

The Nebraska landscape

Since moving to Nebraska four years ago, Beth Franklin and her husband, Robert King, have spent a lot of time traveling across the plains to admire Nebraska's natural beauty.

Nebraska's landscape was in Franklin's consciousness when she began to write the talk (reprinted below) she was giving to students graduating with distinction in December.

"The landscape here is much more salient than other places," Franklin said. As she considered the landscape, she began to form a parallel between it and students entering their teaching careers. "I really believe that where you come from is what you are — in a good sense. To know what you are, you have to know your resources in order to teach, to learn and to work."

She asked her husband, Robert, a well-published poet, to write a poem for her to give to the students. "I wanted to have something to give them and a poem is the best way to capture ideas," Franklin said.

"It is unusual," King said, "to concentrate on where students are coming from. We usually talk about where they are going."

Franklin and her husband moved from North Dakota where they taught at the University of North Dakota so Franklin could accept her current position as chair and professor of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. King is currently a part-time lecturer in the English Department. He has published several chapbooks and has had several original poems published in poetry journals. King can be heard from time to time on KUCV radio as a guest on Nebraska poet William Kloefkorn's "Poetry of the Plains."

By Elizabeth Franklin

Welcome to the Fall 1998 Teachers College honors dinner. It is with great pleasure that I address those of you who are graduating with distinction from Teachers College tomorrow, as well as the faculty who are here this evening who positively influenced your education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. You graduates are to be commended for your excellence in academic achievement. Congratulations also go to your parents, spouses and others who are here with you this evening and who supported you during your university career.

All of the graduates who are here this evening are from Nebraska. Because you grew up in Nebraska, or at least lived in Nebraska, and learned to teach in Nebraska, you have probably internalized landscapes from Nebraska. Images from Nebraska's landscapes are the ones that ground you in your daily life. They are the ones that sustain you, that nurture your heart and soul. Of course, the landscapes of Nebraska are also what you will draw on as you begin your teaching career. Tonight I am going to name five typical Nebraska landscape scenes. And then I am going to metaphorically relate these scenes to teaching and learning. I know that Nebraska has many, many landscapes in her borders, but the following five should be familiar to everyone.

These five landscape scenes that I have a particular feeling for and which have been described by a variety of Nebraska writers and artists are: the muted softness of the Sand Hills, the vast openness of the prairie, the sandhill cranes on the Platte River in springtime, the dramatic stone sculptures of Scottsbluff and Chimney Rock, and the small villages and towns that grew up along the banks of Nebraska's rivers.

How can these landscape scenes be related to teaching and learning? Let's see by starting with the first example — the muted softness of the Sand Hills.

The first time I drove on Highway 2 from Alliance to Broken Bow, I was deeply moved by the Sand Hills. There is such a softness to them, an unbroken texture. They roll gently into the horizon with little peaks and valleys. From your experience with the Sand Hills, you know what it means to treat your students in gentle ways. Like the Sand Hills, students have a soft quality to them, delicate, but also vulnerable. They can be easily hurt, can be affected by harsh words and unkind deeds. Your knowledge of the softness of the Sand Hills will guide you to have positive, nurturing interaction with the students you teach.

The Sand Hills also teach you to look deeply and carefully at the students you teach. At first glance the Sand Hills seem to be mile after mile of undifferentiated, sparsely vegetated and sparsely populated land. If one gets out to walk in the landscape, however,

one is struck by the tremendous variety and diversity in plant and animal life that lives there. Likewise in a classroom, you will know how to look beneath the surface of your students in order to find that which captures their imagination, that which makes them wonder. You will also look for the uniqueness in your students, and when finding it, be able to teach students with the softness they deserve.

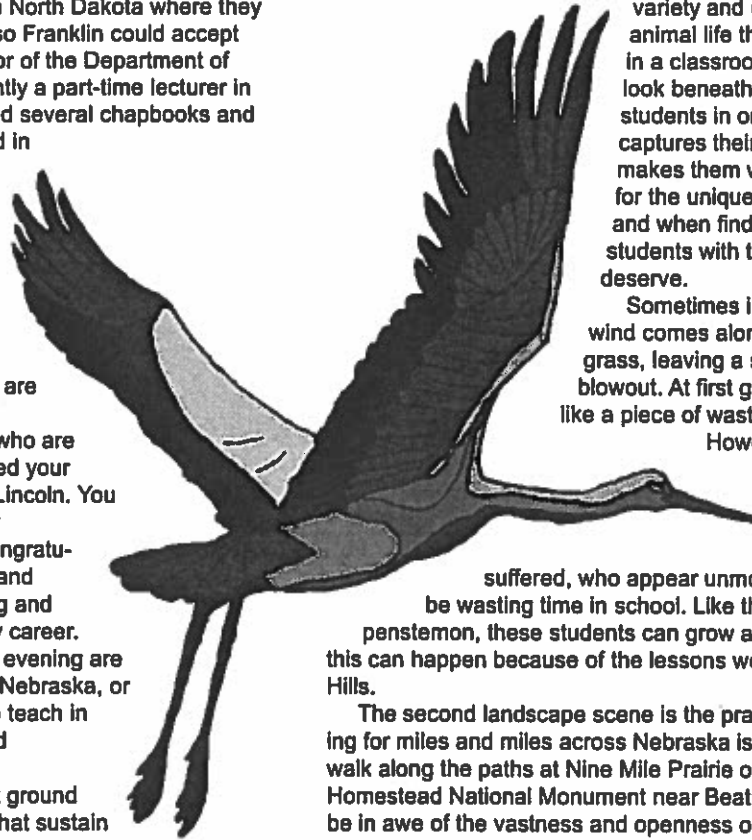
Sometimes in the Sand Hills, the wind comes along and scours away the grass, leaving a spot of sand called a blowout. At first glance, a blow-out seems like a piece of wasted and eroded land.

However, within a short span of time, a flower — a blowout penstemon — appears. You will have students who have

suffered, who appear unmotivated, who appear to be wasting time in school. Like the growth of a blowout penstemon, these students can grow and blossom. You know this can happen because of the lessons we learn from the Sand Hills.

The second landscape scene is the prairie. The prairie stretching for miles and miles across Nebraska is quite impressive. If you walk along the paths at Nine Mile Prairie outside of Lincoln or Homestead National Monument near Beatrice, you cannot help but be in awe of the vastness and openness of the Nebraska prairie. It is dizzying to stand in the middle of prairie grass even when the wind is only slightly blowing. But it is the openness of the prairie, which is most affecting. You can see, as the song says, forever. I lived in North Dakota, another Great Plains state, for 10 years before moving to Nebraska three years ago.

When I first moved to North Dakota, I felt very exposed by the boundlessness of the landscape. I have now gotten so accustomed to the prairie that I feel most comfortable, as I am sure many of you do, in open spaces. The vast openness of the prairie teaches us how to approach new situations with an open mind and open eyes, receptive to what will come. Because you have grown up in wide spaces where you can see in all four directions, you are not fearful. You have a sense of your own freedom because you are not enclosed, bounded, or restricted on the prairie.



guides teachers in careers

From this experience, when you are a teacher, you will be able to see the openness that a classroom can be, even within the four surrounding walls. You will be able, as a teacher, to create spaces where students are not fearful of learning, where they are confident because they can see many directions. Because of the prairie landscape, students in your classrooms will be willing to discuss their ideas, to listen to others, to engage in thinking that pushes them beyond what they know.

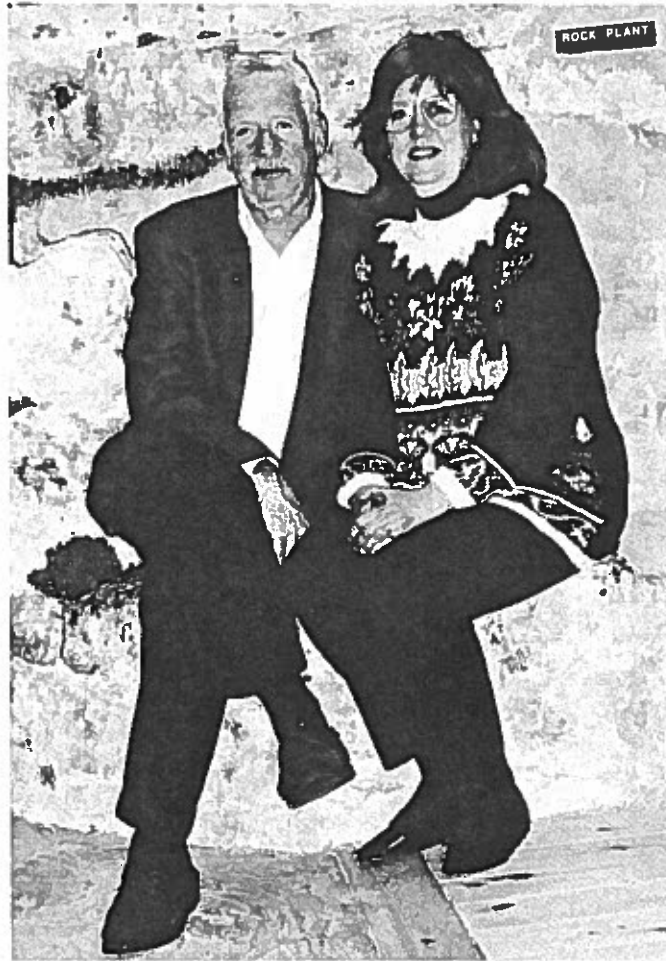
The third landscape scene is the sandhill cranes on the Platte River in springtime. Every year, in springtime, the sandhill cranes rest for six to eight weeks on the Platte River. It is quite amazing to hear these cranes trill in the early dawn as well as during the evening twilight hours. It is also spectacular to see the cranes rise from the sand bars and river banks into the air in the morning and see them return in the evening.

For me the yearly return of the cranes is a metaphor for the journey that takes place in learning. Teachers and students imaginatively travel through the worlds created by books, the Internet, the arts. Through a variety of curriculum projects, teachers and students enter the worlds of academic disciplines, learning to think like scientists, mathematicians, writers, artists and athletes. This intellectual travel is exciting and stimulating. And you understand this because you understand the sandhill cranes. Learning is not just a journey, however.

Sandhill cranes rest between where they have come from and where they are going. Resting is the equivalent of reflection, a process of thinking over what happened yesterday in order to plan for tomorrow. I know that those of you graduating tomorrow have had plenty of experience with reflection in our teacher education programs. As you teach, keep in mind the importance of resting, the value of thinking quietly about your work, dwelling in the experience of teaching so that you can resume your journey with renewed enthusiasm and energy.

The dramatic stone sculptures of Scottsbluff and Chimney Rock are my fourth landscape scene. These stark, flat-topped formations of sandstone and sedimentary rock are remnants of ancient sea beds, left standing as the surrounding rock eroded away. They have been in existence for millennia — from the bottom of Scottsbluff National Monument to the top represents a million years of Nebraska history.

These monuments have served as markers and milestones for many inhabitants and travelers, including the pioneers on the



Robert King and Beth Franklin at Morrill Hall.

Oregon and Mormon Trails. Your milestone markers are the teaching and learning ideas of educators like Dewey and Piaget as well as the ideas of educators who supervised you in classrooms.

In your courses at NU, you have read many books written by teachers and you have taught in the classrooms of exemplary teachers. Let these experiences guide you as you begin your professional teaching career in the same way that Scottsbluff National Monument and Chimney Rock guided those who have come before you.

The last landscape image is that of small villages and towns growing up on the banks of rivers. Nebraska has many rivers and streams, including the Missouri, the Platte, the Loup, the Blue, the Elkhorn, the Republican and the Niobrara, and throughout her history many peoples have lived and prospered on her river banks.

In the year 1000, native peoples built pithouses in the grassy hills along the Missouri, just south of Omaha in Fontenelle Forest. At different times in our history, the Omaha, the Pawnee, the Otoe and the Santee have lived on or near rivers. German, German-Russian, Swedish, Irish,

Czechoslovakian, Bohemian, and Polish immigrants — the ancestors of many of us sitting in this room today — settled their towns along the rivers they encountered. Most recently, immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, Vietnam and Russia call Nebraska home.

I was at Central High School in Omaha last week and observed some Sudanese students doing their schoolwork; this was going on within several miles of the Missouri River. You have had the good fortune of growing up and living in a place where the memories and voices of all these peoples co-mingle in the landscape. Their memories are your memories; their consciousness is your consciousness. You will teach in classrooms and schools that on the surface appear to be different from the classrooms and schools that you attended. But remember, Nebraska has a history of diversity and you can relate to that diversity imaginatively — through the study of Nebraska — and share this understanding with your students.

In closing, I would like to read a poem (Page 8) to you that my husband, Robert King, has written at my request for this occasion. I have copies of the poem for you if you wish to have one. The poem is called "At the Center." As you listen to the poem, keep in mind that Nebraska is in the Central Time Zone and that you have lived the phases of a child and university student in Nebraska. You are now entering the third phase, that of a teacher.

AT THE CENTER

*You are used to living in Central Time
in the middle of the country
where children learn the lessons
of landscapes, the sun up and down
in the sky, rivers and streets running away,
as you lived at the heart of your world.*

*You are used to living for a certain time
in the middle of school
where students learn the lessons
of lessons, knowing to know,
changing yourself in order to change
as you studied the world with your heart.*

*Now you are moving into future tense,
toward the middle of a room
where teachers learn the lessons
of learning, the lives of children,
the heart of the matter,
the heart of each heart in your world.*

*Robert W. King
Graduation with Distinction
December 18, 1998*