

Steel Bridges on the Great Plains: Connecting the desolate plains with industrial America, 1880-1920

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Abstract

During the westward expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century, settlers skipped over the semi-arid Great Plains region, once they reached the western edge of North America's humid zone, and began settling the Pacific Coast. Only in the last quarter of the century did agricultural settlement begin to move westward across the Great Plains. That settlement was not predicated on settlers first establishing small, nearly self-sufficient farms, as had been the case in eastern regions with more rainfall and with timber available for building materials. Rather, settlement of the Great Plains was wholly dependent on industrialization, most notably the railroads that linked the region to the eastern third of the nation, linking the Plains not only to markets for wheat and other small grains grown in the region but also to supplies of building materials, which were not locally available on the Plains. But the railroads could not provide the final link, between railroad depots and individual farms. For that link, farmers relied on networks of rural roads, many of which crossed rivers and streams. This illustrated paper will analyze the crucial link that steel bridges provided to make agricultural settlement of the Great Plains possible.

By analyzing bridge construction in North Dakota, South Dakota, and eastern Montana during the late 1800s and early 1900s, this paper will show a further level of dependence that agricultural settlement of the Great Plains had on industrialization. In the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, industrialization of the Midwestern states (the old Northwest Territory of the United States) had developed alongside agricultural development of the region, and part of that industrial development was the growth of firms throughout the region that fabricated and built steel bridges. This paper will show that such a pattern did not develop on the Great Plains. Rather, bridge fabricating and construction firms in the Midwest extended their service areas onto the Plains states and dominated the business of building steel bridges on the Great Plains.