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## Virtually Constructing a Great Plains: Booster Impacts on Plains Viewing

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# Virtually Constructing a *Great Plains*

## *Booster Impacts on Plains Viewing*

Christina Dando

**ABSTRACT**—The placemaking of the Great Plains was as much perception as it was physical: a significant element was how Americans “saw” or “viewed” the region. To promote settlement of the Great Plains, boosters created and circulated written and visual images to “sell” Americans and immigrants on this region. In this article, I examine the visual images of the Plains (ca. 1890–1930) in booster brochures and compare and contrast them with images found in early Plains dwellers’ photograph albums. These images impacted the place perceptions of the people that came to live and work the Plains, in what John Urry calls the “circle of representation.” That is to say the visual images of the Plains that the settlers encountered before they arrived impacted how they framed the region.

**Key Words:** booster brochures, Great Plains, place perception, place promotion, settlers’ photograph albums

### Introduction

In bountiful fields, the men are posed, the rich crops surrounding them (Figs. 1 and 2). Both are pleasing images, suggesting the photographers thoughtfully framed each. But Figure 1 is from a Montana booster brochure, *The Huntley Irrigation Project* (1911?), designed to sell land. Figure 2 is a photograph taken by a North Dakota homesteader. Is it a coincidence that the images are similar? As I have worked with historic photographs of the Plains—from booster brochures and from settler photograph albums—I have been struck by similarities between the two, leading me to wonder, did booster brochures influence how Plains people came to see the region?

The placemaking of the Great Plains was as much perception as it was physical: a significant element was how Americans “saw” or “viewed” the region. To pro-

mote settlement of the Great Plains, boosters created and circulated images to sell Americans and immigrants on the region. These images affected the place perceptions of the people who came to live and work in the Plains. Sociologist John Urry, in his work on tourism and mobility (Urry and Larsen 2011), suggests that a “circle of representation” occurs when tourists take photographs of the same places and settings represented in promotional literature. That is, promotional images shape how tourists “see” these landscapes (Figure 3). In the late 1800s, land sales brochures were created to influence potential buyers’ perceptions of the region and to convince them of the region’s great agricultural potential. But what is the result of these promotions besides land sales? Did this rhetoric influence how the people who came to live here *viewed* the Plains? In this article I analyze the visual rhetoric of booster brochures (1890–1930) of the northern Great Plains (the Dakotas, Kansas, Montana, and Nebraska) and compare and contrast it with the visual tropes (tropes are recurring figures of speeches, motifs, or imagery, with connota-

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Figure 1. From *The Huntley Irrigation Project* (1911?), Northern Pacific Railroad Company, Advertising and Publicity Department Records, Minnesota Historical Society (134.L.17.38). Caption reads: "Second year from sage brush. Oats which yielded 120 bushels an acre."



Figure 2. "Frank." Elizabeth Roberts Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck (COL 3-89). Roberts was an amateur photographer who used a mass-produced panoramic camera very effectively to capture her southwestern North Dakota landscape.

tions above and beyond literal meaning) found in early Plains dwellers' photograph albums.

### Awash in Images

While most Americans today would agree we are "awash in images," this is not a recent phenomenon, as the United States has been "awash" for well over 100 years (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 5). Land companies, railroads, state governments, and the United States government created and circulated line drawings and photographs to promote settlement of the Plains. Pamphlets published in the 1870s and 1880s employed simple line drawings. As technology made it possible to print photographs, they were added to brochures, beginning in the 1890s (Miller 1988). Promoters were well aware "illustrating a

text greatly strengthened readers' interest" (Kinsey 1996, 91). A short brochure, printed on both sides of a piece of paper and then folded, could feature anywhere from one photograph to more than ten. A multipage stapled brochure could have forty pages and more than forty photographs. A booster brochure in book form could have over 100 pages and over 100 images.

Despite the pervasiveness of photographs in promotional brochures, researchers have not examined these booster images in detail. To investigate these images and their implications, I began with an overview of work on booster literature before addressing relevant research on both iconic images and tourism photography. While tourism photography may seem unrelated, I found an established link between booster images and tourism through Urry's "circle of representation" (Urry and Lars-

en 2011, 176–80). I believe that booster images are like promotional tourism images and impact how people see their destinations, resulting in a “circle of representation.”

### *Booster Images of the Plains*

Booster narratives of the Plains are well documented and analyzed. David Emmons’s *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains* (1971) was the first major work studying the promotion of the central Great Plains in Kansas and Nebraska and its construction of the region as “garden.” Similarly, Jan Blodgett examined promotion of the Texas panhandle in *Land of Bright Promise* (1988). Both Emmons and Blodgett discussed promotional messages but did not examine the images used to illustrate the promotional materials.

G. Malcolm Lewis, Brad Baltensperger, Karen De Bres, and David Wrobel all examined aspects of Plains promotion. Lewis focused on the rhetoric used in the texts of emigrant guides and promotional literature (1988). Baltensperger examined how Plains promoters employed the Plains as “desert myth” in their rhetoric (1992). De Bres explored the depiction of the Kansas climate in promotional literature and how promoters appealed to audiences who wanted to believe there was no desert because humans had transformed the climate (2003). Wrobel examined promotional texts and found that even before 1890, the frontier was being depicted as closed, already a domesticated garden of farmsteads and fields (2002). Nearly all promoters presented their lands as “superior to other lands” and highlighted climate, agriculture, education, and churches as “havens of culture” (Wrobel 2002, 35). After 1890, Wrobel found that while there were some of the same basic themes, they were “more explicit about the need for prospective settlers to bring capital, technological expertise, and a good work ethic than the earlier promotional tracts had been” (Wrobel 2002, 66). He also found increased “scientific data” and emphasis on new technologies, such as irrigation, dryland farming, and mechanization (Wrobel 2002, 56, 68).

For the most part, the above researchers analyzed texts, illustrating their work with booster line-drawings and photographs but with which they were seldom engaged, with a few exceptions. Stephen Ward, for example, analyzed a fascinating poster of “Miss South Dakota” from the South Dakota Immigration Department, where the state is personified as an elegantly attired young woman being presented by her “Uncle Sam”

to “an admiring male world” (1998, 20–23). “Miss South Dakota” holds a scroll depicting images of some of South Dakota’s new institutions, while around her are “tokens” of the state’s achievements. Wrobel briefly discussed a Kansas promotional image and maps as well as provided a gallery of images with descriptive captions, including an illustration by Henry Worrall (Wrobel 2002, 35–36). Only De Bres analyzed images as the focus of an article, examining Henry Worrall’s illustrations which used caricature and humor to promote Kansas, mythologizing Kansas’s frontier in a style closer to editorial cartoons (De Bres 2007). In my review, I found no systematic study of booster images as a body of work.

Beginning in 1857, early booster brochures employed engravings “quite deliberately to reinforce a much more positive image” (Ward 1998, 17). When photomechanical processes allowed the reproduction of photographs, beginning around 1890, promoters were quick to wield this new medium. Photographs offered an edge over engravings in that they were associated with “truth,” serving as visual evidence of their subject matter (Edge 2004, 18). In a region such as the Great Plains, where positive (garden) and negative (desert) images of the region were widely available, photographs that supported booster claims were offered as visual proof of the region’s great productivity (Shorridge 1997, 116; Allen 1985). Oren Meyers writes:

[F]irst, photography enabled people and societies to create a chronological continuity of their private and public histories. Second, the invention of photography redefined the boundaries of acquired knowledge. Third, the vast spread of photography created visual icons that are perceived as being able to capture both a passing fragment of reality, and at the same time, point to a broader picture. (2002, 184)

For this study, I worked with a sample of 40 booster brochures that included nearly 800 images (see Table 1). Few brochures employed just a single image as an illustration, with most having 25 or more images. Boosters may have believed that multiple photographs offered a broader picture and presented unquestionable fact.

Research on the power or impact of multiple photographs is well recognized: “Multiple images reveal repetition and change, pattern and surprise—the defining elements in the idea of information” (Tufte 1997, 105). Multiple images invite comparisons among images, give depth to vision, and even represent and suggest sequences of motion. As Edward Tufte writes: “Multiples



TABLE 1. Booster publications used in this study.

Date	State	Title	Publisher	#No. of Pages	#No. of Figures	Source
1893	SD	<i>Souvenir of South Dakota</i>	State of South Dakota	36	16	<a href="http://sddigitalarchives.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/manuscript/id/78">http://sddigitalarchives.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/manuscript/id/78</a>
1893	SD	<i>The Next Big City Sisseton</i>	Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad	11	5	<a href="http://www.archive.org/details/sissetongeograpooompgoog">http://www.archive.org/details/sissetongeograpooompgoog</a>
1896	KS	<i>A Kansas Souvenir</i>	Kansas Immigration and Information Association	163	215	<a href="http://www.archive.org/details/kansassouvenirbookkans">http://www.archive.org/details/kansassouvenirbookkans</a>
1897	KS	<i>A Farm Out West.</i>	Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad	22	16	<a href="http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/1412">www.kansasmemory.org/item/1412</a>
1899	NE	<i>The Truth About Nebraska.</i>	Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company	11	13	Nebraska State Historical Society (917.82 B924)
1900	SD	<i>South Dakota.</i>	G.H. Perry Land Company, Sioux Falls SD	1 (large sheet folded )	4	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 58–1403)
1900	SD	<i>Land of Bread and Butter</i>	Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad	24	14	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 58–1400)
1900	MT	<i>Montana Agriculturally Considered</i>	Montana Experimental Station	84	15	<a href="http://www.archive.org/details/montanaagricultuooemer">http://www.archive.org/details/montanaagricultuooemer</a>
1902	MT	<i>Reliable Information about Montana</i>	Great Northern Railway	63	9	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 58–1537)
1902	KS	<i>Kansas and Her Resources</i>	Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad	69	16	<a href="http://www.archive.org/details/kansasherresourcoocobu">http://www.archive.org/details/kansasherresourcoocobu</a>
1903	NE	<i>Nebraska's Resources Illustrated.</i>	Nebraska Farmer Company, Omaha NE	140	41	<a href="http://www.archive.org/details/nebraskaoonebr">http://www.archive.org/details/nebraskaoonebr</a>
1904?	SD	<i>South Dakota and Its Homesteads</i>	Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway	1 (large sheet folded)	2	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 58–1408)
1905	ND	<i>North Dakota: Finest Agricultural Land in the World</i>	Great Northern Railway	40	81	Nebraska State Historical Society (917.84 R13)
1908	MT	<i>The Great Judith Basin</i>	Great Northern Railway	16	18	Montana Historical Society, Montana Memory Project (PAM 1357)
1908?	SD	<i>A Million Acres</i>	Chicago & North Western Railroad Company	14	9	Nebraska State Historical Society (978.3 C48m)
1909?	KS	<i>Farms and Ranches for Sale by the Level Land Realty Company</i>	Level Land Realty Company, Bird City KS	18	20	<a href="http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/220803">http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/220803</a>
1909	ND	<i>Out They Go: Prosperous North Dakota</i>	Wm. H. Brown Company, Chicago IL	32	71	State Historical Society of North Dakota (Rare Book 978.48 B815)
1909?	SD, WY, NE	<i>North Western Homesteads</i>	Chicago & North Western Railway	47	40	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 08–1504)
1909	MT	<i>Valier, Mont.: A High Grade Project for High Grade People</i>	Clinton, Hurtt & Company, Chicago IL	23	36	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 57–3261)
1910	ND	<i>Western North Dakota</i>	Northern Pacific Railway	45	30	Nebraska State Historical Society (917.84 R13)
191?	MT	<i>Souvenir Farm Views of Gallatin Valley Montana</i>	H.S. Buell Land Company, Bozeman MT	1 (large sheet folded)	7	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 57–3227)

Date	State	Title	Publisher	#No. of Pages	#No. of Figures	Source
191?	MT	<i>Valier Irrigation Project</i>	Clinton, Hurtt & Co., Valier MT	29	1	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 57-3263)
191?	MT	<i>Up to Their Necks in Wheat</i>	Gortemoller Land Co., Helena MT	12	3	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 58-1519)
1911?	MT	<i>Huntley Irrigation Project</i>	Northern Pacific Railroad	12	14	Minnesota Historical Society (Northern Pacific Railroad Company, Advertising and Publicity Department Records 134.L.17.3B)
1911	MT	<i>Big Timber Project in the Famous Sweet Grass District of the Upper Yellowstone Valley, Montana</i>	Glass Brothers Land Company, Big Timber MT	35	47	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 57-3265)
1915	MT	<i>Montana Free Homestead Land</i>	Great Northern Railway	14?	10	Minnesota Historical Society (Northern Pacific Railroad Company Records HE 2791 .G7)
1915	SD	<i>Corn is King in South Dakota</i>	South Dakota Department of Immigration, Pierre SD	32	15	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 58-1396)
1919?	ND	<i>North Dakota Invites New Settlers</i>	Department of Immigration, State of North Dakota	19	3	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 58-1381)
1919	KS	<i>Kansas</i>	United States Railroad Administration	36	36	<a href="http://www.archive.org/details/kansasoounit">http://www.archive.org/details/ kansasoounit</a>
1919	NE	<i>Nebraska</i>	United States Railroad Administration	35	34	<a href="http://www.archive.org/details/nebraskaoounit">http://www.archive.org/details/ nebraskaoounit</a>
1919	ND	<i>North Dakota</i>	United States Railroad Administration	32	44	<a href="http://www.archive.org/details/northdakotaounit">http://www.archive.org/details/ northdakotaounit</a>
1919	SD	<i>South Dakota</i>	United States Railroad Administration	35	41	<a href="http://www.archive.org/details/southdakotaounit">http://www.archive.org/details/ southdakotaounit</a>
192?	NE	<i>Thurston County Nebraska</i>	Thurston County Real Estate Board	20	50	Nebraska State Historical Society (917.8297 T544c)
1922	MT	<i>Judith Basin</i>	Lewiston Chamber of Commerce	65	81	Montana Historical Society, Montana Memory Project (PAM 1357)
1925?	MT	<i>Wibaux County in the New Corn Belt</i>	Northern Pacific Railway	15	21	Minnesota Historical Society (Northern Pacific Railroad Company, Advertising and Publicity Depart- ment Records 138.H.4.2F Folder 11)
1925?	MT	<i>Prairie County in the New Corn Belt</i>	Northern Pacific Railway	15	19	Minnesota Historical Society (Northern Pacific Railroad Company, Advertising and Publicity Depart- ment Records 138.H.4.2F Folder 11)
1925?	ND	<i>North Dakota: Best of the West</i>	Department of Immigration, State of North Dakota	32	40	Wisconsin State Historical Society (Pamphlet Collection 58-1383)
1927	NE	<i>Sherman County Nebraska</i>	Burlington Northern Railroad Company	20	53	Nebraska State Historical Society (917.8292 S553c)
1927	ND	<i>The Biennial Report of the Department of Immigration</i>	Department of Immigration, State of North Dakota	22	14	<a href="http://www.discovery.lib.harvard.edu">www://discovery.lib.harvard.edu</a>
1928?	ND, MT	<i>Through the Fertile Northwest</i>	Northern Pacific Railroad	23	17	Minnesota Historical Society (Northern Pacific Railroad Company Records HE 2791 .N8)



Figure 3. Cover of brochure entitled *Up to Their Necks in Wheat* (1910s?) for the Gortemoller Land Company of Helena MT, Wisconsin Historical Society, Image Number WHI-113482 (Pamphlet 58–1519).

amplify, intensify, and reinforce the meaning of images” (Tufte 1997, 105). Most booster brochures contained multiple images but certain images were frequently repeated, such as ripe fields or an orchard heavy with fruit, to a point where they became essentially iconic.

#### *Iconic Images—Constructing a Great Plains*

By “iconic,” I refer to images so pervasive that most Americans are familiar with them even if they have never seen the original, such as Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* or Americans raising the flag on Iwo Jima. Robert Hariman and John Lucaites in *No Caption Needed* drew on visual rhetoric in their examination of iconic photographs and the ways in which political action can be constituted and controlled through visual media (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 5). For Hariman and Lucaites, iconic images are those famous media pictures that many Americans can readily name and bring to mind, such the Iwo Jima image (6). These images then echo in more contemporary moments, such as the invoking of Iwo Jima when firefighters raised a flag at ground zero of the World Trade Center. These images provide more than just a visual argument but also offer, according to Hariman and Lucaites, five “vectors of influence . . . reproducing ideology, communicating

social knowledge, shaping collective memory, modeling citizenship, and providing figural resources for communicative action” (9).

Visually commonplace, iconic images operate like stock figures (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 2). “Stock” images, found in advertisements, on greeting cards, and in family albums, are familiar, such as the picture of the Thanksgiving turkey on the table or the new college graduate posed in cap and gown. They are recognizable, drawing on conventions of art and society (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 29). And they can appear in a wide variety of media, such as advertising, newspapers, artistic works, films, and snapshots (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 26). Stock landscape images might be a classic image of a farm with a white farmhouse and a red barn, a lush garden or public park, a bountiful orchard, or a strikingly beautiful wilderness.

Multiple images of a similar landscape—fields, for instance—often “blur” into a single stock image. One stock Plains image features individuals posed in crop-rich fields. I call these “Up to Their Necks” images, after a brochure with the title “Up to Their Necks in Wheat” (Figure 3). My sample includes over 30 examples from brochures of people standing in fields or “Up to Their Necks.” On one hand, each photograph is unique, but

on the other, they resonate with each other, producing a stock image of an iconic Great Plains view.

### *Tourism Photography*

Research in tourism on the effect of pre-trip images on tourists' perceptions and images of the destinations is also useful in understanding booster images. Like booster images, tourism images are designed to encourage consumers to go to a location and spend money, albeit for short terms rather than long term. Extensive work has been done on tourism images and their implications, most notably by John Urry, who proposed in 1990 a "circle of representation" (also called "hermeneutic circle") (Figure 4):

What is sought for in a holiday is a set of photography images which have already been seen in brochures, TV programmes, blogs and social networking sites. . . . While the tourist is away, this then moves to tracking down and capturing those images for oneself. And it ends up with travelers demonstrating that they really have been there by showing to friends and family their versions of the images they had seen before they set off. (Urry and Larsen 2011, 179)

These promotional representations shape travelers' perceptions of both peoples and places, are reflected in their own photographs, and shared with friends and family, thereby perpetuating the circle (Caton and Almeida Santos 2007).

Urry's work has resulted in a number of studies that have attempted to substantiate the circle of representation or hermeneutic circle. Olivia Jenkins, in her 2003 paper "Photography and Travel Brochures: The Circle of Representation," examined the impact of travel brochures on the photography of backpackers in Australia. She found backpackers sought out "photogenic" views for their photographs, often replicating the iconic images of Australia that compose the brochures. Ultimately, Jenkins concluded that her results support Urry's circle of representation (Jenkins 2003, 324).

In 2007 Kellee Caton and Carla Almeida Santos published "Closing the Hermeneutic Circle? Photographic Encounters with the Other," where they explore whether the photographs taken by students in a study-abroad program reflect the "othering" seen in tourism-related media or broke the hermeneutic circle (Caton and Almeida Santos 2007, 9). "Othering" refers to the viewing and/or treating of individuals or groups as different

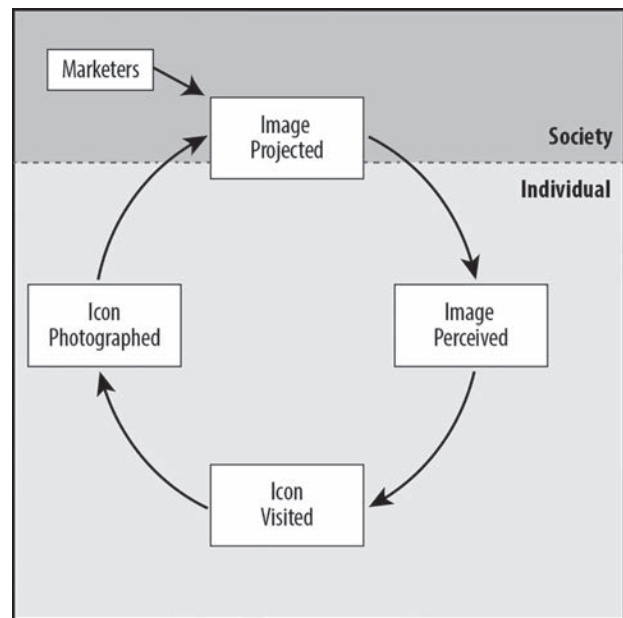


Figure 4. John Urry's circle of representation (after Jenkins 2003).  
Figure by Paul Hunt, used with permission.

and alien than oneself, as in "us" versus "them." Canton and Almeida Santos found that students repeated the essentialization and exoticization seen in tourism media (Canton and Almeida Santos 2007, 22). Like Canton and Almeida Santos, Arturo Molina et al. (2010) found in their study of the role of information sources in the formation of positive destination images that "information sources have a strong influence on tourist destination image generation when they are used as promotion tools" (Molina et al. 2010, 725).

But not all tourism photography studies fully support Urry's concept of a circle of representation. Jonas Larsen in "Picturing Bornholm: Producing and Consuming a Tourist Place through Picturing Practices" (2006) examined the imaginative geography of the Danish island of Bornholm, comparing and contrasting commercial imagery to tourists' photography. Larsen's findings suggest that *who* the tourists are may have a significant impact on whether the circle is completed or not. Families with young children tended to take photographs to document their children's lives (capturing that "Kodak moment"), while adults traveling without children or with grown children do not have this concern, are free to document their trip, and so are more likely to complete the circle.

This research on the circle of representation suggests that booster images may have had an impact on how people came to view the region. To pursue this, I began by analyzing the images in booster brochures to estab-





Figure 5. Plowing images. *Above*, from Elizabeth Roberts Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck (COL. 3–46). The Roberts' home is to the right background. *Left*, from *Kansas*, US Railroad Administration (1919), Library of Congress, accessed from Archive.org, page 36. The caption reads, "Modern method of breaking sod. The soils of Kansas are very fertile and easily handled. Note the excellent tilth."

lish the "visual lexicon"—the body of visual tropes used to portray the Northern Plains. Once I established the booster tropes, I compared them with the tropes that appear in Plains dwellers' photograph albums.

### Analyzing Plains Images

For both the booster brochures and the photograph albums, I used a simple content analysis method, based on the focus of the image or what Roland Barthes calls the studium—"given cultural meanings that we understand at once" (Barthes 1981, 44). For each brochure and album, I subjectively classified the overall theme of each photograph that appeared (Detre 2004, 114). I then created data sheets for each brochure and album to count the number of times a theme appeared in each. Finally, I tallied the number of times a theme appeared in all the brochures and albums to get the relative importance of each theme and reported these results by state and decade.

#### *Land of Plenty: Promotional Brochures*

I worked with 40 brochures, which had approximately 800 images, from the study period, 1890–1930 (Table 1). Of these, brochures created by railroads dominate, composing over half the sample (22 of 40). The second high-

est number of brochures were from land companies, followed by state offices, and then the US government. During World War I, the US government nationalized railroads in order to improve the efficiencies of the railway system, but continued the railroads' practice of publishing brochures on settlement and tourism. For the purposes of this study, I examined only the brochures' images, focusing on what someone would see if they picked up a brochure and flipped through it.

From my analysis, the top 10 booster image themes based on frequency of occurrence and ordered from most to least frequent are:

1. Homesteads. These images were often identified by name, such as "Residence of Robert H. Proudfoot" or "Chickens on the Berry Farm—Near Richardton, North Dakota," which appear in the William H. Brown Company brochure *Out They Go: Prosperous North Dakota* (1909), and often featured families posed out front. I found only a few images of sod houses, mostly in the context of "before/after" images, where the "soddie" is shown in contrast to a just-constructed new home. The dominance of home images creates the impression of an established, domesticated landscape, countering perceptions of the Great Plains as a frontier.
2. Livestock. Beef cattle dominated these imag-

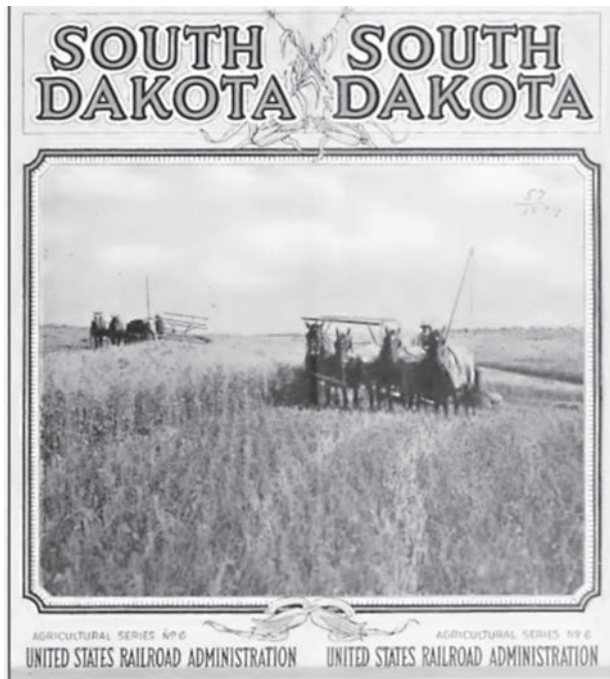


Figure 6. *Left*, cover image of *South Dakota*, US Railroad Administration (1919), Library of Congress, accessed from Archive.org, page 1. *Below*, “Holt Combine Harvesters on Kopac Brother’s Ranch Oshkosh Nebr. Cutting and threshing 100 to 150 acre per day Ed. Kopac photographer,” Ed Kopac’s photograph album, Montana Historical Society, Helena (PAC 81–65, page 4). This image is from a photograph album Ed created for his brother Frank for Christmas.



es. I found that after beef cattle, hogs and dairy cattle were about even in terms of representation, followed by sheep and horses. In every case, the animals were depicted as large and well fed. The depiction of a range of farm animals visually demonstrates that the Plains could support virtually any animal the settlers may wish to raise. And the settlers could count on a diversity of animal products (e.g., milk, butter, and eggs) to support their families.

3. Fields. Wheat and corn represent half the images. But the brochures capture a broad spectrum of field crops, from hemp and flax to kaffir and broom corn. Crops were captured close to harvest, with heads heavy with grain, visually capturing “amber waves of grain” evoked in the patriotic song *America the Beautiful* (lyrics written in 1895). The photographs stand as visual proof of the region’s great fecundity, as if to say, “This is not just potential, this is proven fact.”

TABLE 2. Booster image themes by decade.

1890s	1900s	1910s	1920s
Water and irrigation	Homesteads	Fields	Homesteads
Cattle	Fields	Working the land	Fields
Homesteads	Working the land	Posed	Shocked grains
Working the land	Cattle	Homesteads	Working the land
Fields	Shocked Grains	Shocked grains	Water and irrigation

Note: Within a decade image themes are ordered from most to least frequent.

4. Social institutions. These images include churches, schools, colleges, and universities important for social networking and social replication. Images of social institutions reflect the wealth and prosperity of the community. Although they do not make money, they indicate that the community has not only prospered but has become civilized and progressive enough to have such institutions in place.
5. Working the land. These images depict settlers engaged in working the land, especially activities involved with gathering their crops, such as harvesting, shocking, threshing, and hauling their produce to market. About a quarter of the images depict plowing, with the great lines of sod overturned to the sky, a striking visual image but nowhere near the number of harvest images (Figs. 5 and 6, top). These scenic images capture the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer, transforming the landscape through their noble labors.
6. Towns and economic activities. Included are images of towns as well as images of individual businesses within towns, such as factories for processing sugar beets and broom corn, creameries, and grain elevators. Towns marked the landscape as civilized, “tamed,” and already established (Kinsey 1996, 93). Immigrants to this landscape would not want for anything.
7. Shocked grains. These images capture the bucolic landscape of harvested crops still in the field, shocked and ready for threshing. I found images of wheat shocks dominated (40%), followed by unidentified grains. The harvest season is associated with maturity, again supporting the idea of a well-developed landscape.
8. Water. These images include rivers, streams, lakes, waterfalls, and irrigation. They counter popular perceptions of the region as a dry and lifeless desert.

Water in Western culture is viewed as “life-giving”—where there is water, life can thrive. But these images, particularly of natural water features, also suggest an aesthetically pleasing landscape with the water features complementing the dry uplands.

9. Trees. Trees were often captured in images, in everything from recently planted to mature forests. Over half the trees depicted were fruit trees, many laden with ripe fruit. Like water, images of trees countered most American’s popular perceptions of the region as a “treeless” desert. When the trees are laden with ripe fruit, it reinforces the bountiful imagery of harvest time, times of plenty, and the region as a garden.
10. Posed settlers, or “Up to their Necks.” These images capture settlers standing in fields or orchards with crops literally “up to their necks.” Their posing is both a means of providing scale to the image, for example, illustrating exactly how high the crop is, and claiming ownership and authorship of the crop. There is anecdotal evidence that in at least one case, the men were posed on their knees to make it appear that the crop was taller (Lineback 2005, 105).

Arranging the image themes by decade, I found some interesting differences (Table 2). Overall, the dominating themes were of home and productivity. I found water and irrigation were recurring themes in the 1890s and 1920s. Undoubtedly, this theme was influenced by the extensive drought that occurred in the northern Great Plains during 1887–97 and again in South Dakota and Nebraska during the 1920s.

Cattle are a frequent theme in the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century, but it falls out of the top five in the teens and twenties. One possible explanation is the expansion of cropland and subsequent decline in ranching that occurred on the Plains in the early twen-



TABLE 3. Booster image themes by state.

Kansas	Nebraska	South Dakota	North Dakota	Montana
Fields	Homesteads	Homesteads	Homesteads	Fields
Water and irrigation	Fields	Livestock	Fields	Posed
Working the land	Social institutions	Harvested	Working the land	Shocked grains
Shocked grains	Livestock	Working	Shocked grains	Working the land
Homesteads	Harvested	Posed	Water and irrigation	Water and irrigation

Note: Within a state, image themes are ordered from most to least frequent.

tieth century, particularly in the Western Plains (Cunfer 2005, 16–36).

One last dominant theme that begins in the 1890s and carries through the 1920s is that of settlers posed with rich bounty, “Up to their Necks” (Figure 3). Typically people, predominantly males, are photographed standing in a field, serving as a self-representing scale (objects of known size appearing in an image) (Tufte 1997, 13).

Arraying the themes by state, with the most frequent at the top of Table 3, subtle differences emerge. Kansas brochures have a strong emphasis on water, perhaps to counter “Droughty Kansas” images (De Bres 2003, 112). Nebraska and South Dakota have more diversity in their images, with the themes of homesteads, livestock, and shocked grains common to both states. Nebraska’s early settlement may be reflected in the strong depiction of social institutions. Montana has the greatest emphasis on crops with images of fields and shocked grains. Montana tied with Kansas for most irrigation images. North Dakota has the most depictions of schools, towns, churches, and grain elevators, with Nebraska second. Kansas has the most depictions of the territorial and state capitols, institutions of higher learning, and other state institutions such as old soldiers’ homes, jails, and homes for the insane, perhaps reflecting, like Nebraska, their early settlement. Boosters may have chosen these images to reflect the general interest of Americans in development, progress, and growth (Miller 1988, 215).

Through my analysis, I documented a visual lexicon of the Plains, composed of the following stock images and themes: homes and farmsteads; water features and irrigation; cattle, hogs, and dairy cows; and corn, wheat, and alfalfa (often with settlers posed in the crop fields). Not depicted were open land; minorities (just a few references to Mennonites and Norwegians, and intriguingly, only two references to African American farmers); Native Americans and reservations; and any sign of drought. From these repetitive stock images, I believe a “generic” settled Plains was created by boosters, a clas-

sic isotropic Plains characterized by well-maintained homes, abundant water, healthy farm animals, and bounteous fields ripe for harvest. In commodifying the Plains, I believe promoters removed much of its character and in doing so created a standardized positive, but sometimes false or incomplete, image.

### *Albums*

Photograph albums are similar to booster brochures in that they are collections of multiple images, often with captions. My research here on Great Plains photograph albums builds on work I conducted over the past 15 years (Dando 2008). I found that Plains dwellers documented their lives and landscapes in photograph albums, and that through these albums they were actively constructing place (placemaking) as well as placing themselves in the landscape.

Given the scarcity of intact photograph albums, especially those that include landscape images, I analyzed a much smaller sample, only six photograph albums with 696 images (Table 4). Additionally, the sample is skewed to the north and west, with the majority of albums coming from western North Dakota and eastern Montana. Ideally, the number of albums should equal the number of booster brochures from each state during the study period. However, intact photograph albums are a rarity, as compared to published brochures, and it was difficult to find photograph albums to meet my study’s parameters (from the study period, with a strong landscape component, and created by someone who was living in the Plains and not just visiting). Also, albums do not provide as much information in the form of captions and text, while promotional brochures often have lengthy captions and supporting text. Albums were created by individuals or families for their own purposes, and when shared with family and friends, were accompanied by a verbal narrative by the creator(s) as they guided their viewers through their album. It is impossible to recreate these



TABLE 4. Settler photograph albums used in this study.

Approximate dates	State	Owner/creator	Number of pages	Number of images	Source
1900–1905	North Dakota	Elizabeth Roberts	4 albums, total of 148 pages	62, 73, 74, and 74 images = 283 images	State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck
1909–10	North Dakota	Robert Trousdale	1 album of 46 pages	46 images	State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck
1911–1916	North Dakota	Pauline Shoemaker	2 albums (14, 11) of 25 pages	60 images	State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck
1911–1914	Montana	Grace Binks Price	1 album of 45 pages	188 images	Montana Historical Society, Helena
1920s?	Nebraska	[Kimball County]	1 album of 48 pages	49 images	Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln
1925?	Montana	Ed Kopac	1 album of 70 pages	70 images	Montana Historical Society, Helena

verbal narratives, so I was somewhat hampered in my interpretation of the images. I fully acknowledge that my results cannot therefore be definitive.

From my analysis, the top 10 album image themes, from most to least frequent, are:

**Candid.** The majority of images in the albums are candid snapshots of family and friends. Creating “Kodak memories” through photographs was one of the early advertising slogans from the Kodak Company (Paster 1992). Plains dwellers were quick to adopt this new technology and use it to document their lives and landscapes. These candid are in many ways similar to the category of “posed settlers or ‘Up to Their Necks’” of the booster brochures, as illustrated by Figure 2, Elizabeth Roberts’s photograph of her husband, Frank.

**Livestock/Animals.** Images of cattle, horses, hogs, and chickens are found in the album pages, as individuals documented their success at raising livestock. The Roberts album, for example, contains many images of Percheron horses, the Roberts’s primary economic activity. However, the albums also captured a wide variety of other animals, such as local wildlife (see Figure 8), which was seldom portrayed in booster brochures.

**Homes.** Not surprisingly, the albums all featured images of the album creator’s homes. Photograph albums are a means for individuals to construct and preserve their preferred perspective on their lives. They must be assembled in some way, the photographs ordered and attached to the pages, and captions perhaps added. For Plains settlers, the creation of their homes was an undertaking to be documented, shared, and cherished. They were proud of what they achieved, and photographs and albums were a means of capturing the placemaking process (Dando 2008).

**Ranching.** Images of ranching, particularly of its activities, were often included in the albums (Figure 7). Because many of the albums I used were from the shortgrass prairies of western North Dakota and eastern Montana, where the climate is drier, ranching was and is the prevalent economic activity.

**Water.** Like booster brochures, settler photograph albums depicted water features such as lakes, rivers, and streams. While boosters were likely using these images to counter myths of the Plains as desert, it is less clear the intent of settlers in documenting water. It may have been to capture their local landscape or perhaps to attempt picturesque photogra-

phy, as encouraged by early Kodak advertising, or both (Stilgoe 1984).

**Working the land.** Just as Plains settlers documented their homes and local landscapes (ranching and water), they captured plowing, planting, and harvesting of their crops (Figs. 5, bottom, and 6, bottom). The Price album from eastern Montana has a photograph showing a couple of potatoes next to a jug with the caption “First Crop,” clearly an attempt to document the first harvest from the land. Plains settlers took pride in their transformation of the landscape and their successes in their chosen trade of agriculture, even if it was just a couple of potatoes.

**Badlands.** Images of Badlands, part of the local landscape, were also featured. Badlands are topographic features of buttes, mesas, and spires carved by water into the landscape. To the eye they can be spectacular, with their striking forms and colorful variegated sediments. Black and white photography, as was prevalent at the time, does not do them justice, reducing their beautiful hues to shades of gray. But settlers attempted to capture them and included the images in their albums. The Roberts album is the most successful at capturing Badlands; Elizabeth created striking images of Badlands in her area using a panoramic camera, one of which she labeled “Badlands Scenery,” the word “scenery” suggesting an appreciation for this landscape (illustrated in Dando 2008, Figure 10).

**Fields.** Like the booster images, settler albums frequently depicted fields of crops such as wheat, corn, and oats. They likely had a dual purpose—that of documenting their successes but also capturing the scenic beauty of a bountiful crop ready for harvest.

**Leisure.** Similar to their candid photographs, settlers captured friends and family engaging in leisure activities such as camping, picnicking, fishing, swimming, and playing baseball. These depict the “good times” of Plains life, that it was not all work. Even humor creeps into the albums, such as in Figure 8 where Trousdale has an image of coyotes in a pen with the chickens on the outside looking in at the coyotes.

**Towns and economic activities.** Settlers captured many aspects of their communities including their local towns and businesses. The Trousdale album captures the town of Mott, North Dakota, where

TABLE 5. Comparing image themes in booster brochures and settler photograph albums.

Booster brochures	Settler albums
Homesteads	Candids
Animals	Animals
Fields	Homes
Social institutions	Ranching
Working the land	Water
Towns and economics activities	Working the land
Shocked grains	Badlands
Water and irrigation	Fields
Trees	Leisure
Posed settlers or “Up to Their Necks”	Towns and economic activities

*Note:* For booster brochures and settler photograph albums, image themes are ordered from most to least frequent.

Robert Trousdale was a banker and includes images of the town, the local grain elevator, and local businesses.

I compared the album image themes to the booster brochure image themes (Table 5). The album image themes that are similar to booster image themes are homesteads, livestock/animals, water (but not irrigation), working the land, fields, and towns and economic activities. Posed settlers or “Up to Their Necks” themes in the booster brochures are analogous to candids in the settler albums (Figure 9). Although the image themes in the albums are similar in many ways to those in the booster brochures, there are some marked differences, such as the depiction of ranching, wildlife, and badlands in the settler albums that are absent from the booster brochures.

The images of ranching in photograph albums represent a significant departure from how boosters presented those images. While “ranches” were depicted in booster brochures, they were only depicted as home and buildings, not in terms of activities. In albums, the various tasks associated with ranch life were depicted, including roundups, branding, breaking horses, and de-horning. These images do not quite convey the “settled” land that the boosters were attempting to cultivate. In fact, ranching images suggest the cowboy frontier, an image counter to the settled garden that the boosters were promoting. The settlers’ images of ranching captured a demanding lifestyle, not an image boosters would promote.

The images of wildlife provide another significant contrast. In the booster images, I found only three of



Figure 7. Ranch work from Elizabeth Roberts's photograph album. *Top*, "Hauling cedar posts from Belfield 35 miles." *Bottom*, "Corral work." Elizabeth Roberts Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck (0308 Album 1 photos 27 and 28). The Roberts family bred and raised Percheron horses on their ranch at Amidon, North Dakota.



Figure 8. "Kyhotes in pen on Klines Farm." Robert Trousdale's album, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck (Co. 1-1-53). Trousdale was a banker in Mott, North Dakota.

wildlife (two of bison and one of antelope). For the boosters, wildlife was not a "selling point" for the Plains—agriculture was. For Plains dwellers, wildlife was part of their environment, and often a nuisance that had to be dealt with (Figure 8). Images of rattlesnakes, wolves, and hawks captured wildlife that was both a curiosity and a threat to existence and livelihood. Less threatening wildlife, like antelope, became family pets.

Badlands were another trope depicted in albums but seldom in promotional brochures. Badlands are striking scenery but not economically productive except perhaps as ranch lands. Settlers in badlands regions included images of these features in albums in an effort to document and remember these as components of their "homescapes." It is not surprising that they do not appear in booster brochures designed to promote settlement and economic development of the region. Even in South Da-





Figure 9. Posed settler images. *Left*, from brochure *Western North Dakota: Being a Description of a Land of Great Promise and the Opportunities It Holds for Homeseekers* (Northern Pacific Railway 1911, page 24). Its caption reads: “Fodder corn as grown in North Dakota.” Montana Historical Society, Helena (PAM 2097). *Right*, from Pauline Shoemaker’s album, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck (Col. 196). Shoemaker came to North Dakota as a school teacher and homesteaded in the Knife River region.

kota, whose Badlands National Park is known today nationwide, boosters did not include images of badlands but instead focused on water features and forests.

Despite some differences between images in booster brochures and settler albums, I believe there are enough similarities to suggest that booster images did have an impact on the photographic images settlers took of the region. Settlers’ images of ranching, wildlife, and badlands reflect a slightly different experience of the Plains than that constructed by the boosters. But settlers’ photographs of home and neighborhood reflect booster images of a settled garden landscape, as does the booster emphasis on the bountiful plains, with ample water, animals, and crops.

## Discussion

If a picture is worth a thousand words, how many words are 50 pictures of bountiful wheat fields worth? One of the results of the multiple images used in booster

brochures is that it provides greater depth and more dimension to what is perceived as a “flatland.” Today, researchers are cobbling together the images available on the Internet of important global landmarks (e.g., Eiffel Tower, Taj Mahal) to creating 360°, 3-D images. One hundred years ago, boosters did not have this technology, but their multiple views, such as fifty images of wheat fields, did provide a richer, more nuanced image of the Plains.

Advertisements influence society as they reflect certain aspects of social life (Detre 2004, 115). The images in the booster brochures were meant to reflect Plains life while they sought to sell immigrants on the new landscape, and on the idea that there was “something to see” (Tangney 2004). It was not enough just to depict the land: “Good farm lands were not sufficient by themselves to attract settlers, family life and society had to be considered as well” (Blodgett 1988, 35; see also Wrobel 2002, 40). Boosters were interested in bringing permanent settlers into the region, and that involved selling the



whole family on the landscape. The images of neat fields, homesteads, cities, and institutions were presenting an image of a finished landscape, not a landscape still being “shaped.” It was instilling the message that the hard work of the frontier phase was done, and the landscape was a well-organized garden just waiting for the gardeners. Booster images supported the productive garden perception of the Plains and strongly countered the desert perception of an uninhabitable landscape (Allen 1985; Wrobel 2002, 33; Detre 2004, 120). And the images presented the “facts” or the “truths” of the situation—if there were photographs, then it must be so. Settlers embraced the garden symbolism; as Shortridge writes, “Everyone wanted to believe” (Shortridge 1997, 119).

The images circulating through the booster brochures as well as the photograph albums together created “a common ‘visual reservoir’” (Meyers 2002, 180). All these individuals were members of a community, a Plains community but also a discourse community:

Like speakers of verbal languages and dialects, users of visual language are members of discourse communities that share similar experiences, needs, and expectations. Discourse communities provide the social force that shapes the raw materials of visual language into conventional codes and enables members to deploy, interpret, and sustain those codes as part of that collective enterprise. (Kostelnick and Hassett 2003, 24)

As speakers of a common language, they also shared a common ideology, a rosy view of the region as productive and worthwhile.

Commonalities extend beyond ideology. While my goal was to address the potential impacts of booster images on settlers’ photography in the Plains, it is striking how much the supposedly “professional” booster broacher images look like the candid album photographs (see Figure 9). This may be a tactical decision. Rather than producing “perfect” images, boosters used more candid photographs, similar to those anyone could take, because they seemed “real” and more “truthful.” Another possibility is a double circle of representation, a feedback loop of sorts: just as the settlers were influenced by the booster images, the booster images were influenced by settler photographs of the region.

My work with historic documents does present some limitations. It is logical that the ways in which tourists view or gaze at landscapes differ from how a settler might look at a potential new home: each is viewing the

landscape with different intentions. Insufficient research has been done on the different ways of gazing at landscape, leading to questions of the applicability of work on tourists’ gaze to work on settlers’ gaze (for work on “home gaze,” see Dando 2008). How do we adjust for this? Further, it cannot be definitely established if settler photographers saw any of the brochures, let alone any of the brochures I used in this study. Given that I am working with a deceased population from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, surveys or interviews cannot be conducted to establish what settlers encountered before they arrived. However, there is anecdotal evidence that settlers did consult various brochures in making the decision to move to the Great Plains (Boekelman 1983; Jeffrey 1988). Evidence suggests that these settlers did in turn create images of the Plains that appear to draw on common visual tropes of the Plains.

## Conclusions

The parallels between the two images of the men posed in the bountiful fields are striking (Figs. 1 and 2). The landscapes are similar. They are dressed similar. The overall impression is the same: of men posed with their hard-earned crops, seemingly proud of their accomplishments. The similarities between booster images and settler photographs on the Plains, such as Figures 1, 2, 5, 6, and 9, suggest that this is no coincidence: there is a relationship between booster or promotional images and the images taken of similar locations by settlers. Booster images settlers encountered before they arrived in the Plains did impact how they framed the region, and there is, in fact, a circle of representation.

Booster images, created for commercial purposes, served a much greater purpose than just land sales. These images established “the look” of the Plains: what was to be expected when travelers and immigrants set their eyes on this landscape. This look goes far beyond the initial glance, setting up expectations of bountiful harvest and personal success for the immigrants while framing the Plains as a “Land of Bread and Butter,” the “Finest Agricultural Land in the World,” “A High Grade Project for High Grade People,” to invoke some of the brochure titles. You too could be where they were “Up to Their Necks in Wheat” and document your success with your own photographs.

Images created through place promotion are important but complicated. These societal expectations of great harvests and successes were sorely tested by the reality

of the Plains—by the cycles of drought, by the fluctuating agricultural prices beyond a farmer's or rancher's control, and by the endless hard work. Yet these images crept into the collective consciousness of Plains dwellers as well as the general American public and “immobilizes our dynamic world, changing it to spectacle and straightjacketing it in cliché and stereotype” (Morgan 2004, 174).

The iconic images of the Plains with bountiful fields are still prevalent, but drought images appear just as frequently, a lingering impact of Dust Bowl iconography. This has ramifications today. Many Americans perceive the Plains as a bountiful agricultural landscape of nothing but fields of corn with no cities or other economic activities. Especially during times of drought, some view the Plains as a failed experiment or call for divestment in Plains businesses and the creation of a buffalo commons (*The Economist* 2001, 44). Either view tries the patience of Plains people who love this landscape and are frustrated by clichés and stereotypes.

The visual tropes that have come to define the Plains have their roots in the booster images selling Plains land, a capitalist enterprise that would in turn lead to the production of valuable farm commodities. Viewers consumed the images as they consumed the Plains, their own cognitive images being molded in the process.

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