

# WT 125 White Paper

## The Panhandle

### Abstract:

"Give me land, lots of land, under starry skies above  
Don't fence me in  
Let me ride through the wide open country that I love  
Don't fence me in"  
--From the song "Don't Fence Me In," 1934, Porter & Fletcher

"Carthage is in East Texas and that's totally different from the rest of Texas, which could be five different states, actually. You got your West Texas out there with a bunch of flat ranches, up north you got them Dallas snobs with their Mercedes, and then you got your Houston, the Carcinogenic Coast is what I call it, all the way up to Louisiana, then down south San Antonio, uh, that's where the Tex meets the Mex, like the food, and then in central Texas you got the People's Republic of Austin, with a bunch of hairy-legged women and liberal fruitcakes. Course I left out the Panhandle, and a lot of people do . . ."

--From the movie *Bernie*, 2011, Linklater & Hollandsworth

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### Introduction:

The Texas Panhandle frontier was attractive to early pioneers and settlers because of its long open spaces. Geographic expanse seemed synonymous with rich opportunity. The region was also early in adopting the new technology of barbed wire fencing<sup>1</sup>, recognition that while space was a fine thing, it paradoxically required boundaries and divisions. The barbed wire fencing of the range stands as a powerful symbol of what is an ongoing, fundamental, structural ambivalence in the Panhandle's modern era. Such themes—of openness vs. enclosure, freedom vs. constraint, tradition vs. innovation, public vs. private—of course resonate with universal human experience. But they take on sharp significance in the context of the Texas Panhandle.

Panhandles are famous for developing unique identities, populations that feel somewhat detached from their host states geographically and culturally.<sup>2</sup> Buck Ramsey's

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hilarious essay “Should the Panhandle Secede?,” though tongue-in-cheek, provides a fine example of how a panhandle populace can imagine itself a people apart. Ramsey points out, for example, that Amarillo is closer to the capital cities of New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, and Oklahoma than to Austin.<sup>3</sup> It is common to find appeals to “panhandle pride” in the papers of various civic and regional projects, including the creation of the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum and the establishment of the musical *Texas*.<sup>4</sup> To the people who live here, “Panhandle” is a meaningful signifier of identity. But what does the Panhandle mean, in early days, our current moment, and for the foreseeable future? Does the region have a sense of place and identity that will weather onrushing changes and serious challenges? And what role will the region’s institution of higher education, West Texas A&M University, have in shaping the Panhandle’s future?

## **The Past:**

A panhandle’s geographically-exceptionalist feeling is further fueled in our case by the historical happenstance that the pioneer period and modernity were almost simultaneous. The Texas Panhandle is roughly analogous to the heart of the “Comanchería,” the Comanche empire, within which the Comanches and allied tribes traded and raided with impunity for some 150 years. The Comanchería was not settled by Anglo-Texans until the later 1870s, following the US Army defeat of the Comanches in the Red River War. The region is thus a “late frontier,” relatively close to its settlement history, with a strong feeling of pioneer heritage.<sup>5</sup> The first communities in the panhandle were Tascosa (Oldham County), its origins in Nuevo Mexicano traders and sheepmen; Mobeetie (Wheeler County), its origins in the buffalo hunters’ “Hide Town” and the US Army’s Fort Elliott; and Clarendon (Donley County), a planned Methodist temperance community of Eastern and Midwestern transplants.<sup>6</sup> Of the three, Mobeetie deserves the title of the earliest modern settlement of the panhandle, Hidetown, a whiskey-for-hides operation opening 1874, though Tascosa was a well-established locale well before its “official” 1876 settlement. Clarendon was planted in 1878.

The panhandle’s frontier history and its modern history were almost simultaneous. The transition from Indian hostilities to the motor car occurred within a lifetime, in a space of less than 50 years. Railroad building, barbed wire, streetcars—all such technologies lend further evidence to this “late frontier” hypothesis. The famous example is the long-lived Charles Goodnight (1887-1929), who saw and participated in the region’s transformation from “wilderness” Comanchería to “civilized” Modern era. This remarkably abrupt history, like an accordion at full compression, gives Panhandle regional identity a sense of historical immediacy.

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What may seem a brief and simple story, however, becomes complex when considering the region's immigration history. The Panhandle in the contemporary era does have a reputation for cultural homogeneity; certainly the place has a feeling of an entrenched and dominant Anglo, Protestant, Texan/Southern influence associated with early ranchers like George Littlefield and Charles Goodnight. However, as D. W. Meinig has shown, the Panhandle is "the only area of Texas which does not have strong Southern antecedents." Instead, he finds that the Panhandle's political and religious affiliations demonstrate its Midwestern roots as a place more like Kansas than other Texas regions. The power of Texas identity crossed with strong Midwestern commerce make the Panhandle, in Meinig's words, "a markedly ambivalent region" and "a border zone of Texas society."<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the Panhandle always was a mixed population. Early pastoralists were Hispano sheepmen out of New Mexico. We imagine the first Anglo Panhandle cattlemen to be predominantly post-confederate Texans or Southerners. However, about half of these early ranchers traced their heritage back to the Northeast or Midwestern states like New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.<sup>8</sup> Later waves of farmers and entrepreneurs from Midwestern American or European origins came with railroad development, and included ethnic populations of Catholic German (Nazareth, Umbarger), Swiss (Wheeler), Polish (White Deer), Greek (Amarillo, Borger), Czech (Panhandle), Lebanese (Canadian), and various other European and European-American groups.<sup>9</sup> For the most part, these groups acceded to an assimilationist model and a dominant white, conservative, protestant regional identity into which they could blend.

Other groups were not invited or not inclined to join the assimilated culture. While the early Hispano communities were discouraged, mainly fading back into New Mexico, some people stayed, primarily working in ranching and farming. Later Hispanic population formed due to increasing demand for cheap labor. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century boom in railroad construction, along with agricultural fieldwork, brought itinerant Hispanic labor from South Texas and Mexico, and "barrios" began forming in southern plains communities. The 1930s and 40s brought large groups of labor in for cotton production and vegetable crops. While the cotton zone was primarily south of the Panhandle proper, both private and public labor camps existed in the Panhandle, notably in Hereford. Again, itinerant groups left some permanent settlers in the region.<sup>10</sup>

African American residents of the region comprised a smaller group. Even more than Hispanic people, who were subject to Jim Crow living conditions, African Americans were banned from some Panhandle communities entirely and were restricted to colored neighborhoods in Amarillo and other towns. Amarillo remained one of the most highly

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segregated cities in the country for decades. The small size of the population tended to “mask” the racial dynamics.<sup>11</sup> In 1908, only five black families lived in Amarillo. Later population growth came with WWII economic boom opportunity, but in 1980 Amarillo’s African American population remained low, at six percent.<sup>12</sup> During the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan was a significant force in Panhandle communities, and Amarillo’s chapter included prominent business and civic leaders.<sup>13</sup> Civil Rights, desegregation, and school busing battles would bring the region’s African American community into greater visibility.<sup>14</sup>

Development of the Panhandle came through efforts of early ranchers who bought from the state vast acreages and who developed much additional public land for grazing purposes. In a pattern that in many ways continues today, the ranching era seemed to emphasize mobility—of capital, labor, and product. Investment flowed to the Panhandle from far away, including significant capital from Great Britain, fueling the cattle empires; and much of the profit, when produced, flowed out. Cattle raised in the Panhandle were driven out of state to markets and railheads; freighting of supplies from Midwestern and downstate Texas hubs (in the pre-railroad era) was big business. Transportation continues to be an important economic sector.

Further land sales by the state encouraged railroad development and enabled public school funding. Agricultural development came through the pioneering efforts of small farmers, whom state laws, by the later 1880s and 90s, increasingly favored. The 1890-1910 period was a land rush.<sup>15</sup> The increase in agriculture led to population growth, the development of communities, and a stable economic bulwark. However, aggressive dryland farming of wheat, highly profitable through the first world war, led to the catastrophe of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. This era saw population decline and the decline of acreage in agricultural production. This bust was eased when deep water pumping became technologically and economically feasible following the second world war. Thanks to the waters of the Ogallala Aquifer, farmers could now endure the Panhandle’s tendency to periodic droughts, as in the 1950s, without the old fear of environmental or climatic limitation.

Following business development and population growth associated with ranching, freighting, early infrastructure construction, and agriculture, the oil boom was of singular importance and comprised the final cornerstone of the regional economic regime that continues to the present time. Oil and gas development began in the 1920s, fueling the construction of grand buildings of downtown Amarillo. This economic boom also laid the foundation of the region’s hugely important tradition of philanthropy.

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Overall, this cultural regime was underlain by an optimistic sense of agricultural economic growth, opportunity, and American dream. While the oil and gas industry falls into the frontier-style boom and bust economics, it contributed good jobs and corporate presence in the region. And with irrigated agriculture, it seemed, the region had emerged from the frontier period to fulfill its destiny as the Golden Spread.

## **The Present:**

Despite serious drought during the 50s, the postwar period saw reliable agricultural economic activity, and overall economic growth. The region gained Pantex, a secretive federal presence that provided good-paying jobs, as well as a number of corporate entities with headquarters in Amarillo. As Amarillo entered the 1960s, population growth was strong, reaching a 166,000 in 1966.<sup>16</sup> The economy was similarly robust, and Amarillo was on track to stand at least even with Oklahoma City and Albuquerque, if not in some prominence.

However, the 60s would prove a pivotal moment, as Amarillo and the region saw a decline. A major factor was the 1964 decision to close the Amarillo Air Force Base, which phased out by 1968. In 1970, Amarillo's population had declined to about 127,000.<sup>17</sup> The impact of this decline was felt in schools, churches, tax revenue, and business activity—in all walks of life. Certainly many institutions like Pantex, Amarillo National Bank, Caviness Packing, and other corporate entities weathered the downturn. And new business, like Bell Helicopter, came along. But the base closure coincided with corporate trends that brought centralization at the expense of regional headquarters. Over some years, as this trend continued, Amarillo lost corporate headquarters of petroleum/energy companies Shamrock (Valero), Southwestern Public Service (Xcel), Pioneer Natural Gas (Atmos), and Mesa Petroleum.<sup>18</sup> Residents remember not so long ago that television news time and newspaper columns were devoted to New York Stock Exchange rates of Amarillo companies like Mesa Petroleum and Hastings.

This decade saw other important shifts. One noteworthy development in the cattle industry of the 1960s and 70s was the development of the feedyard business. Innovators like Paul Engler (Cactus Feeders) and Bob Josserand (AZTX) created great economic benefit out of what would become a regional powerhouse: the Concentrated Animal Feed Operation (CAFO). But in terms of agriculture, tightly associated with cattle feeding, this period also saw the first rumblings of concern over the rate of use of Ogallala water. By the late 1950s, water table drawdown already "threatened the irrigation economy of the region." Efforts to conserve and regulate groundwater use ensued, even as farmers increased irrigated acreage to combat decline. In any case, by

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the 1960s, area farmers had to reckon with “declining water resources.”<sup>19</sup> In terms of social change, the 1960s also saw a political shift from Southern Democrat to Republican dominance in the region, cementing a small-government ethos that matched the frontier pioneer identity of the region.

Gary Pitner, former executive director of the Panhandle Regional Planning Commission, argues that while agriculture and petroleum remained as primary economic forces in the region, Amarillo and the region generally erred since the 60s in not investing public resources with the intent of diversifying the region’s economy. This fiscally conservative tendency, Pitner maintains, has cost the area real advancement. While our current prosperity and development may seem to represent a great period of growth, another way of understanding our moment is that we are only recently back on track with mid-60s expectations of population and economic activity.<sup>20</sup>

Agriculture in the Panhandle is a primary economic driver, and agriculture, as Bob Stewart put it, “is not going anywhere.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the economic regime based on irrigated agriculture faces its challenges, declining groundwater and climate change, with a forecast for hotter and dryer.<sup>22</sup> Improvements in technology and government incentives have encouraged farmers toward far more efficient water use. In general, the Ogallala Aquifer continues to decline, but it has done so unevenly—based on relative thicknesses of saturated beds and historical rate and duration of pumping in local areas. Areas to the south, having both thinner beds and longer histories of pumping, are seeing return to dryland farming. Further to the north, areas once unsuitable for farming have become arable due to technological advances—that is, center pivot irrigation systems can now operate on rougher country. They also produce the highest corn yields in the US. These areas have thicker saturated beds and were not pumped in the early period of less economical pumping practices. The high corn yields, however, require large amounts of water. The Panhandle was once north of the cotton belt, but changes in genetic strains of cotton have brought the relatively low-water crop to the region, a change that may help sustain communities. Other crops are grains and forage, including wheat and sorghum.

The family farm by this period has to a significant degree gone over to the corporate entity.<sup>23</sup> And large-scale agribusiness operations have grown to characterize big business in the region. The cattle feeding industry continues to thrive, as do slaughter and packing companies like Swift and Tyson. Massive factory hog farms and dairies are a still more recent trend in the region. Perryton, Dalhart, and Dumas are regional success stories as small towns which have grown and diversified economically while other communities have continued to dry up. Such operations as feeding operations and

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dairies require huge amounts of feed, more than the Panhandle can grow. The region is thus considered in “water deficit.” While the region supports these operations in terms of “direct” water, which is required to operate facilities and sustain animals, the region only supplies about one third of “indirect” water, meaning water used to grow animals’ feed. In other words, about two thirds of the feed required for agribusiness operations in the Panhandle must be imported from less arid farmlands. What makes the Panhandle desirable for agribusiness, despite the expense of importing feed, are factors including favorable climate, a deep water table that is relatively protected from waste contamination, and a small population who will accommodate what can be a malodorous, though economically beneficial, industry.<sup>24</sup>

A relationship exists, too, between immigrant labor and agribusiness. As with the Great Plains generally, the region has a history of welcoming immigrants and refugees as a labor pool to support agriculture and agribusiness. Since the 1960s, companies like Tyson and Swift have employed immigrants and refugees from Cuba, Vietnam, Mexico, and Guatemala. Following recent ICE raids against illegal workers in the Panhandle and elsewhere in the Great Plains, these companies turned to refugee labor from Burma, Somalia, Iraq, and Southeast Asian and African nations. This economic driver has consequences on the ethnic diversity of the Panhandle, and has caused social and political backlash.<sup>25</sup>

Even as labor for packing houses must be imported, economic opportunity is a real problem in the Panhandle today. A 2007 study undertaken by Panhandle Twenty/20 defined the problem as further economic decline due to low rates of educational attainment. The study defined it a “Panhandle Imperative” to take steps to increase educational attainment, and laid out a strategy to implement.<sup>26</sup> Formed in 2003, Panhandle Twenty/20 coalesced as area leaders in education, planning, and business became concerned about a lack of coordinated planning for the future. By its 2012 report, “Our Community, Our Canvas,” the group declared good progress on educational attainment, but refocused efforts on poverty. The group fought this problem on a number of fronts, working to connect churches, nonprofits, and other parties to help alleviate acute poverty issues. On another level, the Amarillo Area Foundation created academic scholarships and also designed the “Texas Panhandle Wealth Building Initiative” to help increase financial stability and to explore possibilities of “place-based job creation and local ownership” of business.<sup>27</sup> While Panhandle Twenty/20 rightfully claims success in its mission, those involved are keenly aware that much work on the issues of economic opportunity, education, and poverty remains to be accomplished.<sup>28</sup>

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Panhandle cultural identity today is tied to conservative political ideology, and celebrates the “producer,” as several scholars have documented.<sup>29</sup> The complex shift in the 1960s from a Southern Democrat to solidly Republican state of Texas, which occurred for many complex reasons—LBJ, Goldwater, populism, and the Reagan revolution—played into Panhandle values of conservatism, individualism, and limited government.<sup>30</sup> It is ironic that while Panhandle people are strongly opposed to big government, they historically have benefitted, sometimes crucially, from government protection, aid, and subsidies. First of all, not until the US Cavalry removed the Southern Plains tribes and provided security, did Anglo settlement of the region really proceed. Later, Great Depression and Dust Bowl relief programs were met here with suspicion as well as gratitude. Panhandle residents sought a middle ground wherein they could accept government funds that would enable them to survive but where they could retain local control over agricultural practices and maintain the idea of individual and community integrity.<sup>31</sup> In the better decades that followed, this ambivalent posture enabled Southern Plains farmers and ranchers to maintain the frontier identity of individualism while accepting government subsidized loans and operating in cooperation with subsidized programs like Conservation Reserve Program, cotton production, and corn ethanol production. In the 2000 volume *The Llano Estacado of the US Southern High Plains: Environmental Transformation and the Prospect for Sustainability*, Brooks and Emel make the point that from the Dust Bowl era on, “government farm subsidy and support programmes have become an essential structural support system” to agriculture on the Llano Estacado.<sup>32</sup> Even today, though many farm subsidies were phased out during the 1990s, farmers are subsidized in the form of federal aid for crop insurance; approximately 60% of farmers’ premiums for insured arable lands is covered by taxpayers.<sup>33</sup> In the Panhandle, a region of unreliable rainfall, such a subsidy turns farming some locales into a worthwhile gamble.

The current growth of West Texas A&M University (founded 1910), which reached record enrollment of over 10,000 in the Fall 2017 semester, may make an interesting place to conclude this discussion of the contemporary Panhandle. The university is rising in prominence, especially in its programs in agriculture, business, and engineering. It is enrolling increasing amounts of students from outside of the Panhandle, while still attracting many students from the immediate region, including first-generation college students. Campus diversity, too, continues to increase, as the university has Hispanic-Serving Institution status and enrolls many international students.

The university’s growth also reflects the national recognition that higher education has become necessary. Students and parents recognize that the expectation of economic prosperity seems to go hand in glove with higher education. Along with that trend, we



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recognize that traditional linkages between college majors and careers have become less predictable, and that many graduates face changing job markets that will require a multiple careers in a working lifetime. In short, changes at the university and in the Texas Panhandle reflect an uncertain future.

## **The Future:**

In pondering the future, it is instructive to consider John Fischer's characterization of the region as one that, consistent with a frontier mindset, is best understood as "a series of mining ventures." In *From the High Plains*, Fischer proposes a boom-and-bust model. Commercial hunters mined bison herds, leading to virtual extinction; cattlemen mined grass, leading to overgrazing; wheat farmers mined soil, leading to the Dust Bowl; the wildcatters mined oil and gas, leading to depletion and pollution; and finally, Fischer writes: "the sixth mining venture on the High Plains, and probably the last, was for water" (171). He predicts a return, within the next generation, to a "landscape . . . dominated once more by grazing animals."<sup>34</sup> Writing in 1978, Fischer did not foresee the era of CAFOs, dairies, and agribusiness that characterizes the current economic regime. While he might have considered it simply an extension of the sixth mining venture based on a further economizing of groundwater, it is important to acknowledge the current agribusiness model and accept its presence, as it is most indicative of the region's future.

While certainly not taking for granted the economic benefits of irrigated agriculture and petroleum production, however, it is necessary to ask what comes next. Hydraulic fracturing will not last forever. And while we may not drain the Ogallala dry, we will increasingly see the point reached at various locales when the cost of pumping deeper and deeper water outruns the benefit of irrigated farming.

In contemplating the future, we face the question of whether there is going to be anything left to mine, whether we finally have to move from a frontier-model to a model of sustainability, from process to place. While the Amarillo economy is strong by standard measures and we are enjoying growth, it is equally clear that the community has a serious problem with poverty, hunger, and economic disparity. While some rural communities have succeeded in attracting agribusiness and otherwise succeeding economically, the general trend in the rural Panhandle is depopulation and alarming decay. A simple drive through many small towns will demonstrate this in the number of empty store fronts on the square—many communities saw their peak populations 100 years ago.

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The answers to the questions of what comes next, why people will live in this area, and by what means our economy will grow in the future, are not easily found. Other than agriculture and petroleum, the regional economy relies on alternative energy production (wind), retail, medical and related services, and light industry. According to Nick Gerlich, professor of marketing at WTAMU, these other businesses do not provide great opportunity for growth. While wind energy (and solar as another possibility) is a great thing, the economic benefit to the region is slight; after the initial development, these wind farms don't sustain many jobs, and the financial benefit goes primarily to the landowner, who may of course not even live and spend money in the Panhandle. Transportation has long been an important sector of the regional economy, but again the economic benefit is mobile, often departing the region. And jobs created in this sector tend to be lower wage retail employment. Historically, Amarillo has had a strong retail sector because it serves as a regional business hub in a region where significant urban centers are sparse. However, internet retailing has and will continue to cut into local retail. The problem is that certain industries, like wind production, gain great benefit from our region, while the region does not gain much benefit back. The challenge is to find ways of attracting corporate headquarters back to the region where the work is getting done.<sup>35</sup>

The city of Amarillo and the region more generally lack "good" jobs, the kind of jobs that attract and retain college-educated "white collar" workers. It is a familiar story that the region loses its younger generation to other places where opportunity is greater. Many parents help their children through college in full expectation that they will be sending them "away" for jobs elsewhere. Gary Pitner's description of this phenomenon in Amarillo suggest that while a small, core group of wealthier families with interests in land, oil, cattle, and banking will remain for generations, the children of the middle class will depart the region for economic opportunity. Meanwhile, the lower socio-economic class continues to grow. This group is largely Hispanic and its younger generation is poised to continue to take lower-paying jobs.<sup>36</sup>

The future of business in the Panhandle, Gerlich argues, must be in attracting light industries, smaller tech firms, and corporate headquarters. The region, after all, boasts a fine climate and low cost of operation. The cost of living, too, could be marketed more effectively to attract a portion of retirees seeking good climate, low expense, and access to medical services. Agricultural scientists see continued growth in CAFOs and similar facilities like dairies, and continued agricultural production on Panhandle farmlands, both in irrigated areas and in dryland. In their study of our "Critical Environmental Region," Books and Emel ask what we wish to sustain: the resource (groundwater), the community (way of life, quality of life), or the ecosystem. Having already in effect

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rejected the latter, which would entail radical reversal of what we recognize as “progress,” the question becomes how to balance the management of groundwater against economic vitality. If we consider how to go about “sustaining the region,” we must recognize a conflict between environmental/resource limits and capitalist economic growth. For the foreseeable future, Brooks and Emel predict a continuance of the agricultural system on the Llano Estacado, though with “inevitably decreasing returns.”<sup>37</sup>

## **Conclusion:**

Historians of the American West fought bitterly over their field’s relationship to the concept of the “frontier.” Was the association of the West with the frontier irredeemably wrapped up in a history of violence and exploitation? Can we celebrate the West without valorizing historic forms of oppression and environmental exploitation? What would the study of the American West as a place rather than a frontier process look like?

Considering the Texas Panhandle brings us to a similar position of interpreting the value of “frontier” as a sense of place. And, not surprisingly, it comes down to how we interpret “frontier” for our moment. Do we value the Panhandle for its frontier heritage, one that valorizes the scout, the explorer, the rancher, cowboy, and frontier? Is valorizing the rugged individualist in today’s society more destructive than constructive in an era more focused on sustaining communities? Is a frontier idea of regional heritage compatible with a new generation of pioneers, entrepreneurs with origins in Chihuahua, or laborers from Somalia? Today we find a mosque in Cactus, Texas, near the town’s dominating JBS plant—is this a form of frontierism that the region can accommodate?

The prescription for the Panhandle’s future vitality offered by Gary Pitner is to dream big like the Panhandle pioneers, to face realities of regional change and scarcity, to work to include a broad base of population across lines of ethnicity and socioeconomic class, and to invest individually and collectively in regional development. Precedent exists for forming such a regional polity, and it can be found in the Panhandle’s historical social formation, which found a middle ground by fusing the ideal of the individualist pioneer figure, the frontiersman, with the cooperative model of the rural community, based on the figure of the farmer. Jeff Roche describes this fusion, which became essential to face the crisis of the Dust Bowl the region faced in the 1930s: “Panhandle Texans portrayed frontier values as a combination of individualism and community. While individual initiative and freedom from constraints certainly played a large role in describing their own past, the responsibility those individuals had to the community, especially in times

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of crisis, was equally important.” Such a fusion was even able to justify uneasy acceptance of federal relief programs which became essential to the region during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression era.<sup>38</sup> While Roche finds hypocrisy in this accommodation, which certainly fails to meet Pitner’s criterion of facing reality, nevertheless the frontier fusion is possible. After all, it broadly reflects historical reality: frontier settlement required scouts and innovators to find pathways, but it equally required those who were willing to do the work of forming and maintaining communities. The frontier fusion remains useful for a regional people who wish to cultivate their heritage while adapting to change. The term frontier must here not be associated with a process of exploitation but rather with place-minded innovation and with the cultivation of sustainable community.

As a region we retain a frontier ambivalence. We love our heritage, but don’t quite know how to transition from a frontier boom-and-bust model to what it means to adapt and develop a sense of place. We know we need to change and grow to succeed and thrive, but we don’t like change (we like our place as it is), and we don’t like paying taxes to support collective projects in economic development. We are pleased to enjoy a thriving business sector with good retail and restaurants, but we retain a stubborn pride in the virtue of tough frontier conditions. We believe it virtuous to have to walk into a stiff headwind. We have internalized the mentality that progress is ephemeral and the fear that what we build will dry up and blow away.

The solution seems to be to increase economic diversity and educational opportunity in a manner that is compatible with our environment, our history, and our sense of regional identity. Many institutions at WTAMU are working toward such ends. The university has a Dryland Agriculture Institute and an Alternative Energy Institute, neither of which is charged with public outreach or interdisciplinary collaboration. In the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum (PPHM) we have on WT’s campus the greatest repository of artifacts and archives revealing a people’s attempts to inhabit the region that we could wish for. While the museum has excellent public reach, there is yet little interaction between PPHM and WT’s academic wing. To foster connections and collaborations between these entities and to increase public outreach on issues related to these entities, WT founded the Center for the Study of the American West (CSAW). CSAW is developing public outreach, research grant funding, and curricular programs to encourage residents and students to think critically about their place in the Panhandle, the High Plains, and the American West. CSAW envisions growing partnerships with PPHM to work on several programs with both educational and economic impact.

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CSAW is embarking on a program tentatively called the Community Sustainability Initiative which would 1) study and collect information on strategies employed by regional communities to further their wellbeing, 2) act as a repository of resources and information for communities in search of sustainability strategies, and 3) offer site visits and consultation from a task force comprised of interdisciplinary WT faculty and staff on individual community sustainability issues. This “think-tank” would draw from professorial ranks across many departments—from the arts and humanities, to agriculture and wildlife biology, to communications, to engineering—but would also depend upon the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum and its collections and would furthermore seek collaboration with agencies such as the Dryland Agriculture and Alternative Energy Institutes.

As advocated by Gary Pitner (formerly of the Panhandle Region Planning Commission) and Carol Lovelady (director of the PPHM), we as a region need to seriously study and invest in questions of quality of life in the Panhandle. Pitner points out that Amarillo still lacks such basic amenities as a public covered pool and an adequate senior citizens’ center, and lags behind in developing new parks and public spaces. Lovelady reminds us that the museum’s collections are centered on peoples’ adaptations to living on the southern plains. Studying quality of life would not only benefit the region, but could produce ideas of great relevance to the plains region, the state of Texas, and the nation. We have a world class museum but no museum science program at WTAMU. Such a program would be a boon not only for interested students but, in terms of the research produced, for the larger community.

In complementary fashion, the region would benefit by developing its environmental resources, fully renewable, in the form of outdoor recreation, tourism, and research. A few things we still have plenty of in the Panhandle is space, sun, wind, and grass. Our prairie and canyon landscape is little-known to potential tourists, but has great potential for travelers interested in immersive experiences in ranching heritage, wilderness exploration and wildlife study, frontier living, hunting, and related interests. Expanded parks and public lands could enable hike-through corridors, tying into our regional “gems” of Alibates National Monument, Palo Duro Canyon State Park, and Caprock Canyons State Park, with its extremely popular State of Texas bison herd. Such development, again, could tie into developing student leadership and building attractive university programs in diverse academic fields, from the business of hospitality/tourism, heritage/museum management, grassland ecology, wind/solar energy, and so on. We should capitalize on the very basic facts of this place, those very facts that we have for generations apologized for: the wind, the flat open expanse, the hard weather, and the tough canyonlands.

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Importantly, when we study our region, we are studying the world. The challenges that we face in the Panhandle are similar to those faced by other regions in other nations. Others are asking, in our global era, what is the future of agriculture, and agricultural communities, when the forecast is hotter and drier, when groundwater is dropping? These are regional problems, but they are also global problems, as economic as well as environmental factors connect us. We at WTAMU, understood as a regional research university, can study local conditions in a manner relevant to the larger world, and we can educate our students to be leaders on a world stage. One can imagine interdisciplinary PhD fields that focus on issues of lived experience rather than on traditional disciplines. Building on our disciplinary strengths in dryland agriculture, alternative energy, heritage resource management, and Western American Studies, our researchers and our students could study issues like the management of marginal lands, regional change and demographics, the economics and cultural dynamics of refugee resettlement, and community sustainability. For such interdisciplinary work, CSAW could serve as the nerve center, operating between academic departments, corporate partners, research institutes, university students, and the general public.<sup>39</sup>

The frontier—the next frontier, new frontier, final frontier—may be cliché in some respects, but the term aptly describes our region’s history and its future.

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