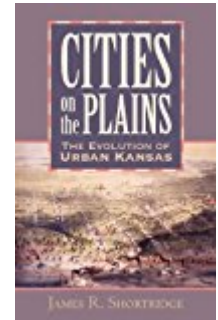


James R. Shortridge. *Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. xiii + 480 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1312-0.



Reviewed by Matthew Daley

Published on H-Urban (July, 2006)

Historians who focus on urban and suburban history typically find the nation's largest cities irresistible. These numerous narratives tell of events that make the happenings of the heartland seem pale by comparison. That the urban fabric of Kansas would have lessons to teach had not previously occurred to this reviewer nor, presumably, to others. James R. Shortridge (in the Department of Geography at the University of Kansas) makes very clear that the story of urbanization in Kansas offers an important case study of how cities develop, prosper, and decline beyond the traditional framework of Rust and Sun Belt cities and biographies of the "great cities."

Shortridge critiques the histories written not only of Kansas's cities, but urban studies in general as being limited by their focus on individual cities and generally inattentive to urban networks from state to national levels. While urban rivalries and differences are with us even today, he argues that those competitions should not overshadow the essential interconnections of urban centers. Shortridge's analysis demonstrates that outcomes for cities are not set in stone. While, the re-

gional dominance of Kansas City derived from such significant, measurable factors as geographic location, market forces, and human agency, the failings and missteps of rivals also contributed. Accordingly, the cities of today should not be viewed as having predestined outcomes as boosters of yesteryear proclaimed, but rather, flexible futures.

The book's conclusions derive from a set of 118 cities that, at some point in their histories, had at least twenty-five hundred residents. These cities extend from the eastern border with Missouri across the state: Kansas City to Topeka, to Lawrence, to Fort Scott and a host of others not especially familiar to readers. Shortridge centers his analysis on a series of interlocking questions: what caused the urban dreamers in these towns and those in many similar communities to falter while the dreams of others came to fruition? How did the current hierarchy of cities emerge in the state? Why did they coalesce in certain areas and not in others? While not bound by theories, he uses several as guides, including Richard Wade's "spearhead thesis," James Vance's mercantile

mode, and the Meyer-Wyckoff model.[1] Next to them he lays out the geographic considerations that shaped the placement of towns along lines of communication, transportation, and strategic (military or economic) points within the state. Finally, Shortridge introduces the historical actors in each town, his dreamers, who made choices about the future direction of each town.

The book's thematic and chronological structure is split into roughly four categories that spread across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first, the pioneer and settlement phase, was marked by struggles over slavery, transportation links, and economic choices that directed settlement location and competitive advantage, such as gaining a prison or university. Railroads solidified or eroded the initial settlements in the second phase, while they created new towns to service their corporate needs. A third era bridged the two centuries as new industries such as mining, irrigation, and oil influenced further urban developments. The final category is defined by the automobile, which hardened patterns of settlement, diminished those locations unable to draw exit ramps, and offered new opportunities to reach unlikely places.

The decline and expansion of urban centers across the state were due to an extremely broad array of factors. Shortridge admits that a general urban model does not emerge from the sometimes adversarial relationships among companies, town promoters, and geography. The relationship between the various railroad companies and the entrepreneur/promoters of each town had a significant impact on which towns would grow and prosper or wither at the end of a spur line. However, with the arrival of new information-technology-based industries and the interstate highway system, some of the railroad towns declined. The discovery of new mineral resources, decades after railroad routes and county seats had been established, often disrupted commercial and governmental structures. Towns such as Col-

by industriously promoted themselves to draw new commercial and public institutions along with new roads, and significantly altered the pattern of urban centers. Further, towns that competed for public institutions at times missed out on other economic opportunities. By accepting the prison, for example, Leavenworth gained a reliable income and employment base, but also gained an image as the home of arguably the most infamous prison in the nation. That patterns of urban success and failure are not necessarily predictable should not come as a surprise, but also hold promise as towns adjust to new opportunities.

Cities on the Plains is not a work of social history. Rather Shortridge goes back to an older brand of scholarship that includes Richard Wade's *The Urban Frontier* and Charles Glaab's *Kansas City and the Railroads* (1962).[2] Shortridge notes early on that his is an interdisciplinary narrative, and in making such a choice he necessarily restricts the depth of his volume. The arrival of new immigrants, industries, and the power of globalized agricultural commodities markets appear only briefly. He discounts their ability to significantly alter the economic landscape of Kansas, but says little of the profound social changes that underlay such shifts. Though the promoters and managers of various towns and industries are discussed throughout the book, their individual motivations do not receive close examination. Even so, people's wholehearted commitments are noted: "People make emotional as well as financial investments in their communities" (p. 380). These investments were disrupted by unforeseen consequences, outside forces, or simple bad luck.

Cities on the Plains provides a clear study of Kansas from its initial settlement by whites to the present, post-industrial economy. While Shortridge's tightly focused study provides little comparison to other Midwestern states or the nation as a whole, the book is extremely thorough in examining the interconnections of geography, trans-

portation, and human agency. It goes beyond an examination of major individual cities and offers a new view of how urban areas interact, expand, and decline.

Notes

[1]. David R. Meyer, "A Dynamic Model of the Integration of Frontier Urban Places into the United States System of Cities," *Economic Geography* 56 (1980): pp. 120-140; James E. Vance Jr., *The Merchant's World: The Geography of Wholesaling* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970); Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996); and William K. Wyckoff, "Revising the Meyer Model: Denver and the National Urban System, 1859-1879," *Urban Geography* 9 (1988): pp. 1-18.

[2]. Charles N. Glaab, *Kansas City and the Railroads* (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1962); and Wade, *Urban Frontier*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Matthew Daley. Review of Shortridge, James R. *Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12031>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.