The Great Plains, bounded on the north by the “park belt” in Canada, on the west by the picturesque Rockies, on the south by the Edwards Plateau, and on the east by an indefinite line of demarcation, is a fabulous area which has taxed the adventurous spirit of man. The region is characterized by extremes. The climate is at times most favorable for man, livestock and crop production, followed with certainty by drought, hail, blizzard, wind, and heat. In prehistoric times, climatic adversities resulted in complete depopulation of the region. Man’s survival in the area over a long period of time is truly the result of his ability to adjust himself to the adversities of nature. Since the weak cannot survive extreme hardship, it became the land of the strong.

During historic times the area has yielded modest fortunes to thousands and immense fortunes to a few. Some fortunes have been short lived as unfavorable climatic and economic forces combined to squeeze out the prosperity. But among the hardy people of the Plains, temporary climatic and economic reverses do not destroy the spirit. They merely serve as another challenge to a people who have never lost their pioneering character.

Tonight we are meeting near the southern end of this vast area, first populated by horses, camels, and similar animals about 35 to 40 million years ago and by man about 10,000 years ago. Man came into the region about the time the horses, camels, etc., were disappearing. He survived for several thousand years only to be driven out by a drought which, by comparison, makes the climatic catastrophe of the 1930’s a petty calamity of nature. As the climatic conditions again became favorable for animal life, the Indians re-established themselves. They were hunters, gaining their sustenance principally from the migrating buffalo herds. Their cunning disposition, developed through centuries of complete dependence for food on their hunting skill and the necessity of protecting their hunting grounds from hostile tribes, made them a formidable barrier to the aspirations of the white man. Matriels, including the horse and gun, acquired from the white man, plus an enhanced desire to keep his new commodities of hunting grounds, increased the fierceness of the white man gradually crowded onto the Plains.

Since the white man first heard of the Plains it is an area of romance. The Spaniards heard stories of the Seven Cities of Cibola with their streets paved with gold and of fabulous Quivira. In quest of this wealth and his band set out on April 22, 1540, the most adventurous journeys of all times. Cibola in July, 1540, but without finding the city. The party continued in quest of Quivira. Leaving the supply of the Rio Grande on April 23, 1541, in a northeasterly direction with Indian guides, it appears to have been, was to direct to a point from which there could be no return. Crossing a region where available water is scarce or non-existent, the urge for gold, thirst and hunger of man and beast. This advance at least as far as Lyons, Kansas, but with no sign of the golden metal. The which the Plains area has yielded, not as usual, a form of agricultural production and an oil and natural gas, found in all parts of the region, represents a happy ratio of the earliest romantic lure associated with the Plains.

Sporadic explorations of the Plains during the century following Coronado’s adventure led to and confirmed the idea of the existence of the American Desert.” The opening of the territory, the desire for trade with the Spanish southwest, the discovery of gold in California and the religious persecution of the Mormons gave a special significance—a significance largely of a transportation barrier. Out of the desires arose the Santa Fe, the Oregon, the California, Mormon trails, all of which were sprouting man and beast who did not reach their destinations appearing with the unfortunate ones who did. The journeys were the dreams of a new nation, not in the unknown to them but pictured in their sell of the Plains.

The length of the barrier traversed, plus the obstacles in the form of hostile Indians, inadequate watering places, hopes.

C. F. Frye, Executive Director, State Geological Survey, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kans. Personal communications.

For an interesting account of the history of the Plains, see E. Myers.