

In reading this book, we accompany its author on a nine-day journey by car from Nebraska to New York, tracing backwards in time the movement west of his father's forebears. A Ph.D. in philosophy who teaches computer science at Sheridan College in Toronto, Kem Luther calls this trip a pilgrimage, and he approaches his task with both a pilgrim's humility and a computer scientist's nonchalant ease with large amounts of information. The result is a small marvel of a book in which the unfolding stories of Arthur, Henry, and Ebenezer Luther become the occasion for insightful reflections on the panorama of economic and natural forces that shaped the settlement of the American frontier.

A spiritual quest anchored in the telling details of the material world, our story begins on a ranch in Broken Bow, Nebraska. It progresses back in time as we head east past the cemetery near the last homestead site where many members of grandfather Arthur's family lie, stricken in 1892 by typhoid fever. Here we pause to consider the effects of that disease on the pioneers, the role of the U.S. government in promoting settlement on marginal land, and how the Homestead Act came to generate profits for eastern mortgage companies while encouraging settlers to take increasingly riskier gambles. As we continue on through the dying small towns of the emptying plains, we reflect on the record of their birth provided by Solomon Butcher, whose photographs bear witness to the "almost daily struggle to turn a strange and uncomfortable land into a landscape of farm homesteads." Many genealogical records are kept in county courthouses and libraries, so we stop in the larger population centers strung along the interstate highways. Here, the author notes the psychological forces at work in midwestern architecture and town planning. A most fascinating chapter is devoted to the central role of the Mississippi watershed in determining the development pattern of the entire Midwest.

Whether he is musing on how the "construction of a road--a good, straight, usable road--is a refutation of the water-formed land through which it passes" or on how the apocalyptic visionaries of the Second Great Awakening were giving voice to the fears of our forebears as they faced the modern age, Luther's essay is immensely informative and spiritually refreshing. Any student of the "Great Experiment" that is the United States would be enlightened by this erudite pilgrim's tale.

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