William L. O'Neill

A BUBBLE IN TIME

America During the Interwar Years, 1989–2001

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INTERLUDE

Buffalo Commons

The most heartwarming form of political incorrectness in the 1990s, one very different from those previously discussed, had to do with saving the Great Plains. This region comprises nearly a fifth of the lower forty-eight states, and much of it is rapidly depopulating owing to drought, falling water tables, overfarming, overgrazing, and the like. In the 1980s a middle-aged academic couple living in New Jersey proposed a big idea for saving the region. Frank J. and Deborah Epstein Popper, an urban planner and a geographer, had been studying the region, which begins at the ninety-eighth meridian, beyond which rainfall is a sometime thing, and ends at the Rocky Mountains. Although it crosses two time zones and runs from border to border, the Great Plains is home to not quite 3 percent of the American people.

It occurred to the Poppers that instead of drilling deeper for water and employing ever more fertilizer amid other doomed efforts to restore the agriculture of this region, 139,000 thinly populated square miles in ten plains states should become what they named Buffalo Commons. In their scenario fences would come down, the plains would be returned to their original state, and buffalo, antelope, and numerous other species would run free again. Thus restored, the plains would have two sustainable industries to replace past agricultural and extractive boom-and-bust cycles: tourism and buffalo processing. The Poppers introduced their idea in a short article published by the obscure (to nonplanners) journal Planning in 1987 under the title “The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust.” Their proposal was both an outline for a specific program and a metaphor that stimulated original thinking.

A funny thing happened as the article circulated beyond academia. Anne Matthews describes it in her book on the Poppers, Where the Buffalo Roam: Restoring America’s Great Plains (1992). Frank Popper, then unknown outside planning circles or beyond Rutgers University where he teaches, and Deborah, who had yet to earn her doctorate in geography, became famous, or rather infamous, throughout the Great Plains. Regional newspapers denounced them, as did state governors, ranchers, farmers, businessmen, and everyone who was stuck in the past and dreaded the future. People sent them death threats, which was perhaps to be expected in: the heartland of the conservative backlash. They received invitations to speak in small towns and large cities so that the locals could revile them in person.

Patiently, tirelessly, fearlessly the Poppers accepted as many as possible, beginning a long, grinding educational program that is still under way. Because of the threats they sometimes traveled under false names, and security had to be provided where tempers ran highest.

At first every meeting was predictable, regardless of the setting. The Poppers would make their presentation, Frank doing much of the talking as Deborah manned an overhead projector showing maps and tables spelling out the region’s decline in land values, population, and just about everything else. Then there would be predictable rebuttals that the Poppers called the Four Responses: “Pioneer Gumption (Don’t underestimate determination and hard work), Dollar Potential (Plains food production can still feed the world), Eastern Ignorance (self-explanatory), and Prairie Zen (Our landscape is a powerful source of spiritual renewal).” Although the evidence lay all about the inhabitants of this region—the ghost towns, the towns whose main streets were lined with closed stores, the abandoned schools, churches, banks, and farms—denial is a powerful emotion, as is the impulse to kill the messengers. To these waves of
hatred the Poppers replied with history lessons and statistics and infuriating bursts of knowledge, beginning with the fact that the plains had undergone four boom-and-bust cycles, the third ending in the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The fourth cycle of decline began in the 1980s and shows no signs of abating.

The Poppers reached their conclusions before the 1990 census, which showed that conditions had worsened faster than expected. Virtually all but the urban counties west of the 98th meridian had lost people at an increasing rate. Since 1980 the number of counties with fewer than two people per square mile had grown from 143 to 150. If the frontier is defined as areas with six or fewer persons for each square mile, a large part of the United States has returned to nineteenth-century levels of population. By 1990, 394 counties, all in the West, comprising 1.6 million square miles and 45 percent of the continental United States but only 1 percent of the population, constituted this new frontier.

As the Poppers repeatedly point out, this frontier cannot be conquered. Most of its mineral wealth has been extracted. Its soil has been depleted, and the great Ogallala aquifer is nearly empty. This immense underground sea of ancient water is what made much of the Great Plains cultivable. In 1950 the Kansas part of the aquifer was fifty-eight feet thick. By the 1990s in some places only six feet remained. Near Floydada, Texas, the water table fell one hundred feet in one hundred years. From Texas to Nebraska cracks and sinkholes have appeared as the aquifer continues to settle. The little surface water in the region is sought after by many states, but there are not enough rivers to go around, something that lawsuits won't change. Federal handouts only make matters worse, encouraging more overproduction that further damages the soil and increases the pressure on ever-diminishing water sources.

The Poppers received a great deal of publicity, not just in the Great Plains but across the country, for the originality of their proposal as well as the fury it aroused. Stories by or about them appeared in newspapers such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, and USA Today. They were written up in major magazines and appeared on national TV. More important, the people of the Great Plains, especially the northern states where the problems are greatest, began to think about the Poppers' message instead of just screaming at it. The 1990 census made a big impression since it documented with hard facts how much decline had occurred in just one decade. And certainly the Poppers' intelligence, grace under pressure, love of the plains, and uncomplaining missionary work made themselves felt. By 1992 public opinion had started to turn, judging by newspaper editorials.

The next year Mike Burbach, editor of the Minot (North Dakota) Daily News, thanked the Poppers for their "audacity and scholarship." He noted that the "post-Popper Great Plains" was already changing for the better and along the lines they had suggested. Buffalo were coming back, and tourism had become increasingly important. He shrewdly observed that while the Poppers had been right about Buffalo Commons, they erred in thinking that the federal government would have to buy big parcels of land. The Poppers themselves soon recognized their mistake because the gains thus far have been the result of voluntary efforts by individuals and groups. Pointing to North Dakota's advantages—what he called the "franchise": clean air and water, low taxes, educated, hardworking people—Burbach wrote that if North Dakotans protected the franchise their future looked bright. "But if we don't protect the franchise. If we yield to bitterness and paranoia and resignation, we've had it. The places whose overwhelming reaction to change is fear, whose hopes and dreams are bounded only by the past, who see the devil in outsiders and hell in new ideas, these places won't make it."

Resistance remains. The Poppers are careful not to blame individuals, but in the end it is the people of the Great Plains who have caused their own problems. Many find it easier to deny this than to face facts.

The 2000 census further documented the region's decline. Almost two-thirds of the counties in the Great Plains have lost population since the Poppers began their crusade. In the 1990s, forty-seven of North Dakota's fifty-three counties and fifty-three of Nebraska's
ninetynine. Three suffered population losses. The largest American income declines and greatest increases in child poverty took place in the plains states. More than half of the nation's poorest counties are in Nebraska and the Dakotas. The three most impoverished are in Nebraska, and they are white counties, not those containing Indian reservations.

On the other hand, the buffalo are coming back and so are the Indians. People are buying farmland and turning it into hunting reserves where wealthy individuals come from around the world to shoot birds and wild animals. Many more inhabitants have gone into buffalo ranching, often without feedlots, antibiotics, or growth hormones, allowing the buffalo to roam and feeding them grasses that the ranchers grow themselves. The Poppers roam freely in the Great Plains as well and have not needed armed guards since the late 1990s. Newspapers and at least one former governor have apologized to them, for Buffalo Commons is becoming a reality not because of government largesse but for economic reasons. Buffalo are easier to raise than cattle and do far less damage to the land. They are often more profitable as well. The North American Bison Cooperative, founded in North Dakota in the early nineties, has more than 450 members in 18 states and four Canadian provinces. It is estimated that the buffalo herd exceeds 300,000 and is increasing by 20 percent each year.

Land conservation is on the rise, much of it a result of private organizations like the Nature Conservancy and the Sierra Club, which buy out farmers and ranchers and promote eco-tourism. One such body, Ducks Unlimited, saved eight million wetland acres as a preserve for waterfowl. In 1992 the Interior Department and the Environmental Protection Agency created the Great Plains Partnership. In cooperation with Canada and Mexico this agency allows buffalo to graze public grasslands on both sides of our borders.

Indians have played a leading role in the Buffalo Commons. In 1992 the InterTribal Bison Cooperative was founded by nineteen tribes and by 2002 included fifty-one Native American groups. Its activities range from buffalo ranching to farming to buffalo meat processing. These activities have invigorated many tribes.

Buffalo Commons—and gambling too, it must be admitted—have reversed the long slide of the plains Indians. For generations their numbers shrank, as did their reservations, while drink and disease took a terrible toll. During the 1990s, on the other hand, rising birthrates and the return of those who had left grew the Indian population by 12 percent in Kansas, 16 percent in Montana, 20 percent in North Dakota and Nebraska, and 23 percent in South Dakota. White flight is still a feature of life on the Great Plains, but even in its embryonic state Buffalo Commons is working wonders for Native Americans.

Much bigger changes are coming, for at present rates of extraction the Ogallala will run dry in a few more decades. Since one-fifth of the country's irrigated cropland uses fossil water from the aquifer, barring a miracle traditional agriculture on the Great Plains is doomed. This is not to say that the region has no future. The cities of the plains, while mostly small by national standards, have been experiencing healthy growth and are likely to go on doing so if they protect the franchise. White flight from rural areas must end, sooner or later, and once the rural population stabilizes and the economy is rebuilt along the lines suggested by Buffalo Commons, and perhaps by other ideas still in their infancy or as yet undreamed of, the Great Plains may become a magnet again. If so, the people of the plains will owe a debt of gratitude to the Poppers—indeed, they already do—but even better will have taken their destiny into their own hands and made the Great Plains great again. As it is, they have more reasons for hope than Americans in other distressed regions.