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Geographers revisit Buffalo Commons

By Larry Dreiling

The New Jersey geographers who posed the concept of the Buffalo Commons over 20 years ago returned to the Great Plains recently to speak to a group they called "the last bastions of romantic capitalists."

The group was the annual convention of the Kansas Farmers Union held at Salina. About 50 people attended the speeches by geography professors Frank and Deborah Popper. The couple teaches at Rutgers and Princeton Universities, respectively.

"Romantic capitalism has a long history on the Great Plains," Frank Popper said. "It's a lot of how and why the land was settled by whites in the first place, not long after the Civil War via the Homestead Act.

"This romanticism has been proven out through the Dust Bowls of the 1890s and 1930s and through the period of time around 1987 when Deborah and I first published our piece on the Great Plains."

The Poppers settled on one thing that most of their critics had leveled upon them in their early research. That is, that the federal government would create a large project to steer people out of the Plains and replace them with bison.

"The only thing we got wrong was that it was going to be primarily a federal project," Frank Popper said. "We were wrong, but we saw the Buffalo Commons as a sort of environmental end state to which the Plains were moving and that it would be a place where traditional agriculture would become more environmental, where ecotourism would become more important, and where the land would be treated more lightly, more gingerly than in the past. Settlement on the Plains would exist in an altered form. The word sustainable has been overused but it applies."

It's been a generation since the Poppers became infamous for their work. Dozens of articles, as well as books and documentary films were made about the couple and their theory.

"It was mainly a piece so Deborah and I could work together," Frank Popper said. "Deborah was a graduate student at the time. We had been writing on the Midwest and the West before, but we wanted to do something together.

"We never really expected it to have the impact it did and does. We would have recoiled then that we would still be talking about it 23 years later. It's clear that in the intervening years a quiet muscle of reality, a lot of the trends we saw in the depopulation of the Plains has continued."

Those trends have been born out in two censuses since the Poppers' initial research was published, the couple contends.

"Young people leave and the people who stay are getting older. The Plains has for a long time had one of the highest median ages of any place in the country," Frank Popper said. "More positively, though, the Buffalo Commons has begun in clear ways to materialize."

For one thing, he mentioned that buffalo production has increased. Banks are financing buffalo producers in increasing numbers and many Indian tribes use the Buffalo Commons as a central part of their land use planning.

For another, the couple offers the increase in development of land easements.

"You are seeing land purchases from The Nature Conservancy, (non-governmental organizations) like American Curry Foundation, the Grassland Foundation, and the Great Plains Restoration Council all are pursuing Buffalo Commons style buyouts," he said.

The biggest buyout, Popper believes, could come in Kansas, where former Gov. Mike Hayden endorsed the Buffalo Commons theory in a 1994 speech when he previously denounced it.

"It was one of the most startling reversals I've ever seen from a working politician. The Great Plains National Park may actually happen," he said. "I never would have thought that Kansas has emerged as a leader in interest."



BUFFALO COMMENTS—Frank (left) and Deborah Popper, the East Coast geographers who in 1987 posited the theory of the Buffalo Commons, discuss how well their theory is holding up during the recent Kansas Farmers Union convention held at Salina. The Poppers admit their initial analysis that federal intervention should be used to return the Plains to the buffalo isn't needed because the area is evolving toward depopulation on its own.

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KC Wheat	900-0	n/a
Minn Wheat	944-4	+7-2
Oats	386-0	+4-0
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That's because of what Frank Popper observes from the writings of historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who in the 1890s, declared the American frontier was closed.

"That declaration was adopted by most Americans, and it complicated history in several ways. If you used Turner's measures, there is more land in Kansas that qualifies now as frontier than there was in 1890. This is land that had less than six people per square mile," Frank Popper said.

"Turner thought that American agriculture would keep the population expanding. More people, more railroads, more livestock, more cities would be created and incomes would go up. It didn't happen. What's happened throughout the Great Plains, particularly Kansas, is that instead of continued growth the numbers have fallen off."

For her part, Deborah Popper said a new social order is needed to keep the Plains sustainable.

"The current scale of grasslands agriculture is mammoth. That conquest of natural systems must instead become the target of American innovation," she said. "It must find room for small, mid-sized and low input farms as well as find room for efforts that make their economic system work with a very different set of social goals."

She said that higher crop production yields, particularly for corn--which she calls an industrial product rather than a food--have not protected "grassland communities."

"Economic efficiency fit its time and place. Today's situation is different," she said. "Children of the rural poor who grow up amid this country's amber waves of grain are the least likely to have a proper diet. Main Streets have nothing there. What we are talking about is the creation of rural ghettos."

She complained about the large investment producers make in land and equipment in order to be fruitful.

"No small farmer can afford this. Instead he sells out to the megafarmer next door, making the megafarmer even bigger.

This has placed long-term impacts on rural communities, she said.

"These efficiencies made rural populations drop. As a result, the farm town has to get more out of every person left, whether for volunteer fire departments, schools, churches or charities--and you all know this."

The challenge, she said, is to turn the theory into a management principle within a larger social system.

Her husband agreed.

"The Buffalo Commons represents a different way of thinking, one where growth doesn't have to occur every year or decade, where you have growth until the bubble bursts, but one that tries to get away from the bubble," Frank Popper said.

He also stood up to the theory's critics.

"I've been accused of having a slightly un-American approach to the land and the environment, where growth is not always the be-all and end-all, where growth can go too far, and the Buffalo Commons implies a quietism or defeatism," Frank Popper said. "Instead, the Buffalo Commons implies too much growth can be a mistake, overburdening the land, overmastering the environment and in the end always getting kicked in the rear or the pocketbook--or someplace else.

"I realize there is a social comedy in two people from back east who are telling people in the Plains what to do with their land. I've enjoyed it, but there are important things to look at in how we treat this vast, characteristically American chunk of land. There are lessons here on how to live on the land that can be applied to the Corn Belt, the lower Mississippi delta, and parts of our largest cities--like Detroit--that are depopulating like the Plains. It's about sustainability. It's about being American."

Larry Dreiling can be reached by phone at 785-628-1117, or by e-mail at ldreiling@aol.com.

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