

Perspectives

By Paul Hosford

So much potential

I wonder what it was like to pull up stakes and head off in a covered wagon. If you didn't fall prey to disease or breakdowns, how did you know when you'd reached your destination? Sure, you knew what state or territory you were heading to, but how did you know which quarter-section of land was the one for you? I can imagine there was an "ah-ha" moment, a moment when you said to your spouse, "This is it -- there's so much potential!" Because that's why you did it -- you were looking for a place with enough potential that it made the daunting challenge of getting there worthwhile.

What sort of potential were the pioneers looking for? The potential to own their own land, raise their own food, build their own home. But I suspect it was more than that -- I suspect pioneer families chose the specific land they did because there was something about it they felt a connection to. Maybe it was the way the land lay or the scent of prairie flowers carried on the breeze, but something made a husband

and wife take a deep breath and know they were home.

Individually they sought land for their family, but collectively they sought land for a new civilization, a civilization they would build from the ground up. Whether they realized it or not, they were carrying deep traditions rooted in ages past. As they labored to build this new civilization out of soil and sweat and promise they were expressing who they were, where they came from and what they believed in.

They believed in building communities that would thrive generation after generation. They knew they wouldn't live to see the full fruits of their labors -- the work they did was for those who would follow. City streets, sewers, water mains, businesses and homes -- these were all things that would outlast them. Streets and sewers carry no reminders of who designed them or who labored in the hot sun to construct them.

And while the laborers were paid, the men and women behind these labors were not. They did it simply because it was the right thing to do. They were pioneers, after all, and it was their job to transform not only the land but the future as well.

They envisioned sustainable communities, communities that would be able to support themselves both economically and socially. Communities that would last for as many centuries as the millennium-old cities they'd left behind in Europe.

But something went wrong. Society changed, technology advanced, and the pioneers' children left to conquer new frontiers. No longer was a quarter section, a school and a church what people worked towards -- they already had those. Now it was much, much more -- the personal dreams and ambitions of each new generation, dreams very different from those that built the little towns which dot the Plains. And the little towns became places that could no longer sustain themselves. Victims perhaps of their own initial successes, many little towns couldn't change with the times. And over time, that doomed them.

We operate under a sense of that doom, the sense that slowly but surely our little towns are slipping back under the sod from which they arose. We are afraid we missed the opportunity a long time ago to adapt, to change, to find ways to stay vital. We just assume that instead of sustaining our populations, our children will leave, our small towns will waste away.

But along comes an area youth survey and guess what? The majority of our Middle Schoolers want to live here, raise their families here. Because despite everything, they still see what the pioneers saw -- that there's something in the lay of the land, the meanders of the creek, something in the evening breeze that makes this "home."

My wife Lori and I recently attended a meeting of people looking for ways to help our children raise their families here. A lot of good ideas were discussed. And as we left, my wife turned to me and said what I imagine my great-great grandmother probably said to my great-great grandfather when they crested a rise and knew they were finally home -- she said "There's so much potential..."

The road to the future always begins with a vision of the potential it holds. Allowing ourselves to see that potential, though, is often the hardest part...