

POETRY ON THE PLAINS:
J.S. PENNY AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF FORT SCOTT

by

DARON BLAKE

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Major Professor
Dr. Bonnie Lynn-Sherow

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Abstract

This thesis recreates the relationship between humans and their physical environment in Fort Scott, Kansas between 1850 and 1920 and uses the poetry of J.S. Penny, a contemporary amateur poet living and writing in Fort Scott, as an essential primary resource. Settlers came to this area in southeastern Kansas in the 19th century for its timber-lined streams, high precipitation, and rich soil. The Missouri River, Fort Scott, and Gulf Railroad was extended through Fort Scott in December of 1869. The arrival of the railroad transformed the town. The natural resources which had been a mark of identity for the people of Fort Scott became commodities to be sold in national markets. Manufacturing and industry boomed, but population would eventually plateau in the early 20th century, creating a small industrial city that had maintained a strongly rural sense of community.

Penny's poetry provides a personal, emotional response to the rapid changes to the landscape around him. Some of his poems on the local landscape directly note specific changes in the local ecology, while some demonstrate Penny's religious connection to the natural world—a common perspective during his time. Other pieces show us Penny's observations of how his neighbors reacted to the weather and environment in Fort Scott. Penny, like many Americans in the early 20th century, saw the history of his home as one of agrarian development and westward expansion over an empty landscape; the Jeffersonian and Turnerian roots of his perspective are evident in his poetry. With Penny's poetry, we can create a more complete environmental history of Fort Scott by understanding how Fort Scott residents related to the land around them.

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The late Frank Willard of Fort Scott, a descendent of J.S. Penny, made this project possible by meticulously preserving and organizing all of Penny's papers and awarding a scholarship to support the study of Penny's poetry. His generosity made my graduate studies possible, and I am extremely grateful.

Dedication

For my parents, Mike and Tina Blake.

Introduction: Stories about Environmental Change

In his essay “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” environmental historian William Cronon emphasizes the importance of narrative to environmental history. The power of narrative, Cronon argues, is especially potent when discussing changes in something as fluid and ever-changing as an ecosystem. Narrative is critical in environmental history because it helps us understand meaning and change: “narratives remain our chief moral compass in the world. Because we use them to motivate and explain our actions, the stories we tell change the way we act in the world.”¹

Environmental historians must use narrative carefully, Cronon writes, because “by writing stories about environmental change, we divide the causal relationships of an ecosystem with a rhetorical razor that defines included and excluded, relevant and irrelevant, empowered and disempowered.”²

Historians are not the only ones who write stories about environmental change. Authors and artists use narrative to understand and represent environmental flux, as well. I argue that the stories artists tell and have told about environmental change provide a unique perspective on how people in the past related to the land. The stories in their work demonstrate what people in the past considered to be “included and excluded, relevant and irrelevant, empowered and disempowered” within the ecosystems in which they lived.

¹ William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *The Journal of American History* 78: 4 (1992):1375.

² *Ibid.*, 1349.

The poetry of J.S. Penny, a real estate agent and amateur poet who lived and wrote in Fort Scott, Kansas in the early 19th century, demonstrates the influence and inspiration that the changing ecosystems can hold for artists. Penny's poetry navigates many diverse topics, but he was consistently preoccupied by the environmental changes happening to southeastern Kansas around the turn of the 19th century as railroads and industry reinvented the region.

Penny's observations of the surrounding natural world are part of an American tradition; many classic American authors, novelists, and poets have created snapshots of the American landscape in certain places and at certain times in our nation's past. Thoreau's prose in *Walden* transports the reader to the temperate forests, cleared fields and busy cities of mid-19th century Massachusetts. Salinas Bay in California is commonly known as "Steinbeck Country" because so many of John Steinbeck's novels describe the area in such vivid detail. While writing *East of Eden*, Steinbeck wrote to his friend and editor Pascal Covici that he wanted "to describe the Salinas Valley in detail but in sparse detail so that there can be a real feeling of it. It should be sights and sounds, smells and colors but put down with simplicity as though the boys were able to read it."³ Steinbeck was referring to his sons, to whom the book would be dedicated. Steinbeck wanted to preserve the feeling of the land for future readers; he called the book "the autobiography of the Valley."⁴

Poetry can also contribute to our understanding of past environments. Walt Whitman created a strong sense of place in his poetry. Whitman scholars have analyzed

³ John Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters* (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 64

the portrayals of nature and place in his work. M. Jimmie Killingsworth finds that the poem “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” first published in 1874, links “manifest destiny to a view of nature as a boundless resource base for human expansion.”⁵ These poems take us directly into the mind of Whitman and can sometimes surprise us by what they show about how he sees the world around him; in this interpretation, as something to be conquered. J.S. Penny’s musings on the landscape are just one example of how authors and poets offer us their perspective on the physical environment around them.

Literature and Environmental History

How can literature about the environment be used as a legitimate historic resource for environmental historians? We can begin by looking at what other disciplines have been doing with environmental literature. There has been a surge in ecological literary studies (also known as ecocriticism) over the past three decades. One of the earliest and most successful of these works was the 1964 book *The Machine in the Garden* by professor and scholar of American cultural history Leo Marx. While not usually defined as an ecocritical work, Marx opened the door for such inquiries. In *The Machine in the Garden*, Marx explored “the pastoral ideal” in American literature and examined how great works of literature can reveal popular interpretations of nature. Investigating such seminal American novels and short stories as *Moby Dick*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Marx traces the common ideal of pastoral escape in American history and how authors’ perceptions of the

⁵M. Jimmie Killingsworth, “The Voluptuous Earth and the Fall of the Redwood Tree: Whitman’s Personifications of Nature,” in *Whitman East and West: New Contexts for Reading Walt Whitman*, edited by Ed Folsom, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 18.

American landscape have created an exceptionally environmentally-configured American identity. Marx writes that “for more than a century, our most gifted writers have dwelt upon the contradiction between rural myth and technological fact.”⁶ Despite increasing industrialization over the past two centuries, Americans continue to identify with an idealized rural and natural past. In the decades since Marx’s book, literary histories, political histories, cultural histories, histories of gender and race, and many other subgenres have used works of environmental literature as a resource. Environmental history itself can use literary works as primary sources to better understand the history of the changing physical environment.

Although Marx studied some of the most revered books in America’s past, we need not, as environmental historians, limit ourselves to the big names and titles. Just as ecocriticism benefits from examining a wide variety of works, so can environmental history; if literature is to be used as a primary source from which we can learn about the relationship between humans and the environment, environmental historians can use works that have reached any level of success.

By widening the scope of our investigation of American literature to include amateur works, such as those of J.S. Penny, we can learn a lot more about specific places and how artists and citizens saw their surroundings. Many writers are identified very strongly with place. Environmental history is by its nature a regional or local endeavor; as ecosystems change across time and place, so must our stories about them. By looking at writers from all over the United States who have reached all levels of success, we can

⁶ Leo Marx, “The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America,” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 354.

write more specific and accurate stories about environmental change on both regional and local scales. Literature of all levels of success and notoriety can teach us not only about the history of the art form itself, but also about their subject matter.

Environmental history is often understood by piecing together three interrelated and dynamically changing concepts: economy, ecology, and cognition. This three-part model was first articulated by Arthur McAvoy in his 1987 article “Toward an Interactive Theory of Nature and Culture: Ecology, Production, and Cognition in the California Fishing Industry.” The incorporation of economical, ecological, and cognitive changes over time can create a complete and complex story of the changing relationship between humans and their environment. Literature is one of the best sources we have to understand the cognitive component of this equation. Stories can help historians to better understand how people in the past related to the natural world. But which types of literature should be used as a primary source? Can creative works be considered environmental literature? No one would contest that *Walden* is both a piece of art and the expression of an environmental ethic, but how do works of pure fiction and poetry fit into a framework of American environmental literature? We can learn to differentiate between environmentally-oriented literature and works that happen to include information on the environment while remembering that both of these types of literature can be helpful for understanding how humans in the past perceived the world around them.

Lawrence Buell provides a checklist to identify an environmentally-oriented work in his 1995 book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. We can use this list to differentiate between a piece that is specifically, purposefully, and primarily environmentally-oriented and a piece which

happens to tell us about the environment. Buell's list has four general criteria, and he emphasizes that few works satisfy (or fail to satisfy) all four:

- 1) "The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history."
- 2) "The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest."
- 3) "Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation."
- 4) "Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text."⁷

With this checklist, we can better specify the intent of the author of the work we are studying. Buell focuses his own literary criticism on works that qualify as more environmentally-oriented than not. Paul Brooks, in his book *Speaking for Nature: How Literary Naturalists from Henry Thoreau to Rachel Carson Have Shaped America*, also focuses on the contributions to environmental writing that have come from purely environmentally-oriented works. Brooks examines the effects of works by "literary naturalists" who "reveal intuitive understanding of the importance of the natural environment, of the need for conservation, [and] of the principles of ecology."⁸ Yet, as

⁷ Lawrence Buell, *Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 7-8.

⁸ Paul Brooks, *Speaking for Nature: How Literary Naturalists from Henry Thoreau to Rachel Carson Have Shaped America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), xiv.

environmental historians, we can widen the scope of our investigation to include works that do not reveal this depth of ecological understanding. Literary and artistic works, whether created by scientifically-minded people or not, serve as essential primary sources to an environmental history. Looking at environmental art as a primary source can help us write stories about environmental change which include the perspectives of some of the key characters in these stories. In the Midwest, writers such as Willa Cather and Mark Twain have given historians some interesting perspectives on the environmental history of entire regions of the United States.

Authors and poets' work often provides a regional or local understanding of the physical world at a specific time in our country's past. The focus in criticism of environmental literature has traditionally been on American classics, yet we can also garner crucial information from lesser-known works. I will be looking specifically at J.S. Penny. His poetry can be used as an important primary source for an environmental history of Fort Scott. By looking at Penny's work and comparing it to other writers publishing in the Midwest at the time, as well as placing it within a national framework of environmental literature, we can better understand the way Fort Scott residents saw and related to their land. Penny's poems are an example of how we can use "stories about environmental change" that others have written as a source to help us write our own stories as environmental historians.

Understanding the Environmental Literature of the Midwest

The literature of the Midwest can reveal much about the region's environmental history. Mark Twain is perhaps the strongest Midwestern literary voice in the history of the United States, and his depictions of life on the Mississippi River and the changing landscape along the river give his readers a sense of mid-nineteenth life in the middle of the continent. While Twain is the best-known author from the Midwest, Nebraska's Willa Cather and her works are perhaps the most studied of Midwestern works by scholars of environmental literature. Cather, famous for novels such as *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!*, is one of the best-known authors of the early twentieth century. Her works have been studied from many perspectives, and one of the most striking and well-known aspects of her writing is her description of the Nebraska landscape and its effects on the pioneering and farming pursuits of her protagonists.

The Willa Cather Archive, an online resource for scholarship of Cather's work run by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has an entire volume on "Willa Cather's Environmental Imagination."⁹ Here, Cather scholars have created a collection of articles that have investigated how Cather's novels represent the Nebraska landscape. Not all of the articles in the collection agree on what Cather's works say about the author and her perspective on the environment. Yet there is a focus on the power of Cather's narrative in describing the way Nebraskans related to the Nebraska landscape; as Susan Rosowski, a premier Cather scholar, wrote in the archive's introduction: "rather than performing poststructuralist games of complicating, transgressing, interrogating, and contesting,

⁹ Susan J. Rosowski, ed. "Volume 5: Cather Studies, Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination. *The Willa Cather Archive* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2003). Accessed June 23, 2012 at <http://cather.unl.edu/cs005.html>.

these essays esteem simplicity, seek connections, and model humility.”¹⁰ Once again, we see that narrative is integral to creating a clear story of the changing relationship between people and the environment.

Cather was writing *O Pioneers*, which would become a national best-seller, at the same time that J.S. Penny was self-publishing his own book of poetry in Fort Scott, Kansas. His works, although neither particularly successful nor well-known, can serve as a similar resource for southeastern Kansas’s environmental history as Cather’s works have been for Nebraska. J.S. Penny was not an environmental or ecological thinker. His works were not environmentally-oriented. Yet his love for the local landscape and his attention to the changes in the natural world around him led him to write poems which today help us to better understand Fort Scott in the early 20th century.

Of Willa Cather, Joseph Meeker, scholar of comparative literature and ecology, wrote in the Willa Cather Archive that it is unlikely that Cather “will find a place among the great literary examples of the environmental imagination. She may have loved her prairie home, but her love was not strong enough to persuade her to live with it and learn its natural history. She shows little knowledge or curiosity about the natural processes surrounding her characters.”¹¹ Although Steinbeck called *East of Eden* an “autobiography of the [Salinas] Valley,” he also wrote that “this book is *not* about geography but about people and I do not want to give the place undue importance.”¹² Yet his attention to detail

¹⁰ Susan J. Rosowski, “Introduction,” *The Willa Cather Archive* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2003). Accessed June 23, 2012 at http://cather.unl.edu/cs005_intro.html .

¹¹ Joseph W. Meeker, “Willa Cather: The Plow and the Pen,” *The Willa Cather Archive* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2003). Accessed June 23, 2012 at http://cather.unl.edu/cs005_meeker.html.

¹² Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 15.

and strong sense of place still allow us to better understand the geography of the Salinas Valley in the early 20th century. The same could be said of J.S. Penny. Like Cather and Steinbeck, Penny was not an environmental thinker. He was not primarily concerned with the environment, but for the purposes of an environmental history of Fort Scott, this does not matter. Penny inadvertently chronicled changes in the environment. His poetry, mostly concerned with life and a sense of community in a small Kansas city, portrays the way that he and other residents of Fort Scott looked at the natural world around them and what changes were happening to that world. We can use what scholars have done with Cather's work through ecocriticism as a model for studying amateur writers (like Penny) in order to understand how people thought about the land—whether it was a backdrop or a character, a process or a place. There are key differences between a study of a classic novelist like Cather and an amateur poet such as Penny—their audiences, motivations, and pressures were different. Still, by looking at the poetry itself with an ecocritical eye, we can see how Penny related to the land around him.



Figure 1: A photo of J.S. Penny, circa 1890. From Ralph Willard Collection of J.S. Penny papers, available at Hale Special Collections.

J.S. Penny's Poems and The History of Fort Scott

J.S. Penny was born in 1848 in Des Moines, Iowa. In 1898 he sold his family farm in Iowa and moved with his wife and two sons to Fort Scott, Kansas. He would work as a real estate agent there, but was best known to his neighbors for his amateur poetry, which he commonly wrote for and sent to friends and had published in local newspapers.

It is within this varied collection of Penny's poetry that we can find clues to help us piece together a history of Fort Scott during the early 20th century. By focusing on the environmental history of this area, we can understand how Fort Scott residents changed and were changed by the environment in which they lived. Penny's poems, and what evidence we can find of their reception by his neighbors and local readers, can fill in the human perception of nature which is a crucial part of any environmental history.

There are two prominent patterns in Penny's perspective of the natural world that we can easily decipher from his work. First of all, he saw the historical development of Fort Scott in a traditionally Turnerian fashion. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner presented a famous essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Turner's thesis stated that the frontier, ever moving westward throughout American history, had closed at the end of the 19th century. Turner also argued that it was this frontier and the experience of it which had created the character of Americans and of their democracy: "to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom-these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier."¹³ Turner's frontier thesis became incredibly influential in

¹³ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 1893. Available online at <http://www.learner.org/workshops/primarysources/corporations/docs/turner.html>.

American thought both within the historical profession and among the American public; it became the “central, if not the only, thesis of Everyman’s History of the United States.”¹⁴ Penny’s poetry also reveals that Penny saw the overcoming of the Kansas land as an integral part of Fort Scott’s history and character. Penny’s poetry about the land is predominately a white, male story, much like Turner’s interpretation of American history.

Secondly, Penny’s nostalgic portrayal in his poetry of Fort Scott’s development was based on this Turnerian understanding of history and on Penny’s Jeffersonian ideal of agrarianism and agriculture. Thomas Jefferson’s ideal of an agrarian society that fostered independence and republicanism had inspired Americans for more than a century before Penny’s time. Jefferson wrote in the late 18th century that “those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God ... whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”¹⁵ This ethic of Jeffersonian agrarianism, which held that rural culture and a physical relationship with the land would preserve the morality of the nation, was woven into American thought and is especially evident in Penny’s poems about farmers, the land, and the small-town culture and sense of community in his beloved Fort Scott.

These two aspects of his poetry can help us understand the way that Penny and his neighbors related to nature as Fort Scott entered the 20th century. As seen in Figure 2, during the 1910s and 1920s, Fort Scott became connected to both coasts and throughout the Midwest by the Missouri Pacific and Kansas Pacific railroads.

¹⁴ William Appleman Williams, “The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy,” *The Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 24, No. 4. (Nov., 1955), 381.

¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia, New Edition* (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1853) 176.

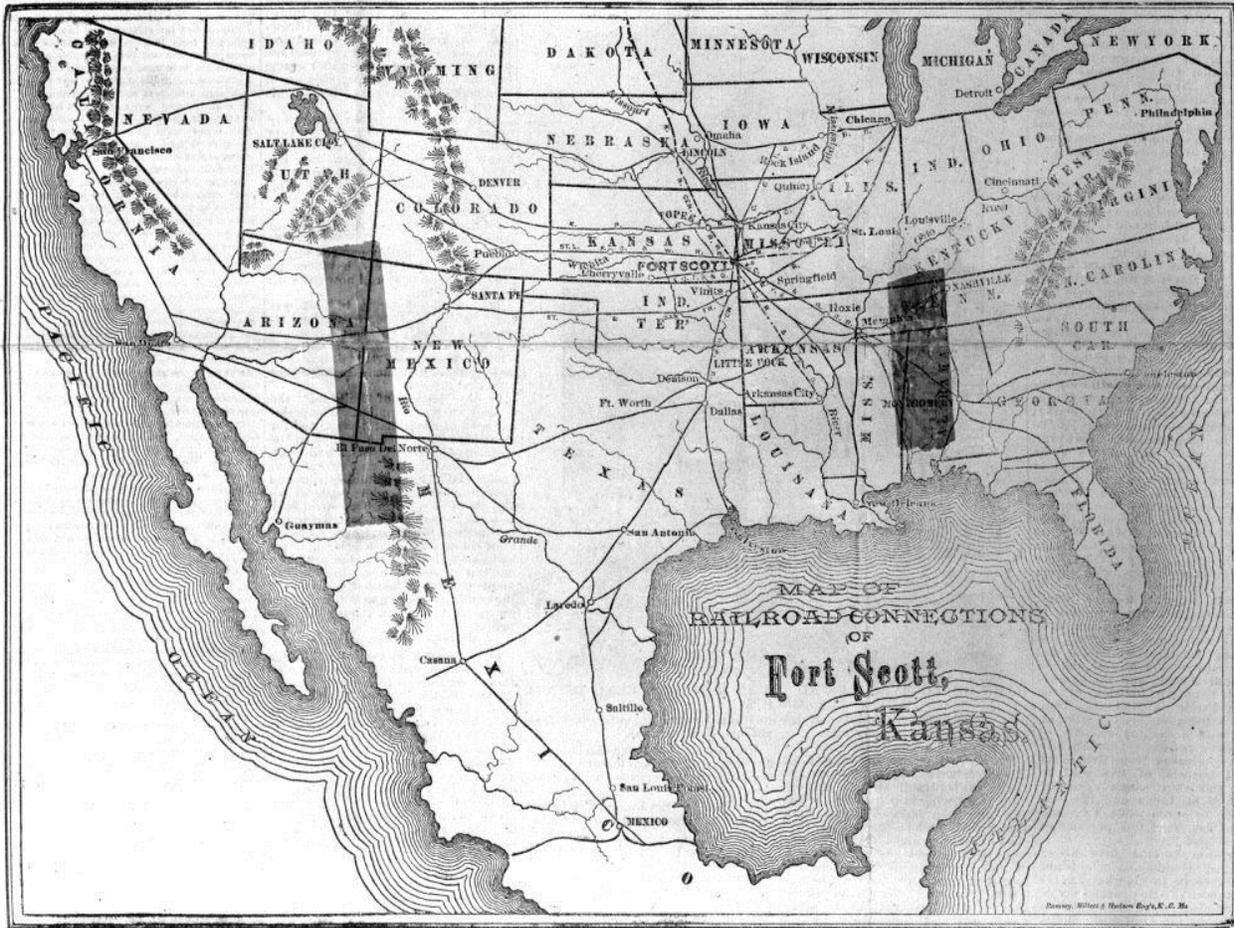


Figure 2. This map of railroad connections of Fort Scott, published sometime between 1900 and 1920, demonstrates the connections which transformed Fort Scott from a small town to a small industrial city over the turn of the century. **SOURCE:** Map by Ramsey, Millett & Hudson Eng's, K.C.MO. Available at *Kansas Memory: Primary Sources from Kansas Historical Society*, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/210419>.

The coming of the railroad in 1869 had opened up markets and changed the fate of Fort Scott. J.S. Penny was observing and writing as his town was transformed by the industrial growth brought by the railroad. As William Cronon explained, “because we use them to motivate and explain our actions, the stories we tell change the way we act in the world.”¹⁶ By understanding the Turnerian and Jeffersonian roots of Penny’s stories about

¹⁶ Cronon, “A Place for Stories,” 1375.

the land, we can better understand why Fort Scott residents developed and related to the land in the way that they did, and so we write a clearer story about environmental change in Fort Scott during the time of the railroad.

Chapter 1- The Development of Fort Scott

In 1916, insurance agent and amateur poet J.S. Penney wrote of his beloved home town of Fort Scott:

“We love her because her streets are clean; her beautiful lawns are clothed in green, Because her street-cars are so slow, and never in haste, when we want to go.”¹⁷

Fort Scott, county seat of Bourbon County in southeastern Kansas, lay between the timbered banks of the Marmaton River and Mill Creek. In 1916, it was a small city of about 10,000 people.

Fort Scott was established as part of a governmental attempt to protect settlers and Indians from one another by creating a frontier of forts and roads that separated the two groups and was policed by the militia. The Osages, who lived in present-day Bourbon County, were considered especially lawless and dangerous by white Americans. Fort Scott was established by the federal government in 1842 on the Marmaton River, but the Osages proved to be a minimal threat. The fort began as Camp Scott, but forces were diverted during the Mexican War, delaying construction of the fort. The actual fort was not completed until 1850, at which time its original purpose had become obsolete- there were no border troubles between Indians and whites in this area. Fort Scott was occupied until 1853, at which point the government abandoned it for Fort Riley, located further

¹⁷ John Scott Penny, “The Town We Love,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours* (Fort Scott, KS: J.S. Penny, 1917).

west.¹⁸ However, the Fort would see action in the border troubles preceding and during the Civil War: “more troops were stationed at Fort Scott during the four years of civil war than had been there during the entire time it was a frontier military post.”¹⁹ In 1861 Confederate Major General Sterling Price made a failed attempt capture Fort Scott in the Battle of Dry Wood. Although there was no further conflict located directly at Fort Scott, the fort “became a staging area for troops operating into Missouri, Arkansas, and Indian Territory (present Oklahoma). Fort Scott also became an important gathering point for refugees, including former slaves from Missouri and Arkansas and pro-Union residents of Indian Territory.”²⁰ Although federal plans for the fort changed, settlers found the outpost’s location to be ideal, and the area around the original fort buildings eventually became a town that thrived despite no continual source of federal support.

Kansas territory opened for settlement in 1855. Many squatters came to Bourbon County, which was mostly reserved for Indian tribes of New York. The areas not reserved for New York tribes were Cherokee Neutral Lands, which had been originally set up as a barrier between the Osage tribes and the whites, but were subsequently set aside for the relocated Cherokee nation in a treaty with the Cherokees in 1835.²¹ Disputes over Indian land titles and ownership did not significantly discourage the settlers who were attracted by the natural wealth of the land, and white settlers began flooding into Bourbon County. Yet Fort Scott and southeastern Kansas were not readily accessible;

¹⁸ Leo Oliva, *Fort Scott: Courage and Conflict on the Border*, 34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁰ Leo E. Oliva, *Fort Scott: Courage and Conflict on the Border*, 67

²¹ Frank W. Blackmar, ed., *Kansas: a cyclopedia of state history, embracing events, institutions, industries, counties, cities, towns, prominent persons, etc., Vol II.* (Chicago :Standard Publishing Company,1912). NP. Accessed online May 9, 2011 at http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1912/n/neutral_lands.html.

they were “far removed from water navigation, and were served only by expensive animal-powered land communications.”²² Despite the obstacles of land ownership and distance, and despite border tensions between pro-and anti-slavery factions, settlers were drawn to the area surrounding Fort Scott for its scenic landscape and abundant resources.

The town of Fort Scott was incorporated in 1857. It would remain a relatively small, self-sufficient, and rural town for less than a decade. Fort Scott was an early example of the many towns across Kansas which were transformed by the railroad in the late 19th century. In December, 1869 the Missouri River, Fort Scott, and Gulf Railroad (later known as the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis Railroad) was extended through the town. The arrival of the railroad was a transformative moment in Fort Scott history; an 1870 *Fort Scott Tribune* article boasts of the new schools, churches, depots, mills, factories, gas works and sidewalks that had been built in a single year: “The improvements we have mentioned have cost several hundred thousand dollars, but it was money well invested, and with Fort Scott the word still is, Progress.”²³ As more people and goods were shipped through the small city, local industries boomed and the population had doubled to 10,000 people by 1890.²⁴

Yet competition with other budding towns would ultimately limit Fort Scott’s population growth. While other towns prospered by becoming railroad centers which profited from railroad company support, Fort Scott never became headquarters for any of

²² James C. Malin, “Early Theatre at Fort Scott.” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 24:1 (Spring 1958), 31.

²³ Banwart, Donald D. *Rails, Rivalry, and Romance: A Review of Bourbon County, Kansas and Her Railroad Nostalgia in Words and Pictures, 1864 Through 1980, Including the Dramatic Railroad Construction Race to the Indian Territory Border* (Fort Scott: Sekan Printing Company, 1982) , 53.

²⁴ James Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 210.

the three main lines which ran through it.²⁵ Although Fort Scott was an important stop and industry continued to benefit from easy transportation of goods, people flocked to larger urban centers. By 1890, Fort Scott's population leveled off. This rapid boom in industry, combined with a stable population, developed Fort Scott into a small industrial city unique in southeastern Kansas. Despite remaining a small city of around 10,000 people through the 20th century, Fort Scott maintained the strong sense of community of a smaller town and the industrial diversity of a larger city. This culture of rural values fit into the Jeffersonian ideal of agrarian democracy and morality that J.S. Penny would emulate in his poetry.

The Arrival of the Railroad in Fort Scott

*"I have here a wond'rous steed,/ Noted for her strength and speed;/With her massive nerves of steel/ And her legs an iron wheel."*²⁶

Historian Daniel Walker Howe writes that in the second half of the 19th century "railroads had an enormous impact on Americans' lives. They allowed the cities to keep growing by bringing them ever greater quantities of food. The efficiency with which railroads could transport freight meant that inventories and storage costs could be reduced in many parts of the economy."²⁷ In the 1850s, Kansas towns vied for railroad lines to connect them to wider markets. However, as historian Craig Miner has noted, "there

²⁵ Ibid., 274.

²⁶ Penny, "The Engineer's Steed," in *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 13.

²⁷ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 565.

would be no direct state investment in Kansas railroads, as there had been in Missouri, largely because the disastrous results in that neighboring state had led Kansas to prohibit state aid to internal improvements in its Wyandotte Constitution.”²⁸ Railroad companies, and not the state government, would run railroad development in Kansas.

Towns such as Fort Scott strove to build strong economic relationships with railroad companies and bid against other towns to have a railroad line. Fort Scott was successful; in December of 1869 the Missouri River, Fort Scott, and Gulf Railroad was extended through the town. Over the next half-century, railroad companies bought and sold railway lines in southeastern Kansas while continually expanding their lines. For instance, “the Fort Scott [the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis Railroad] was leased to the St. Louis & San Francisco RR in 1901 and thereby became a part of the much enlarged Frisco system.”²⁹ By 1918, three separate railroad lines ran through Fort Scott (all operated by the St. Louis & San Francisco): the Missouri Pacific, the Missouri-Kansas-Texas, and the St. Louis-San Francisco lines.³⁰

Residents had anticipated the railroad for years and were prepared to make the most of it. As soon as the Missouri River, Fort Scott, and Gulf Railroad was completed, new businesses and trades entered the city, and customers came with them. Donald Banwart, historian of the railroad in Fort Scott, writes that “with the completion of the MRFtS&G Railroad, many new customers came to Fort Scott. The trade came from western Missouri and eastern and southern Kansas where heretofore they used to shop at

²⁸ Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 100.

²⁹ Henry County Library, “Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis Railroad: a Brief History,” last updated June 2, 2008, <http://tacnet.missouri.org/history/railroads/kcfsm.html#MRFSG>.

³⁰ Self and Socolofsky, “Kansas Railroads, 1918”, in *Historical Atlas of Kansas*.

Lawrence, Ottawa ,and Kansas City, all of which had railroads then for several years... Fort Scott streets were constantly thronged with teams and carts of every description, laden with merchandise, fruits, vegetables and coal.”³¹

Fort Scott citizens celebrated their town’s growing prosperity accordingly. As J.S. Penny wrote of the train:

“There’s no horse that ever strode/
That can pull as big a load/
And I never
use a whip/
On her side or on her hip.”³²

As seen as Figure 3, by 1887 the Gulf railroad depot already served as a dining hall and was a central meeting place in the town. The railroad was a huge boon to the town, and railroads were celebrated frequently. The *Fort Scott Daily Monitor* noted in 1870 that railroad celebrations and events "are coming to be of almost weekly occurrence in Kansas. Towns in the interior are being connected with the balance of the world with such rapidity that we can scarcely keep track of them."³³ The arrival of the railroad led to the doubling of Fort Scott’s population by 1890.

³¹ Banwart, 23.

³² Penny, “The Engineer’s Steed,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 13.

³³ *Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, March 3, 1870. Quoted in James C. Malin, “Early Theatre at Fort Scott,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly Spring 1958 (Vol. 24, No. 1)*.

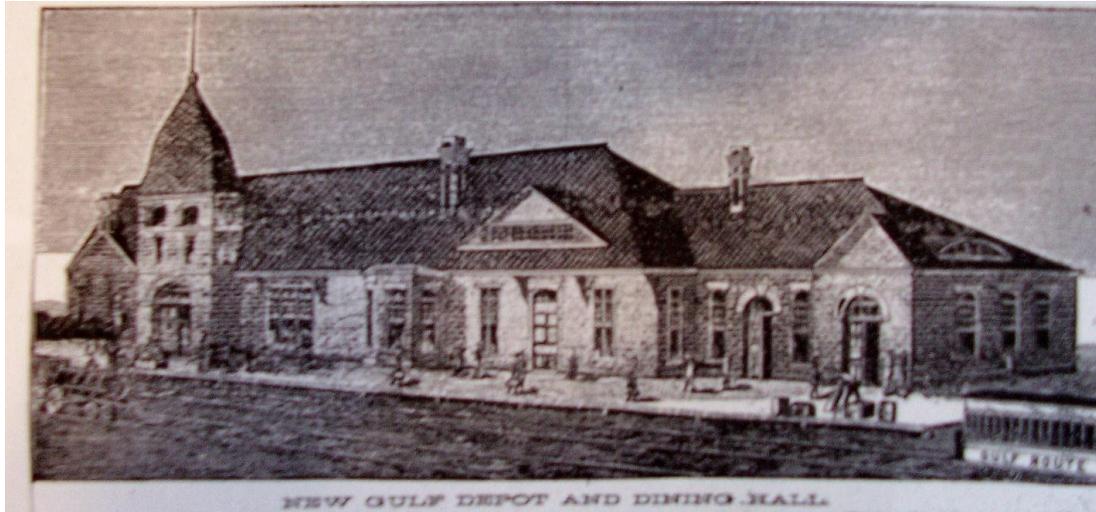


Figure 3: A sketch of the Gulf Railroad Depot and Dining Hall in Fort Scott.
SOURCE: Fort Scott Tribune Business Directory, January 1, 1887. Kansas State Historical Society.

1870-1920: The Development of Fort Scott Industry

“For the richly laden trains/ Rolling in from off the plains/ Keep the gates of commerce wide/ To the ever-moving tide.”³⁴

The arrival of the railroad in Fort Scott brought economic growth, and the nation noticed. Donald Banwart notes that in 1870, the *Chicago Railroad Review*, “the noteworthy publication of the rail industry... stated:

‘Fort Scott is rapidly pushing out upon the encompassing hills. It is not only as a distribution mart but also as a manufacturing center, that Fort Scott seeks to be distinguished, inspired by support in inexhaustible deposits of coal, lime, cement, materials, paints, and situated in the midst of the acknowledged stock (cattle) region of the state, equally productive

³⁴ Penny, “Kansas Wheat Fields,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 98.

of grains and fruit. Here already are flour mills, a large woolen mill and the iron foundry, the place has a genuine city philosophy and action.”³⁵

With access to more resources, labor, and wider markets, the city’s industry and manufacturing businesses had soared. Writing in 1886, less than twenty years after the railroad reached the city, historian William Cutler noted that “Fort Scott has been styled... the "Pittsburgh of Kansas," on account of its present and prospective importance as a manufacturing center.” That Fort Scott had so quickly become known as a manufacturing center comparable to Pittsburgh demonstrates the rapid transformation that the city underwent during this period.

The government actively supported the development of agriculture and industry in Fort Scott. In the 1850s, industrial tests revealed that sorghum cane, an exotic plant, thrived in eastern Kansas. The government funded experiments in Fort Scott to test new methods of diffusing sugar from the plant. In a report, Magnus Swenson, who ran some of experiments, concluded “without hesitancy that sugar can be produced fully as cheaply in Kansas as in Louisiana.”³⁶ The Parkinson Sugar works at Fort Scott were the most productive sugar factory in operation in the state in the late 1880s. Figures 4 and 5, of the Parkinson Sugar Works Factory in 1887 and then again in 1912, demonstrate the transformation of the factory over that time span. In 1887, the sorghum cane plants were being loaded onto horse-drawn carts. By 1912, the front of the building was paved as the automobile has become more and more a central part of industry and daily life.

³⁵ Banwart, 39.

³⁶ U.S.D.A.: Division of Chemistry. “Record of Experiments Conducted by the Commissioner of Agriculture in the Manufacture of Sugar from Sorghum and Sugar Canes at Fort Scott, Kansas, Rio Grande, New Jersey, and Lawrence, Louisiana. 1887-1888,” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1888), 15.

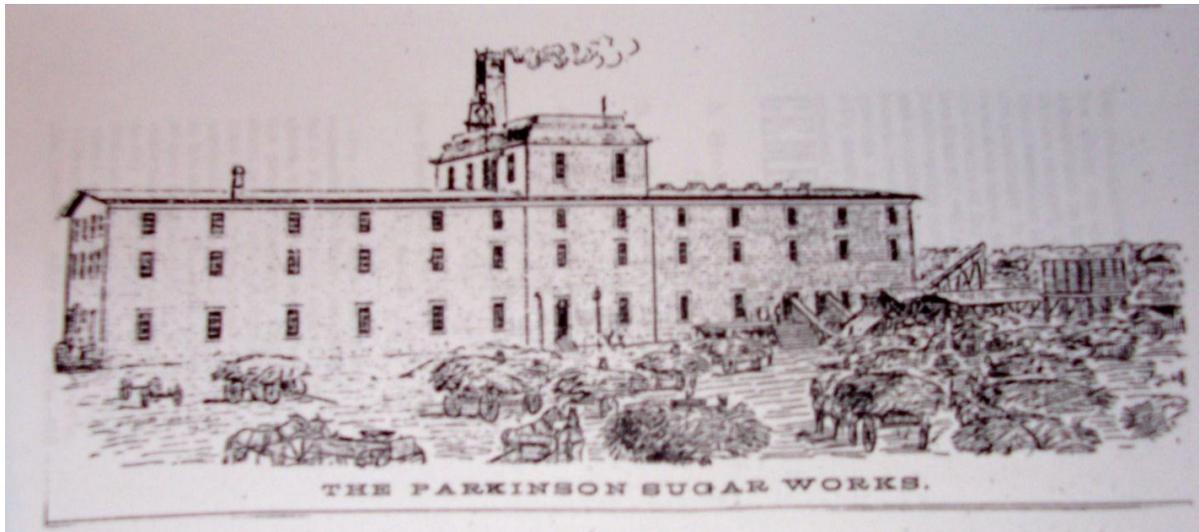


Figure 4: A sketch of the Parkinson Sugar Works in Fort Scott. SOURCE: Fort Scott Daily Tribune Business Directory, January 1, 1887. Kansas State Historical Society.



Figure 5: By 1912, the syrup plant had expanded and had paved its front area to allow automobiles to carry goods to and from the factory. SOURCE: Special Collections and University Archives, Wichita State University Libraries.

Many industries, like the manufacture of sugar, found a productive home in Fort Scott. The manufacture of cement was another prosperous industry that was bolstered by the railroad. The cement factory in town was established in 1867, and in 1918 was still

boasting of the success of the industry and the rich deposits of lime and stone in the immediate area.³⁷ In a history of Kansas published in 1912, it was noted that “a good quality of cement is manufactured from the stone found in the vicinity of Fort Scott. Mineral paint and clay for brick are also plentiful. Natural gas was found in Bourbon County in 1867 and has been used for lighting and heating. There are numerous manufacturing plants, principally at Fort Scott.”³⁸ Natural gas and coal were both successful extractive industries by entrepreneurs at Fort Scott.

Transportation, hospitality, and entertainment businesses were boosted by the growing industry that the railroad had kindled; “the year 1870, the first under the railroad regime, introduced intense competition among hotels, saloons, billiard halls, and associated amusement facilities for entertaining the influx of traveling population as well as residents.”³⁹ Kansas City, also undergoing a massive period of transformation, was the third city in the entire United States to have cable cars.⁴⁰ As seen in Figures 6 and 7, cable cars were also used in Fort Scott. This modern technology would not have found its way into a smaller city so quickly if Fort Scott didn’t have access to ideas and goods to Kansas City via the railroad.

³⁷ “Cement Factory,” in the 1887 Fort Scott Business Directory. (Fort Scott, Kansas: Fort Scott Daily Tribune, January 1, 1887), 127.

³⁸ Blackmar, *Kansas: a cyclopedia of state history, embracing events, institutions, industries, counties, cities, towns, prominent persons, etc.*, 1912. NP.

³⁹ James C. Malin, “Early Theatre at Fort Scott,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly Spring 1958 (Vol. 24, No. 1)*, accessed December 5, 2010 at <http://www.kshs.org/p/kansas-historical-quarterly-early-theatre-at-fort-scott/13144>.

⁴⁰ Jason Roe, “Decline of the Incline,” Kansas City Public Library: Missouri Valley Special Collections, accessed December 1, 2010 at <http://www.kclibrary.org/blog/week-kansas-city-history/decline-incline>.



Figure 6. A photo of Fort Scott cable cars circa 1880-1900. With a direct rail line to Kansas City, Fort Scott had access to this new urban technology. SOURCE: Special Collections and University Archives, Wichita State University Libraries, http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/kw/images.asp?xfile_name=kw_fort_scott_bourbon_ks2.jpg



Figure 7: This 1887 drawing in an atlas shows a prosperous Fort Scott home. Note the presence of both horse-drawn carriages and horse-drawn cable cars on tracks but without cables. SOURCE: The official State Atlas of Kansas: Compiled from Government Surveys, County Records, and Personal investigations. (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts and Co, 1887), n.p. Rock Creek Valley Historical Society.

Even after the population had leveled off at the end of the twentieth century, new industries continued to come to Fort Scott. In 1912 the Borden Condensery, seen in Figure 8, was built. “This condenser was one of the first to be built this far south. Most of the milk condenseries have been located in Wisconsin and other northern states. Since this, one was built at Mt. Vernon, [Missouri] and one at Iola, Kansas. Dairying is becoming an established part of our agricultural program. During the six years that the Borden plant has been in operation the dairy farmers in Bourbon County, Kansas, have increased from about 300 to 1,000.”⁴¹

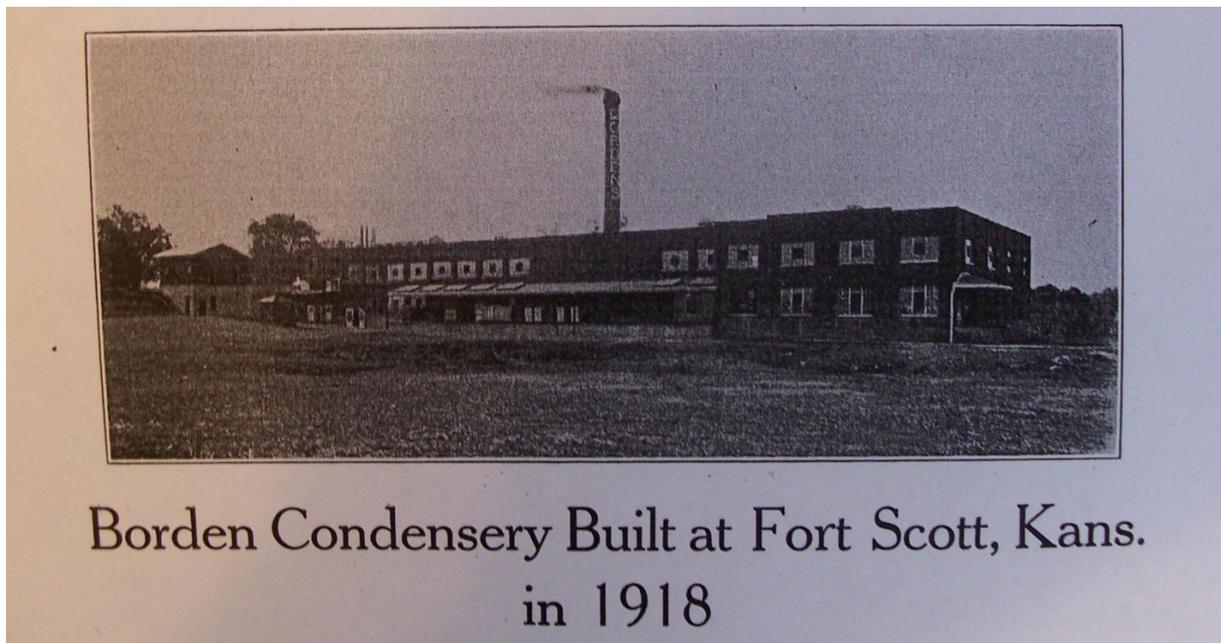


Figure 8: Borden Condensery in 1918. SOURCE: Dairying in Wisconsin and its Possibilities in Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma by the Good Roads Association of Greater Kansas City, 1918.

⁴¹ Good Roads Association of Greater Kansas City, “Dairying in Wisconsin and its Possibilities in Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma.” (Kansas City, Missouri: Good Roads Association of Greater Kansas City, Coates House, 1918).

Competition with other towns' resources and railroad access would limit Fort Scott's growth, however. James Shortridge notes that "efforts to diversify further by the addition of manufacturing industries proved difficult...because companies could obtain cheaper fuel either one county to the east (coal) or a similar distance to the north or west (natural gas)."⁴² Fort Scott's industry had reached a plateau in the 1920s, but as shown in Table 1, its population hit a plateau in 1890.

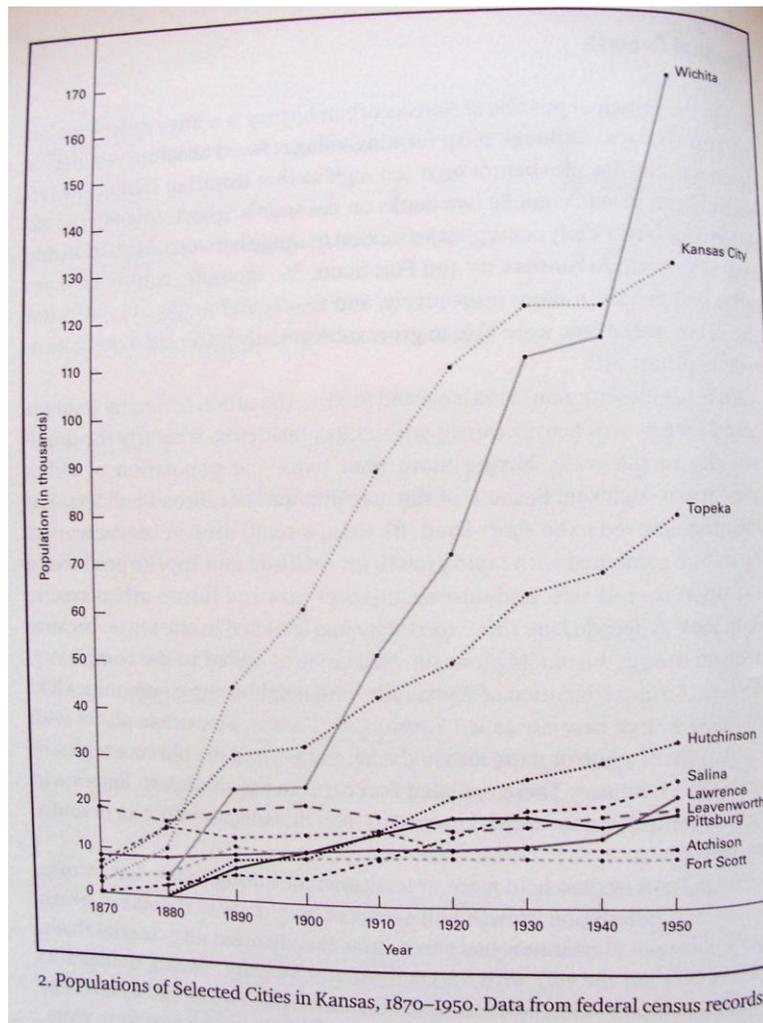


Table 1. Population trends of Kansas cities from 1870-1950. Fort Scott's population levels off after 1890. SOURCE: James R. Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains Kansas*, 210.

⁴² Shortridge, *Cities on the Plain*, 275.

Why did the population level off at the end of the 20th century? Fort Scott was not the headquarters of any of the railroad lines, and so most railroad workers and employees lived in cities like nearby Parsons where railroad companies ran their businesses. Fort Scott's economy was diverse, but none of the local factories or industries hired large numbers of people: there were not thousands of employees at the sugar factory or the condenser. The mining communities of southeast Kansas began to die off between 1910 and 1920. Former miners would move to larger nearby towns, such as Pittsburg.⁴³ Why didn't these miners move to Fort Scott? It was too far north, and "with the demise of underground mining, some miners remained in former camps and worked, if they were able, in other economic pursuits, usually in or near the coal field."⁴⁴

J.S. Penny's hometown entered the twentieth century as it would leave it: a small city of 10,000 with an economy based on several industries. What kind of character did the city of Fort Scott have, and how did it compare with other southeastern Kansas cities?

Industrial Center or Small Town? The Character of Fort Scott

*"We love her because her streets are clean; Her beautiful lawns are clothed in green,
Because her street-cars are so slow, / And never in haste, when we want to go."*⁴⁵

⁴³ Dr. MJ Morgan, lecture notes, October 25, 2011, Kansas State University.

⁴⁴ William E. Powell, "Former Mining Communities of the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* (Summer, 1972), 198.

⁴⁵ Penny, "The Town We Love," in *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 57.

Fort Scott had become a small industrial city with the strong sense of community typically found in a much smaller and more rural town. The industry had been diversified by the abundant natural resources surrounding Fort Scott which made so many different endeavors possible and profitable. These natural resources had attracted settlers in the earliest days of Fort Scott, and were also an enormous part of the strong sense of community that defined the city. Residents of Fort Scott felt united by a long history of being deeply connected to the bountiful land in Bourbon County, especially along the banks of the Marmaton. J.S. Penny wrote often of the Marmaton, and sometimes addressed it directly as a fellow resident of eastern Kansas. In “Marmaton River,” he implores the Marmaton to tell the sea, when she reaches it, that:

“you came from Kansas,/ a State of worth and note/... Don’t say you’re
from Missouri./ The ‘Puke’ you must disown,/ But say, “I am a
Jayhawk,”/ And don’t have to ‘be shown’.”⁴⁶

The Marmaton was the pride of Penny and of Fort Scott, a town that had developed with a strong dependence on and love for the surrounding land.

Industrial developments affected the Marmaton in many ways, including the unexpected creation of new spots for community recreation along the river. In a 1978 interview with the Old Fort Genealogical Society, Cecil Kern remembered his childhood in the early 1900s in Fort Scott. He recalled that his father worked for the O’Connor and Hamlin Ice Company, located on the Marmaton, for over seventeen years. Mr. Kern remembered two popular swimming spots along the Marmaton known as Big Log and Hot Hole. According to Mr. Kern, “Condensation from the ice plant drained through a

⁴⁶ Penny, “Marmaton River,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 36

pipe into the river; this warmed the river water several degrees, so this area was called Hot Hole.”⁴⁷ In this instance, the Ice Company’s presence on the Marmaton created a new spot for residents to enjoy the river.

The entire town was affected by industrial growth in the years of intense railroad development. In the late 1880s, Donald Banwart writes, “real estate sales were struck by a tidal wave; large brick buildings in the downtown district were in the plans and the street railway was expanding its lines and carrying capacity crowds. Immigrants were influxing into Kansas and a look on any given day in 1887 showed that Fort Scott was getting her share. The railroad coaches on her passenger trains were jam-packed.”⁴⁸ Despite these significant changes to the city’s population, industry, and size, there still remained the close community bonds that were exemplified through the city’s many organizations, clubs, events, and celebrations.

Fort Scott was a thriving city in the early 20th century, and its residents celebrated with pride. Contemporary newspapers give a strong sense of town participation in many community projects and events. In 1912, the *Fort Scott Tribune* advertised an upcoming July 4th automobile parade: “There are now nearly 150 automobiles in Fort Scott, and it is hoped that 100 of them will be in line on the morning of the 4th ... Many comedy features are planned for the parade, the least of which will be a clown. Already instruments have been secured for the band and arrangements are being made for uniforms. The overwhelming interest in having a parade demands that boys and girls be

⁴⁷ Kern, Cecil, interview with Fay Davis, *Old Fort Log* (Summer 1980), 29. Published by the Old Fort Genealogical Society, Fort Scott, KS. Copy available at Riley County Genealogical Society.

⁴⁸ Banwart, 143.

hired to help with decorating. A number of societies of the city are arranging to have automobiles as floats in the parade. Already five societies have signed their intentions.”⁴⁹

The same year, the newspaper advertised a bowling tournament at the Y.M.C.A. between “Fort Scott, Pittsburg, Wichita, Hutchinson and Topeka. None of the out-of-town teams will actually come to Fort Scott. At the same time all the teams will bowl, and at the conclusion the scores will be telegraphed around. This is a new method, wherein several teams can bowl together and not go to the expense of making the trip.” The article went on to let Fort Scott residents know that “George Burkholder has had his popcorn stand moved to the vacant lot on Main Street, just north of the Bargain Center, and is now open for business. Mr. Burkholder, for many years, had a stand at the corner of Wall and Main streets. The new place will give him an excellent location.”⁵⁰ It was small notices like this that let residents know what was going on in the community.

In 1915 the city held a dandelion-picking contest to be judged by Mayor Hesser. The *Daily Tribune* reported that over 3500 pounds of dandelions were picked! This was part of a “clean-up and paint-up campaign” for the city. Prizes were given throughout the spring from neat yards and lawns. During the dandelion contest, “boys and girls were seen making their way toward the square, hauling and carrying dandelions. From 3 o’clock on there was one continuous stream of children. Everyone brought at least half a bushel and were rewarded with a picture show ticket.”⁵¹ By the end of the day, Market

⁴⁹ *The Fort Scott Tribune*, 1912, available online at <http://www.fstribune.com/story/1864937.html>.

⁵⁰ *The Fort Scott Tribune*, 1912, available online at <http://www.fstribune.com/story/1854310.html>.

⁵¹ “Got 3,609 Pounds,” *Fort Scott Daily Tribune*, May 12, 1915, 4. Cited in *Old Fort Log* (Fall-Winter 2009), 65. Old Fort Genealogical Society. Copy available at Riley County Historical Society.

Square was decorated with “a pile of dandelions 20 feet square and 5 feet high.”⁵² Events like these boosted town pride while creating shared community memories.

There were many organizations and clubs that developed during the early 20th century in Fort Scott. Baseball had been played in Fort Scott since the 1860s. A 1942 *Fort Scott Tribune* article written by Fred Ury, an organizer and manager of several Fort Scott baseball teams, gives a history of the sport in the city. Ury writes that in 1915, “the Fraternal league, a city organization, was formed with teams representing the Elks, Moose, Eagles and Homebuilders lodges. There was a lot of baseball talent in the city at that time and some good baseball was furnished at Othick park.”⁵³ It was during these thriving years before World War I that the sport was reorganized into a league.

People congregated in all types of groups. In 1924, the *Fort Scott Tribune* described the recent party thrown by the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company for their employees. Moose Hall was filled with 120 guests and decorated with Christmas bells, mums from the local floral shop, and candles and lamps. Guests were treated to music, dance, and a dramatic reading. At 11 o’clock, the party was moved to the dining room for sandwiches, fruit salad, pickles, and mints. The new manager, C.T. McDaniels, gave an encouraging address that let the employees know that the “district traffic chief from Parsons said that the Fort Scott exchange for its size handled more local and toll calls, per

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Fred Ury, “Seventy-Six Years of Baseball!- Sport Began Here Soon After the Civil War,” *Fort Scott Tribune*, 1942. Cited in *Old Fort Log* (Fall/Winter 2001), 65. Old Fort Genealogical Society. Copy available at Riley County Historical Society.

day, than any in the district.”⁵⁴ Employees were joined together in pride of the success of their company and their town.

It was celebrations, clubs, events, and projects like these that let the residents of the growing city stay closely in touch with each other while industry boomed and the population grew. Fort Scott residents saw themselves as part of a thriving community rooted in a history of farming and cooperation and quickly progressing into the 20th century. This perspective of local history is reflected in the Jeffersonian ideal of agrarianism that Penny touted in his poetry about the city.

The entire southeast region of Kansas was undergoing significant change in the second half of the nineteenth century. Eastern Kansas had been quickly settled after the opening of Kansas Territory for white settlement in 1854. In the years between the opening of the territory and the Civil War, pro-and anti-slavery forces rushed into the Kansas territory to promote their political and economic interests. The migration patterns and their resultant culture regions in eastern territorial Kansas were heavily shaped by the politics of the Bleeding Kansas era. Some regional cultures intermingled with one another as they moved into eastern Kansas. Others remained relatively isolated.⁵⁵

Southeastern Kansas became an especially diverse area because of the vast employment opportunities offered by mining companies. Immigrants comprised most of the mining work force, and “by the turn of the century, southeastern Kansas was a

⁵⁴ “Telephone Employees Party (From an old Tribune-Monitor, 1924,” *Old Fort Log* (Spring 1983), 10. Old Fort Genealogical Society. Copy Available at Riley County Genealogical Society.

⁵⁵ James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 37-38.

polyglot area peopled by Italians, Germans, French, Belgians and a variety of ethnic groups from the British Isles and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.”⁵⁶ The first southeast coal fields opened in 1874. Immigrant workers began to settle in “company towns,” communities formed around the mine which were characterized by cheap housing and a strong sense of community. Mining towns didn’t start to die off until around 1910, when the southeastern coal fields were outcompeted by other coal-producing regions.⁵⁷ Other factors leading to the continued demise of the coal fields were “ the economic impact of the depression, the rise of mechanized surface mining, competition from oil and gas, labor problems in the coal field (strikes), and competition from Eastern coals.”⁵⁸

By the end of the nineteenth century, southeast Kansas was connected to the northeast corner of the state by railroads and therefore connected to the rest of the nation through Kansas City. In the most southeastern corner of the state was the Cherokee-Crawford coal field, which became dotted with transient mining communities. There were not many cities in this region; Pittsburg and Parsons were under 6,000 people each while Fort Scott hovered around 10,000. Yet both Pittsburg and Parsons would grow to over 10,000 in the upcoming decades, while Fort Scott’s population stood still.

Pittsburg, which would become the largest city in southeast Kansas, was founded atop the Cherokee-Crawford deposits. It became an industrial center known for its

⁵⁶ Ann Schofield, “‘An Army of Amazons’: The Language of Protest in a Kansas Mining Community, 1921-1922,” in *Kansas and the West: New Perspectives*, ed. Rita Napier (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 304.

⁵⁷ Dr. MJ Morgan, lecture notes, October 25, 2011, Kansas State University.

⁵⁸ Powell, “Former Mining Communities of the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas,” 197.

mining, but also had a diversified economy which supported its population growth.⁵⁹ Pittsburg became a larger, more urbanized, and more industrial city than Fort Scott would ever become. Parsons, named after Levi Parsons, the president of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad, was Fort Scott's primary competition for railroad deals in its early days. Yet Parsons was a one-company town; it was founded by the MKT railroad to become a headquarters for their operations.⁶⁰ As mentioned above, company towns were characterized by their high sense of community.⁶¹ Yet Parsons was completely different from Fort Scott. Although both were small cities with a strong and united sense of community, a one-company town such as Parsons could never have the industrial diversity of Fort Scott. The different industries brought an assorted population to Fort Scott, where the sense of community was based on a historic connection to the land that had first inspired settlers to stay there, and not based on loyalty to a railroad company.

The arrival of the railroad completely transformed and invigorated Fort Scott in the 1870s. However, population leveled off because competition with other towns limited the amount of growth which Fort Scott would undergo. The diversification of industry and the stabilized population transformed Fort Scott into a small industrial city unique in southeastern Kansas. Fort Scott maintained the strong sense of community of a smaller town, rooted in a strong connection to the land and a deep sense of Jeffersonian agrarianism, while developing the industrial diversity of a larger city based on the diverse and plentiful natural resources available.

⁵⁹ Shortridge, 275.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁶¹ Dr. MJ Morgan, lecture notes, October 25, 2011, Kansas State University.

Chapter 2 - Resources, Railroads, and Reminiscences: How Industrialization Changed Perceptions of the Land in Fort Scott

With the arrival of the railroad, the natural resources which had been a mark of identity for the people of Fort Scott became commodities to be sold in national markets. With burgeoning industrialism came unanticipated changes in the relationship between Fort Scott residents and their environment, including a growing sense of nostalgia for the pristine natural beauty of the region.

Yet while the arrival of the railroad and the subsequent industrialization of Fort Scott substantially altered the environment and changed the perspectives of Fort Scott residents, nature continued to shape human activity. As Richard White has noted, “nature does not dictate, but physical nature does, at any given time, set limits on what is humanly possible. Humans may think what they want; they cannot always do what they want, and not all they do turns out as planned.”⁶² Natural forces and resources dictated the lives of Fort Scott residents in 1920 as much as they had in 1850. The evolving environmental philosophies of the town did not change the physical realities of life in southeastern Kansas.

⁶² Richard White, “Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field.” *Pacific Historical Review* 54:3 (August 1985), 335.

Natural Riches Encourage the Settlement of Fort Scott

*“Endless prairies stretching west/ Yielding wheat, “till you can’t rest;”*⁶³

The physical environment in Fort Scott was a driving force of settlement and had played an enormous role in the development of the region. William Allen White wrote in 1897 that “it would be as untrue to classify together the Egyptian, the Indian, and the Central American as to speak of the Kansas Man without distinguishing between the Eastern Kansan, the Central Kansan and the Western Kansan.”⁶⁴ Settlers in different parts of the state had vastly different lives because the terrain with which they worked was completely different. The state of Kansas contains a wide variety of natural environments and climates, most clearly distinguished by the amount of rainfall in each region.⁶⁵ Eastern Kansas has much more rainfall and surface water than the central and western portions of the state. This attracted settlers who were looking for a place to start a farm.

Fort Scott resident and historian T.F. Robley, writing in 1897, recalled that “the spring of 1859 opened and continued fairly seasonable, except there was a little too much rain. Even up to June the rivers and streams...were often past fording, and sometimes out of their banks. But, nevertheless, the prospect for growing crops was good, and there had been much more planting than ever before. Emigrants were coming into the Territory in large numbers.”⁶⁶ Bourbon County has many streams and rivers whose timber-lined

⁶³ Penny, “Kansas Prairies,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 56.

⁶⁴ William Allen White, “The Story of Agua Pura,” from White, *The Real Issue: A Book of Kansas Stories* (Chicago: Way and Williams, 1897), 23.

⁶⁵ Walter P. Webb, *The Great Plains* (1931; repr., Lincoln: University Press of Nebraska, 1981), 17-18.

⁶⁶ T.F. Robley, *History of Bourbon County, Kansas, to the close of 1865* (Fort Scott, Kans.: Fort Scott Monitor, 1894), 139-140.

banks attracted settlers. The Marmaton River and Mill Creek run through Fort Scott, and Robley noted that along these and other streams there “was an abundant growth of black walnut, sycamore, cottonwood, oak, coffee bean, linn, etc.”⁶⁷

There were natural resources under the ground, as well. Under Fort Scott and the surrounding areas lay soil which was ideal for farming, “of a limestone formation and richer of itself than a sandstone formation. Under the black soil is about eighteen inches of a dark brown sub-soil.”⁶⁸ More riches lay even deeper under Fort Scott: deposits of clay, cement rock, mineral paints, flagging stone, and coal. There was also a natural gas well less than two miles up the Marmaton River from Fort Scott, from which escaped “about 2,000 cubic feet of gas per day. The well was bored in 1870, and a company formed with the view of supplying Fort Scott with gas from this well, but in reaming out the well, the reamer was broken in the well either by accident or design, and the larger portion of the flow cut off.”⁶⁹ There was a wide array of flora and fauna, and early settlers of the area “had plenty to eat — game of all kinds — deer, wild turkeys, prairie chickens, fish from the streams, and their gardens and "patches" produced all else necessary.”⁷⁰

The site of the fort itself was built within the Osage Cuestas. Cuestas are ridges “with a steep face on one side and a gentle slope on the other. The fort was built on one

⁶⁷ Ibid., 69.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁹ William G. Cutler, “Bourbon County: Location and Natural Features,” in Cutler’s *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago:A. T. Andreas, 1883), accessed May 7, 2011 at http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/bourbon/bourbon-co-p1.html#LOCATION_AND_NATURAL_FEATURES .

⁷⁰ Robley, *History of Bourbon County, Kansas, to the close of 1865*, 25.

of those ridges, overlooking the confluence of Mill Creek with the Marmaton River.”⁷¹ The timbered streams, rich soil, and high rainfall attracted settlers. T.F. Robley wrote that during the 1840s and 50s, Bourbon County “began to attract more attention and become better known to the people of the East and North. The few settlers who had found their way down here "writ back." While their letters did not bear any very encouraging word about the state of political affairs or the peaceful condition of the people, they did tell of a beautiful country, genial skies, [and] a spring that opened in March instead of May.”⁷²

Many settlers came to Bourbon County and the surrounding lands, but the town of Fort Scott itself was not a hubbub of commerce. Travelling through the town in May of 1857, Eugene Bandel wrote that the fort “is situated on the banks of a tributary of the Osage, where the banks are well timbered. It has now been sold by [the] government, and a town established in its place. The old quarters still serve the citizens as houses and stores. In the center of the former parade is a fine deep well. The fort is built of framework, and no new houses seem to have been added as yet to the old fort.”⁷³ The early settlers of Fort Scott focused on supporting themselves and enjoying the natural abundance of the land. The growth of the city would pick up in later years, as industrialization increased and manufacturing became a large part of the local economy.

Early settlers were impressed with the scenery near Fort Scott and with the available land. In April of 1858, David E. Cobb was travelling along the Marmaton and

⁷¹ Leo E. Oliva, *Fort Scott: Courage and Conflict on the Border* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1984), 14.

⁷² Robley, *History of Bourbon County, Kansas, to the close of 1865*, 68.

⁷³ Eugene Bandel, “[Diary of Eugene Bandel, May, 1857](#),” in *Frontier Life in the Army, 1854-1861*. Bandel, Olga and Jente, Richard, trs.; Bieber, Ralph P., ed.. (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1932), pp. 330.

looking for a spot to claim for his own. Writing home to his brother Judd, David described a spot “on the north side of the river, on a beautiful site-the prairie sloping in every direction, good timber in close proximity and surrounded by a very fertile country and is well located and will be a town of some importance if nothing should happen to prevent.”⁷⁴ David, like other settlers of the Fort Scott, predicted that the natural abundance of the area would lead to the establishment of a significant town. Describing the “most fertile farms in the country” along the Marmaton, David wrote of “a variety of scenery unsurpassed for beauty and grandeur in the Western country.” The beauty and resources convinced Cobb to stay; “In fact Judd this is the most beautiful country I ever saw-that is a wild country- If the Lord is willing and nothing prevents I shall set my stakes here.”⁷⁵ Cobb lived in Fort Scott until his death in 1891. He held many positions in Fort Scott and was an important citizen- he worked as superintendent of schools, probate judge, county clerk, postmaster, a representative in state legislature, and served in the militia defending Fort Scott against the Price raid of 1861.

The town slowly grew as more settlers came to the area. In 1860, the Bourbon County Agricultural Society was formed to support the growing number of farmers. C.W. Goodlander was a resident of early Fort Scott and worked as the town’s carpenter. He published a memoir of these early days at the Fort Scott Printing Company in 1899. In the early 1860s, Goodlander noted, there began to be a higher demand for buildings, which increased the demand for timber. Goodlander recalled that “in 1862 Jack White

⁷⁴ Letters of David R. Cobb April 25, 1858 to brother Judd. “Letters of David R. Cobb, 1858-1864, Pioneer of Bourbon County.” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* (1942) 11:1, 66. Accessed May 6, 2011 at <http://www.kshs.org/p/kansas-historical-quarterly-letters-of-david-r-cobb-1858-1864/12889>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

established the first hard wood lumber yard here. Joe [Jack's business partner] used to joke Jack a good deal about his lumber. As anyone knows, native lumber, especially elm, is more or less of a warpy nature. Joe used to say that Jack had to have a tight board fence to keep his lumber from crawling out of the yard and that his lumber was so crooked he had to measure it with a cork screw."⁷⁶ As the town grew, Fort Scott residents began to look elsewhere for additional timber. Goodland wrote that "in the summer of 1863 I built the stone block across the street opposite the Wilder House for Dr. Miller, who at that time was south with the army. The same year I built the first church in Fort Scott for the Presbyterians... up to this time the lumber used for building was native, such as walnut, oak, sycamore, elm, and so forth. When I got the contract for the Miller Block and Presbyterian Church, I found that I must have some pine lumber, so I commenced hauling pine lumber from Leavenworth."⁷⁷ The increased population of Fort Scott during the years of civil war encouraged the use of a larger quantity and a wider array of natural materials. Working men like Goodland began to look outside of the lands surrounding the town to get the supplies they needed.

⁷⁶ C.W. Goodlander. *Memoirs and Recollections of the Early Days of Fort Scott* (Fort Scott, Kansas.: Fort Scott Monitor Publishing Company, 1899), 95.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

The Coming of the Railroad and the Transformation of Fort Scott

*“The wondrous power/ Combined in steel and steam,/That enables men to do more, in an hour,/ Than all day, with a team.”*⁷⁸

C.W. Goodlander marked December 7th, 1869 as an important day in the history of early Fort Scott. He wrote that “on the 7th day of December, 1869, the Missouri River, Fort Scott & Gulf R. R., now known as the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis R. R., reached this point, and the days of hauling lumber by wagon was at an end.”⁷⁹ As the town’s carpenter, Goodlander marked the economic importance of the arrival of the railroad— different types of lumber from areas farther away would widen his choice of material and decrease the cost and time of transportation. Railroads began to cross the nation and revitalize local economies during the 1840s, but it wasn’t until 1869 that Fort Scott experienced this transformative phenomenon.

James Willard Hurst wrote that the nineteenth century United States “valued change more than stability and valued stability most often where it helped create a framework for change.”⁸⁰ Law and governmental policy during this period were designed to help citizens release “creative energy” by “increasing the practical range of choices

⁷⁸ Penny, “Colaborers,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 101.

⁷⁹ Goodlander. *Memoirs and Recollections of the Early Days of Fort Scott*, 110.

⁸⁰ James Willard Hurst, *Law and the Conditions of Freedom in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1956), 24.

open to them and minimizing the limiting force of circumstances.”⁸¹ The laws and policies which encouraged economic activity reflected popular attitudes in the United States during the nineteenth century about the responsibility of citizens to use natural resources and make a profit. These policies also applied to railroads. In the early years of railroad development there was a “new wave of economic interventions by most of the states, many localities, and eventually the federal government as well. Rather than waiting for prosperity to return in the 1840s, American governments actively promoted [prosperity] through their investments in the newly invented steam railroads.”⁸² In the late 1850s, towns in Kansas vied for railroad lines to connect them to wider markets. However, “there would be no direct state investment in Kansas railroads, as there had been in Missouri, largely because the disastrous results in that neighboring state had led Kansas to prohibit state aid to internal improvements in its Wyandotte Constitution.”⁸³ Although railroad companies, and not the state government, would be in charge of railroad development in Kansas, the nineteenth-century attitude noted by Hearst prevailed in Fort Scott as much as in any other town: citizens had a duty to use the natural resources and make a profit, and the railroad would enable them to do so.

Shortly after the war, the area including and to the south of Bourbon County known previously as the Cherokee Neutral Lands was sold by the government to the company that built the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Gulf Railroad. C. W. Goodlander

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸² Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 561.

⁸³ Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2002), 100.

explained the conflict between the squatters who had been living on this land and the government and railroad companies who were trying to make a profit off of it:

“Prior to the sale of these lands by the government there had been a great many people settled on the land, expecting when they would come in market to use their preemption rights or get the land at the government price, \$1.25 per acre, so when the land was bought by the railroad company, they were ordered off. They resisted, so the government to back up its sale, sent troops here to eject the settlers from the land. The settlers resisted from year to year until the railroad got as far as Fort Scott, and the Kansas City & Gulf people, being of a liberal disposition, made a compromise with the settlers that was satisfactory to those who still resided on the land and peace was restored between the railroad and the settlers, the railroad company selling the land to the actual settlers at approximately near the same price they would have had to pay the government.”⁸⁴

These settlers did not want to lose the land with which they had come to identify themselves. They knew that the railroad would bring access to larger markets for their natural resources, and by holding out, these settlers were able to retain ownership of the valuable land surrounding Fort Scott.

⁸⁴ Goodlander. *Memoirs and Recollections of the Early Days of Fort Scott*, 121.

The arrival of the railroad in 1869 radically transformed the city of Fort Scott. Residents welcomed the railroad and rapidly adjusted and adapted to the new pace of life. Figure 9, dated around 1900 and from Bourbon County, shows a man on a bicycle that has been uniquely adapted for rail use.



Figure 9: A man rides a bicycle with an attachment to enable riding on railroad tracks. This early 1900s photo shows one of the many ways that Bourbon County residents adapted to changes brought by the railroad. SOURCE: *Kansas Memory: Primary Sources from Kansas Historical Society*, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/210173/>.

With access to more resources, labor, and wider markets, the city's industry and manufacturing businesses soared. William Cutler went on to write that Fort Scott's

“natural advantages are both numerous and great. There is an abundance of building stone, lime, cement, coal, water and natural gas, the latter, however, has not as yet been utilized.”⁸⁵ Cutler’s history reflected popular attitudes that the plentiful natural resources of Fort Scott would continue to provide growth for the town.

The success of the sorghum cane experiments felt like another victory to the residents of Fort Scott; their land was productive and their resources were many and varied. Cement and coal also created industrial opportunities for Fort Scott. With the railroad came the opportunity for Fort Scott residents to import the technology needed to access the cement rock and export it as a profitable good. Even though the railroad had reached Fort Scott, its development further south was delayed by land disputes. In 1882, an Atchison newspaper wrote that “the Missouri Pacific railway company, at the instance of the coal operators of whom J.P. Pomeroy, of Atchison, is one, will this coming summer build a branch from in the vicinity of Nevada, Missouri, to the old Fort Scott coal fields, a distance of twenty-five miles. Although the coal in that section is very fine and plenty, the mines are not worked because it has no railroad facilities, but the new arrangement will fill the country with miners.”⁸⁶ The railroad was seen as the key to accessing resources and transporting manufactured goods out of Fort Scott and the surrounding area.

⁸⁵ William G. Cutler, “Bourbon County: Railroad History,” in Cutler’s *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago:A. T. Andreas, 1883), accessed May 7, 2011 at <http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/bourbon/bourbon-co-p5.html>.

⁸⁶ No title. *The Atchison Globe*. Atchison, KS. May 8, 1882.

An Evolving View of the Natural World

*“You’ve watched the immigration tide/ Go flowing past you far and wide/ You’ve seen the wilderness subdued/ By men who came here well imbued/”*⁸⁷

As citizens celebrated the economic growth spurred by the arrival of the railroad, their relationship with their natural surroundings was transformed. Industry burgeoned and the city grew. There emerged among residents a growing sense of nostalgia for the pristine natural beauty of the area surrounding Fort Scott. Kansas historian Craig Miner noted that “ironically, the more latter-day Kansans loved their native landscape, the less they could enjoy it.”⁸⁸ Fort Scott residents increasingly wrote about the changing environment and bemoaned the loss of the area’s natural beauty. Eugene Ware, AKA “Ironquill,” was a famous poet from Fort Scott who often wrote about the industry of the area. Ware wrote that the realist poet from Kansas “has no muse nor chief; / He sings of corn; he eulogizes beef; / And in the springtime his aesthetic soul / Bursts forth in vernal eulogies of coal.”⁸⁹ Ware was satirizing the focus on crops and goods at this time; as a poet, Ware missed the appreciation of natural beauty which he considered a thing of the past. Writing in 1894 about the year 1854, T.F. Robley explained:

“The climate was another feature of those days. It was most delightful and enjoyable, especially in the fall of the year. It has changed in these later years, for civilization seems to have taken out the “wild taste.” The atmosphere probably contained no more ozone than now, but it was wild ozone. It did not smell to heaven laden with iron filings and the abrasion of gold. The immense prairies south and west — larger in extent than all

⁸⁷ Penny, “The Old Government Buildings on Plaza,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 66.

⁸⁸ Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000*, 31.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

western Europe — were annually burned over. The smoke from the autumn prairie fires permeated the entire atmosphere which came up to us from the grand pampas of the southwest toned down into superb Indian summer. But the wild prairies have disappeared beneath the plow, and Indian summer has disappeared with the Indian. ”⁹⁰

Writings like these convey the nostalgia that Fort Scott residents in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries felt for their beloved environment. Robley, writing about the days of southeastern Kansas before the settlement of the white man, wrote: “the valleys of the Kaw, Marais des Cygnes, Neosho, Marmaton and Paint Creek were the favorite hunting grounds of the Osages, Cheyennes and Arapahoes. The wolves, deer, antelope and the migratory buffalo roamed the wild prairie unfettered by wire fence and unbalked by railroad crossing.”⁹¹ Robley sees the wire fence and the railroad crossing as impediments and imperfections on the natural landscape.

This nostalgia included concern for the wellbeing of the natural environment as well as for the health of Fort Scott residents. Both of these concerns reflected larger trends in the nation. The conservation and preservation movements headed by Gifford Pinchot and John Muir reflected popular anxieties about the natural world, and in cities and towns across the nation, citizens worried about their own wellbeing and the effect of industry on the human body. Historian Gregg Mitman has noted that “whether through intimate bodily experience of illness and place, or through abstracted scientific

⁹⁰ Robley, *History of Bourbon County, Kansas, to the close of 1865*, 28.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

knowledge of ecological communities, conceptions of health have been integral to environmental experience and understanding.”⁹²

In the late 19th century, the health benefits of the natural resources in Fort Scott were used to attract more settlers. An 1887 atlas shows an artist’s rendition of the Fort Scott Sulpho-Saline Sanitarium. The caption describes the creation of this “great health resort”: during the summer of 1883, citizens of Fort Scott worked to “develop the hidden mysteries of old Mother Earth, firmly believing that underneath the city of Fort Scott lay embedded vast bodies of coal, oil, and natural gas.” However, when the well hit a depth of 621 feet, “a body of water was struck which came to the surface with such force as to carry with it drill, rods, and everything else in the way.” A sample was forwarded to the University of Kansas, and sulphates and sodium were detected in the water.⁹³ The image in the atlas, seen in Figure 9, shows an elaborate sanitarium. In 1972, residents of Fort Scott discussed this image and shared memories of a natatorium placed at a “well-remembered mineral well.”⁹⁴ A photograph, shown in Figure 10, of a natatorium had been found, and residents debated whether this could possibly be the same building depicted in the 1887 atlas. Whether or not the atlas had exaggerated the sanitarium, it is clear that there was a health spring in Fort Scott in the late 19th century and that residents and developers used the health benefits of the environment as a lure for further development.

⁹² Gregg Mitman, “In Search of Health: Landscape and Disease in American Environmental History.” *Environmental History* 10:2 (April 2005), 185.

⁹³ *The Official State Atlas of Kansas: Compiled from Government Surveys, County Records, and Personal Investigations*. Philadelphia: L.H. Everts and Co, 1887. Rock Creek Valley Historical Society.

⁹⁴ “Memories of Sulpho-Saline Sanitarium,” *The Fort Scott Tribune*, July 1, 1972, 1.



Figure 10: The depiction of the sanitarium in an 1887 atlas shows an opulent health center. **SOURCE:** *The Official State Atlas of Kansas: Compiled from Government Surveys, County Records, and Personal Investigations.* Rock Creek Valley Historical Society.



Figure 11. This undated photo, shared in the *Fort Scott Tribune* in 1972, caused residents to debate the size and scale of the sanitarium that had used Fort Scott's mineral water for health benefits in the late 19th century. **SOURCE:** "Memories of Sulpho-Saline Sanitarium," *Fort Scott Tribune*, July 1, 1972.

Yet as the relationship with the land changed, so did feelings about personal health. In the early 20th century, Fort Scott residents began to anticipate that the industrialization which had deforested creek beds, added smoke and particles to the air and water, and brought ever larger numbers of people into the city may also be affecting their bodies. J.S. Penny noticed the changing nature of the Marmaton River in his poem “The Marmaton.” Written in the early years of the twentieth century, the poem notes that:

“These doctors sell us lots of pills/
They say, will cure us of our ills/
and then they’ll tell us all to drink,
Big lots of you, although you stink;
Now all people have their fads,
And our commission, city dads/
Are goin’ to build a septic tank,
Below the city, on your bank,
; And then they’ll take the city drain,
And mix it with the sorghum cane,
then what they’ll do,
with this whole mess,
No one has yet begun to guess.”⁹⁵

Penny and other Fort Scott residents were concerned about the environment’s health as well as their own. The coming of the railroad and the growth of the city had had an unexpected effect on the relationship between residents and their environment: as industry flourished, nostalgia for a pristine natural landscape increased.

Although the economic and cognitive perspectives of Fort Scott residents towards their natural surroundings changed after the arrival of the MRFS&GRR railroad in 1869, natural forces continued to shape life in Fort Scott. While the railroad increased access to more natural resources (which were becoming depleted), the climate and landscape of the area still dictated the daily lives of Fort Scott Residents. C.W. Goodlander recalled in his

⁹⁵ J.S. Penny, “The Marmaton,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours* (Fort Scott, Kansas: J.S. Penny, 1917), 35.

history of early Fort Scott that “The drouth of 1860 has passed into history as all know...water in the Marmaton did not run over the fording places for eighteen months. About the only thing that grew, to my knowledge, was sorghum cane — about the only crop that season, except some rattle snakes, I raised on my claim.”⁹⁶ Droughts and floods were relatively frequent occurrences in Fort Scott, and sometimes an unexpected blessing; in the Battle of Drywood Creek in 1861, “it had rained every day and night ... [and] put Drywood up so high that Price could not get his army across, and this is the reason Fort Scott was not burned at the time.”⁹⁷ Nature was not tamed by the railroad; droughts and floods were just some of the forces to which residents were subjected.

Severe electrical storms and tornadoes were other natural phenomena from which the arrival of the railroad offered no escape. On May 7, 1886, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* ran an article about a severe storm that had shaken Fort Scott the day before. As the storm swept across the town, torrents of rain created flash floods. A woman tried to save her 5 year-old son from drowning, and in doing so, dropped her sixth-month old infant into the water. The infant drowned. The article continues by describing “a ball of fire, described by those who saw it to be as large as a man’s head,” which struck and shattered a flag-staff and “then scattered, diffusing most of its force on the Nelson building, in which the *Tribune* office is located. The electric fluid flashed around the presses and machinery, cracking like pistols and shocking several of the employees.”⁹⁸ Severe storms were a frequent occurrence in southeastern Kansas. J.S. Penny observed a tornado sweeping across the plains north of Fort Scott on the afternoon of April 27th,

⁹⁶ Goodlander. *Memoirs and Recollections of the Early Days of Fort Scott*, 43-44.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹⁸ “Storm and Flood: A Violent Rain Storm Sweeps Over Fort Scott, Kan,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, St. Louis, MO, May 7, 1886, Issue 349, 3.

1916. Houses, barns, and town buildings were destroyed. In his poem “The Tornado,” dedicated to that April storm, Penny wrote that:

“The stoutest heart cannot but quake/When viewing ruin in the wake/ Of
this great storm, whose cruel wrath,/ hath left destruction in its path.”⁹⁹

Fort Scott residents, with or without a railroad, were at the mercy of the climate.

Flooding was a constant threat to crops and to transportation. In Figure 11 a group of men is pictured near railroad tracks in Bourbon County. Dated September 7, 1915, the photograph includes a note that the flood waters were six feet deep.



Figure 12: Flooding in Bourbon County in 1915. SOURCE: *Kansas Memory: Primary Sources from Kansas Historical Society*. <http://www.kansasmemory.org/>. Kansas State Historical Society. Photo available online at <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/210162>.

J.S. Penny noted these floods in his book, and wrote that the year of 1915 “was a very wet one, during the early months of the summer, and frequent complaints were

⁹⁹ J.S. Penny, “The Tornado,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours* (Fort Scott, Kansas: J.S. Penny, 1917), 89.

heard from the farmers about the condition of their crops.”¹⁰⁰In Penny’s poem “The Farmer’s Complaint”, he describes the wet summer of 1915:

“It’s an ill wind that blows no good,/ We’d stop this raining, if we could,/ But since it’s certain that we can’t/ Why, what’s the use for us to rant?”¹⁰¹

In Penny’s own humorous way, this poem exemplifies Richard White’s statement that due to natural forces, “humans may think what they want; they cannot always do what they want.”

The arrival of the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis Railroad in Fort Scott in 1869 transformed the relationship between Fort Scott residents and their environment. But even though residents saw their environment in an increasingly nostalgic light and accessed natural resources at an increasingly accelerated speed, the natural world itself continued to dictate their daily lives and the possibilities of their economic development. Fort Scott was as much at the mercy of the natural world in 1920 as it was in 1850.

¹⁰⁰ J.S. Penny, “The Farmer’s Complaint,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours* (Fort Scott, Kansas: J.S. Penny, 1917), 85.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Chapter 3 - “My Simple Little Rhymes”:

The Poetry of John Scott Penny

*“If I could write a charming book,
In which kind friends, would sometimes look,
And read some soul-inspiring thought,
I’d feel my life, not spent for naught.”¹⁰²*

The stanza above was a conventional device used by poets in the 19th century as a statement of humility and as an introduction of the poet’s work to his audience. This verse, written by Penny, appears at the beginning of his book *Short Poems at Odd Hours* which he published in 1914. While this opening passage played into conventional methods of the time, it is especially telling of the relationship Penny had with his audience. Penny’s readers were his “kind friends” that lived in Fort Scott. With these opening lines, Penny was introducing his work to fellow citizens with whom he worked and lived, many of whom appeared in the book’s poems.

J.S. Penny was born in 1848 in Des Moines, Iowa. That same year, his father, a farmer, was elected to the legislature of the new state of Iowa. His parents were Democrats, and Penny would remember in later years that he had grown up hearing “heated discussions” about the Missouri Compromise and the Missouri Border Ruffians

¹⁰² J.S. Penny, “If I Could Write,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours* (Fort Scott, KS: J.S. Penny, 1917), 7.

in the new Kansas territory.¹⁰³ Penny grew up on the farm in Iowa, and in 1881 he married Irene Hixson.



Figure 13. John Scott and Irene Hixson Penny Circa 1890. Ralph Willard Collection of J.S. Penny papers, available at Hale Special Collections, Kansas State University.

Penny wrote that he “remained on the old home farm until I was forty-six years of age, then sold it and moved to a farm in Bourbon County Kansas, where we arrived on the 24th day of February 1894.”¹⁰⁴ After six and a half years on that farm, located outside of Devon, Kansas, Penny and Irene moved their family to Fort Scott so that their sons, Hubert and Guy, could attend a district school. In Fort Scott, at the time a growing

¹⁰³ J.S. Penny autobiography, Ralph Willard Collection of J.S. Penny papers, available at Hale Special Collections, 1.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

community of about 10,000 people, Penny entered the real estate business. He worked with local land agent W.C. Gunn and sold land in southeastern Kansas to emigrants from all over the nation and the world. On October 17th, 1914, Penny opened his own small real estate, insurance, and loan business on Main Street, and settled permanently into the community that he would call home until his death in 1933. It was here in town, in the later years of his life, that Penny would pursue his love of poetry. However, he would always have a special fondness for the “many pleasant days- and evenings- on the Kansas farm, and... never regretted the change we made when we left the old home, with all its sacred memories, and followed the ‘Star of Empire,’ on its westward course.”¹⁰⁵

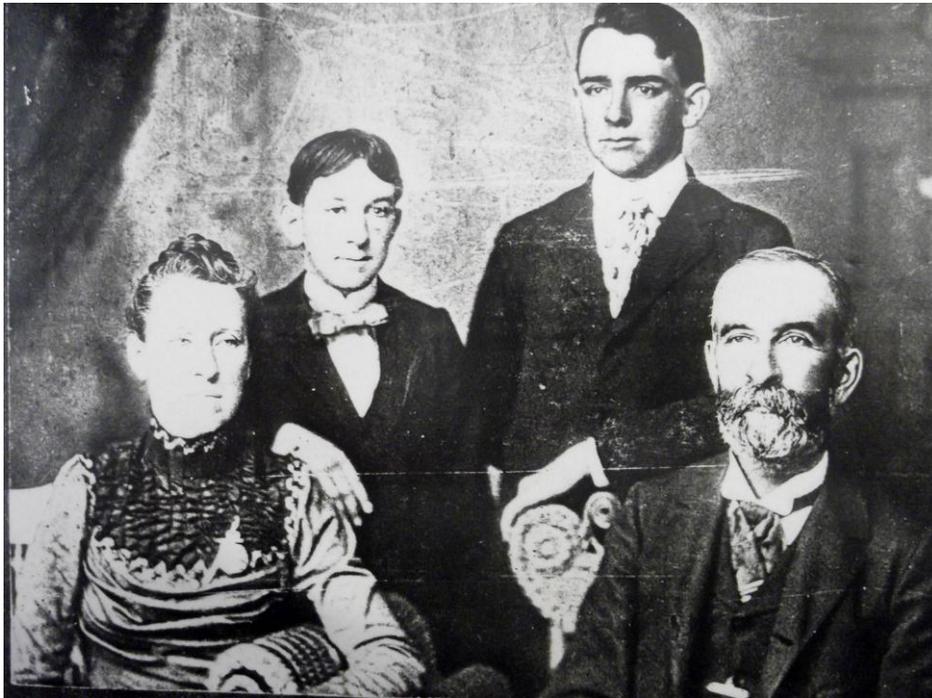


Figure 14. Irene, Hubert Graham, Eugene Guy, and John Scott Penny, circa 1900. Ralph Willard Collection of J.S. Penny papers, Hale Special Collections, Kansas State University.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 3.

Penny was an observant, sensitive man who had cherished poetry since his early days at school in Iowa. He admired many of the poets of his day, and especially emulated the schoolroom poets, those figures who wrote the most popular poetry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Penny wrote from a young age, but it wasn't until he had established a comfortable and permanent living for himself and his family in Fort Scott that he began to pursue publication. He wrote hundreds of poems and published a collection of them in 1914 as *Short Poems at Odd Hours*. He was inspired by daily life in Fort Scott and sought appreciation of his work from friends, neighbors, coworkers, and community members.

Looking at Penny's poetry, it becomes obvious that he had dreams of greater poetic success. However, he struggled with these dreams and felt conflicted: how would his ambition affect the contentedness he felt in being a local poet who wrote for his community? Penny's poetry reveals a tension within him between ambition and individualism, and community and contentedness. Of ambition, he wrote:

“You are never quite satisfied- you fill the lives of men with woe.”¹⁰⁶

But ultimately, while Penny emulated the most successful Schoolroom Poets of the time and perhaps daydreamed of achieving their fame, he found fulfillment in the praises of the tight-knit community of intellectuals and business people with whom he associated in Fort Scott.

Penny's poems never brought him fame or fortune, but they provide a unique and valuable perspective of life in a small Kansas city in the early years of the twentieth

¹⁰⁶ Penny, “Ambition,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 54.

century. His work tells us not only about himself, but also about the world he lived in and was inspired by.

**“Gems worth far more than gold”:
The poetry that influenced and inspired Penny**

*“I cannot tell the worth of a book
Until its truths unfold;
Then, I may see in it, when I look,
Gems, worth far more than gold.”¹⁰⁷*

Penny idolized many different poets. Perhaps he was most directly encouraged to write by two famous poets, also writing in the style of schoolroom poetry, who lived and wrote in Fort Scott during his own time: Eugene Fitch Ware, also known as Ironquill, and Albert Bigelow Paine. Ware and Paine had poems published in periodicals and books throughout the nation from the late 19th century into the 1930s.¹⁰⁸ Having these two successful poets who also ran local businesses must have been a huge source of inspiration for Penny. Ware, especially, was a role model for Penny; he also came from Iowa and moved to Fort Scott in his later years (in Ware’s case, to practice law). Ware became a captain in the Civil War and was a hero in Fort Scott.

The third poem in Penny’s book, entitled “At the Grave of Eugene Ware,” praised Ware’s “fertile pen” and the “beauty of his verse”. Penny went on to say:

¹⁰⁷ Penny, “Colaborers,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 100.

¹⁰⁸ Fred Campbell, Jr., “Fort Scott’s Forgotten Poet,” *Fort Scott Tribune*, November 10, 2009.

“there is this in the writings left us;/ A style, that is pure and mild,/ And is
easy of understanding,/ By the unlearned, and the child.”¹⁰⁹

This stanza reveals what Penny admired about Ware and what he valued in poetry: a pure, clear style that could be enjoyed by all who read it. This type of popular poetry, which Penny also wished to write, was made famous by the schoolroom poets, a group of extremely popular writers whose style was enjoyed by the American public from the end of the Civil War through the first World War. Penny drew creative energy and inspiration from his local network of poets as well as from the national scene.¹¹⁰

It was the schoolroom poets who most inspired Penny. He grew up reading them in the Iowa school system during the 1850s and 1860s. Some of the biggest names within the schoolroom canon were Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, and John Greenleaf Whittier. These were the literary celebrities of the nation. As Angela Sorby explains in *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865-1917*, “once upon a time... poetry mattered to middle-class people in a way that it no longer does.”¹¹¹ Schoolroom poetry was often recited aloud and was used in all schools across the nation as a pedagogical tool. But these poems did more than teach America’s young—they were a beloved part of American culture and were treasured by thousands of Americans. Sorby writes, “popular poetry ultimately offered, not an escape from literary and social conventions, but an escape *into* them—and into the simultaneously nurturing and disciplinary communities that poetic performances helped

¹⁰⁹ Penny, “At the Grave of Eugene Ware,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 9.

¹¹⁰ For more information on the way literary culture develops over different scales of time and space, see Franco Moretti’s *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models For A Literary History*.

¹¹¹ Angela Sorby, *Schoolroom poets : childhood, performance, and the place of American poetry, 1865-1917*, (Lebanon, NH: University of New Hampshire, 2005), xi.

to construct.”¹¹² It was these literary conventions and poetic communities which Penny treasured and strove to recreate on a more local level in Fort Scott.

These poets’ influence is visible in Penny’s work. His poems often mirror those of the poetic celebrities of his day, most of whom were schoolroom poets. James Whitcomb Riley’s “The Old Swimmin’ Hole” represents two very popular trends in poetry at the turn of the 20th century: memory poems and dialect poems. Riley wrote the “The Old Swimmin’ Hole” in 19th-century Indiana (often referred to as “hoosier”) dialect and described a beloved swimming spot of his youth in Indiana.¹¹³ This swimming hole was now gone as the land was transformed by the industrial development that arrived with the railroad all across the Midwest in the 1870s and 1880s. The poem wistfully looks back to the past and mourns the change and loss that comes with time; the swimmin’ hole used to be full of bulrushes, cattails, sunshine, and rippling water, but the narrator cries:

“When I last saw the place/The scenes was all changed,/ like the change
in my face;/The bridge of the railroad now crosses the spot/Whare the old
divin'-log lays sunk and fergot.”

This is one of many poems by Riley that influenced Penny. Dialect poetry was massively popular during the second half of the nineteenth century, and Penny has several poems written in this style. In “The Black Man’s Lament,” Penny uses black dialect to describe an ex-slave’s recollection of his youth:

¹¹² Sorby, xlv.

¹¹³ Riley was known as the “Hoosier Poet” because he wrote many of his most famous poems in “hoosier” dialect—that of 19th century Indiana. See Elizabeth J. Van Allen’s book *James Whitcomb Riley: A Life*.

“Yes, I know I’m growin’ old,/ Soon de story will be told,/ Ob my life, an’ how I libed, away down souf;/ I were born in old’ Car’line,/ In de shade of dem big pine/ Dat am what my mudder tole me, wid her mouf.”¹¹⁴

These dialect poems were extremely popular in the day of the schoolroom poets. Their success was tied to the development of realism and regionalism in national poetry.

Memory poems were also very common. As the Industrial Revolution transformed the nation, many poets looked back on earlier days with nostalgia. They wrote of an idealized past; in John Greenleaf Whittier’s 1866 poem “Snow-Bound. A Winter Idyl,” the poet describes a cozy, isolated cabin where a family waits out a formidable winter storm. With a laughing chimney, a slowly simmering mug of cider, and a drowsy dog lying by the fire, the poem creates a scene of tranquility and peace which describes the mid-nineteenth century but purposefully evades the very real violence and turmoil of the Civil War. Snow poems themselves were a subgenre of popular poetry, and Penny has many pieces of this type, such as “The Storm King,” “Morning after a snow-storm,” and “Winter Wind.” Yet Whittier’s “Snow-Bound” is part of a larger trend of memory poems, a kind of idealistic nostalgia that is ever-present in Penny’s work. In “The Old House Deserted,” Penny speculates on the former inhabitants of a deserted house:

“Did here one day/ Bright children play/ Around your open door?/ I’d love to see,/ In childish glee,/ Them playing here once more.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Penny, “The Black Man’s Lament” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 132.

¹¹⁵ Penny, “The Old House Deserted,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 96-97.

Robert Frost, another poet with whom Penny was undoubtedly familiar, wrote many poems about deserted homes in the Northeast. Penny's poems reveal an incredible sensitivity and love for the past as well as a fear of change, all of which were common in American poetry during his time.

Penny's work reflects the work of the schoolroom poets whose poetry was treasured by the nation. Yet there is more to be learned from Penny's poems than his inspirations and the types of poetry which he admired. Both his published and unpublished pieces give us a sense of life in Fort Scott in the early 20th century. They also serve as a window into the mind of a man who treasured his community and valued his neighbors' praise, yet sometimes dreamed of reaching a larger audience.

“These children of my brain”: Penny's Poems

*“If these children of my brain,
Should the reader entertain,
I will feel myself repaid
For the efforts I have made.”¹¹⁶*

There are several themes to which Penny returned again and again in his poetry. Some reflect topics that poets of the early 20th century commonly used: war, memory, mortality, and religion and nature. Yet others reflect the uniqueness of Penny's local quality and his own personal predilection for the Midwest and his town; these are poems about Fort Scott, about state and regional pride, and about community and friendship. By

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 6.

organizing our analysis of Penny's poetry by theme, we can recognize major trends and subtle differences in the way Penny perceived the world and structured his poems.

War

Many of Penny's war poems reflect traditional and popular modes of poetry during World War I. In his work, he lamented over the sin of brother killing brother, he sympathized with those "brave hearts at home" suffering with no news from overseas, and he offered prayers for the cessation of war.¹¹⁷ Penny did not often discuss politics in his poems, but he proudly supported President Wilson's entry into the war and wrote many patriotic poems about Uncle Sam. Yet behind these patriotic poems which boast of American strength and morality was a poet who was very antiwar, a literary tradition of the nineteenth century that went back to Mark Twain and Henry David Thoreau. One important aspect of Penny's war poetry is that he described all nations as guilty of justifying war by religion. Many poets of Penny's day only blamed the Germans for this crime and evaded an examination of American justifications. Yet Penny condemned all nations:

"To slay and kill, your fellow man,/ You deem a righteous cause,/ If by so
doing you can win/ A nation's loud applause."¹¹⁸

For Penny, war was truly a curse. He supported the American cause in his more patriotic poems, but ultimately questioned the morality of killing for any purpose. While some of

¹¹⁷ Penny, "Brave Hearts at Home," *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 117.

¹¹⁸ Penny, "War," *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 121.

his earlier poems are pro-Wilson, his later poems avoid the politics of war, leaving his readers to question how his views on the war and on President Wilson changed by 1918.

Memory

Penny's poems reveal a very sentimental, musing soul which longed for youthful memories and mourned the loss of family and friends from his past. His memory poems are plentiful and range from specific verses recalling a particular memory or person to wistful lines which bemoan the loss of youth. Looking at his mother's old rocking chair sitting in a corner, Penny wrote:

“You're lonesome and vacant, old chair, to-night,/ The form you once
held, has taken its flight/ And I listen, in vain, for the clear sweet voice/
That in childhood oft, made my heart rejoice.”¹¹⁹

As he entered the later years of his life, Penny was filled with a growing nostalgia for youth. He wrote:

“While sitting here, by the cheerful fire,/ My thoughts run back,/ with
longing desire,/ To the days of youth, and I long to know,/ Where are the
faces, of long ago?”¹²⁰

Memory poems were a popular genre in Penny's day, but the genuine longing for the past that is evident in so many of Penny's poems reveal a deeply personal concern with memories and youth. His memory poems are often interspersed with celebrations of progress and change. This paradox between nostalgia and celebration of progress, evident in Penny's work, is also common for poets of the 19th century.

¹¹⁹ Penny, “My Mother's Chair,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 30.

¹²⁰ Penny, “Faces of Long Ago,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 84.

Mortality

These memory poems are often tied to Penny's obsession with mortality. The mysteries of life and death constantly vexed the poet and appeared in all types of poems. Poems of death, such as William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis," were increasingly popular in the years after the Civil War. While Penny rarely addressed death head-on, his memory poems and philosophical musings about life and faith are always tinged with an ever-present fear of mortality. For instance, in "The Family Table," a poem about a cheerful family meal, Penny ends with the stanza:

"Some day, there'll be a vacant place,/ Some day we'll miss a dear one's
face,/ Some day we'll drop a silent tear,/ For some loved one will not be
here."¹²¹

For a man who treasured his friends and family as much as J.S. Penny, death was a perpetual threat to his happiness.

In his poems, Penny wavers between unquestioning faith in the afterlife and a genuine fear of the unknown. The reader can sense an inner battle between fully accepting the assurances of his faith and the valid concerns of an observant man who cannot help but ponder what happens after death:

"Must soul and body part,/ When death shall come to me,/ And ever dwell
apart,/ Throughout eternity?/... Existence is to me/ A thing I cannot know-
--/ A fearful mystery!/ Perhaps 'tis better so."¹²²

¹²¹ Penny, "The Family Table," *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 31.

¹²² Penny, "Life," *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 74-75.

Although almost every poem concerning mortality ended with self-reassurance in God and the afterlife, Penny returned to this topic in his poetry more and more as he aged and faced his own mortality.

Penny's fear of mortality was tied to his struggle with ambition. This trend is most evident in "Mutibility"; even if one gains fame and fortune,

"hopes of life fall thick and fast,/ like leaves in bleak December's blast;/
And like them, quiv'ring in the fall,/ We soon must go, both great and
small."¹²³

His was a fear of transience, whether in others' memories of him or in his own physical existence, and he assuaged this fear by preserving his thoughts on paper.

Fort Scott/ Friendship and Community

As we saw above, the coming of the railroad had changed Fort Scott into a small industrial city that still maintained the strong community sense of a smaller town. Penny's most endearing works are those that describe his "dear old town" of Fort Scott and the friends that he treasured. He has numerous poems dedicated to specific members of the community, including former business partner W.C. Gunn, the tailor Mr. Piotrowski from whom Penny borrowed a hatchet, and Mr. Smallwood, a farmer known for his Brandywine berries. These poems show an easy friendliness and open affection between Penny and his neighbors, and he often included with the original poem a response from its subject. Mr. Piotrowski's son wrote to Penny: "You came into my father's tailor shop and asked him for the loan of an old dull hatchet, and in a short while returned with the

¹²³ Penny, "Mutibility," *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 59.

little poem which my father read and laughed over heartily... I thank you, Mr. Penny, for this little token of regard, which was a source of pleasure to my departed father.”¹²⁴

Interchanges such as these give us an idea of the strong sense of community between these citizens of Fort Scott.

In poems such as “Fort Scott Walks in February” and “Fortney’s Flower Garden,” both published in Penny’s book and shared with neighbors, Penny beseeched his neighbors to shovel their sidewalks and tend to their gardens. According to Penny, Mr. Fortney, whose flowers created the loveliest spot in town,

“should be/ Followed up, by you and me;/ it would make a beauty spot/
Out of our dear old Fort Scott.”¹²⁵

Poems like these bring to mind a chuckling Penny, sitting at his desk and scribbling out verse while anticipating the responses of his beloved friends (and perhaps hoping to inspire some better gardening in his neighbors).

Penny wrote many poems for church dedications, funerals, and other community events. Absent in these poems are the inner struggles which are so evident in his more personal work; he was more than willing to fit the poem to the occasion and to the audience. His doubts about mortality and the afterlife do not appear in his dedications to the dearly departed. In “Death,” read at the funeral of Penny’s friend W.J. Smith on January 8, 1915, Penny wrote:

“we know Death is silent, and may be near,/ But our Savior died,/ And
hath opened wide/ This way to heaven, then why should we fear?”¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Penny, “Piotrowski’s Hatchet,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 18.

¹²⁵ Penny, “Fortney’s Flower Garden,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 50.

¹²⁶ Penny, “Death,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 16.

That Penny could omit his personal concerns from these poems, written especially for his neighbors, demonstrates his eagerness to be of use to community. He wanted to comfort and help his friends and neighbors, and the best way he knew to do that was through his poetry.

As mentioned above, the Marmaton became a major character in Penny's poetry. He commented on the town's environmental decisions regarding the river, saying that the city leaders

“are goin’ to build a septic tank,/ Below the city, on your bank,/ And then
they’ll take the city drain,/ And mix it with the sorghum cane,/ Then what
they’ll do, with this whole mess, No one has yet begun to guess.”¹²⁷

The sorghum cane was runoff from agricultural experiments being conducted by the federal government of Fort Scott. Poems like these not only give us an idea of the environmental conditions and changes occurring in southeast Kansas circa World War I, they also give us a sense of Penny's love of the river. Many poems were dedicated to the beauty and value of the Marmaton, while others, infused with Penny's playful spirit, joked about its cleanliness:

“I trust that in the days to come,/ You’ll keep yourself, all free from
scum./ And hope that you will still flow on,/ You dirty little
Marmaton.”¹²⁸

The Marmaton poems, like many of Penny's writings about Fort Scott, are some of the most charming of his works and give a real sense of local and regional pride. They are

¹²⁷ Penny, “The Marmaton,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 35.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

also some of his most well-crafted; his poem “The Bridge,” which teasingly mocked town leadership’s inability to decide on a new bridge after a flood, is written in six stanzas, each in limerick form. Penny appropriately and successfully applied the limerick form to create a humorous and enjoyable poem.

Nature and Religion

It is in Penny’s poems on nature, often intertwined with his religious musings, that we can best interpret the way Penny and his neighbors saw and interacted with the physical world around them. Penny was incredibly inspired by the natural world. He wrote of Kansas prairies, of pastoral scenes, of seasonal changes, and of life on the farm. This was a very common topic in nineteenth century poetry. For Penny, a very spiritual man who wrote many verses and hymns about living a Christian life, nature was a reflection of the divine. Like many poets of his time, Penny saw God in nature. In “Through Timber Strolling,” Penny writes:

“When everything performs its duty,/ There is in nature’s works rare
beauty;/ Pity the man, who looks, not seeing/ The Power that spoke them
into being.”¹²⁹

He often played into the Romantic view of God as an artist, and in “A Day in the Park” wrote of the sounds of calling birds and the wind in the trees as being “led by the Great Conductor’s hand.”¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Penny, “Through Timber Strolling,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 28.

¹³⁰ Penny, “A Day in the Park,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 80.

Perhaps Penny's favorite natural topic was the Marmaton River, upon whose banks Fort Scott was founded. Rivers were a defining feature of the Midwest for Penny, and he wrote that

“naught in nature is more grand,/ When God lets filter through His hand,/ The peaceful river, running down/ And singing, past my old home town.”¹³¹

For Penny, the Marmaton was more than a piece of the natural landscape; as we saw above, the Marmaton became a character in Fort Scott much like the other neighbors featured in Penny's poems.

Penny also wrote about the agricultural successes of Kansas farmers with pride and perhaps a bit of exaggeration. In “Kansas Prairies,” Penny describes:

“Endless prairies stretching west/ Yielding wheat, ‘till you can’t rest;’/Corn, and Kafir, oats and rye/All seem piling mountain high./ Here is food for man and beast; Here are train loads, rolling east, Where are millions to be fed/Crying out for Kansas Bread.”¹³²

Like so many of his neighbors and peers, Penny's regional pride was based in the productivity of the land. It was this agricultural success which Penny believed created the “manly boys, and pretty girls,/ With rosy cheeks, and hair that curls/Around the brightest set of brains,”¹³³ who were produced on the Kansas plains. Penny saw the plains and farms surrounding Fort Scott as part of an agrarian tradition that stretched back to

¹³¹ Penny, “Peaceful River,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 78.

¹³² Penny, “Kansas Prairies,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 56.

¹³³ Penny, “Kansas,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 56.

Jefferson's ideal of rural culture and a physical relationship with the land which would uphold the strength, intelligence, and morality of the nation.

Penny's poems about Fort Scott and Kansas often look back across a historic landscape. In "Kansas Wheat Fields," Penny writes of the Kansas Plains:

"Where not very long ago/Ranged the giant buffalo./ Here today on every side,/ Peace and Plenty doth abide,/ Where the richness of the soil/ Recompenses honest toil."¹³⁴

In these few lines, both Penny's Jeffersonian agrarianism and his Turnerian view of history are evident. His history of the development of the plains is simple; before development, there were buffalo on the prairie. Looking around him in 1915, he saw "Peace and Plenty" brought by the "honest toil" of Kansas farmers. In Penny's view, the work of the farmer in taming and making productive the land was key in both developing the character of Fort Scott and of its residents. In "Kansas and Her People," he writes that:

"up from the soil, of [Kansas's] treeless plains, / has spring a race, with brawn and brains:/ Treading the paths their forbears trod,/ with faith in themselves, their State and God."¹³⁵

Penny's poetry reflects the predominately white and male Turnerian view of westward expansion in American history. His poetry excludes any Native American history, despite the long history of Osage life, culture, and settlement in southeastern Kansas. Like Turner, Penny assumed that the landscape had been empty until the

¹³⁴ Penny, "Kansas Wheat Fields," *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 99.

¹³⁵ J.S. Penny, "Kansas and Her People," *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 72.

westward march of American civilization had reached that part of Kansas in the mid-19th century. In “Marmaton River,” Penny writes that before the “white man” had discovered “this country,” the Marmaton ran through the region. Addressing the river itself, he wrote that

“You bear no flaming story/ of armies that have crossed/ Your waters,
and have battled/ To victory, or have lost./ But you can tell of armies,/ Of
panting buffalo,/ That peaceful quenched their thirstings/ A thousand years
ago.”¹³⁶

Obviously, Penny’s perception of southeastern Kansas before the white settlement of the mid-19th century was that of empty plains and peaceful herds of buffalo. In his view, white men brought the plow, and the plow brought development and history to Bourbon County.

“Dear Mr. Editor,”: Penny’s goals and accomplishments

*“But Still, I know your task is varied;
So, while my feeble verse lies buried
Beneath the pile, in your waste basket,
Let’s clasp our hands, above its casket.”*¹³⁷

In an eight-page autobiography, written in 1920, which focuses mostly on family history and the move from Iowa to Kansas, Penny ends with a short paragraph about his writing:

“Among many other foolish things I do, I am found guilty
of the sin of writing ‘verses,’ and find much pleasure in the

¹³⁶ J.S. Penny, “Marmaton River,” *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 37.

¹³⁷ J.S. Penny, “My Stuff Not Good Enough,” in Ralph Willard Collection of J.S. Penny papers, available at Hale Special Collections.

diversion. I call my efforts ‘verses,’ because no one has ever been known to charge me with being a poet, and since I am timid regarding my own efforts, I am content (no I’ll not say I am content) with results, for I have always wanted to engage in literary work, but circumstances have prevented, until my time in life has become a handicap, for best results in this field of human endeavor.”¹³⁸

This self-description demonstrates that Penny’s hopes and goals for his poetry were sometimes a source of inner conflict, which appeared in his work. He was not always sure what he ultimately dreamed of accomplishing; was he truly content to remain a small town poet read by a few hundred people at most, or did he dare to hope for more?

Penny’s brief encounter with national recognition came from the publication of his poem “The World’s Answer,” a response to Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae’s famous World War I poem “In Flanders Fields.” As Fort Scott resident Fred Campbell, Jr., recalls, “for a brief moment in 1919, Fort Scott was celebrated in the national press by the writing of this patriotic poem, and John Penny was hailed as a literary patriot by the Bourbon County Historical Society that same year.”¹³⁹ Penny’s poem, along with other responses to “In Flanders Fields,” must have been published in national periodicals, although his papers do not tell us which ones. His reply shows some of his finest work, and it is no wonder that he found recognition for this poem:

¹³⁸ J.S. Penny autobiography, Ralph Willard Collection of J.S. Penny papers, available at Hale Special Collections.

¹³⁹ Fred Campbell, Jr., “Fort Scott’s Forgotten Poet,” *Fort Scott Tribune*, November 10, 2009.

“The World's Answer”

Sleep on in peace, ye honored dead
While larks are singing overhead;
The sacrificial blood you shed
Will be the bond in coming years
To bind as one two hemispheres.
So was your life not spent in vain.
Although you lie among the slain,
With poppies blowing overhead,
In Flanders fields.

The torch ye threw from failing hands
We're holding high at your commands;
And though you lie beneath the sod,
We're keeping faith with you and God,
And all who met war's stern demands,
In Flanders fields.

This achievement was the greatest success Penny ever gained outside of Fort Scott. Yet the love of his community for him was a constant source of fulfillment and is evident from the many letters and responses he received for his poetry. In 1923, a Mr. H.A. Strong published in *The Bourbon News* some praises of Penny's contributions:

“But chief of all,/ our laureate poet,/ Engrosses my attention;/ A Penny
rare, a Penny rich,/ Deserving recognition./ I recommend to governor
elect,/ This poet-politician,/ This democrat of gentle mien,/ And happy,
chaste expression.”¹⁴⁰

Penny cheerfully responded:

“A Penny rare may be all right,/ But Penny rich—misnomer;/ For poverty
has gripped him tight,/ As it did ancient Homer.”¹⁴¹

Penny’s playful nature and accessible poems struck a chord with the people of Fort Scott, who had grown up reading and cherishing the schoolroom poetry that had inspired Penny. They treasured their local poet, who wrote in rhyme about the world they knew so well.

Penny, in return, cherished his neighbors’ praise and preserved their letters and responses. Mr. William Peake Dillard wrote to Penny on November 19, 1920: “My Dear Mr. Penny;- I have and thank you very much for the copy of your poem of the other day. It is like every thing you write good. By all means put it in the papers. I shall keep this copy till I can get your writings in book form.”¹⁴² Penny also enjoyed friendly critiques with his friend C.O. Coghill. Coghill praised Penny’s poem “When Autumn Comes,” but criticized the line mentioning the “hum of bees.” Coghill wrote: “Don’t you think that’s straining the old poetic license a bit too far, in fact almost to the breaking point? I am not much of a naturalist... but it has been my understanding that at this season of the

¹⁴⁰ H.A. Strong, “A Penny for Your Thoughts,” unknown newspaper, 1923. Available in Ralph Willard Collection of J.S. Penny papers.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Letter from William Peake Dillard to J.S. Penny, November 19, 1920, in Ralph Willard collection of J.S. Penny papers.

year all self respecting bees are at home in the hive,” wrote Coghill.¹⁴³ Although they never met in person, Coghill was also an amateur poet, and he and Penny had a long correspondence full of friendly critiques and praise, peppered with jokes and teases.

It was this attention and recognition by his community which motivated Penny to continually publish his work in the local papers. He may not have achieved the fame of his beloved schoolroom poets or even of his local inspiration Eugene Ware, but he was loved by his neighbors and took pleasure in their praise.

Penny was an observant, sensitive citizen who was driven to write about his beloved town and share his thoughts with those close to him. He admired many of the great poets of the nineteenth century and of his own time, and they inspired him to follow his passion for verse. He was a man vacillating between a desire for national recognition and poetic greatness and a contentedness to craft a place for himself within Fort Scott as poet. He was proud of his poetic contributions to the town, and he ultimately found much fulfillment through his writing. His poetry gives us a window into Fort Scott’s past through which we can glimpse daily life and better understand the importance of community in a small Kansan city in the early 20th century. His neighbors’ enthusiastic support demonstrates the massive influence that schoolroom poets had on the public and the role of poetry in American society in the era of the first World War. It is not only the content of his poems, but also the positive reception by his neighbors, that can help us understand how Fort Scott residents viewed the natural world around them.

¹⁴³ Letter from C.O. Coghill to J.S. Penny, November 12, 1923, in Ralph Willard collection of J.S. Penny papers.

Conclusion-Penny as a Primary Source

Lawrence Buell's four criteria for environmentally-oriented literature allow us to analyze our literary sources and to better understand the purpose and perspective of their authors. However, we should not let definitions of environmental literature limit what we use as a primary source for environmental history. Amateur works of literature and poetry, which may not be traditionally viewed as environmental literature, can be incredibly useful in piecing together the puzzle of environmental history in Southeastern Kansas.

By expanding the definition of "environmental literature" for the sake of historical research, one can learn even more about the past. For many locales like Fort Scott, there are no famous tracts or watershed publications which delve into the environmental history of the place. Fort Scott in the 1910s and 1920s had no Henry David Thoreau, Edward Abbey, or John Muir. Neither did most places in the United States—and yet everyday people wrote about the world around them. As environmental historians, we can take this challenge to seek out the less obvious sources and sift from them information that can fill in our understanding of the past. These sources might not be what Buell would consider environmental literature, but they have stories about environmental change to tell.

Literature and artistic endeavors give us the perspective of the artists. The recent surge in ecocriticism and environmental analysis of literature has produced some fascinating insights into authors' relationship to and use of the natural world in their work. The *Cather Archives* collection of environmental analysis of Willa Cather's works looks at the novels of this famous author. Each scholar has a different interpretation, but

they all analyze the ways Cather includes, uses, and represents the environment. The Cather Archives use literary criticism to explore the environmental themes in Cather's work; their purpose is not to use Cather as a primary source for historical study. However, the way these scholars have investigated Cather's perspective on the environment can be molded in order to use literature as a primary source in environmental history.

We can use what scholars have done with Cather's work through ecocriticism as a model for studying amateur poets and novelists and essayists and playwrights in order to understand how people thought about the land—whether it was a backdrop or a character, a process or a place. An analysis of J.S. Penny's poetry serves as an example of this type of study; he did not write environmental poetry, but his words show us how the land was changing in Fort Scott in the 1910s and how Penny and his neighbors felt about it.

While the studies of Cather's work can serve as a model, it is important to note a few key differences between studying the classic works of the great novelists and artists and analyzing lesser-known work. Perhaps the most significant difference pertains to the audience. An author like Cather writes for a national audience. Her writing was her living and she had to meet and satisfy enormous expectations. Penny had none of this pressure—poetry was his passion and his pastime. He had a steady job as a real-estate agent. His audience was his neighbors and the readers of the *Fort Scott Tribune* and other local newspapers. His poems reveal a tension between ambition for renown and contentedness with his place as an amateur poet, but this tension did not affect his poems on the local physical environment. While some of his poems on war and religion may have been written to suit a more general and national audience, his natural poems were

about his personal relationship with the environment and about local pride and understanding of the land.

Applying this type of analysis to the work of hundreds and thousands of amateur creators who have written about their local landscapes will add detail and depth to local and regional environmental histories. Let's look specifically at what we can learn from J.S. Penny's poetry about the past of Fort Scott. How would our understanding of Fort Scott's environmental history be different without records of Penny's poetry and the responses of his friends and neighbors? The government report on sorghum experiments and the newspaper articles about new industries give us information about the economic growth after the arrival of the railroad and the diversification of industries and heightened use of natural resources. Historians and scientific reports help us to understand how the ecology of the region itself was changing, although for Fort Scott there has been no consistent scientific understanding written down by a scientifically-minded observer. Letters and histories from Fort Scott residents like T.F Robley and C.W. Goodlander would give us stories and observations about the changing times. Some of Robley's writings on the end of Indian summers and the changing landscape give us a touch of his personal reaction to these changes.

What Penny's poetry provides is a true emotional response to the rapid changes to the landscape around him. Poems like "The Marmaton" directly note specific changes in the local ecology. Some poems, such as "Through Timber Strolling," show us Penny's religious connection the natural world—a common perspective during his time. Other pieces, such as "The Farmer's Complaint," show Penny's observations of how his neighbors reacted to the weather and environment in Fort Scott. His tone in his natural

poems can be playful and proud or nostalgic and sad. His poetry gives us an incredibly personal, emotional, and at times spiritual view of the changing environment in Fort Scott. It also demonstrates that Penny, like many Americans in the early 20th century, saw the history of his home as one of agrarian development and westward expansion over an empty landscape; the Jeffersonian and Turnerian roots of his perspective are evident in his poetry. Penny's work serves as an essential source that contributes to the cognition element of environmental history—with his poetry, we are closer to a complete environmental history of Fort Scott.

William Cronon wrote in 1992 that "...the special task of environmental history is to assert that stories about the past are better, all other things being equal, if they increase our attention to nature and the place of people within it. They succeed when they make us look at the grasslands and their peoples in a new way... if environmental history is successful in its project, the story of how different peoples have lived in and used the natural world will become one of the most basic and fundamental narratives in all of history, without which no understanding of the past could be complete."¹⁴⁴ In this light, J.S. Penny's poetry is a key resource which helps to create a more complete history of early Fort Scott by allowing us to better understand how people in southeastern Kansas lived in and identified with their local surroundings in the early 20th century.

¹⁴⁴ Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," 1375.

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