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### WESTERN PRAIRIES.

A Theory as to How They Were Formed by Nature for the Use of Man.

[W. H. Ballou in Chicago Tribune.]

In discussing the origin of prairies we must take into consideration the distribution of soil and the remaining evidences as to its development. The rich soil prevails all over its level and low-land tracts. As a rule the tops of prairie mounds and ridges are sand. What does this signify? Simply that the prairie land has been for ages under water, stagnant for the greater portion of the year, and vast areas of it perpetually so. The growth of shrubs and small trees have only been perpetual along ridges. All the other shrub areas have been made almost within the memory of man. The ground whereon Chicago now stands was largely under water when Beaubien built his hut at the forks of the river. Indeed, the final drainage of the city is but recent, and vast tracts of wet meadows are still in existence all about the outskirts of the place.

I do not intend to convey the idea that our Western prairies were once under a great fresh-water ocean. There is no evidence to show that such was the case. I mean simply that the prairies were for ages a vast territory of wet meadows with water of varying depths. All over them to-day one may still find an abundance of sloughs where the stock of the farmer gets very poor drink in the summer either out of a shallow well sunk in its center or by stamping holes in the ground and drinking the liquid that flows in. These sloughs, in miniature, together with the great swamp lands on which the States are receiving indemnity from the Government, and large undrained wet meadows, are typical of what 350,000 miles of our prairie was once. In a paper read at the Cincinnati meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, I have shown that the Michigan forests of white pine were but sprouting when Columbus discovered America. So, too, had he been able to float over our now prosperous prairie domain in an air-ship, he would have seen only here and there a mound top or a ridge protruding from unlimited wet meadows. Again, he would have found great lakes thickly sprinkled with islets where our pleasant chains of little inlet lakes now exist. The rivers were then more numerous and greater in volume. The Mississippi was a vast flowing lake with a grander sweeping current and with bottom lands where now are high lands. Lake Michigan fed it with its pure waters and no dredge was required for Calumet river, and levees could not have been projected.

In the time of Columbus—and no one knows how long before his time—our prairie farms were prairie seas, mainly of shallow, though not entirely stagnant water. Some one will ask then why we do not find great quantities of shells of fresh-water mollusks. They were the prey of innumerable aquatic birds, of the literal swarms of ducks, geese, grebes, coots, rails and the like. Even as I write we are passing many square miles of wet meadows on the Burlington road. Many of these wild birds are nesting about me, and I see them now, feeding on mollusks. They tell the story why we find no shells.

The origin of the rich black soil is obviously due to the sedimentary deposits of the still water. Foliage and trees could find no root in the watery wastes, and consequently instead of great forests being swept away by prairie fires, there were no forests to burn. The mound-builder conformed to his environments and built his mounds to escape floods and not cyclones, as Prof. Swing holds, for cyclones are a modern institution, existing only since the growth of trees and forests. I am further convinced that the red man had no habitation on our prairie land when Columbus came over, and that the antelope has never been plentifully indigenous east of the Missouri river.

I take it that the shape of the surface exposure of prairies is somewhat due to accident. When the upheavals occurred which formed the out-lying mountains, corresponding depressions formed prairies. That some are rolling and some flat is a natural consequence of such depression through distant upheaval. I have used the term "somewhat" as referring to the accidental or possibly designed upheaval of outlying mountain-chains. By so doing I make room for other possible agencies, such as glacial drift and action. One must bear in mind also that aquatic vegetation, constantly decaying and dissolving, greatly enriched the soil and darkened its color. Florida was made by corals, assisted by the mangrove buds. Much of Louisiana, Texas, and parts of other gulf states were made by the Mississippi at the cost of the Northland. So, too, our prairies developed their unlimited richness by special agencies described.

### Develop the Land.

We take the following sensible and timely article from Dakota Terra Firma: "Dakota's prosperity is almost wholly in the thousands of young men who have come here to make their homes, and while spring rushes are expected and will undoubtedly continue, helping those in mercantile pursuits for a number of years, our efforts should be directed hereafter more to the improvement of our land. In a few years 'booms' of the character witnessed in our present development will be unknown, and our country will depend largely for its prosperity on the improvement of its quarter sections. There is a fortune in 100 acres of good farm land for agricultural purposes, and, again, there is a fortune in the rise in value of Dakota land. Raw prairie in eastern Nebraska doubled in value in a single season, and it will do so here. A few hundred dollars improvement on a farm is worth more than the same amount invested in almost any mercantile trade, and 'tis surer than a gold mine. Let us then direct our efforts to the true development of Dakota, and in a few years we will enjoy living in the most prosperous state of the Union."

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