

The Usable Past: *A Study of Historical Traditions in Kansas City*

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Introduction

This article is based on two papers: the first was co-authored, and read to the Urban History Group luncheon, American Historical Association, at St. Louis, December 1956; the second, by A.T. Brown, was read at a session of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association meeting at Lincoln, Nebraska, in April 1957. The leading ideas and much of the phraseology here are Dr. Wohl's; due to Dr. Wohl's untimely and tragic death in November 1957, the junior author assumes responsibility for the entire article.

A critical and provocative examination of the Local historians' craft, Wohl and Brown prepared their papers as part of the Kansas City History Project which Wohl founded and directed from 1954 until his death, and Brown continued until 1963. Carol Kammen, noted author on the historiography of local history, reprinted the article in her *The Pursuit of Local History: Readings on Theory and Practice* (Altamira Press <<http://www.altamirapress.com/>>, 1996). In her introduction to it she notes:

In this important essay, the authors discuss the many pasts to be found in Kansas City—an exercise in expanding the subject of local history from the usual players to a more rounded cast. Wohl and Brown look at the traditional history of the city and what it purports to tell us and then at the other pasts that are there to be found: the oral, the deviant, the inarticulate traditions. Their discussion of the way local history has been used to promote the business of the community is also interesting and has lessons for local historians.

Essays on historiography generally deal with the careers of important historians and the changing practices of professional scholarship. Quantitatively, however, in this country most of the history written during the nineteenth century must have taken the form of local and county histories, produced or sponsored by local residents rather than by trained scholars. These frequently

shapeless and always self-gratulant community chronicles exhibit in the main only the haziest notions of historical method or philosophical consistency. They can nevertheless reveal the sense of particular local pasts in relation to given stages of local development. They illustrate the conception of "usable past," and hence provide us with one meaningful index to cultural history in general.¹

By way of example, investigation of the origin and content of Kansas City's historical traditions, which are embodied in ten published books and many reminiscent articles, may suggest lines for comparative study. A history of this community's historiography shows that most of the writing has been closely related not only to attitudes toward the respective historians' "presents," but also to current prophecies about the future. The primary concern, at first, was with economic history. As the city grew, the scope of inquiry widened and came to include a tentative kind of social and even cultural history. Extending over all of the written histories, there has been a dominant tradition, drawing its force from conceptions of what the city was supposed to *be* and what it was supposed to become.

This dominant tradition more or less monopolizes the local history that has found its way into books, leaving to competing interpretations only the evanescent hospitality of occasional newspaper columns and the near oblivion of unpublished reminiscences. The written histories of Kansas City that have appeared since 1880 yield the picture of a community blessed by geography, made up of remarkably acute businessmen, more or less immune to the partialities of political argument, and engaged for a century or so in prophecy fulfillment. The tradition traces back not to the founding of the original town, but rather to a later stage: the middle 1850s, when the Kansas-Nebraska Act first stirred urban ambition and visions of unlimited development among the community's power elite. This means, of course, that the tradition arose in the competitive town-boosting that was universal over the expanding Middle West. Early boosting literature puts forth exuberant claims as to the bright destiny that awaits a particular spot among all others and suggests that great rewards await the men who will keep faith with the prophecy. So far as they concern Kansas City, the nineteenth-century prophecies were associated with a changing idea of what the West was good for. One line of thinking held that it was "the Great American Desert"; a counterpropaganda, some of it launched from Kansas City, asserted that the West was instead a veritable Garden of Eden. In the 1840s and

1. "Escape from the past is scarcely more possible for a community than for an individual. New growth is ever occurring but generally as an outgrowth of vital traditions or latent capacities.... If the community's tradition (its own story, its history) is then part of its character, the history of its historiography is an important chapter in the story of its cultural development". – Blake McKelvey, "A History of Historical Writing in the Rochester Area," *Rochester History* 6 (1944): 1.

1850s William Gilpin achieved a measure of lasting fame by enunciating the geopolitical theory that the site of Kansas City—significantly called “Centropolis” in his writings—was certain to support a commanding metropolis as continental development progressed. It was in this historical setting, a bantling town striving for growth while the potentialities of its hinterland were debated, that something like a philosophy of local history crystallized in Kansas City.²

The crystallizing agent, and the leading source figure for later local historians, was Robert Thompson Van Horn. Born in Pennsylvania in 1824, he became early in life a kind of typical American journeyman intellectual. School teaching, legal training, river-boating, and experience as printer, then editor, of Ohio and Pennsylvania newspapers made up his education. Van Horn always assumed the editorial burden of town-boosting: “standing around scratching heads,” he wrote in Ohio in 1850, “will never make Pomeroy the city nature intended it to be.” Even before he is likely to have heard of Gilpin, he was a good western nationalist, maintaining in one editorial that “in this valley is to concentrate the population, wealth, and civilization of America.”³ One of his ventures was an ill-fated daily paper in Cincinnati; its plant burned to the ground. “It has failed,” he wrote to his parents, “and I am again loser.” Referring to his own optimistic disposition, he mentioned that he had a temporary job clerking on a river boat and concluded: “if I can financier so as to be able to raise a few hundred dollars, I am going out West, probably to Nebraska, where I hope in a few years to retrieve my fortunes and kick up a dust generally among the natives.”⁴

In St. Louis in July 1855 Van Horn met a lawyer from the young and ambitious settlement known as Kansas City. The lawyer was acting for a committee of Kansas City businessmen who wanted someone to take over an enterprise at which they had so far been unsuccessful: the operation of a local newspaper. After a quick trip to the place with the lawyer, Van Horn took the job. He paid the businessmen \$250 as the first installment on the plant they had set up, and was to pay them a second \$250 to complete the contract one year after starting operation. By that time, however, Van Horn had succeeded so well in

2. See Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA, 1951). To Smith’s chapter on Gilpin may be added Gilpin’s own basic contribution to the debate over the nature of the West: *The Central Gold Region* (Philadelphia, 1860). Gilpin’s map of his projected “Centropolis” is reproduced in the *Kansas City Star*, May 26, 1901.

3. Meigs County (Ohio) *Telegraph*, June 27, April 25, 1850; the volumes of this paper edited by Van Horn are in the Kansas City Public Library. Where not otherwise indicated, biographical data on Van Horn comes from the sketch in Theodore S. Case, *History of Kansas City, Missouri* (Syracuse, NY, 1888), 432-40. There is a small but valuable collection of Van Horn papers in the Archives of the Native Sons of Kansas City.

4. Pomeroy, Ohio, February 27, 1854, Van Horn papers, Native Sons Archives.

giving the Kansas City men the kind of newspaper they needed that the second installment was waived. From, in his own words, “a loser” in the summer of 1854, Van Horn had changed his base and become a spectacular local success.

He had done this by transforming business ambitions into community ideology. In doing so, he developed a Kansas City orthodoxy through the columns of his paper (the *Kansas City Enterprise*, later called the *Western Journal of Commerce*) and in other public deliverances, every premise of which was later taken up organically into written Kansas City history. The premises seem to be four, as follows: 1) Kansas City’s natural advantages; 2) the need for imaginative, unflagging enterprise to cooperate intelligently with nature; 3) the pitfalls of partisan politics; 4) the existence of historical continuity whereby the rise of Kansas City fulfills a process long under way even before business development came along.

Van Horn’s first premise rested on a geographic determinism similar to Gilpin’s and stated simply that Kansas City’s growth was predestined by natural advantages. “God,” he said on one occasion,

*has marked out by topography the lines of commerce...and it is by studying these great tracings of the Almighty’s finger that the pioneer of trade and the herald of civilization has selected the site of those gigantic cities of the Republic, and which has fixed upon the rock-bound bay of the Missouri and Kansas as the last great seat of wealth, trade, and population in the westward march of commerce.... If men will only study topography the problem is solved.*⁵

This theme was frequently elaborated and even entered the editor’s private correspondence. Inviting an Ohio friend to visit Kansas City, Van Horn predicted that “you will be led to wonder why God in his mysterious Providence first offered the continent to men at its eastern portals, and so long kept the great and glorious West a *terra incognita* to humanity. This is the masterpiece of creation and the perfection of topography.”⁶

Portrayals of natural advantage lent themselves especially well to outside consumption, but they raised obvious difficulties at home. Van Horn was aware of the danger, and it led him to his second premise: the need for constant entrepreneurial aggressiveness. “Most of our people,” he wrote, “were too inclined to trust to our I ‘natural advantages’ and too slow to recognize the fact that the money and enterprise of rivals could overcome and filch away that which is but the fruits of natural advantages properly improved.” Without

5. Address at merchants’ Christmas dinner, 1857, “Railroads and the Press—Twin Brothers in American Progress and Development,” quoted in William H. Miller, *The History of Kansas City* (Kansas City, 1881), 79.

6. To I. Cartwright, Kansas City, February 27, 1858, Van Horn papers, Native Sons Archives.

vigorous action, he warned, the advantages given by nature would be “just so many monumental mockeries of [our] folly.”⁷

Held together in a healthy tension, these forces—nature and enterprise—need fear only one obstacle: the catastrophic stupidities of politicians. Van Horn saw partisan politics as a vast and treacherous bog in which the brightest prospects of wealth and progress might be at any moment sacrificed to demagoguery. Kansas City needed certain things that, unfortunately, involved government action: mail and army contracts, railroad grants, arrangements of Indian land titles, etc. These interests might be damaged in the political arena if they were not protected. Hence, Kansas Citians would be forced into political activity but only to defend requirements that would otherwise be neglected. The importance of politics was always that of its negative threat. “Congress may wrangle,” Van Horn wrote, “this man or that man may succeed, and yet neither the success of the one nor the failure of the other will build our railroads, regulate our banks, maintain our public institutions, or protect our growing internal interests.”⁸

Events seemed to confirm this attitude; referring to the Kansas troubles of 1855, he wrote that everything had been going along very nicely with Kansas City until “*political* influences in the Eastern portion of the Republic” interfered. The Civil War itself, arising from expressed issues in which Kansas Citians were largely uninterested, seemed only to prove that an undue concern with political matters spelled disaster for a hopeful western town.⁹

Van Horn’s own political career reveals so many party changes that it can be interpreted as reflecting only the rankest opportunism unless this philosophy of politics is kept in mind. Albert D. Richardson, who had worked with Van Horn in Cincinnati, was surprised to find him proslavery in 1857; four years earlier, issue after issue of their Ohio paper had condemned the Kansas-Nebraska bill as “the Nebraska infamy.”¹⁰ In a laudatory biographical sketch published in 1888, the writer approvingly noted Van Horn’s political migrations. Before the Civil War he had been (in Kansas City) a Democrat, “and, as Jackson County was largely of that faith, he was respected and influential at home, and able to accomplish more than if he had been of any other politics.” By 1865 events had made him a Republican, “and again he was on the side where he could do the

7. *Western Journal of Commerce*, May 24, 1860.

8. *Ibid.*, June 25, 1860.

9. *Kansas City Enterprise*, December 22, 1855. On the effort of the Kansas City leadership to remain “neutral” during the Kansas conflict, see James C. Malin, *Grassland Historical Studies*, (Lawrence, KS, 1950), vol. I, 102-18.

10. See the interesting sketch of Van Horn (who is not named) in [Albert D.] Richardson’s *Beyond the Mississippi* (Hartford, CT, 1867), 27-29.

most good for the town.”¹¹ An essentially negative attitude toward party politics was part of the larger opportunism of town-building.

The guarantees for Van Horn’s metropolis were not in politics; instead, they were in nature and enterprise, to which might be added a kind of historical guarantee. The fourth of his premises holds that the growth of Kansas City is but the culmination of a long series of historical processes that have taken place on the same ground. Urban greatness will arise in time on the spot where earlier enterprises had flourished. Canoes yield to flatboats, which yield to steamboats, which in turn give way to railroads. This point, less explicit than the other three, means simply that history is but a fulfillment that might have been predicted far back in time. The proof offered was that such prophecies had indeed been made. Late in his own life, in a memorial address on one of his fellow town-builders, Van Horn emphasized the farsightedness of the vigorous little group that had pushed Kansas City forward. Fifty years ago, the scene had not been prepossessing, but today, he said, the prosperity of Kansas City and the surrounding region “vindicates the prophetic ken of these early settlers.... To be the commercial metropolis of this empire was the ambition of Kansas City, and its fulfillment, then a dream, a prophecy, has become an actual realization.”¹²

On the basis of this four-part theory, Van Horn produced hundreds of editorials, addresses, and memorials. When writers approached the subject of Kansas City history, they found the conveniently arranged data waiting for them. They would in any case have had to consult the files of the *Western Journal of Commerce*, but the point is that in taking the paper and its editor as sources, they took also the extant presuppositions they found there. The felt needs of time and place had given rise to a theoretical structure of beneficent determinism, which continued to be of vital importance to the city builders as long as growth was a radical problem.

This theory was worked into one of the first books printed in Kansas City, Charles C. Spalding’s *Annals of the City of Kansas*, which carried a brief account of the town’s beginnings and was designed to attract favorable attention to the place. Spalding had come west with a university degree and a background in civil engineering; during the struggle to organize Kansas, he published a proslavery newspaper there—despite his Vermont birth and upbringing. In 1855 he came to Westport, Missouri, where he functioned both as city engineer and newspaper editor. The following year he moved up to the river settlement and

11. Case, 434-35.

12. Manuscript of memorial address on Milton J. Payne (n.d., 1890?), Van Horn papers, Native Sons Archives.

joined the small staff of Van Horn's Kansas City paper.¹³ Van Horn encouraged him in putting together the materials for his book, much of which came straight out of the columns of the paper. Spalding says his inspiration came from "almost invariably" hearing steamboat passengers at the Kansas City levee saying to one another, "come, let us go ashore and examine the business resources of this place...." The local Chamber of Commerce officially approved the work, and the city council helped circulate it.¹⁴

Spalding's main point, of course, was that Kansas City had a golden future. What he lacked in history—the city was, after all, but a fledgling community—he pieced out with prophecy. The past, indeed, was nothing but prologue for this enthusiast, as for many who followed him. He began with a direct quotation of four pages from Gilpin's *Central Gold Region*, in which it was argued that "these plains are not DESERTS, but the opposite, and are the cardinal basis of the future empire of commerce and industry, now erecting itself upon the North American continent." Coming closer to home, Spalding refers to prophecies Senator Thomas Hart Benton was supposed to have made concerning a future great city where the Kansas and Missouri rivers come together. The force of the prophecies and the basis of Spalding's conviction was in the theory that underpinned them: nature herself had prescribed an urban future for the site, and history had only to report first the realization of this fact by prophetic men and then the unfolding of destiny. Highly confident, Spalding refers to "these great natural advantages that we enjoy, such as soil, climate, and rivers, which come to us stamped with the patent of the creator."¹⁵

If Spalding's *Annals* can be called history only by courtesy, the same is not true of William H. Miller's *History of Kansas City*, which appeared in 1881. A native Missourian, Miller was born in 1843; he was another wandering journalist and had edited or written for a number of western newspapers in the 1860s and 1870s. Among them was Van Horn's, for which Miller specialized in what would today be called business news. In 1877 he forsook journalism to become full-time secretary for the Kansas City Board of Trade, an organization in which Van Horn

13. Westport was then four miles from Kansas City; it has since been absorbed into the metropolis. Biographical data on Charles C. Spalding comes from an obituary in the Boston *Daily Advertiser*, January 20, 1877, kindly supplied by the Boston Public Library, and also from a valuable sketch by James Anderson, appended to the facsimile reprint of *Annals of the City of Kansas* published by Frank Glenn (Kansas City, 1950).

14. Charles C. Spalding, *Annals of the City of Kansas*, fifth and sixth unnumbered pages after the frontispiece; about a dozen copies of the original, printed by Van Horn and Abeel in 1858, are known to have survived. We have used the Glenn facsimile edition cited above.

15. Spalding, 10-14, 16, 70.

had been and still was active.¹⁶ Miller's history, indeed, appeared in its first form as part of the *Kansas City Daily Journal's* "Annual Review" in 1877.

Miller's book, the matrix of nearly all later written Kansas City history, reflects a consistent stress on economic matters. The emphasis was realistic, since by far the greatest energy had been devoted to economic growth in the city of his day. It led Miller, however, to ignore a great deal of local history. He sketches only briefly the colorful life of the early French fur trading community; this, to him, was not the real stuff of history. The French community had been stagnant; it had made no effort to build a city. Again, the inhabitants of nearby Westport who were southerners and who developed a characteristic social life of their own, get short shrift from Miller.¹⁷ The South, and the southerner's outlook, both lost out in the competition of events. These people were not aggressive or expansive enough and hence were left behind by the times; Miller probably thought they deserved no better from the historian of the city's affairs.

Reluctantly, he gave a few pages to political matters; the events of the border warfare leading up to the Civil War of course bore directly on Kansas City's economic fortunes. But Miller hurries on; politics, in his eyes, constituted an unfortunate obstacle in the path of his main concern. Political conflict was, from his point of view as from Van Horn's, wasteful because divisive. It comprised an order of things more or less "bad" for the city. In 1858 Spalding had remarked of Kansas City's hinterland that "The adjustment...of her political affairs will be seed-time and harvest for her sovereign farmers," and had cherished a hope that perhaps the politicians would not have their war, since, after all, "the great idea of progress and money making, so peculiarly characteristic of the American mind, is rapidly overstepping and losing sight of the operations and negotiations of politicians,"¹⁸ Miller, to whom this seemed a just and sensible view, regretfully notes, with the memory of the war fresh in his mind, that "During the excited political contest of 1860 public attention was so much absorbed with politics that there appears to have been but little effort to inaugurate new enterprises."¹⁹

Investment and trade are more relevant than wars and elections to the story Miller tells. He asks, in effect, this question of the past: how did it happen that between 1838 and 1881 a group of small, rather unimpressive settlements at the

16. The only known biographical sketch of William H. Miller is in *The History of Jackson County, Missouri* (Kansas City, 1881), 816, 817. Miller's *History of Kansas City*, in addition to the separate publication cited in these notes, appears in this volume, pp. 373-632.

17. Miller, 15-16; Elizabeth Butler Gentry contributed a lively sketch of the early Westport social life (a subject that Miller ignored) in Carrie Westlake Whitney, *Kansas City, Missouri: Its History and Its People*, (Chicago, 1908), vol. I, 641-63.

18. Spalding, 9-10.

19. Miller, 72.

junction of two rivers became transformed into the booming confusion of an urban establishment? Everything else is marginal to this, the real issue.²⁰ As has been suggested, this was also the real issue so far as the people who were riding or guiding Kansas City's future were concerned. The main point in 1881 was still to make the city grow, and, following this logic to its end, if history was useful at all it was because it might offer pertinent instruction. Miller employs all the usual paraphernalia of the economic historian: trade figures, population growth, the course of investment, the diversification of commerce—showing us all the arts and devices that made Kansas City a great market place. His account, however, is given rational coherence and intellectual dignity by a careful working out of the theory of urban development pioneered locally by Van Horn.

In his introductory chapter Miller describes ancient cities as having been founded by the fiat of monarchs, with some consideration of military advantage and soil fertility. There follows a hiatus until after the American Revolution, when the requirements changed. (This contrast may not be so arbitrary as it appears, since Miller is distinguishing, substantially, between town-building before and after the Industrial Revolution.) In the later dispensation the crucial determinant was access to transportation facilities, and nowhere was this more true than in the American West. Kansas City was peculiarly fortunate in this vital respect, since—Miller says—“there are but few, besides our own city, that from the first have held the advantage over all rivals in all phases of transportational development, or that stand to-day more pre-eminent in this regard.” In its most general form, the theory is stated as follows: “the long since observed physical law that ‘motion follows the line of least resistance’.... All effort employs the methods, and follows the lines that most facilitate the attainment of its object.”²¹

Such is the theme of Miller's book, stated, restated, and illustrated. The river junction first drew the fur traders, then the more comprehensive Indian trade, then the Santa Fe, Oregon, and related trades. So unshakable was the influence of this determinant, that, in Miller's eyes, it carried the city through crisis after crisis with perfect safety. Early land-title uncertainties, the menace of cholera epidemics, negative interpretations of Kansas City's hinterland, even the Civil

20. Miller's concluding chapter is captioned: “Kansas City—Why She Is and What She Is”; in it, he reviews the factors that seemed decisive in the city's growth, noting the apparently unlimited resources of the “new West”. In spite of its youth, Kansas City's supremacy in its region was clearly secure. “Since, therefore,” Miller continues, “Kansas City already so largely controls the trade of this vast area, and since its intense and speedy concentration here is assured ... it manifests that her growth will be measured by that of the country. It remains only for us to review the resources of the country and compare them with those of districts commercially tributary to the great cities of the world, to arrive at some idea of what Kansas City must become” (p. 249). History and prophecy were as inseparable as two sides of the same coin.

21. *Ibid.*, 6, 7.

War, which was an unqualified catastrophe—all these proved unavailing against the geographic talisman. By 1865, Miller remarks,

*This city seemed to be well nigh out of the race for commercial supremacy, and would have been so regarded had it not been for her well demonstrated natural advantages, and the fact that the main line of the Union Pacific Railway started at this city ... and the fact that the Missouri Pacific was nearly completed. These gave heart to her citizens to renew the struggle, and an era of unprecedented activity followed.*²²

This bland and apparently lucid statement introduces again the ambiguity in natural advantages that had bemused Van Horn. The railroads, after all, came to Kansas City because campaigns were waged by groups that wanted them, because financial contributions were raised to attract them, because deliberate and ultimately successful entrepreneurial tactics were adopted. By the time railroads appeared on the scene, the logic of geographical advantage was no longer decisive; the lines could have gone to Leavenworth or St. Joseph. Miller, unconsciously paradoxical, makes this apparent when he enthusiastically quotes one of Van Horn's postwar editorials, according to which "There is a tide in the affairs of men—and the same is true of cities.... If we do not act at the tide of our opportunities, our future history will be a record of failure.... Providence never assisted a lazy man—fortune never smiled on an indolent community."²³ With the opening of the railroad era, Miller's "line of least resistance" wavers, and will no longer support his interpretation. Still, he does not abandon it but adroitly restates it so as now to include a qualifying implication. Kansas Citians must at least cooperate intelligently with nature. This seemed to involve mostly the avoidance of factional passion: "Kansas City has but to preserve ... unity of action to acquire the trade of the whole trans-Missouri country west to Arizona and south to Mexico."²⁴

Van Horn's booster theory of urban growth had been plastic enough to allow for both natural determinism and enterprise. One of the lasting effects his protege, Miller, had on the historiography of Kansas City stemmed from his overlooking the tension between them and passing on to his successors his own

22. *Ibid.*, 110.

23. *Ibid.*, 111. See Roy Robert's prefatory note to the most recent (and best) history of Kansas City, Henry C. Haskell and Richard B. Fowler, *City of the Future* (Kansas City, [1950]), 5: "but for the daring, the vision, and the faith of a handful of men, the capital of this great empire might just as well have been St. Joseph, Leavenworth, or even Independence. All three had a head start over the scrawny little village that sprang up at the mouth of the Kaw".

24. Miller, 247.

patchwork explanation. His subsequent role as an authoritative historian effectively quelled further exploration of the problem, since Miller's text rather than the contemporary sources became the wellspring from which most later historians drew their material. After the fashion of medieval chronicles, following a safe and respected authority, writers down to the 1940's paid Miller the high compliment of amiably plagiarizing his text. We are not stressing the equivocal ethics of unacknowledged borrowing. Instead, we wish to note what seem to be the reasons for such wholesale use of Miller's material. Miller himself had made up fully 10 percent of his book by quoting Van Horn directly. It appears certain from the context of later borrowings that the authors assumed Miller's work to be the canonical version of what had happened in the past, which it would be idle to check or try to improve on. It was only worth while to embellish the text with added comment and a few confirming glosses. Secondly, and even more important, this consistent plagiarism gave a unity to much of the history that has since been written about Kansas City by providing a classic framework in which the city's past could be contained. The systematic transmission of what was originally a booster's conception of city history has ruled out, since Miller's formulation of it, any substantial consideration of the early French community or of the enviroing cultures in Westport and Independence and, most of all, any realistic and accurate account of the personal and community enterprise that helped win Kansas City's battles with her urban rivals.

Miller's immense influence is clearly prefigured in the work of the next local historian, Theodore Spencer Case, whose *History of Kansas City* appeared in 1888. Originally a physician, Case was in his long life by turns an army officer, a lawyer, politician, and member of the directorates of an extraordinary variety of public and private organizations in Kansas City. He arrived there in 1857 and lived through the heroic years when the city was securing its foundations and winning out over nearby communities. He was an old-timer, so to speak, by the time Miller arrived in the city in 1871.

In writing his own history, Case was dealing with a period of change and growth that he had himself experienced.²⁵ We might, on this score, expect vivid and original personal testimony. There is, in fact, little in Case that is not in Miller, aside from compilations of business statistics for the years after 1881 and up to 1888. It is probably a tribute to Case's celebrated geniality and talent for sociability that much appears in his work about the city's voluntary

25. The best biographical sketch is in H.L. Conrad, ed., *Encyclopedia of the History of Missouri*, (New York, 1901), vol. I, 517-19. It is difficult to say how much of his history Case actually wrote; his preface credits the assistance of compilers and remarks that he has subjected their work to strict inspection (p. 4).

organizations and clubs. Again, however, the focus is on the wonderful transformation of a wilderness camp into a burgeoning city. "It has been impossible," Case writes, "to do it full justice. Older citizens are so bewildered by it as to have lost track of old landmarks, and their memories are at fault, while the newer ones have been so completely engrossed by current progress as not to have taken the past into consideration at all. Even the present is more than they can keep up with."²⁶ At the outset he states the familiar deterministic doctrine: "as if nature had designed the place for a great city,"²⁷ but his comment on the text diverges significantly, if almost imperceptibly, from Miller's. The supporting evidence for the doctrine is strongest, of course, in the earliest years of the city's history. Case runs quickly over this phase of the story and turns rather abruptly to more recent experiences. And in so doing, he obliquely makes a different point: enterprise, not natural bounty, accounts for the fulfillment of the prophecies. Railroads provided the city's leaders with an opportunity that, if missed, would have resulted in fatal loss. Case remarks quite casually on a set of facts Miller never paused to notice. He asserts directly that there was local opposition to railroad projects in Kansas City;²⁸ unfortunately, he does not develop this topic, but it does suggest the influence of artificial advantages in shaping the city's course.

In diverging from Miller in this respect, Case does not abandon his model so far as to avoid the problem. He simply adds "the energy and enterprise of its citizens" to Kansas City's natural advantages and then drops the question, only recollecting himself a few pages later with a lame addition: "many persons, in viewing the wonderful growth of Kansas City...imagine it was forced into prosperity by reason of its geographical position...but...it was only by great vigilance and a hard struggle on the part of her citizens that she obtained the advantages above mentioned."²⁹ Still, as given, the explanation in Case's history diverts attention away from economic decisions in favor of an immanent geographical mystique.

William Griffith, who followed Case as a city historian, seems to have earned the almost total obscurity that now shrouds his name.³⁰ For the most part, he simply transcribes Miller and could be dismissed but for two remarks that

26. Case, 3.

27. *Ibid.*, 28.

28. *Ibid.*, 60-61.

29. *Ibid.*, 55, 58.

30. William Griffith, *History of Kansas City* (Kansas City, 1900). The Kansas City directory for 1900 identifies Griffith as associated with the firm that published his book; the same firm published other local history material and may have commissioned Griffith's book as one for which a substantial local sale was expected.

indicate a new stress entering into the city's history around 1900. In the first place, while sedulously underscoring the site's locational advantages, Griffith was properly impressed with the coming of the railroads and pointed to the successful bridging of the Missouri River as the circumstance that brought them. This coup, he concludes (quite incorrectly), was "due to the decisive, intelligent action of a few well-known business men, aided and abetted by the united assistance of the entire populace."³¹ Wherever, in fact, Griffith makes interpolations into Miller's text, the stress is on enterprise and strategic risk-taking, despite the oft-repeated bow to natural advantages.

More important, in the light of what was to come, were Griffith's reflections on the changing appearance and style of life in Kansas City. Already in 1900 he could remark with shocked surprise on what the place had looked like twenty years earlier. The prospect in 1880 had been dismal indeed:

The old-fashioned Missouri hog, fitter for the race-track than for the pork-barrel ... patrolled the streets and disputed the king's highway with the king and all his subjects. At night, when the hogs were off duty, a billion frogs...told their troubles to the stars and saluted the rising sun with croaks of despair. In wet weather the town-site was a sea of mud and in dry weather a desert of dust. There was no paving.... The water supply made whiskey-drinking a virtue and the gas was not much better use than to be blown out. The population of the city included as fine a collection of the ruffian brotherhood and sisterhood of the wild West as could well be imagined. Renegade, Indians, demoralized soldiers, unreformed bushwhackers, and border ruffians, thieves, and thugs imported from anywhere, professional train-robbers of home growth, and all kinds of wrecks of the Civil War, gave the town something picturesquely harder to overcome than the hills and gulches of its topography.

All this, he says, was "a sight to make granite eyes shed tears." Indeed, Kansas City in the full bloom of its economic growth offered "not a single pleasing prospect except the towering ambition, indomitable determination, and volcanic energy of the good people of the place."³² Here is the new theme: celebration of the city's increasing urbanity, which is studied by tracing the evolution of an increasingly organized social life in Kansas City.

The earlier theme—accounting for the city's growth—is still present; in Griffith and his successors it becomes a set formula, phrased in classic terms of such apparently unimpeachable validity that it hardly seems to call for extended comment. Carrie Whitney in 1908, Charles Deatherage in 1928, and Roy Ellis in

31. Griffith, 49.

32. *Ibid.*, 106-107.

1930 all repeat it with ritual emphasis. And the same stress, although modified by these new emphases, continues in the work of the city's latest historians.³³ Spoken of in this vein, the histories carry on the great tradition of seeing Kansas City's past as the fulfillment of prophecy, a conception that was central with Van Horn and Spalding. As the most recent writers justly remark, "Kansas City was a connoisseur of prophets."³⁴

But when the prophets are gone, what of the prophecy? Already, late in the 1890s, young William Allen White saw in Robert T. Van Horn, Kansas City's prophet par excellence, the sad picture of a man who has survived his era: subdued, living in the past, largely ineffectual. "Perhaps," White wrote many years later, "I was too preoccupied... to sense very clearly what a mauve tragedy in the background, set in old age's shabby pastels, was passing across the stage before my very eyes."³⁵ The city's history had left Van Horn behind, and its historiography, too, veered into different channels than those by which the editor had steered his course. By the early twentieth century, the issue that began to engross the historians was the changing character of the city's social life, and the conception of what ought properly to be included in an urban history drifted more and more into a description and justification of the culture of Kansas City. The writers began to grope for the "essence" of Kansas City's past, rather than for the "process" by which she had matured into metropolitan stature.

In 1900 even Griffith went to some pains in his history to distinguish the merits of economic expansion from the equally desirable virtues of increased civic amenity. For novelty, he had suggested that progress in the one did not necessarily mean an enhancement of the other. Kansas City's special urban quality, he claimed, partakes of "the spirit of the West". This spirit hovers over the city's past and present like a benign *genius loci*, which "saw the cabin fall and the palace rise."³⁶ Eight years later Whitney struck the same mystical note and

33. Whitney, *Kansas City Missouri*, 641-63; Charles P. Deatherage, *Early History of Greater Kansas City* (Kansas City, 1928); Roy Ellis, *A Civic History of Kansas City* (Springfield, MO, 1930); Darrell Garwood, *Crossroads of America* (New York, 1948); Haskell and Fowler, *City of the Future*. To these may be added an unpublished M.A. thesis: Alice Lanterman, "The Industrial Development of Kansas City" (Northwestern University, 1939). For examples of plagiarism referred to above, see Miller, 236, passage beginning: "The school year of 1868-9..."; Case, 115, same words; Griffith, 75, same words; and Whitney, vol. I, 306: "Of the school year of 1868-1869...". See also Miller, 45, passage beginning: "There was no municipal government..."; Case, 198-99, beginning: "A circumstance occurred..."; Whitney, vol. I, 125, beginning: "A circumstance occurred..."; and Deatherage, 375: "There was no municipal government...". Again, see Miller on the Panic of 1873, 147: "the effect of this panic..."; Case gives the same passage without acknowledgment, 92-93 and again with acknowledgment, 284-85.

34. Haskell and Fowler, 61.

35. William Allen White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York, 1946), 212.

36. Griffith, 102.

assured her readers that the “Western element knows no note of decadence” and that “the finality of Western history still lies in the distance.”³⁷ And again, twenty years after this, Deatherage opened his voluminous history with a long poem invoking Manitou, who was identified as the tutelary spirit of the West.

This search for a larger context in which to set Kansas City’s past is not limited to a simple identification with the merits of a particular section. Kansas City comes to be seen, rather, not only as a happily typical western metropolis, but as one that somehow represents peculiarly American characteristics. The city’s own history becomes a nucleus around which increasingly larger sections of the country’s history are wound, with the tacit implication that each illustrates the other. Griffith begins the process by devoting no less than one-fifth of his small book to the Louisiana Purchase and the Missouri Compromise in order to set the stage. Whitney, fumbling even more wildly for a usable frame of reference, begins her consideration of the city’s Civil War era by discussing the Northwest Ordinance in detail. But Deatherage sets the record for diffuseness by opening his book with the discovery of America and literally does not reach Kansas City until page 347.

These strenuous attempts to overcome a narrow parochialism in the city’s history and to extend its historical base bog down for lack of a conceptual vocabulary that could be used to relate the wider range of American history to local events. The authors press hard on their western metaphor, and the occasionally grotesque disproportion and irrelevancies in their works reveal an honest but unavailing effort to produce social history as sound and as sharp as the economic history written earlier. The uses to which material on the Santa Fe trail is put offer a compact example of this kind of changing emphasis. In Miller the trail figures as an economic issue, and he is interested in it solely in that connection. Case, who follows him, deals with it in much the same way, but he occasionally graces his account with anecdotes of adventure in the prairie commerce. Whitney, on the other hand, devotes thirty pages to the romantic associations of the subject, as an exemplification of life in the Old West, and barely mentions the business transacted; Deatherage follows Whitney’s lead in the matter.³⁸ The effect, in the end, is to create an entirely amiable but unmistakable sentimentality designed to enhance sentiment of place by manipulating the emotional implications of data. This tactic, in the end, submerges the legitimate importance of the Santa Fe trail in the city’s economic history.

37. Whitney, vol. I, 9.

38. Miller, 21-26; Case, 33-36; Whitney, vol. I, 149-79; Deatherage, 293-323.

Since 1930 the identification of the city's history with that of the nation and the statement of its essential urban attributes have been more gracefully expressed. Garwood, writing in 1947, claims that Kansas City's history "to a large extent has been a history of the country, in miniature, for the last one hundred years". Haskell and Fowler, three years later, warmly agree. "The history of Kansas City," they say, "in the last hundred years has paralleled with extraordinary fidelity the history of the United States. Many of the factors that shaped our life between 1850 and 1950 found local expression at the great bend of the Missouri". This emphasis, we think, reflects more than an exuberance of local pride; it stresses the notion that some of the main issues and central conflicts of American history found a crucial testing ground in the history of Kansas City. It is significant that the most recent history of the city, for example, turns to examine once again the factor of location, this time not to show that economic advantages are derived from the city's site, but to point out that Kansas City was in the path of at least two of the most important developments in American history: the Civil War and the settlement of the plains frontier.³⁹ And, it is implied, where the current of historical events ran most swiftly, the influence of those events was strongest, most lasting, and peculiarly telling.

So far, our review of the general course of the city's historiography has found a basically optimistic line, understandable in view of its roots in the booster tradition. But here and there, especially in some of the more recent works, a less sanguine note can be detected. In 1930 Ellis was musing whether it was wise to hope for continued increase in the city's population. Cities may forget, he warns, that "numbers alone do not constitute any proper criterion of comfort, culture, or permanent prosperity."⁴⁰ The unpublished M.A. thesis cited above (note 33) refers again and again to "Kansas City's worth" and to Kansas City's "just claims," in striking contrast to the high confidence that had characterized Spalding, Miller, and Case.⁴¹ Perhaps this new mood, slightly represented as it is, may be due to the fact that the excitements of the city's first and most rapid growth are now muted. Garwood, more recently, suggests that "Probably the city today can be described as full grown, and for the time being somewhat quietly disposed toward the march of events."⁴² This last would be indignantly scouted by many in the city, and it might be noted that Garwood is not a native;

39. Garwood, 11; Haskell and Fowler, 15.

40. Ellis, 36; on page 148, Ellis remarks that "the strategic location of Kansas City" funneled into it a fine assortment of riffraff, "quite as much of the flotsam and jetsam of society as will any street in America [present]...". Thus does geographical advantage return to plague the local historian!

41. Lanterman, 2, 54, 130.

42. Garwood, 321.

the strength of the historical tradition, with its origins far back in the first booster literature, is not so prominent in his book.

This written tradition, as we have outlined it, is essentially the success story of a city; it parallels closely the success story of Van Horn himself, who worked out most of its theoretical framework. It is easily accessible, its assumptions and its data, indeed, being the only ones that a more or less casual or hurried research is likely to encounter. Other local figures, whatever their reasons, have found themselves drawn toward different aspects of the city's history and have shown that much of what the written tradition takes for granted is in fact highly problematic. These divergent expressions, when they have been preserved at all, have taken the form of addresses to "old settlers'" associations, letters to editors, and unpublished reminiscences; they can be described, for contrast, as a sort of "oral tradition".

The leading source figure in the oral tradition was John Calvin McCoy. Son of the famous Baptist missionary, Isaac, he arrived at the site of the future city in 1830, almost a generation before Van Horn. He founded Westport, acted as secretary to the original town company, and engaged in large-scale business operations in the two towns before the Civil War.⁴³ Nevertheless, there was a more or less poetic vein in McCoy's character that seems not to have been satisfied with a purely business career. He did not stick consistently to the job of town-building; after putting up a store in Westport, according to his daughter, he soon realized "that he was not fitted by nature, or inclination, for a mercantile life" and withdrew from the enterprise. "You know," his mother once wrote of him, "he don't calculate closely about things, and promises too much...." He was continuously involved in surveying trips and Indian matters, which took him west into the wilderness as well as east to Washington.⁴⁴ During the Civil War McCoy, a southern sympathizer, had to leave Kansas City—significantly unlike Van Horn, who usually found himself able to roll with a punch. In 1863 McCoy corresponded with a Kansas City associate with whom he had business, proposing a meeting place outside the city. "I suppose," wrote this earliest of

43. The most complete biographical sketch of McCoy was itself "oral", a memorial address delivered before the Jackson County Historical Society, "John C. McCoy, Pioneer, and the Early History of Jackson County", by W.C. Scarritt. It was printed in the *Kansas City Times*; an updated clipping is in the John C. McCoy Scrapbook in the Archives of the Native Sons of Kansas City. In addition to this sketch, the present account generalizes from newspaper items, 1855-1860, and letters in the Isaac McCoy Letterbooks, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

44. Mrs. Nellie McCoy Harris, "Memories of Old Westport," in *The Annals of Kansas City*, (Kansas City, MO: Missouri Valley Historical Society, 1924), vol. I, 466. Christiana McCoy to Isaac McCoy, April 20, 1840, Isaac McCoy Letterbooks; John C. McCoy, "Survey of Kansas Indian Lands," *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society*, vol. 4 (1890), 300-302, lists twenty-two surveying trips between 1830 and 1855.

local pioneers, "it might not be safe for me to go to Kansas City...."⁴⁵ Shortly after the war McCoy returned to Kansas City and engaged in real estate; he was never able to recoup his losses and died in 1889 in the care of relatives. Having withdrawn from history as participator, however, he re-entered it in the 1870s as bard-raconteur and spent his later years retelling and writing down the local history that he could remember.⁴⁶

In brief, McCoy simply denied or ignored most of what came to make up the written tradition. His first contribution to a newspaper was called forth, he said, by an earlier article on local history that had included some misstatements; he did not specify what they were. His account, as would be characteristic, dwelt on the direct, personal quality of experience, rather than on its broad economic meaning. On his arrival at the site, he wrote, the ground was "clothed with dense primeval forest—the still, quiet solitude interrupted only by the barking squirrel, the howl of the wolf, the distant baying of the hunter's dog...". Subsequent progress did not please McCoy; he sighed "for the good old days of genuine disinterested honesty ... when one might lie down to sleep without fear of having his throat cut, his pockets picked, or the socks stolen off his feet".⁴⁷ His letters are studded with unpleasant imagery when the reference is to industrial growth: locomotives always screech, the city is always raucous ("Plutonic bellowings...as if old Nature had a stomach ache"), and morality tends to deteriorate in it. In pleasant contrast, the "dense, primeval forest" and its denizens recur time and time again.⁴⁸

McCoy cut in behind Van Horn's "heroic age" with a "golden age" of his own. He wrote and spoke a good deal about the Indians and the French, on which Miller and Case had been almost totally silent. His major concern was not with pedantic correctness in small details; what he wanted was to preserve certain elements in the city's history that appeared to be rapidly vanishing into oblivion. When Miller's history appeared, McCoy praised it as containing much "historical and statistical information of great value". Nevertheless, he quickly added, "the facts I have written ... are not touched upon in that work".⁴⁹ Earlier than this, he had already noted the appearance of a number of good statistical

45. To P.S. Brown, November 11, 1863, in Native Sons Archives.

46. An extensive collection of his "letters to the editor" and addresses are preserved in the McCoy Scrapbook [cited above in note 43].

47. McCoy Scrapbook, 2 (*Kansas City Daily Journal*, February 15, 1871).

48. *Kansas City Daily Journal*, February 22, 1888; McCoy confessed that he had no interest in economic history: "we will not waste time or space now to tell what everybody knows of the...dozen or more great iron bridges—the speeding cable trains, the screams and crash of a thousand trains...".

49. *Kansas City Daily Journal*, March 19, 1882.

compilations relating to the city's growth, "but this," he said, "is only a part of the past history of Kansas city..."⁵⁰

Although the early town builders had been his intimate friends, McCoy pays them little heed in his reminiscences. Far from being heroes of enterprise, he wrote, they were "not disposed to risk much in the experiment, and did very little to push the town..."⁵¹ As far as prophetic insight was concerned, McCoy denied that there had been any. That the early businessmen were actually creating the basis for an urban center "never entered into their calculation". Many writers had asserted that Kansas City's greatness was predicted early in the course of events; but McCoy counters: "not a particle of foundation in fact has that assumption". Had anyone actually ventured upon predictions of this kind in the early days, he would have been laughed to scorn and his prophecies marked down as "the idle vaporings of a demented intellect". As for Spalding, that young man had written his material "as a puff for the young town, and the stereotyped fraud has become history"⁵²

The historians of the written tradition could not, of course, ignore McCoy's writings; all of them quote from him one or more passages about the "dense, primeval forest" or else his account of the 1844 flood. But their purpose is to set off all the more dramatically the constructive energy of the town-building enterprise and never to call into question the value of the enterprise itself, as McCoy did. Interestingly enough, his standing as a founding father of the city was hardly alluded to in the written tradition until 1947, when Garwood identified him as the "principal founder" of Kansas City.⁵³

There were other contributors to the oral tradition, men and women whose memories were cast in the same vein as McCoy's. Some of their narratives are preserved in a typewritten folder of "Pioneer Recollections" in the archives of the Native Sons of Kansas City. Apart from McCoy himself, the most prolific contributor was Daniel Geary, who had held office in the city government in the Civil War period. Geary could not remember the 1830s and 1840s, but he never failed to point out failures to predict accurately the course of events in Kansas City in the 1850s and later. "I might also recite many interesting incidents," he wrote once, answering a request for information about the war, "but I have observed that wherever I attempted to ... only yawns were elicited which

50. *Ibid.*, January 1, 1881.

51. Undated *Journal* clipping, McCoy Scrapbook, 7.

52. *Kansas City Daily Journal*, November 18, 1883.

53. Garwood, 23; it has been noted above that Garwood cannot be considered an authentic bearer of the written tradition; he devotes more of his text to Frank and Jesse James than to the coming of the railroads to Kansas City.

indicated lack of interest." Apparently, people preferred to get their history out of books, and as to the existing written histories of the city Geary simply remarked that they "might be classified as 75% absolute fiction, 20% exaggeration, mixed with a substratum of 5% truth."⁵⁴

Obviously, there is more than one "past" in Kansas City. The written tradition—with its success story of prophecies redeemed, boldness vindicated, and the city itself a continuing testimony to triumph over the wilderness—exercises an almost hypnotic influence not only over its historians but in the city's present-day publicity. But historical traditions easily become a tangle of vested metaphors, blocking inquiry into the very questions they offer to solve. The conflicts between and within the traditions we have called "written" and "oral" mark a range of questions that remain open for new investigations and fresh judgment. It is quite clear that adequate local history can be written in terms of neither stereotype.

Perhaps the most important suggestion to emerge from our examination, however, deals not with the adequacy of Kansas City's historical traditions, but rather with their effect upon and their place within the general history of American culture. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century local history comprises an enormous body of literature in this country; the attitudes and presuppositions enshrined in this literature offer potential rewards to historical investigators. To some extent, what people believe about the history of their locale may shape their notions of how they ought to live in it and of the values they may hope to realize in their community. If, as Charles and Mary Beard once wrote, "the history of civilization may become an instrument of civilization itself," the course of American urban historiography may have operated in the formation of "urbane" and local attitudes.

54. Geary to W.L. Campbell, January 12, 1915, in "Pioneer Recollections" folder, Native Sons Archives.