most intensely). All of the congregations I served were agrarian cultures located in farming communities, and all these communities suffered the ravages of the industrial agriculture economy over the past decades, with declining memberships. In all these settings the original prairie or savannah landscape that shaped these agrarian cultures was altered radically by European/American colonization.

Early in our marriage, my wife and I spent two and a half years on the island of Crete, in a voluntary service assignment with Mennonite Central Committee and the World Council of Churches, engaged in Greek Orthodox Church agricultural development programs. Living on Crete presented a vastly different and new landscape for these prairie-bred young people! It was an island landscape where mountains and sea were inescapably visible no matter where you were! But it was in timeless agrarian villages tucked away in the mountains, sustained by the ancient Greek Orthodox faith, that I came to my calling to serve as the pastor of rural Great Plains congregations of Anabaptist faith. These villages in Crete produced olives and grapes and small grains and sheep and goats and an abundance of vegetables and fruits, all sustained by an ancient Christian faith.

In the past few years, I made two trips to Israel/Palestine, joining Christian Peacemaker Team delegations near the city of Hebron in the south and walking for a week along the Jesus Trail in Galilee from Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee and back. Here again was a new landscape of rugged hills and deep valleys, yet miniature in scale compared to the vast expanses of the Great Plains. I stayed in both Arab and Jewish villages and towns, observing how Christian, Muslim and Jewish faiths informed and sustained these agrarian cultures.

In all of these places, I saw the way that the landscape has shaped the agrarian cultures that live there, and also how the landscape has been altered by them. Landscape determines opportunities, challenges, and constraints. When the boundaries established by the landscape are transgressed, both the land and the human community suffer want, deprivation and loss.

There is something immutable, one might think eternal, about the land. Or this is at least how it has always appeared to humans that live upon it. This is of course not true. Land across the earth has been damaged and destroyed by human civilization again and again in the past 6,000 years. But because the land is so ancient and vast, changes to it happen on a scale that is scarcely noticeable in a single life span. And so we think that what we personally do to the land, in our little place, will hardly make a difference. And so, we use it with impunity. *It doesn't matter if I litter this particular landscape with my trash!*

But humans live in a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship with the land on which they dwell. Through agriculture and other means, humans shape the land, using it for sustenance and exploiting it for its economic potential. But as noted, the land always determines possibilities, constraints, potential, and challenges for human communities. When we do not live within those parameters, communities do not survive long, and the land ceases to sustain life as it has always done. And so, “civilized man has marched across the face of the earth and left a desert in his footprints.”<sup>3</sup> The male pronouns in this quote not only date the author, but accurately describe the gender agency involved in the land’s exploitation; with patriarchy giving birth to civilization.

While the land is not immutable, as we sometimes imagine, it is nevertheless unimaginably ancient! All of the elements that comprise the land were already present when the earth took shape 4.6 billion years ago. Even more amazing and ancient, we and the land, the earth and the sun, are but stardust, remnants of supernova explosions of earlier generations of stars creating the heavier elements needed for the explosion of life that took place on earth beginning 3 billion years ago.<sup>4</sup>

The land, as a physical phenomenon, came into existence on the third day of creation, when God brought forth dry land from the midst of the ancient seas that covered the earth, and along with the dry land the green plants

upon which all other higher forms of life depend (Gen. 1:9-13). The land, pedosphere or soil on which we walk, rests in turn upon the lithosphere, that solid, rocky part of earth that forms the earth's crust. The *dry land* was the result of millennia of earthquake, volcanic, and geothermal activity that brought to the earth's surface the molten rock of the earth's mantle, eventually creating the continental land masses or plates that formed three billion years ago, raising *dry land* above the hydrosphere of seas that cover the earth.<sup>5</sup> For the last 200 million years, these continental plates or cratons, have traversed the face of the earth, from the ancient mega-continent Pangaea, to the continental configuration of the globe today.<sup>6</sup>

The North American continent, where the Great Plains is the central massive feature, has been under water as often as it has been dry. In the Cambrian Period (545 to 490 million years ago), for example, most of North America was covered by a shallow sea. In areas where Pre-Cambrian rock was exposed, it was eroded by water and wind into fine quartz sand that blew into the sea and settled on the sea bottom, sometimes many meters thick.<sup>7</sup>

This is the source of the red Sioux quartzite that underlies most of southeast South Dakota in an arc from central South Dakota into southwest Minnesota and northwest Iowa.<sup>8</sup> Outcroppings of this Cambrian rock can be found at Falls Park in Sioux Falls, Palisades State Park northeast of Sioux Falls, Pipestone National Monument and Jeffers Petroglyphs both in southwest Minnesota, and Gitchie Manitou Park on the Big Sioux River in northwest Iowa. The ancient rock formation underlying this area of the Great Plains is significant in the story of this land. Sioux quartzite has been used in building construction, for example, in the many red stone buildings in Sioux Falls. When crushed, this red rock is also frequently used to pave roads in the countryside and as filler for cement used on community farms.

The eons of underwater life in the Great Plains also account for the fossilized sea creatures often found in limestone layers and in the rocks of the community and which are exhibited at Heritage Hall Museum in Freeman. The Ordovician, Silurian, Devonian, and Carboniferous Periods all left evidence of abundant life in the rocks that remain.

The Mesozoic Era (250 million years ago) was the Age of Reptiles, most notably the dinosaurs whose fossils can be found across the Great Plains. During this time the mega continent Pangaea began to break up and the

continents, including North America, took the shape they have today. About 165 million years ago the Rocky Mountains began to be thrust up, forming the western boundary of the Great Plains. The dinosaurs that had lived on the land for millennia disappeared abruptly about 65 million years ago.

The Cenozoic Era that followed marked the emergence of mammals. This era also saw the appearance of various kinds of grasses for the first time—plants integral to the prairie ecosystem. Over the course of millions of years, these grasses colonized the arid lands of the Great Plains.<sup>9</sup> Then, beginning three million years ago, parts of the Great Plains were shaped by an enormous climatological cycle, the most recent ice age.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout a long geological history, the lands of earth have been subject to periodic ice ages. The most recent one continued almost to the beginning of the Holocene Epoch, 10,000 years ago. At its greatest extent, the ice sheet extended from the Missouri River valley to the Great Lakes and as far south as Kansas. With tremendous force the glaciers ground down the land, leaving behind vast areas of sand and dust when they melted. This process shaped the land, as did the rock debris that the glaciers carried on their journey south.

The Great Plains, including the land upon which I live, was thus shaped by both geological and climatological forces. The erosion of the Rocky Mountains was responsible for its formation with a downward slope of one kilometer from west to east.<sup>11</sup> The eastern boundary of the Great Plains lies generally along the Mississippi River valley. Overall, the Great Plains extend from Texas in the south to the mid-reaches of Alberta and Saskatchewan in the north.

The configuration of the land in the Freeman area owes most to the glaciers of the ice age. They ground out the contours of the land and left the rocks and soil that make the prairie such a productive and rich ecosystem. The glaciers did not plane down the Cretaceous rock of Turkey Ridge completely. They merely overrode it, leaving glacial debris on the surface. Land around Freeman shows debris from the Wisconsin Ice Age that began 60,000 years ago.<sup>12</sup> The James and Vermillion Rivers, forming the western and eastern boundaries of the Freeman community, show the drainage patterns established by the receding glaciers. Glacial deposits also account for the rich variety of field stones found on area farms, including fossils that represent many geographic regions and various historical epochs. These rocks come to

the surface with the frost each spring and were gathered by farm families that used them as filler for foundations, basements, and feedlots.

This long history of land formation in the Freeman area includes the Holocene Epoch that began 10,000 years ago. By this time, the Great Plains had taken the shape that we see today, with vast herds of grazing bison and other herbivores dominating the prairie ecosystem. This was the land prepared for the presence of human beings, who were expanding and occupying every ecosystem on earth. The Holocene Epoch, so brief in geological time but encompassing all of human history, was a time of stable geological and climatic conditions that enabled the explosion of natural and human life. Until the beginning of this epoch, human communities were small hunter-gatherer societies that followed seasonal game and plant life. But around 10,000 years ago, humans began to domesticate plants and animals, leading to the Agricultural Revolution and the formation of villages and towns, and eventually cities that gave birth to human civilization.

Given the geological and climatic conditions of the Holocene Epoch, it is tempting to think that the lands of earth were prepared this way as a foundation for the full flowering and maturity of the human occupation of the earth. We humans have done what we have during the past 10,000 years not solely through our ability to manage the natural environment through agriculture, but because nature has been kind to us and allowed us to flower in what for us has been a very long and peaceful period. Geologically and climatically, however, it is a very short period of time. So, we should not take too much pride in the flowering of human civilization! The mass extinctions that occurred in the Cambrian, Ordovician, Devonian, Permian, and Cretaceous Periods remind us that there is nothing permanent about any life form here on earth!<sup>13</sup>

Here on the Great Plains, scattered human communities emerged, sometimes settling for a time along the streams and rivers of this more arid region, migrating originally from Asia. A vast array of cultures and civilizations lived here during the past 10,000 years. The human population of the Great Plains was relatively small, scarcely impacting the natural prairie environment and its flora and fauna.

The land of southeast South Dakota, specifically, shows evidence of settled human habitation about a thousand years ago. At the Prehistoric Indian

Village site north of Mitchell, one finds a village of the Mound Builder cultural heritage—a collection of lodges along Firesteel Creek. This village engaged in *three sisters* agriculture (corn, beans and squash raised together in a symbiotic relationship) while also following game in a seasonal way.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the village was abandoned and its people moved on when the trees along the creek (providing poles for lodges) were used up.<sup>15</sup> There are always ecological constraints to human habitation, and we quickly outgrow one or another natural resource needed for our chosen way of life.

Although its effect on the Great Plains was initially small, the history of the land took a decidedly new turn with the arrival of European imperial power in North America in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Spanish Empire was the first to claim and explore the Great Plains after their conquest of Mexico in 1521.

The British Empire colonized the east coast of North America in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries while the French Empire colonized Canada and the Great Lakes region. Late in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the French explorer LaSalle led a party down the Mississippi River, established a capital in New Orleans, and claimed all the land drained by the Mississippi River as the territory of Louisiana. So it was French explorers who initially explored the upper Great Plains, including South Dakota, in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. French colonization in the Great Lakes region and the Great Plains took the form of the fur trade, exploiting the rich natural life of the region with the help of Native American nations.

The French Empire lost the lands east of the Mississippi River to the British in 1763, and at the same time ceded the rest of Louisiana west of the Mississippi (virtually all of the Great Plains) to the Spanish Empire. With a capital at St. Louis, Spain now took over the fur trade, using the Missouri River and its tributaries as the primary artery of transportation. Louisiana was briefly returned to French rule in 1800, before the French Empire *sold* Louisiana to the newly emergent United States in 1803. The Americans wasted no time in exploring and colonizing the vast Great Plains area. Thomas Jefferson immediately commissioned the Lewis and Clark expedition to the West Coast. Lewis and Clark followed the Missouri River north through South Dakota just 30 miles south of Freeman on this 1803-1806 expedition.

The European imperial adventures into the Americas represent a

strikingly new form of global human expansion across the globe. Until the European Age of Exploration began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, human populations had expanded in a much more natural and peaceful way across the globe. Now began a search for wealth and treasure, particularly on the part of the Spanish, that quickly transmogrified into an enterprise bent on colonizing as much of the land on earth that could be claimed by the powers involved. Receiving religious sanction for their exploits through the Doctrine of Discovery, a series of papal decrees sanctioning colonization of the world, European empires conquered, enslaved, and/or extinguished native populations with impunity, laying claim to whatever wealth could be extracted from the land and making it a home for European immigrants and the establishment of colonies.<sup>16</sup> In their colonial adventures, European powers were aided by the flora, fauna, and germs they brought with them to the Americas, enabling a form of ecological imperialism that decimated, displaced, and disenfranchised native populations as well as native flora and fauna.<sup>17</sup>

The Dakota First Nations we associate with the Great Plains were inhabitants of Minnesota, the Dakotas, and the Great Plains in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, driven westward by colonization. At the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the Great Plains was considered *The Great American Desert*.<sup>18</sup> But with the flood of westward-bound pioneers, and the construction of the Trans-Continental Railroad, the area was increasingly recognized for its rich agricultural land. By the 1850s, Euro-Americans began settling west of the Mississippi. Treaties were made (forced upon) resident First Nations in the 1840s and 1850s, opening the lands of Iowa and Minnesota to Euro-American settlement. And by the time of the Civil War, the white settlement boundary was the Big Sioux River.

The Yankton Sioux Nation, part of the Nakota branch of Dakota nations, was at this time treating most of southeast South Dakota as their home and hunting ground. In 1858, the United States and the Yankton Sioux Nation signed a treaty ceding the southeast quarter of what would become South Dakota to the United States in exchange for a reservation in Charles Mix County along the Missouri River. While the Civil War of the 1860s and the so-called Dakota uprising of 1862 in Minnesota slowed the incursion of white settlers, when the Civil War was over, the land of southeast South

Dakota was surveyed in anticipation of white settlement. Dakota Territory was established in 1861, with its capital in Yankton, and South Dakota became a state in 1889.<sup>19</sup>

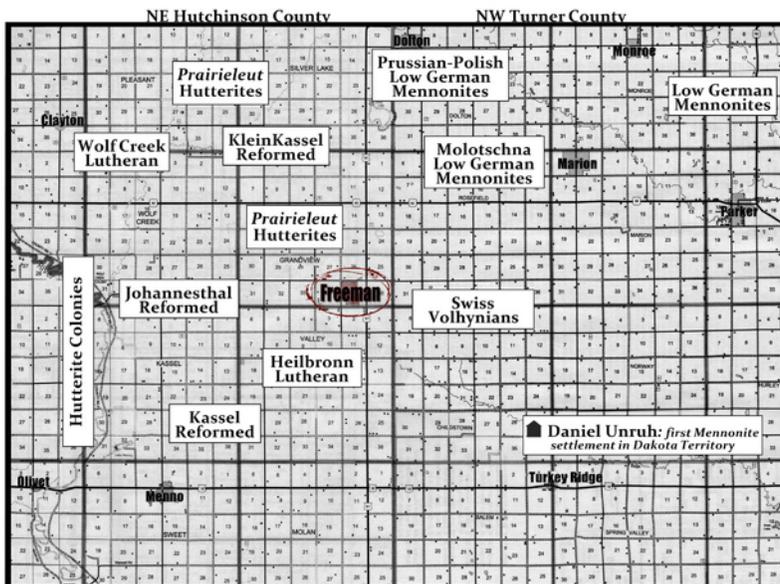
Thus the prairie, left undisturbed for thousands of years (with the exception of herds of herbivores crossing from time to time), was now invaded and destroyed by humans of European origin bent on subjecting the land to agricultural production, at the invitation and with the encouragement of the United States Government. Having *purchased* the land of Louisiana in 1803, and *taken* the land from the Yankton Sioux in 1858, the United States *gave* the land to white settlers through the agency of the Homestead Act of 1862, granting a quarter section (160 acres) of land to resident homesteaders who could make the land agriculturally productive. With this giving of the land to homesteaders, the United States did not relinquish claims of sovereignty over the land, despite the fiction of private property. And so, in the space of a few decades, the prairie that had existed for thousands of years as a stable and fruitful natural ecosystem, was destroyed and transformed into a settled agrarian landscape.

Aside from the injustice perpetrated by the disenfranchisement of aboriginal people, was this transformation from wild prairie to agrarian settlement a bad thing for the land? That depends on the wisdom, character and heritage of the agrarian cultures that claimed the land and settled on it. In any case, it was perhaps inevitable that the prairies would be plowed for agricultural use, just as tropical forests are destroyed by slash and burn to *purchase* a few years of crop production and food. Human beings generally subject all ecosystems to the demands of economy, wealth and power.

But it is one thing to *subsist* on the land, as Native American cultures and most traditional agrarian cultures around the world have done. It is another to *mine* the land for its agricultural productivity, as industrial agriculture has done in the past several decades. Many of the people that came to the Great Plains in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century arrived as part of immigrant agrarian village cultures, with a long history and tradition of economic subsistence. To be sure, these European agrarian cultures introduced from the start a much more invasive agricultural system than most Native American cultures had practiced. Yet, for the first two or three generations at least, these European agrarian cultures remained by and large subsistence

cultures. They did produce excess agricultural products to feed people in the cities and to improve their lands and farms, as agrarian cultures have done from the beginning of the Agricultural Revolution. But they remained integrally related to the land for those first generations, with an intimate and wise understanding of it, informed by their agrarian heritage and by their experience of living in this prairie environment.

Among the agrarian cultures that colonized the Freeman area in the 1870s were three Anabaptist cultures, two of which represent my own cultural heritage. Beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Anabaptism took the shape of local agrarian communities of faith, partly to escape persecution by the European powers among whom they lived, but also as an ancient strategy of coping with and providing an alternative to the dominant imperial cultures of urban civilization. It is a strategy at least as old as the formation of Israel as a decentralized Tribal Confederacy in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>20</sup> The unique Anabaptist emphases on discipleship (following Jesus in daily life), community as the manifestation of Christian redemption, and nonviolence as a strategy of resistance to imperial power, empowered these local Anabaptist cultures, inspiring and fostering their agrarian proclivities, which in turn reinforced their Anabaptist theology and value system.<sup>21</sup>



Settlements of the Germans from Russia in the Freeman Area

The three Anabaptist cultures that formed the Freeman community were Swiss Volhynian Amish, Low German or Dutch Mennonites, and the *Prarieleut* (Prairie People) non-communal branch of the Moravian Hutterites. The agrarian heritage of the Swiss Amish began in the Swiss Alps in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and continued for generations in the Rhine River valley, before moving east in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, working the land for Polish noblemen in Volhynia. Persecution drove many Dutch Mennonites eastward to the Baltic Sea coasts of Prussia as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, where they utilized their agrarian knowledge to settle the swamplands of the Vistula River, before also later (beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) migrating to the woodlands of Volhynia or the steppes of the Ukraine where rich agrarian Mennonite colonies took root along the Black Sea. The Hutterite movement began and thrived in the rich agricultural region of Moravia for decades until persecution drove them to Hungary, Transylvania, and Romania. A small band of surviving communal Hutterites found refuge in the Russian Empire in the 1770s, where they regrouped and grew and renewed their fellowship with Swiss and Dutch Anabaptists who were now also living in Russia.<sup>22</sup>

All these Anabaptist groups migrated as small, familial village and congregational entities, living (at least at times) as second class citizens on lands that noblemen or authorities wanted to have settled and colonized. They developed self-sustaining village economies and with their agricultural expertise provided goods and services in the lands that they were invited to inhabit. Germans of all kinds were invited to Russia by Catherine the Great. She wanted German people to colonize lands recently conquered north of the Black Sea from the Turkish Empire.

Low German, Swiss and Hutterite colonists in Russia and Volhynia were granted virtual autonomy, allowed to retain the German language, religious beliefs, customs and educational patterns. But by the 1870s the Russian Empire was engaged in a process of Russianization, which provided the *push* that drove thousands of Anabaptists to leave for the United States and Canada in the 1870s. At the same time, the American Empire was beginning the process of colonizing the Great Plains. The nation was seeking Christian peasants from Europe who could settle the area. This was the *pull* that brought the three Anabaptist groups to America in the 1870s.<sup>23</sup>

These Anabaptist agrarian cultures came to America with their cultural

heritage of faith and agriculture intact. They came as village and church communities with a long history of making their life together in a wide variety of ecological settings—steep mountain slopes, cleared forest land, rich rolling hills, alluvial plains, reclaimed sea and swamp land, and high steppes. They had every intention of maintaining their Germanic, Anabaptist, agrarian culture and life here in North America. But the homestead settlement pattern—160 acres per household, precluded them from settling in villages. Now they were scattered in isolated homesteads across the prairie. Perhaps related family members would seek land claims near each other, but that wasn't always possible, and even when it was, it wasn't like living next door to your neighbors and going out to your fields, as their village life in Russia allowed them to do. In those settings it was much easier to develop a self-sustaining village economy utilizing all the gifts and skills needed for the crafts and small industries required.

The land the immigrant pioneers came to in the 1870s was undisturbed virgin prairie. The buffalo that had dominated the prairie ecology for centuries had been nearly exterminated by white hunters, intent on depriving First Nations of their livelihood, so the prairie ecosystem was no longer intact. But the prairie itself was unbroken, a vast sea of grasses and forbs periodically renewed by lightning-ignited fires that renewed the prairie while wiping out any emerging trees but those along streams and lakes. Dominated by big bluestem grasses higher than a human being, the prairie presented a vast vista ---a sea of grass-- reaching the horizon in every direction. It is still possible to see the horizon 20 or 30 miles away on the higher points of the landscape.

It was nevertheless a harsh and brutal environment for early settlers. There were four definite seasons, with fierce blizzards in winter lasting for days and amassing huge drifts. Blazing mid-day suns of summer scorched and withered all but the hardiest prairie plants with their roots reaching through topsoil often six feet deep and harboring whatever moisture scarce rainfall bestowed. Spring and fall were brief pleasant interludes between the extremes of summer and winter. Yet despite the harshness of the environment, the prairie supported a vast array of life, from the grasses and forbs that flowered and brought glorious color to the prairie in spring and fall, to the vast array of songbirds and waterfowl that inhabited the streams and

sloughs, to the fish and amphibians of the rivers and streams, to the full range of mammalian life that inhabited every ecosystem.

The land that became the Freeman community was ideally suited for agriculture, lying on a fairly flat and level plain, extending from Menno in the southwest to Parker in the northeast; from Bridgewater in the northwest to Hurley in the southeast. Only Turkey Ridge on the southern parameters of the community breaks the flat terrain of the prairie. One also finds drainage waterways, with frequent sloughs because of the flat land. Quite accidentally, the town of Freeman itself was built near the top of three watersheds, with water flowing north and east to the Vermillion River on the east side of town--west to the James River on the west side. Turkey Ridge Creek drained the land to the southeast. All these watersheds can be seen on one spot about two miles south of Freeman simply by turning your gaze 360 degrees.

There are also two natural lakes in this area--Silver Lake north of Freeman and Swan Lake south of Hurley. The flatness of the prairie is broken into rugged gullies, bluffs and gulches along Turkey Ridge Creek in the southeast, Wolf Creek in the northwest, and the West Vermillion River in the northeast. These are the only permanent waterways and woodlands in the area, with native oak and majestic cottonwoods. Here the land was also most suitable for domestic cattle grazing, though much of it has been put to the plow. Here and there, especially on the edge of the Turkey Ridge Creek valley, the glaciers left such an abundance of rocks that the land has never been cleared and plowed. But most of the area was one vast grassland that in the 1870s had been neatly surveyed and laid out in sections and quarter sections, each marked with a metal pin in the corner, ready to be claimed and put to the plow by eager pioneers.

The three Anabaptist cultures that immigrated to the Great Plains in the 1870s each found their geographic niche. Hutterian *Prairieleut* settled west of what became Freeman toward the James River; Swiss Volhynians settled southeast of Freeman toward and along Turkey Ridge Creek; Low German/Dutch Mennonites settled northeast of Freeman around Silver Lake and the West Vermillion River. Though they shared an Anabaptist faith and Germanic cultural identity, each group had its own dialects, food and heritage, so while they often cooperated, they also saw each other as rivals. Their best effort at cooperation was the establishment of South Dakota Mennonite College in

1900, later known as Freeman Jr. College and Academy.<sup>24</sup>

On this vast prairie grassland, in 1874, there were no roads and no human infrastructure other than surveyor markings of the quarter sections. The immigrants arrived in the area by train, disembarking at Yankton, the nearest railroad terminal, after an arduous, usually month-long sea journey from Europe. In Yankton the families purchased teams of oxen, ploughs, wagons, perhaps a milk cow and some chickens. They then began the 30 plus mile hike to the prairie land they intended to claim, fording the James River north of Yankton.

In the summer and fall of 1874, the settlers scarcely had time to build rough houses (made from the prairie sod they began to break)--much less grow crops--before the first harsh, devastating winter of 1874/1875 fell upon them. But for the financial generosity of Mennonites and Amish in the eastern United States (who also provided wheat for flour), this newly born prairie community would not have survived those first years. As it was, they survived winter and summer storms, prairie fires, grasshopper plagues, and droughts, by the skin of their teeth. They were the first, or very nearly the first, European settlers in the area.

It was inevitable that the settlers would break the prairie with the plow. After all, they were farmers with a centuries-long agricultural heritage. Their stock in trade was raising annual crops and vegetables for food and animal feed. Such annual crops could only be planted in soil that had been cleared, or in this case plowed, which meant the destruction of the prairie.

Annual crops were in fact a dicey proposition on the eastern edge of the Great Plains. West of the Missouri River, for example, most of the land remains undeveloped, suitable only for cattle grazing, with an annual rainfall of 20 inches.<sup>25</sup> Even on the eastern edge, where rainfall amounts are higher, immigrant farmers had to plant crops, especially corn, more sparingly than in regions of the Corn Belt to the east. This was a border region between the land of the farmer and the land of the rancher, that ancient tension reflected in the history of the American West and in the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4.

Nevertheless, the agrarian cultures of the Freeman community succeeded in establishing a fairly successful and somewhat sustainable agricultural economy during the first half of their 150-year sojourn on this land. Although

the land was farmed too intensively and the soil exposed to erosion and loss of carbon through oxidation, the farms were relatively small and quite diversified, both in terms of crop rotation and animal husbandry.

Every farm had not only gardens, orchards, and field crops, but also an abundance of livestock, including beef and dairy cattle, hogs, sheep, and poultry. Thus, a good bit of the land remained in pasture for grazing and haylands (the latter was often rotated with field crops--small grain and corn). Tree lots planted as part of homestead claims or to shelter homesteads soon provided fuel.

The homestead claims provided by the United States Government were extensively utilized. I studied a 16-section area of north-central Childstown Township of Turner County and found that at least three and often four quarters of every section of land was settled and claimed via homestead claims. Initially, a quarter section of land was more than enough to occupy and sustain a farm family with the kind of agricultural economy described above. There was even enough land for second and third generations to settle on. If one overlooks the disenfranchisement of First Nations peoples, the 1862 Homestead Act of the United States was indeed a fairly radical land tenure arrangement.

As noted, for many years the agrarian cultures that made up the Freeman community were largely subsistence economies. The first goal was to produce enough crops and animals to allow families to survive. Essential goods and services were supplied by members of the community with requisite skills and abilities. As the goal of survival was achieved, the farms and the community used the surplus to improve operations and to develop a variety of community institutions, as well as to provide food and raw materials for emerging cities in the area—Sioux Falls, Yankton, and Mitchell. The building of a railroad line between Marion to northern Nebraska in 1879 gave birth to the town of Freeman and provided both a market for the community's produce and the goods and services needed for the community's growth.

A healthy prairie farm ecology requires that soil be disturbed as little as possible and kept covered at all times. This farm ecology requires a wide diversity of plant and animal species, a soil filled with living roots, and an integrated livestock component.<sup>26</sup> The first two requirements were violated

by settlers from the very beginning in the way that the prairie was broken as well as the introduction of annual crops. Other requirements of a sustainable prairie farm ecology were violated with the industrialization of agriculture following World War II. Even crop rotations were abandoned in favor of monoculture corn and soybean production. The natural ecology of the soil was replaced with chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides, and ultimately with the introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). And livestock production was removed from the context of a diversified farm and limited to feedlots and indoor confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs), redolent with waste, disease, and inhumane treatment of livestock. All this was done in the name of efficiency and profit. Farms no longer were in the business of raising food for consumption at the local and/or state level. They were now producing commodities for a global market. This was promoted by the U.S. Government and multinational corporations that controlled both agricultural inputs and markets. Technocratic bureaucrats dictated what technologies should be used for agricultural production.<sup>27</sup>

The land was now no longer seen as the partner and teacher of agrarian culture. Now the land was seen as an economic medium required for industrial production of commodities for a global market. The destruction of the land that began with the breaking of the prairie was completed as the soil was lost through water and wind erosion and killed as a living organism with compaction caused by use of large equipment, chemical poisoning, and loss of carbon to the atmosphere that was necessary for healthy soil.

The death of the land also brought forms of death to the human community that lived upon the land. As farms grew larger to compete with each other, the communal bonds and ethical constraints that had guided communal life and traditional farming methods were undermined and replaced with an economic bottom line of profit. Theologically, the Anabaptist churches were heavily influenced by Protestant Fundamentalism, in which correct doctrine often and eternal salvation replaced discipleship and community as the heart of the Christian faith, further undermining the agrarian values of the community.<sup>28</sup> The population of the community plummeted to nearly half what it had been at its height in the 1930s, with the population loss most severe in the farming sector.<sup>29</sup>

At its height in the 1950s, the landscape of the Freeman community

reflected a bucolic agrarian scene. The countryside was filled with prosperous farms, usually several in every section of land. The farms were served by county and township governments and all-weather roads, rural mail and telephone service, and (since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century) rural electric service, with rural water and fiber-optic telecommunication infrastructure to follow. The farms were nearly all fenced so livestock might graze on permanent pastures as well as harvested crop land. Nearly all farms were sheltered by stands of trees, and often orchards.

The farms themselves had framed houses, usually a large barn that was used for horses and dairies, and smaller barns for poultry and hogs, along with granaries to store crops and sometimes machine sheds for farm equipment. Silos were common on many farms. Small tractors capable of pulling a two or three bottom plow had largely replaced the horse-drawn equipment used earlier. But there was usually a variegated patchwork of fields, some in permanent pasture, some planted with hay, others with small grains, corn, and sometimes other specialty crops, all planted in various crop rotations. Nearly every farm had a small dairy of a dozen or more cows. That, along with flocks of several hundred chickens, provided basic farm income via the sale of cream and eggs.

Unfortunately, this bucolic agricultural landscape was not sustainable. The land showed the effects of wind and water erosion, being so often exposed to the elements. Too much of the land was devoted to annual crops. Just as seriously, this agricultural economy could not accommodate the growth of the community. Instead of staying on the farm, young people went to college for an education, and then to the city to pursue careers. Freeman's agricultural economy was not sustainable ecologically or socially.

Today the landscape of the Freeman community is very different. There are frequently no farms in a section of land, and rarely more than one, though nearly every section has one or two former farmsteads, usually deserted, sometimes the rural residences of off-farm workers. More and more abandoned farmsteads, along with trees that sheltered them, are being bulldozed to create another acre or two of monoculture cropland. Most of the fences are gone, as livestock (mostly poultry and swine) are now placed in feedlots or in confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs). These dot the landscape, typically distant from residences, due to their intense odor.

Cropland fields are often now quarter- or half-section in size, primarily fields of corn and soybeans, the two main monoculture commodity crops now raised.

The fields themselves are often now visited just twice a year, often by non-resident renters, once in spring when the GMO-treated crops are planted and the chemicals and fertilizers applied, and once in the fall when the crop is harvested. Both planting and harvesting are accomplished with immense machines that can scarcely maneuver even in the large fields and still less along the country lanes leading to the fields. It is an increasingly sterile landscape, devoid of the wild places that used to persist along fencerows or waterways. The farms that do persist are often exposed to the elements, with only a few trees surrounding a modern ranch-style home, and the only outbuildings huge machine sheds and complex clusters of grain bins (where grain for the global market is stored). Seldom does one find even a small garden by these rural homes.

These farms are also causing global warming and climate change via the petroleum used to power farm equipment as well as by the carbon that escapes from the barren, inert dirt of the fields that no longer the root systems to build and hold the carbon. Confined animal feeding operations add to global warming by concentrating animal wastes that pollute ground water and are artificially dispersed back to the fields. Climate change in turn is a threat to the land itself, hastening the desertification that has typically followed the *civilized* invasion of land, in this case through the industrialization of agriculture. Ironically, only a regenerative agriculture has the possibility of reversing and ameliorating the effects of climate change so evident throughout the world.<sup>30</sup>

It wouldn't have to be this way! The original prairie of the tall-grass ecology is irrevocably gone, never to be restored except in small tracts. The human presence is here to stay! But the land itself could be restored to a regenerative agricultural environment sustaining local agrarian cultures that might repopulate the land.

The original agrarian cultures that settled this land 150 years ago made many mistakes, but they also got some things right. Their agrarian heritage of faith and culture was infused with ethical values that respected the land and the life that grew upon it, seeing the land as the gift of a gracious God for the

welfare of all humankind. They sought, as best they could, to be taught by the land itself. They understood their vocation to be that of raising food for the human family, their own families, to be sure, but also the larger society in which they lived. Their farms were small and diversified, requiring a large input of human labor and care.

It is these kinds of agrarian cultures that might reclaim and renew the land now so devastated by industrial agriculture. They might hold the land in community farmland trusts that preserve the land in permanent regenerative agricultural easements for the common good of the community. Such cultures would work together to develop local and regional food systems on small farms dedicated to producing and processing food for their communities and their region. These farms would return to the agricultural methods required for a regenerative agriculture—limited soil disturbance, permanent soil armor, diversity of crops and animals, the feeding of living prairie roots, and integrated livestock operations.

In this way, much of the land would be returned to grass for grazing and hay production, mimicking the original prairie ecosystem. Some annual crops for food and animal feed would be planted, with care not to leave the soil exposed. Permaculture crops would be planted and harvested whenever possible. The small towns of the area would continue to provide the infrastructure needed to serve these small farms with goods and services, including health, education, faith, financial, retail, industrial and local governmental institutions, but also with processing and marketing facilities.

In the meantime, we can only mourn the loss of the land that was -- the vast land of the original prairie stretching to the horizon in every direction--but also the land that was squandered and despoiled by the devastation of industrial agriculture. We can only mourn the loss of the human cultures that knew and loved this land—the aboriginal peoples who traversed and used this land for thousands of years, and the immigrant European cultures that were lured to settle and colonize the land for the empires of civilization in the last 150 years.

May our mourning not be in vain! May the spiritual values and the faith heritage of all the peoples who have known and loved this land be restored in the creation of new agrarian cultures that honor and love and learn from this ancient land, shaped so carefully through the epochs of the past to be

prepared for the human presence that has come to live upon it! May there be a flowering of all these agrarian cultures so that the land may once more find its destiny in a new and abundant prairie ecology, rife with natural and human life of every kind! Otherwise, we mourn in vain for the land that has been lost, for the land that we have loved!

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> John Paul Gries, *Roadside Geology of South Dakota*, Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1996, 57, 63, 89.
- <sup>2</sup> Stephen J. Lavin, et al., *Atlas of the Great Plains*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011, 18, for a map defining the boundaries of the Great Plains.
- <sup>3</sup> Anonymous quote in Tom Dale and Vernon Gill Carter, *Topsoil and Civilization*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Toronto: McClellan and Stewart Limited, 1961, 6.
- <sup>4</sup> Brian Swimme & Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*, San Francisco: Harper, 1992, 60-61.
- <sup>5</sup> Swimme & Berry., 93, 270.
- <sup>6</sup> Petr Jakeš, *Living Planet Earth*, Prague: Aventium, 1994, 68-69.
- <sup>7</sup> Candace Savage, *Prairie: A Natural History*, Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2004, 34.
- <sup>8</sup> Gries, *Roadside Geology*, 10-11.
- <sup>9</sup> Savage, *Prairie*, 51.
- <sup>10</sup> Savage, *Prairie*, 53.
- <sup>11</sup> Savage, *Prairie*, 8.
- <sup>12</sup> Gries, *Roadside Geology*, 15, 57.
- <sup>13</sup> Swimme & Berry, *Universe Story*, 270-272.
- <sup>14</sup> Ron Robinson, *The Village on the Bluff: Prehistoric Farmers/Hunters of the James River Valley*, Sioux Falls: Archaeological Laboratory, Augustana College, 2011, 17.
- <sup>15</sup> Robinson, *The Village*, 46.
- <sup>16</sup> S. Roy Kaufman, *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle: It's Prehistory, Birth, Growth, Maturity, Decline, and Rebirth.*, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, Chapter 2, for a documented history of the colonization of the Great Plains.
- <sup>17</sup> Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2004.
- <sup>18</sup> Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981, 152-160.
- <sup>19</sup> Kaufman, *Drama*, chapter 2, for an account of the disenfranchisement of First Nations.
- <sup>20</sup> S. Roy Kaufman, *Healing God's Earth: Rural Community in the Context of Urban Civilization*, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013, Chapters 7 and 8.
- <sup>21</sup> S. Roy Kaufman, "The Agrarian Heritage of Anabaptism," 2021 publication in *Anabaptist Remix: The Varieties of Cultural Engagement*, 2021, Lauren Friesen and Dennis Stoesz, eds., New York: Peter Lang, for an exploration of the way the Anabaptist vision informed and shaped Anabaptist agrarian cultures.
- <sup>22</sup> *Three Groups, One Story: The Journey that Built a South Dakota Community*, DVD pro-

duced by Heritage Hall Museum and Archives, Freeman, SD, in 2018. This dvd provides an introduction to the European history of these three Anabaptist groups, as well as Kaufman, *The Drama*, chapter 3.

<sup>23</sup> Kaufman, *The Drama*, Chapter 3 and 4, for a more extended discussion of this immigration.

<sup>24</sup> Kaufman, *The Drama*, Chapter 4, for a description of the Russian-German settlements around Freeman.

<sup>25</sup> Lavin, *Atlas*, 41.

<sup>26</sup> These five principles of soil health are described in Gabe Brown, *Dirt to Soil: One Family's Journey into Regenerative Agriculture*, White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2018, 1-3, and throughout the book.

<sup>27</sup> Kaufman, *The Drama*, Chapter 7, for an exposition of industrial agriculture in the Freeman community.

<sup>28</sup> Kaufman, *The Drama*, 125, 142-143, 230, 243, for a discussion of the influence of Fundamentalist

theology on the agrarian cultural life of Anabaptist congregations.

<sup>29</sup> Kaufman, *The Drama*, 171.

<sup>30</sup> Maynard Kaufman, *Collected Agrarian Writings*, Bangor: Helianthus Press, 2020, Chapter V: Coping with Climate Change, particularly the essays "Raising Food in a Changing Climate," "Carbon Sequestration, Naturally," "Hubris and Humus," and "Homesteading in a Changing Climate."

