

Discussion Questions

1. The *Kadoka Press* on April 24, 1927, called western South Dakota “the greatest ‘next year’ country in existence (page xiv).” Do you agree with this characterization? Why or why not?
2. A basic premise of this book is that converting the grasslands of West River South Dakota to tillable cropland was, at best, a questionable action and, at worst, a disaster. Others, from the federal government report, *The Future of the Great Plains*, and the Resettlement Administration’s movie “The Plow That Broke the Plains” (both in 1936) to Frank and Deborah Poppers’ more recent call to convert the region into a “Buffalo Commons” have likewise questioned the possibility of conventional agriculture in the western part of the state. What is your opinion on the issue?
3. If the agricultural population in West River South Dakota is strictly circumscribed by climate and limited resources, what potential for town growth and development do you believe exists in the region? What actions can people take there to improve their economic potential?
4. Do you think Paula Nelson’s strategy of using Kadoka as a typical West River town works well to describe conditions there? She relies heavily on newspaper reports to describe conditions. Does that make sense, or do you perceive any hazards in the approach?
5. The history of white settlement in western South Dakota during the early 1900's can be viewed as a series of cycles of “challenge and response.” How effective do you think people’s responses were to the challenges and hardships they faced?
6. As experts push the idea of diversified farming (“The cow, the sow, and the hen”), increasing numbers of rural people followed their advice (page 19). Discuss the effectiveness of this technique. What have been the long-term consequences of this transformation?
7. History, from one perspective, is a story of change and continuity over time. What changed and what stayed the same in the West River region during the 1920's and 1930's?
8. What role did women play in the household economy, and what was their importance in society (Chapter 3)?
9. Coming to the realization during the twenties that it would never become “a young Chicago,” the town of Kadoka found itself caught, according to Paula Nelson,

“between its ambitions and its realities (page 62).” Discuss what this meant for the town and what it meant for small towns in general over the course of their histories.

10. The author notes on page 62, “As with all small towns, a few energetic, involved individuals disproportionately shaped the social world.” Has this been true in your experience? Some call it the 80/20 rule (80 percent of the work gets done by 20 percent of the people). Is this inevitable? What might be done to get more involvement from the entire citizenry?
11. The relationship between the individual and community is always a dynamic one. Towns shape the people who live in them and vice versa, Nelson contends. How do you look at this situation?
12. Matters like cleaning up the town, electrification, and water development posed major challenges during the 1920's (Chapter 4). How do present-day problems facing small towns compare?
13. South Dakota towns were increasingly shaped and influenced by outside forces that their residents had no control over (page 91). How has this situation changed since then?
14. What are “the social costs of space” (Chapter 5)? Can we ever eradicate or transcend the problems posed by relatively low population and long distances in South Dakota?
15. What impact did the “Dirty Thirties” have on the West River region (Chapter 6)? Are those circumstances likely ever to recur?
16. Do you think it curious, as the author does, that West River people harbored “a willingness to accept aid combined with a thoroughgoing contempt for and distrust of the federal government”? Do you think the psychological concept of “cognitive dissonance” applies here?

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