
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Through its regular features, whether book notes and reviews or feature articles, Kansas History always strives to keep its readers abreast of the most recent scholarship and endeavors to publish materials that increase our understanding of the history of Kansas and the Central Plains. The journal thus serves as a vital forum for scholarly discourse, and we appreciate those readers who, from time to time, express their opinions on various issues raised within its pages. Earlier this year we received such a letter from the Honorable William H. Avery, former U.S. congressman and thirty-seventh governor of the state of Kansas. The governor's comments pertain to an article by historian Jay Antle published in the autumn 1997 issue of Kansas History, "Against Kansas's Top Dog: Coyotes, Politics, and Ecology, 1877-1970." Because the governor's letter and the author's response address some important issues and contribute to the historical dialogue, we decided that their publication would be of interest and benefit to the journal's readers.*

To the Editor:

Recently Dr. Ramon Powers, director of the Kansas State Historical Society, called to say he had received a letter from a state legislator criticizing an article in the 1997 autumn issue of *Kansas History* regarding coyotes, politics, and ecology. Dr. Powers said he had not read the article previous to its being printed in the magazine, and only after receiving the legislator's letter did he read the entire story. After reading the article in the magazine, as I remember, he said he was "shocked."

It was not clear if he was shocked by receiving a letter from a legislator or shocked from what he had read. For his own reasons he invited me to write this letter to the editor setting out my memories and views.

On the recommendation of the affected state agencies and the Kansas Livestock Association, I signed an agreement similar to one former Governor Anderson had signed with the Predator and Rodent Control Division of the U.S. Department of Interior in 1966 to assist in the control of coyotes in Kansas. That agreement with the department was apparently operative for several years. There is no public record of any objection other than from a few avid environmental specialists. The author of the article has a master's degree from the University of Arizona and it is doubtful he was even in Kansas at that time. Notwithstanding, he wrote the debate over this agreement with the Department of Interior which stirred up a debate resembling the sometimes violence on college campuses across the nation over the war in Vietnam!

The debate over coyote control was so animated and controversial that I had forgotten all about it.

Possibly the legislator's problem with the article, and also mine, was that the author seemed to find quotes in the Docking papers and other sources that were critical of me and at the same time quotes and references always representing what the author considered "public interest" in reference to Governor Docking. Otherwise, it would seem as a matter of professional courtesy, he might have taken a few minutes to call me for my version of the issue. For balance and fairness, a two-minute telephone call would have enabled the author to have added to the story that I was raised on a farm, returned to the farm after college, farmed quite an extensive acreage by 1950 northeast Kansas norms and developed a cow herd of more than one hundred head. The owner of a cow herd does not need to be reminded of the continued concern and occasional loss from an uncontrolled coyote population.

In fairness to the author, it should be mentioned here that most articles and stories in *Kansas History* deal with pioneer days in the history of the state and generally the persons mentioned in those articles are no longer living. Possibly, he concluded I was no longer living—even though I am a member of the Board of Directors of the Society.

Representative but not inclusive of the unbalanced statements in the article: "Docking's papers suggest that Avery's signing of the 1966 agreement had as much to do with politics as with coyote predation"; "Avery chose politics over his personal ambivalence about federal hunters disrupting Kansas ecology"; "Docking, himself a member of the Livestock Association"—never mentioning I had been a member of the Livestock Association for quite a number of years.

Governor Docking voided the Department of Interior agreement after receiving "a flood of letters." Of course this had absolutely nothing to do with politics—or at least it was not considered so by the author.

In quoting from letters to Governor Docking critical of my action, the author always includes in the text the name of the writer of the letter. However, he includes the following quote from a Docking letter but for some reason does not similarly include the name of the author: "It appears to me that the only folks having problems with predators are those who do not properly care for their stock. . . . These farmers blame the predators, namely the coyote for their laziness or neglect."

On the lighter side, the story carried numerous critical but accurate quotes from the *Kansas City Star* over my signing the agreement with the Interior. No Kansas papers were

quoted or referenced. Not apparently mentioned in the Docking papers was that when I ran for re-election in 1966 and Robert Docking was my opponent, the *Star* carried a strong endorsement for my reelection. This despite the fact that I had signed the coyote agreement several weeks before the election.

A footnote states the author is now an assistant instructor of history at the University of Kansas. As an alumnus of the university, I hope he can refrain from presenting historical facts, especially Kansas historical facts, with a political slant.

Wm. H. Avery
Retired farmer and former Governor
Wakefield, Kansas

To the Editor,

Before I respond to Governor William Avery's comments on my article in the Autumn 1997 issue of *Kansas History*, I would like to thank him for responding to it. I welcome the opportunity to comment further upon the topic of coyote control in Kansas. As he points out, I did not interview him while researching this topic which was admittedly a weakness in the article. However, rather than filling in that gap by explaining his motivations for signing the 1966 coyote control agreement with PARC, Governor Avery chose to take issue with my characterization of both his actions and the debate over the agreement. Before I deal with his individual comments, I should note that Governor Avery does not challenge the essential point of my article—that Kansas had developed a system of coyote control which made both fiscal and ecological sense by 1950. The 1966 agreement with PARC threatened this system.

Governor Avery writes that I overstate the extent of the controversy surrounding the signing of agreements with PARC and that "only a few avid environmental specialists" were concerned about this issue. Nowhere in my article do I suggest that college campuses erupted in violence over the coyote control issue. I merely open the paper with a sentence which mentions 1960s protests in an attempt to place the controversy over the 1966 agreement in chronological context. Further, the evidence suggests to me that more Kansans than "a few avid environmental specialists" were concerned about Federal intervention in coyote control efforts in Kansas. Once the 1966 agreement was brought to the public's

attention, a number of Kansans both environmentally concerned and not expressed objections to the agreement.

More troubling to me is Governor Avery's accusation that my article was fundamentally unfair and politically motivated. I wrote in my article that Avery likely had political motivations for signing the 1966 agreements over his own stated reservations about Federal intervention. I also believe Governor Docking had political reasons for canceling the agreement after his election. Responding to the wishes of constituents, whether it be the Kansas Livestock Association or Wichita Audubon Society members are all "political" actions. In a democracy, doing things for "political" reasons is not inherently a bad thing. In this case, I believe that Governor Docking's decision did serve a larger public interest by preserving a system of coyote control which minimized large-scale poisoning while still targeting troublesome individual animals which could devastate individual Kansas farmers and ranchers. In fairness, if I were to revise the article, I would say that Governor Docking had "political" reasons as well for canceling the agreement given the distaste Americans currently have for that word. My own agenda was not to criticize a Republican governor or praise a Democratic one on the basis of their political affiliations but rather on the basis of their decisions regarding coyote control. As to Governor Avery's concerns about my teaching, he can rest assured that my teaching evaluations praise my overall fairness and encouragement of multiple viewpoints. Finally, as the footnote states, I received a Masters degree from Arizona State University, not the University of Arizona. As a Sun Devil, I need to prevent any identification with that other school down state.

To conclude, I would like to thank Governor Avery again for his response and I would encourage the editorial staff of *Kansas History* to consider instituting a regular "Letters to the Editor" section in future issues of the journal. Given the complex history of Kansas, there are ample opportunities to consider and debate the ways we think about the past. Regular opportunities for *Kansas History* readers to respond to interpretations offered in article form will allow us to have critical conversations about our shared past.

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