Elwyn Robinson and Settlement Patterns in North and South Dakota

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Introduction

What is probably Elwyn Robinson's most enduring legacy is his six themes of North Dakota history. He used them as his theory to explain how and why North Dakota was settled and developed the way it did. To an extent, he also used them to prophesize North Dakota's future.

Remoteness is Robinson's first theme. He says that this indicates the "...great distance between North Dakota and the chief centers of population, industry, finance, culture, and political decision in the nation..."(Robinson 1959). Dependence is his second theme. It is the term he used to describe North Dakota's position as a "colonial hinterland," subject to decisions made by outsiders. Radicalism is his term for the theme which describes the state's political responses to being so remote and subject to outside control.

His fourth theme is economic disadvantage. It relates to the wild variations in the state's revenues and the population's personal income. The

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too-much mistake is his term for the theme describing all the state institutions, banks, railroads, counties, churches, etc., which came into being during the settlement period. Finally, adjustment is the process which North Dakota is going through to adapt to its circumstances.

In Robinson's explanation of the too-much mistake, he looks at several pertinent factors relating to North Dakota's making of this mistake. He correctly cites problems with the size of homesteads allowed under the 1862 Homestead Act, the weather differences between the two halves of the state and the expectations of the pioneers who came to settle in North Dakota (Robinson 1959).

What Robinson did not examine as part of his too-much theme are some geographic, economic, and available technology factors which also played a role in townsite development and railroad construction in North Dakota. By combining the geographical work of Peter Hamburg, the economic and technology work of John Hudson with Robinson's own work, we can compare the settlement experiences of South Dakota and North Dakota. This comparison and expansion of Robinson's too-much theme will help in understanding why so many communities came into existence and why some survived while others did not in the upper Great Plains.

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South Dakota Settlement and Geography

Settlement patterns in South and North Dakota were different from each other. The initial "permanent" settlements were fur trading and supply centers such as Pembina, N.D. and Yankton, S.D. As the fur trade died out, many of these posts were abandoned, but a few, such as Pembina and Yankton, survived. Most of the settlements were located along rivers, such as the Red and Missouri Rivers. The primary reasons for settling along rivers were the access to water, the ability to trade goods with other areas, and the wood supply which was naturally located along rivers. With these two points in common, settlement in North and South Dakota proceeded in different directions.

Settlement in South Dakota started in the easternmost portion of the territory, along what is now the Minnesota-South Dakota and Iowa-South Dakota borders. The next area of settlement was along the Missouri River, followed by the Black Hills. The sections in between were settled later, particularly through the efforts of the railroads.

Townsite development in eastern South Dakota started in the traditional pattern, going from east to west. Development of towns along the Missouri took place next because of the steamboat lines that began operating along the river. Steamboat operations started because of the U.S. Army's need to support its troops operating against the Indians in Dakota

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and Montana Territories. Permanent towns started up to supply the needs of the steamboat operators and provide places where the Army could base units to fight the Indians if the need arose. Settlement then spread out east and west of the Missouri River. After gold was discovered in Montana Territory, mining camps and other settlements started up in that territory, which is why steamboats began going further up the Missouri River.

Railroad construction in South Dakota followed a different pattern than anywhere else in the Midwest and West. It actually followed the construction pattern found in Europe and the eastern portion of the United States.

Railroads in Europe and the eastern United States were built in order to connect existing places. In other words, cities and towns that already existed received railroad service first. Thus, connections were made first between major cities like Baltimore, Md., and Washington, D.C., with the smaller communities along the right of way getting railroad service in the process. After the major cities were connected, branches were built and smaller railroads were absorbed by larger lines, allowing the larger lines to provide service to smaller communities more economically than by building competing branch lines.

With the discovery of gold in South Dakota's Black Hills, the rush was on and settlement started there, regardless of the Indians' claims to the

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area. The mining camps and supply towns were the first permanent white settlements in the area. The need to move supplies in and gold and other resources out led to the first railroads in South Dakota being built in the Black Hills, rather than in the eastern portion of the state.

The rugged nature of the Black Hills led to the construction of narrow gauge railroad lines. Narrow gauge rails were spaced three feet apart, from centerhead to centerhead, rather than the usual standardized spacing of 4 feet, 8-1/2 inches. The primary reason for building narrow gauge trackage was its lower construction cost as compared to standard gauge. Narrow gauge construction reduced the amount of grading work needed on the right of way, since the rails were spaced closer together. With the smaller gauge, the equipment was proportionately smaller, and less material was needed to build the trackage and rolling stock.

There was a very important tradeoff, however. When a narrow gauge train reached the end of the line, the cars had to be unloaded and reloaded into standard gauge cars, or vice-versa. (Passengers were not considered a problem in this respect, as they could move themselves from one train to another.) What the railroads did was trade faster and less expensive construction costs for higher labor costs in their efforts to serve the Black Hills mining camps. The change of gauge was not a reason for towns to come in to existence, however, as the railroads built to towns that

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already existed. The gauge was changed in a town where it was convenient for the railroad to accomplish this. The railroads considered building narrow gauge tracks a better alternative to providing service than to do nothing.

Another factor affecting South Dakota's railroad and townsite development was the existence of transcontinental railroad routes in Nebraska. Railroads, such as the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy, built north from existing towns in Nebraska, rather than start in eastern South Dakota and build west. This move conserved financial resources and saved construction time. The major consequence of this move was that the eastern and western halves of South Dakota were not connected by railroad until 1906-1907, when the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Pacific started construction of their route to the Pacific (Hamburg 1981).

The terms of the Pacific Railroad Act and the Homestead Act also affected townsite development, settlement patterns, and railroad construction. The Northern Pacific was Dakota Territory's land grant railroad, and its builders really had no choice over the route. This was in response to the Northern Pacific's 1864 congressional charter, which specified a northern route. Since rails had to follow the land grant, South Dakota lost out for a transcontinental railroad route.

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According to Peter Hamburg, there were three significant times of settlement in South Dakota: 1878-1890, the 1890s, and the period from 1900-1915. (These time periods also correspond to railroad construction activity, and are roughly similar to what Robinson says took place in North Dakota.) Like North Dakota, South Dakota land development and town and railroad growth slowed down in the 1890s, due to drought and the national economic downturn caused by the Panic of 1893. What construction did take place tended to connect rail lines of the same company in mining, ranching or logging areas. Railroads were not building lines and then encouraging settlement along them (Hamburg 1981).

As the country slowly recovered from the effects of the 1893 Panic, the federal government opened Indian reservations in South Dakota. The Sisseton reservation had the fastest growth and settlement; it was surrounded by railroads, had more fertile land and was less arid than reservations in other parts of the new state (Hamburg 1981).

As new railroad construction resumed in the early 1900s, settlements and townsite development increased. Railroad revenues were up, agricultural commodity prices and precipitation were high, and the country had recovered from the Panic of 1893 (Hamburg 1981). All of these factors led to more people coming to South Dakota. What happened was a series of cyclical events. More moisture increased agricultural yields, which

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attracted more settlement, which encouraged more railroad building and townsite development. In the central and western parts of South Dakota, settlement and agricultural yields also increased as irrigation was introduced.

North Dakota Settlement and Geography

North Dakota's settlement began somewhat like South Dakota's, with the initial settlements near rivers, and developing a higher population concentration in the eastern portion of the state. What makes North Dakota different is that the Northern Pacific reached the Missouri River before settlement spread out very far east and west of the Missouri River. Since gold was never discovered in the Badlands of North Dakota, this area was not settled the way the Black Hills of South Dakota were. North Dakota followed the more traditional pattern of settlement beginning in the east and spreading westward.

According to Charles Wood, the Northern Pacific faced a major problem in building its line across North Dakota. The Northern Pacific had to create its own markets between St. Paul and the gold mining camps and towns of Helena, Bozeman, and Deer Lodge in Montana Territory (Wood 1968). In other words, there was a lack of business along this route, which forced the railroad to develop business along its line. This led to the development of bonanza farms and townsites along the line. (The Northern

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Pacific's business problems along its main line were cited by Eugene Smalley in his 1883 history of the Northern Pacific. So, some of its financial problems were recognized even as the Northern Pacific's construction was being completed.)

The pattern of settlement followed the Northern Pacific's main line, which ran from Fargo in eastern North Dakota to the border with Montana Territory in the western portion of North Dakota. Along the right-of-way, the railroad laid out, or had someone do it for them, many towns. Eventually, three of these towns, Jamestown, Mandan and Dickinson, became larger than most others because of the administrative structure used by the Northern Pacific. This structure was known as divisions, and these larger towns were called division points. (South Dakota's railroads also used this structure, which helps account for the size of Watertown and Huron, for example.)

The Northern Pacific was a land grant railroad, receiving alternate sections of land along its right of way. It appears to have followed the pattern established by the Illinois Central Railroad in Illinois. Their land grant, the nation's first, was given to the line's owners by Congress in the early 1850s. It called for alternating sections of land to go to the railroad so they could establish their main line right down the center of Illinois, and for a branch line off of this main line to Chicago. However, what quickly

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happened was the branch line to Chicago became more important to the
Illinois Central than the original Freeport to Centralia main line. The effect
was that the two routes swapped positions in terms of their importance to
the Illinois Central.

Richard Lingeman best describes what the Illinois Central did in his
book, Small Town America:

> . "In the middle of the alternate, six-square mile
> checkerboard sections interspersed with sections of public
> domain land on each side of its right of way running the
> length of the state, the Central strung out a series of
> monotonously laid-out towns, and gave them names
> running in alphabetical order" (Lingeman 1980)[1].

This is the general pattern which the Northern Pacific used in
building across North Dakota. The major deviation from the Illinois
Central's land grant was in the size of the sections which the Northern
Pacific received. The Illinois Central's sections were six square miles each,
while the Northern Pacific's were ten square miles each.

The business downturn of the early 1870s, caused by the Credit
Mobilier scandal and the Franco-Prussian war, interrupted the Northern
Pacific's construction at Bismarck. Another factor which hurt the Northern

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[1] The author agrees with Lingeman's assessment of this Illinois Central
practice because he's followed this route. Old U.S. Highway 51 runs parallel
to this now abandoned trackage, all the way from Mendota, Il., to Centralia,
Il. The towns are not in alphabetical order anymore, but the pattern
Lingeman refers to is still there if you look at an Illinois highway map.

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Pacific was winter in the 1870s. The railroad did not run in the winter, unless requested by the United States Army. There simply was not enough business to justify running trains in the winter, unless the Army needed to supply its troops in their operations against the Indians.

While construction was halted, townsite development appears to have continued, albeit at a slower pace. Towns were built to fill in the gaps along the rail line between Fargo and Bismarck. Part of this townsite development also appears to have been spurred along by the rise of the bonanza farms, the first being the Cass-Cheney farm near Casselton. Their intensive cultivation of wheat provided the Northern Pacific with badly needed revenue, which helped keep it alive.

While the Northern Pacific built across the southern portion of North Dakota, James J. Hill's St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba (hereafter referred to as the Great Northern) built in the northern portion of the state. Hill believed that the Northern Pacific did not have the best route possible for their line. He believed going north would produce better results. There are two other reasons Hill wanted to go north. The first was to be away from the Northern Pacific in terms of competition; second, to attract business from Canada. The Great Northern also engaged in townsite development, but Hill apparently preferred to tip off his friends over where the tracks were going rather than have the Great Northern build the towns.

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Another problem Hill had in building towns was that the Great Northern was not a land grant railroad. As a result, his line did not have land that had been obtained at little or no cost to him. Hill had to purchase or lease the land his railroad was to run on.

In common with the Northern Pacific, the Great Northern's main line ran east to west. For both railroads, their branch lines generally ran at a 45 degree or 90 degree angle to the main line. A new competitor, the Soo Line, was started by Minneapolis milling interests that wanted a railroad independent of both the Northern Pacific and Great Northern. They were interested in lowering the transportation cost of North Dakota wheat, and thought having their own railroad would be one way of doing that. While interested in townsite development, the Soo Line was not involved to the same extent as its two larger competitors. The arrival of the Soo Line, however, provided a new reason for townsite development, one not really seen before in the Dakotas.

John Hudson (1985) points out in Plains Country Towns that competition between railroads was the reason for new townsite development. He uses the battles between the Great Northern and the Soo Line in the early 1900s across northern North Dakota as an example.

When the Soo Line started to build what became known as the Wheat Line (Thief River Falls, Minn., to Kenmare, N.D.), they did not

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expect the Great Northern to react. They expected to get all the business from its new construction, which did not happen. Instead, the Great Northern reacted by building branch lines in areas where the Soo Line was building it's new main line. This resulted in new townsite construction and competition between the two railroads for the farmers' business.

Another interesting aspect of the Soo Line's operations was its original main line North Dakota trackage. It ran from the south-eastern portion of the state, starting at Hankinson and going through Minot to Portal, N.D., where it continued north to connect with the Canadian Pacific's main line in Canada. As a result, the Soo Line's branch lines tend to run east and west, paralleling at varying distances the Northern Pacific and Great Northern's main lines.

Two other railroads played small roles in establishing towns in North Dakota. The Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Pacific built a branch line from Ortonville, Minn., to Fargo, N.D., and a very small part of their transcontinental main line ran through North Dakota. The only major town, and it was only major to the Milwaukee Road's operations, was Marmath, in the southwestern corner of North Dakota. It was a division point, division headquarters and classification yard.

North Dakota's only intrastate railroad, the Midland Continental, also did some townsite development. However, its efforts were doomed to

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failure as the railroad never became the major Winnipeg, Manitoba, to Galveston, Texas, railroad its promoters hoped it would become. However, it must be pointed out that no matter how small or large the railroad was, they did something that the territory's and later North Dakota's state politicians were reluctant to do, and that was promote the area.

One major difference in encouraging settlement existed between North and South Dakota. North Dakota did not have an immigration commissioner, leaving the work of advertising and settling the new state up to the railroads and townsite developers and speculators. South Dakota did the opposite. The state had an immigration commissioner, eliminated the job, and then recreated it. The state's immigration efforts, while apparently not coordinated with those of the railroads and townsite developers and speculators, also helped bring settlers to the state.

The Northern Pacific in particular was active in recruiting immigrants to North Dakota. They advertised the Red River Valley and other parts of Dakota Territory in the United States and Europe. To promote the territory, the Northern Pacific had about 1,000 immigration agents working in Europe, with 831 in the United Kingdom itself (Wood 1968). While the Northern Pacific's Land Department was probably the most active of the three major North Dakota railroads, the Great Northern's and

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Soo Line's agents were also busy in Europe and the United States. To help pay the tremendous construction costs, the railroads needed the land settled and in cultivation. Since the land turned out to be good for growing wheat (and potatoes in some areas), agricultural success became one way to advertise and promote settlement. In concert with the provisions of the Homestead Act, the railroads provided the land inducement and transportation alternative for persons who felt the urge to move West and be their own boss on their own land.

Economics and Technological Considerations

A lack of adequate transportation alternatives affected the settlers, except along rivers, before railroads came along. Settlers walked or depended on animal-drawn transportation to move themselves, their families and what worldly possessions they had to a new homestead or town. In both states, the eastern portions had more settlement than the western portions, resulting in more townsite development and railroad construction. Robinson and Hamburg both point out that there was more moisture and better soil conditions in the eastern parts of their respective states. Both also have in common a rugged western portion, with poorer soils and a drier climate than is found in the eastern portion.

For both states, railroads solved the problem of reducing the prohibitive costs of shipping agricultural products to markets and bringing in supplies of food, fuel and construction materials. Building railroads allowed settlement to take place, increasing the populations of both states much faster than would have been possible with any other transportation alternative.

Why did the railroads plat out towns or have friendly speculators do the job in their place? This allowed the railroads to have the profits from the sale of lots, giving them an infusion of working capital to carry the interest charges incurred during construction of the trackage, and support activities needed to keep the railroad operational. Platting the towns themselves gave the railroad the opportunity to lay a town out in the manner which suited its needs, rather than those of the speculator or private developer. The railroads had to have the flexibility of picking locations which met its operating needs, such as where division points, yards, maintenance facilities, and crew changing points were needed.

This flexibility was needed because of the technology available to railroads in the late 19th century. Steam locomotives required refueling, watering facilities, and ashpan cleaning about every one hundred miles in this time period. Since this work had to be done or the locomotives would not function, we have an example of where the available technology worked

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with the divisional administrative structure. The railroads went ahead and built classification yards, car repair shops, dispatching facilities, and supervisory offices about every 100 miles. On the Northern Pacific, for example, this helps explain why Jamestown, Mandan and Dickinson grew to be larger than otherwise may have been the case. Other towns along the main line may have had similar facilities, but on a much smaller scale. These were usually towns where several branch lines came together and met the main line, such as Casselton, N.D. These towns, however, did not have division offices.

In other cases, as Hamburg points out, townsite subsidiaries of railroads often platted out towns before the track was in place (Hamburg 1981). The subsidiaries, or the speculators who had been let in on the secret beforehand, knew where the trackage was going to be built, so they were able to secure claims on the appropriate places before anyone else knew what was going on. In other cases, however, the general location of a line was known well before the tracks were built. "People were so anxious to settle in a particular townsite that they would live in tents or other temporary housing until the land was sold and they had bought their lots" (Hamburg 1981).

One of the best examples of this took place in the Fargo-Moorhead area. It was obvious from the direction the Northern Pacific's surveyors and

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track builders were taking where the Red River was going to be crossed. While surveying crews tried to "fake out" squatters where the tracks were actually going to be by staking out false routes, their ploy did not work. The Northern Pacific crossed the Red River and entered Fargo in June 1872.

Settlement and railroad construction slowed down after 1911 in both states, due to the lack of available land, drought conditions, and the general availability of railroad transportation throughout the states. Hamburg points out, which Robinson does not, the growth of alternative transportation, such as cars and trucks on a growing highway network (Hamburg 1981). While Hamburg never specifically states this, he implies that this is the beginning of the end of animal usage as an alternative transportation source. More motor vehicles means fewer animals are needed for transportation work.

Another point about both states is that the railroads didn't hesitate to build across Indian reservations, even before they were opened to white settlement (Hamburg 1981). In some cases, such as with the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific, the railroad purchased the needed right-of-way, but in others the right-of-way was taken from the tribe.

In both states, if the railroad didn't come to town, the town usually ended up dying. (As one example, Robinson cites Mardell, N.D.) There are some cases where the railroad ran close enough to a town that the town

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just moved over to the tracks. A town's inhabitants would drag the buildings to where the tracks were.

However, Hamburg points out an exception to this rule, based on how far away the town was from the tracks. "In the days when horses were the main form of local transportation, towns more than ten miles from the railroads usually continued in existence" (Hamburg 1981). In other words, towns less than ten miles from a railhead would end up dying, because they would lose their role as a supply point for those settlers who lived further away from a railroad.

One of the more important questions to settlers was what good the railroad did for them after they had started their homesteads, besides take their crops to market. According to both William Cronon (1991) and Hamburg (1981), the railroads not only took their crops to market but brought in tremendous quantities of fuel, lumber, food, and fencing. Since the settlers did not grow enough food for themselves and quickly exhausted the available supplies of wood, the railroads made it possible for them to survive on their plots of land.

Both states also lacked markets for their agricultural products. After the homesteaders established their 160-acre plots, they faced the problem of getting to town to deliver their crops and pick up supplies. Being bulky to transport, moving crops over long distances by freight wagons

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or pack animals was not profitable until the railroad came along (Hamburg 1981).

Hudson reinforces this point about the available transportation alternatives to farmers. Most likely, a farmer had a horse or two and wagon available for transportation. Two of the determining factors in how much of a crop to grow were the distance of a farm to a grain elevator and how far a farmer could comfortably travel in one day with a load of grain. His estimate was to live about five-to-eight miles away from an elevator, for a round trip of 10-to-16 miles. Any further out than that, and the farmer would have to stay over at someone's house or sleep under his wagon on the trip home. Living further than eight miles out, the farmer would only grow enough grain for his own use as livestock feed, if he grew any at all.

Two reasons for this are the wagon's carrying capacity and the number of trips a farmer would have to make to town to get his crop to market. Hudson says that there always was work to do around the farm, and the time it would take to move a crop to market was not limitless. Winter would come and that would stop the crop from going to market, as the farmer would not want to get caught in an unexpected blizzard.

With the construction of railroads, even with competing railroads in the same area such as the Great Northern and Soo Line, the cost and time burden of transportation was lowered for farmers. More railroad

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construction made it easier to get crops to market. In turn, this increased the number of farmers growing cash crops, giving them the opportunity to pay off the claims on their land.

A combination of factors caused many towns and railroad track miles to come into existence. Railroad operating costs, economics and the transportation technology available to railroads and farmers during the settlement period in North and South Dakota simply did not allow for easy alternatives. Towns, railroad stations, and grain elevators were built five-to-seven miles apart so farmers had relatively easy access to markets and transportation for their crops. This arrangement allowed the railroads to serve markets they could not have considered otherwise, more conveniently and at less expense to themselves and their customers.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Elwyn Robinson's consideration some of the factors which led to the development of his too-much theme was incomplete. His failure to consider some geographical, available technology, and economic factors during North Dakota's settlement period affected his development of the too-much theme. We have seen that incorporating the work of Peter Hamburg and John Hudson with Robinson's leads to a fuller understanding and explanation of the development and death of some North

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and South Dakota communities. It is also possible apply these ideas to other areas of the Great Plains.

Ultimately, however, the major differences between North Dakota and South Dakota in terms of how they were settled are not important. Both states suffered from the effects of what Elwyn Robinson calls the too much theme, and are going through the adjustment process to make up for it. What was necessary and useful during the settlement period has changed. Those changes require far fewer people, settlements and railroad track miles to produce more than was possible during the settlement period. With the development of long-haul trucking and airline service as non-railroad transportation alternatives and changing farm economics and technology in North Dakota, we can also see how Robinson's themes can be considered forerunners to Frank Popper and "Buffalo Commons."

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