

Is it not strange (some of us ask ourselves) that this kind of crude materialism should have triumphed over a state once strongly under the influence of New England transcendentalism? How has it happened? What's the matter with Kansas in 1954, anyway?

Well, straight off, one can answer, I think, that what's the matter with Kansas is not worse than, nor greatly different from, what's the matter with larger and larger areas of American life these days. A single-minded, unimaginative timid conformism in key positions; a steadily more standardized intellectual life in consequence -- that's what's the matter with Kansas and it is increasingly what's the matter with the United States, in my opinion.

William Allen White once wrote that "When anything is going to happen in this country, it happens first in Kansas"; that Kansas is "hardly a state" but "a kind of prophecy." He supported his contention by mentioning Abolition, Prohibition, Populism and the Bull Moose. I'm not sure he'd now add the present growing national passion for the second-rate in our political life, the present insistence that everybody must think like the more reactionary of our business men on pain of being damned as a traitorous fellow -- but perhaps he should and would. For in this, too, Kansas seems to have anticipated a national trend.

As early as 1910, Carl E. Becker, then at Kansas University, noted in one of his most famous essays that "A Kansas individualism is the tendency to conform." The paradox, he thought, stemmed from the unusual difficulties of the Kansas frontier, where sheer endurance was so important; endurance, wrote he, "is itself a kind of conformity."

My own belief is that Becker was naming a characteristic not merely of Kansas individualism but of all individualism of the "rugged" variety. Competition seems as certainly a kind of conformity as endurance is, being an effort by many men to conform as precisely as possible to some single standard by which all their efforts are graded. He who most precisely conforms is adjudged the winner.

There's no doubt, however, that Kansas' peculiarly bloody birth and arduous frontier upbringing did encourage a more profound devotion to "rugged individualism" than most other states have had, with the result that a conformist pattern was finally established within two decades after the frontier disappeared. There arose what Becker called "the deification of the average" or "the dogmatism of the general level."

I've also wondered sometimes if geography might not have been among the chief determinants of our Kansas mind -- the fact that we have no mountains here, nor lakes worthy of the name; that there's a sameness to much of our landscape (though I personally find it beautiful); and, most important of all, that the geodetic center of the United States lies not very far from the exact center of our state.