

THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RURAL GREAT PLAINS COUNTY SEAT: A  
CASE STUDY OF TWO WESTERN KANSAS COUNTIES

by

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## **Abstract**

The county seat town holds an important role in American geography. Whether serving simply as a governmental or judicial meeting place for a specific political district, or acting as an economic hub for a county and its surrounding hinterlands, any given American county seat exists with a variety of different cultural meanings imposed upon it. This study analyzes the historical and cultural geographies of two rural counties in the heart of the American Great Plains which have, or at one time had, exceptionally small county seats of fewer than 250 residents. Both counties are adjacent to one another in western Kansas. One, Logan County, originally had its county seat located near its geographic center in the village of Russell Springs, but relocated its seat in the 1960s to the larger town of Oakley. Gove County, today maintains its original county seat of roughly 150 inhabitants near its geographic center despite the presence of more populated towns within the county's boundaries. Both counties provide excellent material for a case study devoted to understanding what the role of the county seat is in rural America today. In this study I find that the discrepancies between these counties and their seats arise from the different ways in which distinct cultural groups understand or interact with the county seat. An individual's age, ethnicity, land use or livelihood practices, and location within a county all have an effect on their interpretation of the role of the county seat. This thesis provides a glimpse into the complex cultural nature of rural Great Plains communities through the lens of historical and geographical change.

# Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	v
List of Tables .....	vi
Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2 – Literature Review .....	6
Historical Development of Great Plains County Seats .....	6
Place Attachment and Significance .....	12
Chapter 3 – Study Area.....	18
History and Geography of Logan County.....	21
History and Geography of Gove County .....	31
Chapter 4 – Methods.....	42
Chapter 5 – Results .....	49
Age.....	49
Generational Culture.....	50
Age 65 and Older .....	50
Age 40 to 64 .....	53
Age 20 to 39 .....	55
Religious Background.....	58
Ethnic German and Volga-German Population .....	59
Religious Ideologies.....	61
Land Use.....	64
Location and Situation .....	70
Logan County.....	71
Gove County .....	74
Chapter 6 – Conclusion.....	83
Jeffersonian and Agrarian Ideals .....	87
Future Studies .....	90
Bibliography .....	91

## List of Figures

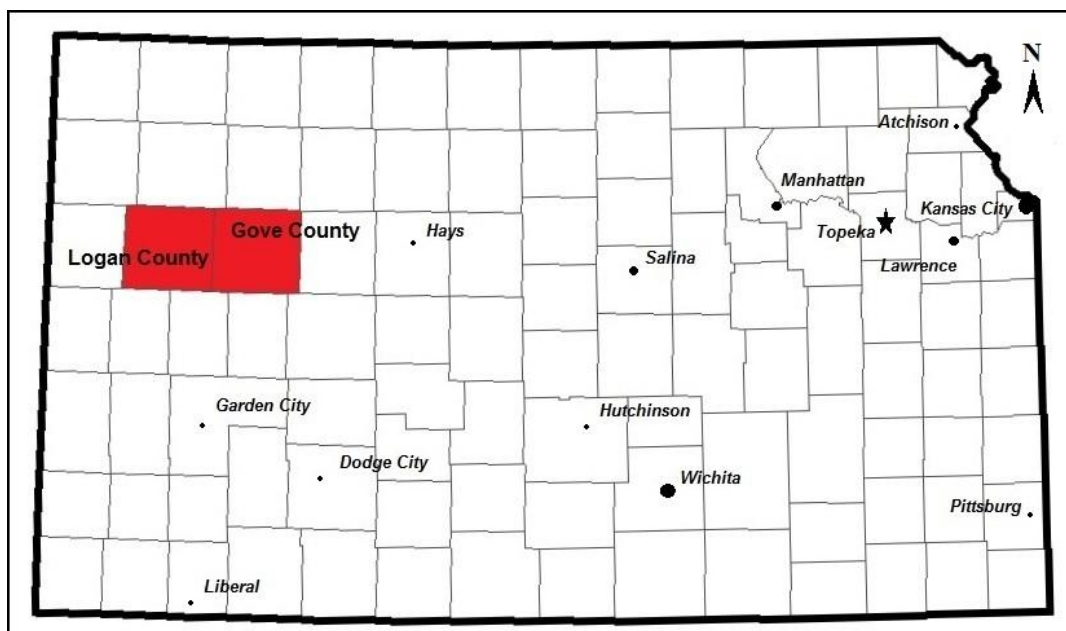
Figure 1.1 – Location of Logan and Gove counties and their position within Kansas .....	1
Figure 1.2 – Logan and Gove counties, Kansas general reference .....	2
Figure 1.3 – Census Year of Maximum Population by Kansas County .....	4
Figure 3.1 – Total Population of the Great Plains by County in 2010, with Logan and Gove Counties Highlighted .....	19
Figure 3.2 – Population Density of the Great Plains by County in 2010, with Logan and Gove Counties Highlighted .....	21
Figure 3.3 – Percentage of the Great Plains Population over Age 65 by County in 2010, with Logan and Gove Counties Highlighted .....	23
Figure 3.4 – Logan County Courthouse, Oakley, Logan County, Kansas.....	27
Figure 3.5 – Old 1888 Logan County Courthouse, Russell Springs, Logan County, Kansas .....	28
Figure 3.6 – Logan and Gove counties, Kansas general reference .....	31
Figure 3.7 – Broad Street in Gove, Gove County, Kansas .....	37
Figure 3.8 – Agriculture Activity in Logan and Gove Counties.....	41
Figure 4.1a – Old Logan County Courthouse, Russell Springs, Logan County, Kansas .....	47
Figure 4.1b – Gove County Historical Society, Gove, Gove County, Kansas .....	47
Figure 5.1 – Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Park, Gove County, Kansas.....	62
Figure 5.2 – Church of the Brethren, Quinter, Gove County, Kansas .....	63
Figure 5.3a – Dunkard Brethren Church, Quinter, Gove County, Kansas .....	63
Figure 5.3b – Reformed Presbyterian Church, Quinter, Gove County, Kansas .....	63
Figure 5.4 – Agriculture Activity in Logan and Gove Counties.....	66
Figure 5.5 – Rugged Southern Logan County Ranchland, Russell Springs Township .....	68
Figure 5.6 – Gove, as Seen from Kansas State Highway 23 .....	69
Figure 5.7 – Logan County General Reference .....	72
Figure 5.8 – Gove County General Reference.....	75
Figure 5.9 – County Seat Café and Grocery Store, Gove, Gove County, Kansas .....	79

## List of Tables

Table 3.1 – Population Change in Logan County and Incorporated Logan County Towns.....	30
Table 3.2 – Population Change in Gove County and Incorporated Gove County Towns.....	39
Table 3.3 – Population Change in Gove County and Incorporated Gove County Towns, Continued.....	40
Table 4.1 – Numbers of Those Interviewed by Location of Residence and Age.....	45
Table 5.1 – Township Population and Predominant Agricultural Activity .....	67

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

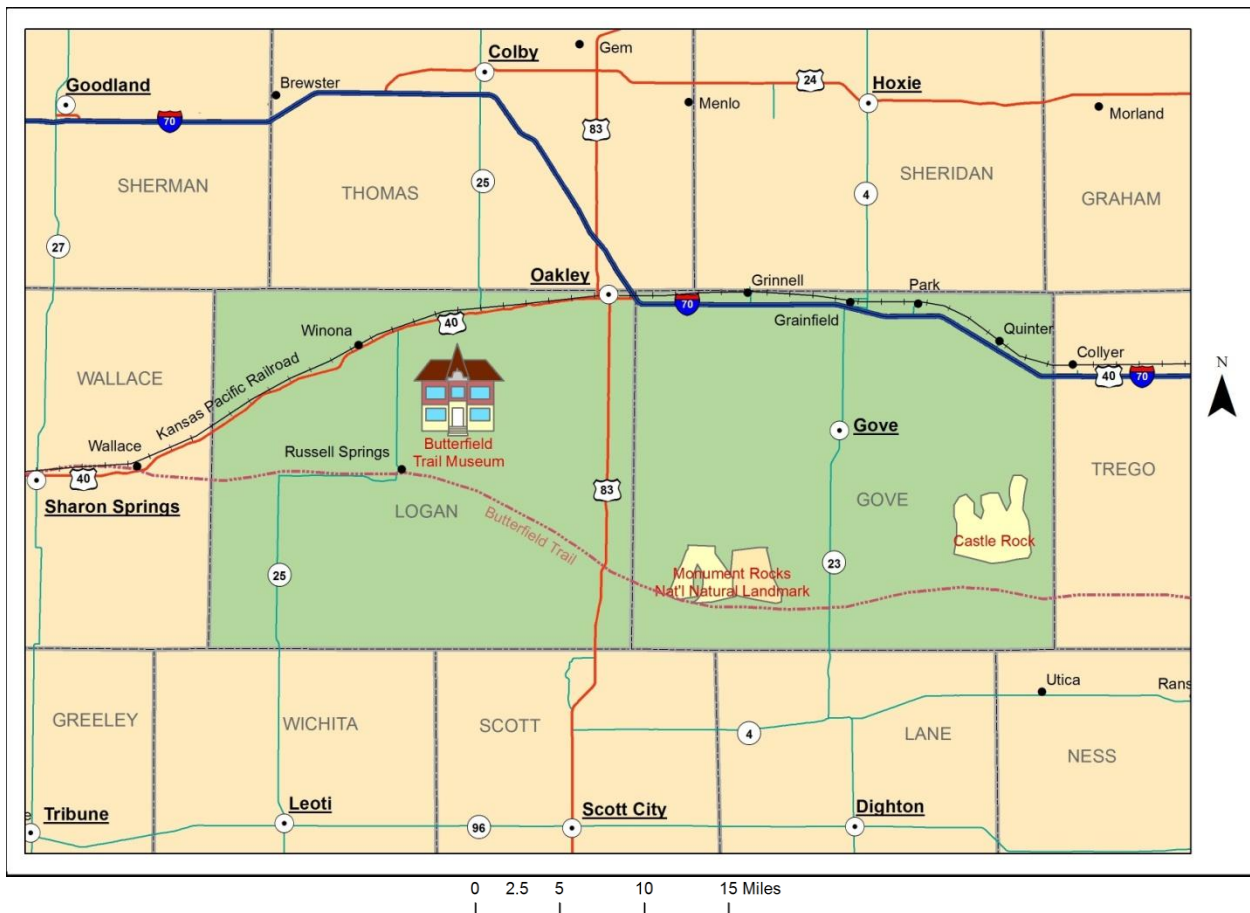
In the plains of western Kansas, there are two adjacent counties located between Hays and the western edge of the state (Figure 1.1) which, to the unfamiliar observer, appear to be quite similar. One is Logan County; the other is Gove County. Both depend economically upon farming and ranching, and both share a similar physiography common to the western Great Plains. Like most counties of northwestern Kansas, these counties are rectangular in shape, and each contains an area of approximately 1,000 square miles (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Both counties once had county seats located near their geographic centers. For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, these seat towns were two of the state's least populous county capitals with fewer than 210 residents each. Interestingly, throughout the previous century, despite having such small county seats, these counties were home to larger towns. Incorporated municipalities with populations over four times larger than the populations in these two original county seats were, and are,



**Figure 1.1 Location of Logan and Gove counties and their position within Kansas**  
Cartography by author.

present in Logan and Gove counties. In the 1960s, Logan County elected to move its government to its largest town, which was more economically connected to the main east-west transportation corridor of the state. Gove County did not make this change and currently maintains its county seat in the same small village.

Clearly, the people of these counties interpret the role of the county seat in different ways. For Logan County (Figure 1.2), the seat better serves its county from a more populous, more economically-connected community. For Gove County, the role of the county seat is not as dynamically linked to size or economic strength. The perfunctory questions that arise from a basic understanding of this discrepancy between interpretations of the role of the county seat in

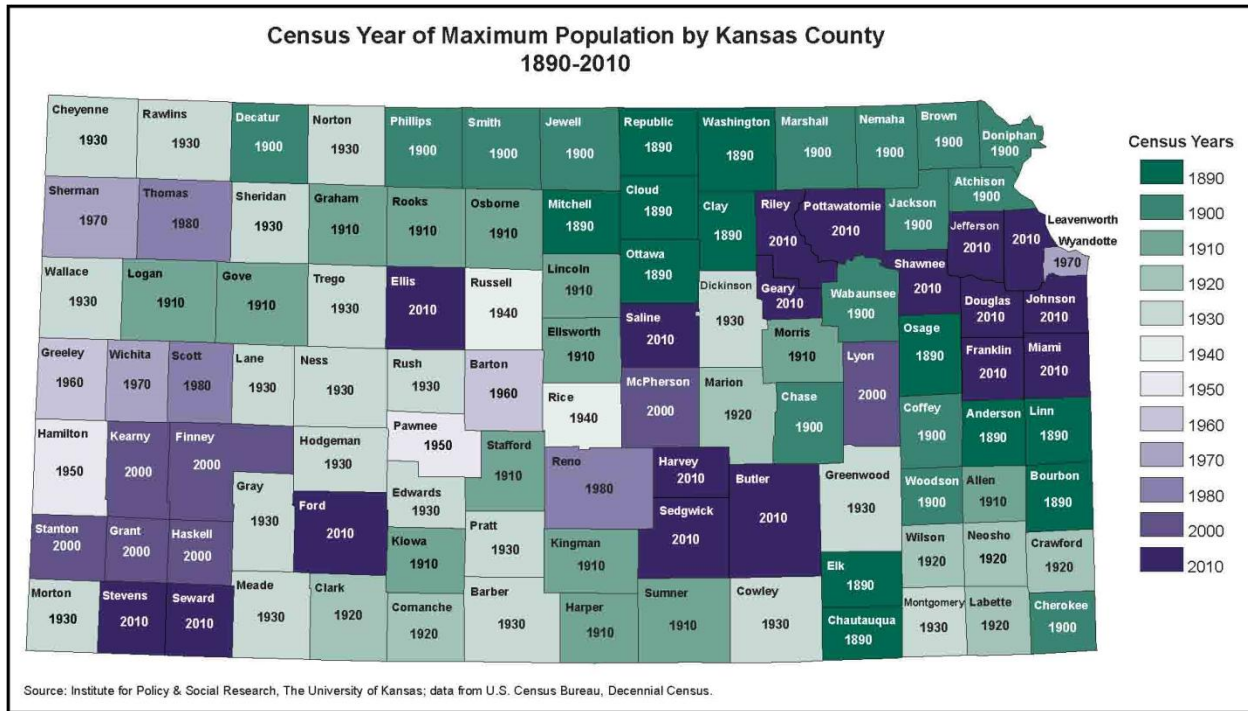


**Figure 1.2 Logan and Gove counties, Kansas general reference**  
Cartography by author.



these counties are intriguing. Why did one county transfer the title of county seat away from its smaller centrally located government center to a larger town? Why did the other seemingly-similar county not make this change? Is this difference in the designation of a county seat evidence of a cultural difference between these two seemingly similar locations? If so, what cultural conditions or characteristics might be present in each county that could explain these distinct interpretations of what a county seat is or should be? Such superficial questions hint at the deeper purpose of my thesis, which is to understand how different segments of society interpret the role, or perceive the importance, of the county seat. A more in-depth analysis of the cultural landscape is necessary to provide an explanation for each county's situation. Logan and Gove counties allow for an examination of the values that population groups can assign to a county seat. These counties also make possible the discussion of which cultural values might have the greatest impact on the role of the county seat town.

Why is it important to focus on the rural counties and county seats in this part of the country? After almost a century of steady population decline in the American Great Plains, the vast majority of the over 200 counties in this region with fewer than 15,000 residents are facing an existential threat. The wisdom of having so many counties and so many county seats in such a sparsely populated part of the nation is coming into question. Within rural Kansas, for example, many of the counties reached their maximum population prior to the 1930s (Figure 1.3). In some state legislatures, such as those in North Dakota and Nebraska, the idea of county consolidation has been proposed in the recent decades. Just as rural school districts throughout the United States have been forced by their states to consolidate for the past half century due to dwindling student populations, now counties may face the same fate. With such a specter looming over



**Figure 1.3 Census Year of Maximum Population by Kansas County**

Data Source: Institute for Policy and Social Research, The University of Kansas; data from U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 2010.

the counties of the rural Great Plains, it becomes important to understand the relationship Great Plains residents have with their county and, by association, the county seat. It also becomes worthy to understand if the county and its government, represented by the county seat town, are interpreted differently by disparate segments of society. By focusing on the two counties of this study, I seek to highlight the human and cultural challenges that could arise from a change in the existing dynamics between rural populations and their local governments.

To be certain, different population groups interact with their local government communities in different ways. Every population develops a perception or sense of place for their home that is special and specific to their experiences and circumstances, whether on the Great Plains of Kansas or any other inhabited section of the world. Cultural geography attempts to understand assigned values of place significance and local perceptions of place by exploring the effects of human settlement patterns, historical events, and cultural backgrounds. I seek to

understand how people's cultural background can influence their perceptions of the county seat. To achieve this end I examine the history of Logan and Gove counties. These counties are representative of the larger demographic and cultural phenomena occurring within much of rural America including the Great Plains. The role or significance of the county seat seemingly has a different meaning to the people of these two places. The central purpose of this thesis is to analyze of how different social groups interpret the role, or perceive the importance, of the county seat town. To build such an analysis, my thesis has three primary questions. 1) What are the perceived roles played by the county seat? 2) Do different segments of the population, or cultural groups, interpret the role of the county seat in different ways? 3) Which cultural traits, conventions, or beliefs, have the greatest impact on how an individual interprets or understands the role or significance of the county seat?

This study continues in chapter two with a discussion of past works in geography and related fields regarding county seats and place attachment. I then provide a framework for my study area that expands upon the historical backgrounds of Logan and Gove counties in chapters three and four. These chapters explain the past ways in which Logan and Gove county residents have approached their county seat communities. This is followed in chapter five by a description of the methods I employed in this study for collecting information. Chapter six addresses the results of my research focusing on my purpose and answering my three central questions. Chapter seven concludes the thesis with a final analysis and my suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter 2 – Literature Review**

In this chapter I discuss the most pertinent geographic literature to by pulling from distinct realms of historical, humanistic, and phenomenological work. This section initially focuses on the geographic and historical writings that document the development of the county and county seat in the American Great Plains. This provides background for my investigation of Logan and Gove counties. With this historical framework in place, the chapter then proceeds to highlight works that discuss place attachment and how different people interact with place. This develops the foundation for this thesis that these two locations are worthy of attention, as they provide examples for understanding the complexities of group place perceptions and the assignment of meaning within different population segments.

### **Historical Development of Great Plains County Seats**

Geographic and historical literature abound with examples of the evolving role of the Great Plains county seat. Some of the key scholars on the topic include Robert DeArment, J. B. Jackson, James Schellenberg, and William Wyckoff. These scholars discuss how initially the counties of the Great Plains were established in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century so that roughly a 900 square miles area would be served by one governing community. That community, called the county seat, would be ideally positioned within the county to provide equal access to the local government for all citizens based on time and distance devoted to traveling to that town. Prior to 19<sup>th</sup> Century settlement, the actual size and economic viability of the county seat town was of little consequence to the inhabitants of a rural county. Rural county inhabitants of the 1700s in the eastern United States were overwhelmingly employed as farmers. With the lack of sizable communities the population was evenly distributed, with the majority of the population residing on farms in all reaches of a county. As James Schellenberg discusses, most of the earliest county

seats in the United States in the rural East, in states like New York, North Carolina, and Virginia were consequently small villages with a courthouse and little else. This is known as the *Virginia Model* Schellenberg (2004). Thomas Jefferson wrote endlessly of the virtues of the yeoman farmer and the ideality of the pastoral lifestyle. Cities were places to be regarded as suspect, and in Jefferson's vision for the future, the nation should expand westward as a country of small hard-working agrarian communities (Gilbreath, 2007). Because cities are unnecessary for this lifestyle, a county seat that would fit Jefferson's vision would be simply a courthouse located at a crossroads. The Virginia Model is one of the earliest interpretations of what a county seat community should be prior to the Industrial Revolution. To this day a number of counties in the Tidewater region of Virginia have maintained county seats in rural locations away from the influence of larger towns in line with Jefferson's vision of a proper agrarian community. Such county seats include Heathsville, Matthews, and King and Queen Court House which bear a striking resemblance in size to the current Gove County seat.

Over time, as the American population became more urbanized and dependent upon non-agricultural industries for employment, the role of the county seat became associated with economic development. Smaller county seats subsequently became market centers for surrounding farmsteads and even smaller nearby communities. This connection between the county seat and local economic prominence reached its zenith in the Great Plains in the late 1800s.

The Great Plains is a region of special physical and cultural characteristics well documented in geographic and historical literature. Its physiography is dominated by flat or rolling prairies with fertile soils suitable for agricultural activity (depending on annual precipitation amounts). Though culturally diverse in some sections, like the Denver Metropolitan

Area, the South Plains of Texas with its growing Mexican population and the scattered Native American settlements of the Dakotas, most of the Great Plains states are culturally homogenous with large percentages of non-Hispanic white populations, and politically conservative voting precincts (Cherry, 2004). In large part, the Great Plains is a region dominated by counties with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants sprinkled with small communities that pride themselves on their friendliness and informality (Kilborn, 2003). The people of this region possess a number of cultural attributes that have caused scholars and laymen alike to regard the area as distinct amid the multitude of cultural districts of the nation (Mather, 1972). One example of this distinction, unnoticed by many as a cultural trait, is exhibited in the way that the Great Plains region has established local government in the form of counties and county seats. The county and county seat are certainly not unique phenomena to the Great Plains. However, the way in which its counties were created is a recognizably distinct cultural characteristic of this region. Many of these counties were formed prior to settlement.

In western Kansas state legislators thought that by establishing counties, people would be more inclined to settle the region. For example, in Grant, Greeley, and Logan counties, precipitation amounts range from 18 to 24 inches a year, and people viewed the land as less desirable for agriculture as a result. James Shortridge (1995) points out that because of this people tended to settle the more arid regions after the State organized the counties in the eastern two thirds of the state. In order to facilitate settlement in the drier parts of the state, landowners possessing large swaths of this semiarid region, such as railroad companies (Conzen, 2004), promoted the idea that in the Great Plains the rain follows the plow. In no other section of the country were so many counties delimited under the assumption that settlement would follow organized structure. Unfortunately, it was not until decades later that people realized that the

rains do not always follow the plow and that so many counties and towns on the Great Plains would be extremely difficult to sustain (Kristof, 2002). Because initial settlement in such areas was tenuous, geographers identify the earlier villages of western Kansas and the Great Plains as a whole as intensely preoccupied with survival. One way to bolster a town's survival was to foster its development as a market center for the surrounding area. In order to build such economic networks to the surrounding hinterlands, early Great Plains community leaders sought the locally auspicious title of county seat (Schellenberg, 2004).

The economic role of the county seat within a Great Plains county, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was one of prestige well understood by regional and historical geographers (Jackson, 1952; Dietz, 2004). People believed that the ideal county seat not only acted as the center of government for its county, but also as the economic life force for its county. Because of this in Great Plains counties, with a handful of exceptions, the county seat was traditionally the largest town within its county (DeArment, 2006). In the mid to late 1800s, because the seat had political clout within its county, the county seat town was almost guaranteed a status of economic significance. In discussing the role of the Midwestern county seat in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Thomas Wood provides evidence for why this belief pervaded in the middle of the nation during this period. He explains exactly what kind of economic activities a county seat was expected to enjoy:

The presence of the county government in a town brought substantial economic benefits: contractors for the construction and maintenance of county buildings; the provision of food, drink and lodging to lawyers, judges, plaintiffs, and defendants attending court; a newspaper to print notices of court actions; the sale of paper and other office supplies for the county offices; and in general the increased traffic a courthouse generated as people came to attend court, record deeds, obtain marriage licenses, and so forth (Wood, 2007, 1106).

Because residents understood that economic prosperity is afforded to any community important enough to be granted the title of county seat, the competition between communities contending for the title of county capital could become fierce. This was especially true farther west in the Great Plains region. In sections of the Great Plains such as the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles and the western halves of Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, a county seat title was believed to be crucial for the survival of a young community. The role of the county seat in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was so significant that people were willing to die over it. John Dietz is one of many geographers who writes of the county seat battles of the American Great Plains: “Early communities vied with each other for the right to be the county seat, and occasionally heated battles occurred. Such a role was perceived as essential if a place was to become dominant in the future urban hierarchy” (Dietz, 2004, 246). The title of seat was so important to some earlier settlers of the region that the jarring blow received by a town that lost a county seat conflict was enough to cause some towns to completely disband and cease existence (Chiles, 1990; Wood, 2007).

By the 1900s, the turmoil over county seat battles had subsided a bit. Yet the role of the county seat was still one associated with economic importance and general significance to the county community as a whole. J. B. Jackson discusses the role of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century county seat by describing the fictitious “Optimo City” as the county seat of Sheridan County somewhere in the western half of the United States. He explains what makes a Midwestern or Western American community successful. Optimo City was suited as an economic center for the agriculture industry of its surrounding hinterlands, connected to the rest of the nation with a powerful infrastructure, and situated as governmental and political center for its county. The economy of a community was benefited from the condition that it possessed the title of county seat. Because Optimo City



was a regional government center, the town required a transportation infrastructure to allow access to county residents conducting county business. This allowed for the development of economic activity, ensuring Optimo City's future prosperity. To Jackson, the role of the county seat in the 1950s was still one of general importance to the local population with relevance in the lives of the local citizenry (Jackson, 1997).

Today, geographers are noting the change in the role of the Great Plains town as well as the Great Plains county seat. With nearly universal populations decline occurring throughout the rural reaches of the region, rural county seat communities find that their county seat title has not spared them from a fate of a waning population (Wyckoff, 2002). Such struggles have led a number of outsiders to question the wisdom of having so many counties in the Great Plains. Some, like Clark Archer of the University of Nebraska Lincoln, make the case that there are too many administrative units in this part of the country for practical use. A reflection of this sentiment is echoed in the fact that in the ten Great Plains states (defined by Archer), over 21,000 local governmental units exist, including counties, municipalities, school districts, and special districts. As a result the Great Plains has a much larger than average number of local government officials. According to Archer, in the 1990s one out of every 285 residents in the Great Plains was an elected official, while the national ratio was one in every 500 persons (Archer, 2004).

Some declensionist geographers, like Frank and Deborah Popper, make a powerful argument that far too many settlements were created in the region, counties included, to ever adequately support the large population envisioned for the region in the late 1800s. Some feel that the government created far too many counties in the 1870s and 80s to be realistic. Having a county every 30 miles works well in Indiana, which has over 6 million people and 92 counties, but a state like Nebraska, with only 1.8 million people and 93 counties, is having trouble

sustaining such a small ratio of persons per county due to some diminishing tax bases (Popper and Popper, 1987). Aaron Gilbreath discusses Gove, Kansas in particular in 2007 describing how the town, despite being the county seat, struggles for survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. His research shares that the people of the town hold on for dear life to their town's title of county seat, for fear that without it, Gove will cease to exist. In the 1900s, the local population assumed that after establishment the county seat would survive and have relevance for decades. Today the mere condition of a town being called a county seat does not ensure a future.

### **Place Attachment and Significance**

It is my assertion that one's background has a powerful impact on how they perceive the importance of the county seat. Based on the existing attachment to place literature within geography, such a position is hardly novel. Yi-Fu Tuan has written a number of books that deal with different segments of society and their special approaches to place attachment. In *Topophilia*, Tuan acknowledges the role of such factors as gender, age, and ethnicity on place perception (Tuan, 1974). Traditionally in Western Europe and the Americas, different generations regard a place with differing sentiments and connections so that feelings of attachment can be regarded as an ever changing element of the community. In a recent study in Greensburg, Kansas, Jeffrey Smith and Matthew Cartlidge reveal that place attachment for the elderly in rural Kansas can be especially significant for matters of community decision making (Smith and Cartlidge, 2011). This particular type of place attachment is vitally important to understand in the American Great Plains where an ever growing segment of society is comprised of residents above the age of 65.

Beyond generational sentiments, a feeling of attachment held by a population of a county, state, or region can vary due to other factors such as place of birth or locations of childhood experiences. These factors are crucial to the formation of place meaning and significance

explained by Edward Relph (Relph, 1976). Very similarly Altman and Low discuss place attachment and the vital bond that can be formed with seemingly “ordinary landscapes” and childhood homes based on differing experiences and points of view (Altman and Low, 1992).

In addition to the rich literature available discussing place attachment in the geographic realm, there also exists a number of multidisciplinary works related to geography that tie into place attachment from a humanistic and phenomenological perspective. In a phenomenological geographic study on the community of Wonder Valley, California, Jacob Sowers shows different population groups and their particular relationship with that community. Sowers primarily identifies these groups, or *ecotones*, and their interaction with the community based on when individuals migrated to the relatively young settlement in the desert east of Los Angeles starting in the 1950s (Sowers, 2010). Sowers finds that different population groups interpret the significance or the role of a singular location in many different way. In 1993, Randolph Hester dissected the place perceptions of a community in rural coastal North Carolina providing geographic phenomenological insight into why some locations (such as businesses, parks, and monuments) are more valued within a community than others (Hester, 1993). His approach suggests the underlying complexities of population segment preferences and how those preferences translate into the creation of meaning for a structure or a location. Kevin Lynch explores this topic in greater depth in *The Image of the City*, in which he develops a language for the “mental map” of each individual. Nodes, edges, and districts are insignificant unless valued in the eyes of the populace (Lynch, 1960). For background on place perception of one’s community, region, and even state, I look to phenomenological writers such as Tim Cresswell and Thomas F. Saarinen. Both stress the concept that a location is of little consequence without an individual to ascribe meaning to that location. Local residents must be engaged by researchers

in their process of understanding and documenting a place. By failing to account for local perception, an argument for, or against, place significance would be pointless (Saarinen, 1976 and Cresswell, 2004).

It is certain that any study seeking to understand the significance of a community, such as a county or a county seat, must take into account community perceptions from the local population. Great Plains literature *does* suggest that the inhabitants of this region have a deeply felt connection to their local communities, including county seats (Mahoney, 2007). Despite what some may feel about the failure of over-optimistic settlement plans for the Great Plains (Popper and Popper, 1987; Bowden, 2008), the people who remain in rural counties and villages are extremely loyal to place (e.g. hometowns, school districts, and counties). This bond is found in rural communities throughout the Great Plains. For example, a January 2008 *National Geographic* article featured a commonly held response to the declensionist movement. In it, North Dakota governor, John Hoeven, lambasted Charles Bowden's take on regional woes. He reported that the state's economy is actually doing quite well despite the fact that the Bowden piece focuses mainly on challenges attributed to areas of the state with shrinking populations. Though the opinions of the governor can be understandably interpreted as biased in favor of supporting the image of his state, the public discourse that developed based on the governor's response provides a window into the feelings and opinions of the general public. The responses were dominantly supportive of small North Dakota communities (Hoeven, 2008). The consensus seems to be that declensionist claims may be logical, however they have little impact on the affinity and support that everyday residents have for their Great Plains communities. Any suggestion that the existence of some of these North Dakota communities is a mistake is received by residents as an insult, just as it would be in most communities worldwide.

This relationship is extant between local residents and their home counties as well. In a number of rural Great Plains counties, the county government is the most present and important form of government in a person's life. In the Texas Panhandle, for example, the state government in Austin can be up to 600 miles away depending on one's location. The only federal agents that northwest Texans encounter regularly would be a census taker every 10 years and the local postmaster. Interaction with county officials, like county clerks, tax assessors, school superintendants, district judges, and commissioners, is much more commonplace, especially in counties with smaller populations. In their documentation of county courthouses in the county seats of Texas, Kelsey and Dyal account, "from birth throughout life, and even after death, the lives of Texans [have been] intertwined with the county government" (1993, xv). Therefore, ties of community have been formed in these counties that cannot be broken simply by pointing out that consolidation might ease the pains of a shrinking tax-base.

These community bonds of affinity become immensely clear when local responses to county consolidation are considered. Though economic factors may highlight a clear case for the advantages of county consolidation in rural areas, there exists a dominant strain of popular thought in rural communities that consolidation diminishes local autonomy. As a result, consolidation of any kind is quite typically unpopular. In an article documenting the response in rural Nebraska to the consolidation movement proposed by the Platte Institute for Economic Research (Burger and Combs, 2009), a Cherry County, Nebraska rancher, Jerry Adamson expresses his concerns over consolidation, which he voiced in succinct opposition. He states, "I don't see this county consolidating with anybody. One size doesn't fit all." The rancher continues to express his fear that consolidation with neighboring counties will force many independent counties to lose their political power (Nasser, 2009). This sentiment is all too prevalent, and

therefore must not be marginalized. Such a view hints at the purpose of this thesis, which is to better understand the perceptions that various people have of the county seat.

This opposition to consolidation not only suggests a desire to maintain the current county structure of the Great Plains, but also the advantageous position held by the county seat towns of the region. To a great many small towns in the rural Great Plains the title of county seat remains desirable. To be a county seat is seen almost as an assurance of a town's legitimacy and survival. It can be the validation of a town's very existence. The importance of the survival of any small county seat in the Great Plains relates to the place identity experienced by an individual. The people of the county seats of the Great Plains do not want to lose the title of *county seat* for their towns because they fear such an event would result in the "death" of their town. They need only look to the lessons of the past, when in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the losers of county seat wars became eventual ghost towns. They feel that this loss would signify the loss of their history, heritage, and ultimately their identity.

Certainly the American Great Plains is a special region because of its political geography. No other part of the country was organized quite so quickly under the belief that a semiarid region could sustain so many people. Unfortunately, this has resulted in steady rates of depopulation and subsequent calls for consolidation in the past century. Be that as it may, the counties of the Great Plains that are struggling to maintain their existence are indeed surviving, at least currently. These county and county seat communities each have a strong will to survive that can be associated with the significance that these locations hold in the lives of their residents. The future of counties and county seats in the Great Plains may be uncertain, but the will to maintain the current regional county structure is not.

One of the most recent and pertinent studies conducted in northwest Kansas regarding struggles from a shifting population has been Aaron Hastings Gilbreath's "*A Little Place Getting Smaller*": *The Depopulation and Social Spatialization of Gove County, Kansas* (2007). Gilbreath discusses how local perception of one's town plays a role in hampering the economic success of the county of Gove as a whole. It is suggested that the idealized vision of a Jeffersonian agrarian society with nodal rural communities scattered about, valued by many Gove County residents, has led to a much sharper decline in population for all Gove County towns. Without the county concentrating its energy into the economic vitality of *one* town, larger regional markets were allowed to form elsewhere in places like Colby, Goodland, and Hays. As a result, towns like Grainfield, Grinnell, and Quinter have been adversely affected in order to benefit the small county seat of Gove. Although an excellent study on the relationship of small communities in a county of rural western Kansas, the actual discussion of a county-wide connection to the small town of Gove is not addressed in Gilbreath's thesis. The argument that the county seat has not been relocated because the people of Gove County are generally content to see the seat stay in Gove is not fully addressed.

With this framework of geographic literature established, this study continues by examining the distinctness of place exhibited in Logan and Gove counties. The subsequent chapter is a look at the selected study area and an explanation of each county's historical background.

## **Chapter 3 – Study Area**

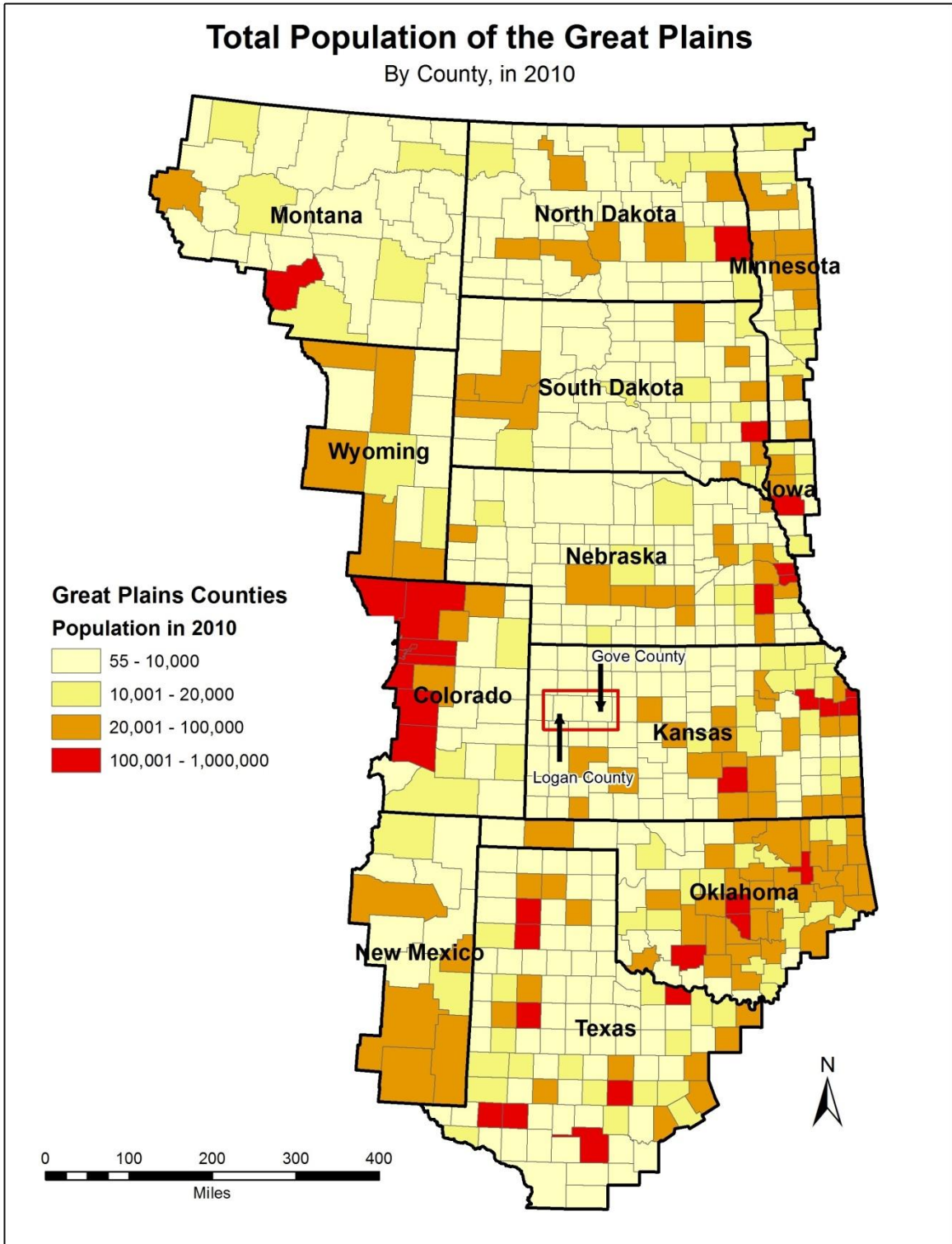
Counties in the Great Plains share a number of demographic characteristics. Many of them have small population totals, and Logan and Gove are no different (Figure 3.1). According to the 2010 Census, Logan County is home to 2,756 residents and Gove has 2,695 residents. A second characteristic common to the rural Great Plains, exhibited by these two counties, is a low population density; Logan and Gove counties have population densities of 2.6 and 2.5 persons per square mile respectively (Figure 3.2). Furthermore, the percentage of the population over the age of 65 has been increasing for the past 100 years. Both counties have percentages of the population over 65 that are well above the 2010 national average (12.8%). Logan County has 20.8% of its population over age 65 and Gove County has 24.0% (Figure 3.3).

Not only do Gove and Logan counties share a number of demographic similarities to the rest of the Great Plains, but their common history help justify their consideration as study sites. Both counties were established at roughly the same time and both were settled by similar cultural and ethnic groups. Despite the similarities, however, events have unfolded differently between the two counties. These subtle, yet important differences give us a window into how different segments of a population regard the county seat.

### **History and Geography of Logan County**

Logan County was formally organized on September 17, 1887 by an act of the Kansas State Legislature. Communities developed in earnest in the 1880s and 90s along trade routes and river valleys where the natural landscape made transportation feasible. Due to the Kansas Pacific Railroad, an economy of animal husbandry grew in the county with cattle-ranching the primary economic activity. By the earliest decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, crop cultivation became more commonplace.



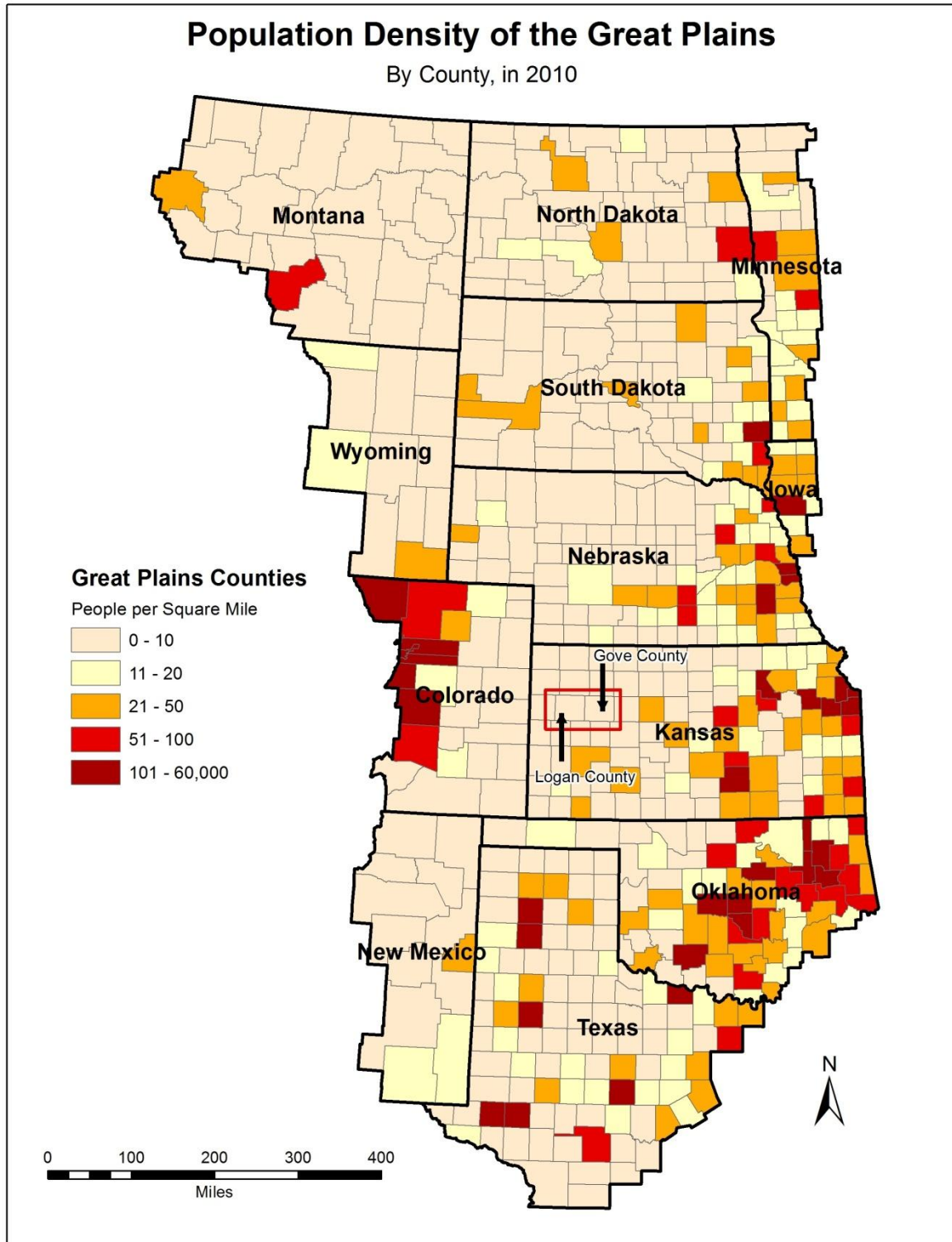


**Figure 3.1 Total Population of the Counties of the Great Plains in 2005, with Logan and Gove Counties Highlighted**

Data Source: United States Census Bureau, 2010. Cartography by author. Cartographic extent based in part of the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*; Wishart, 2004.

Before organization, Logan County had at least one established town, and that was the trading post of Russell Springs. The community was founded along the Smoky Hill Trail in 1865 just north of the Smoky Hill River (Tuttle and Tuttle, 1982). The post's original name was Eaton in homage to the colonel who accompanied Lieutenant Julian R. Fitch in surveying the trail that same year for the city of Leavenworth. However, the name was soon changed to reflect the significance of the natural springs in the vicinity in order to attract westward trekkers away from the Platte Valley Route of Nebraska or the Arkansas River Route used by the Santa Fe Trail farther south. The Smoky Hill Trail, though relatively short-lived, was influential in creating a need for trading, feeding, and horse and mule-care settlements in what would become Logan County. In 1865, David A. Butterfield, with the backing of Eastern capital and experience in the freighting business, began planning a line of such trading posts at least every ten miles between Fort Riley and Denver. Butterfield also established the Butterfield Overland Dispatch, which delivered mail and other goods across the Great Plains. Before this development, the trail was more or less an obscure unused pathway. Yet, in the years to follow under the direction of Butterfield, and later Wells Fargo, hundreds of wagons loaded with well over 500,000 pounds of freight used the Smoky Hill Trail until railroads entered the region. The trail clearly had an effect on the early population distribution of Logan County. Because the stage route required refueling sites for passengers and draft animals as well as sites for purchasing supplies and for lodging, small communities developed at ten mile intervals in central Logan County in the 1860s. These communities were short-lived, due to the Kansas Pacific Railroad, yet it was this time period that saw the establishment of Russell Springs, the most politically powerful town in the county for the next few decades (Funk, 1958).

The Kansas Pacific Railroad, which later consolidated with Union Pacific in 1880, was



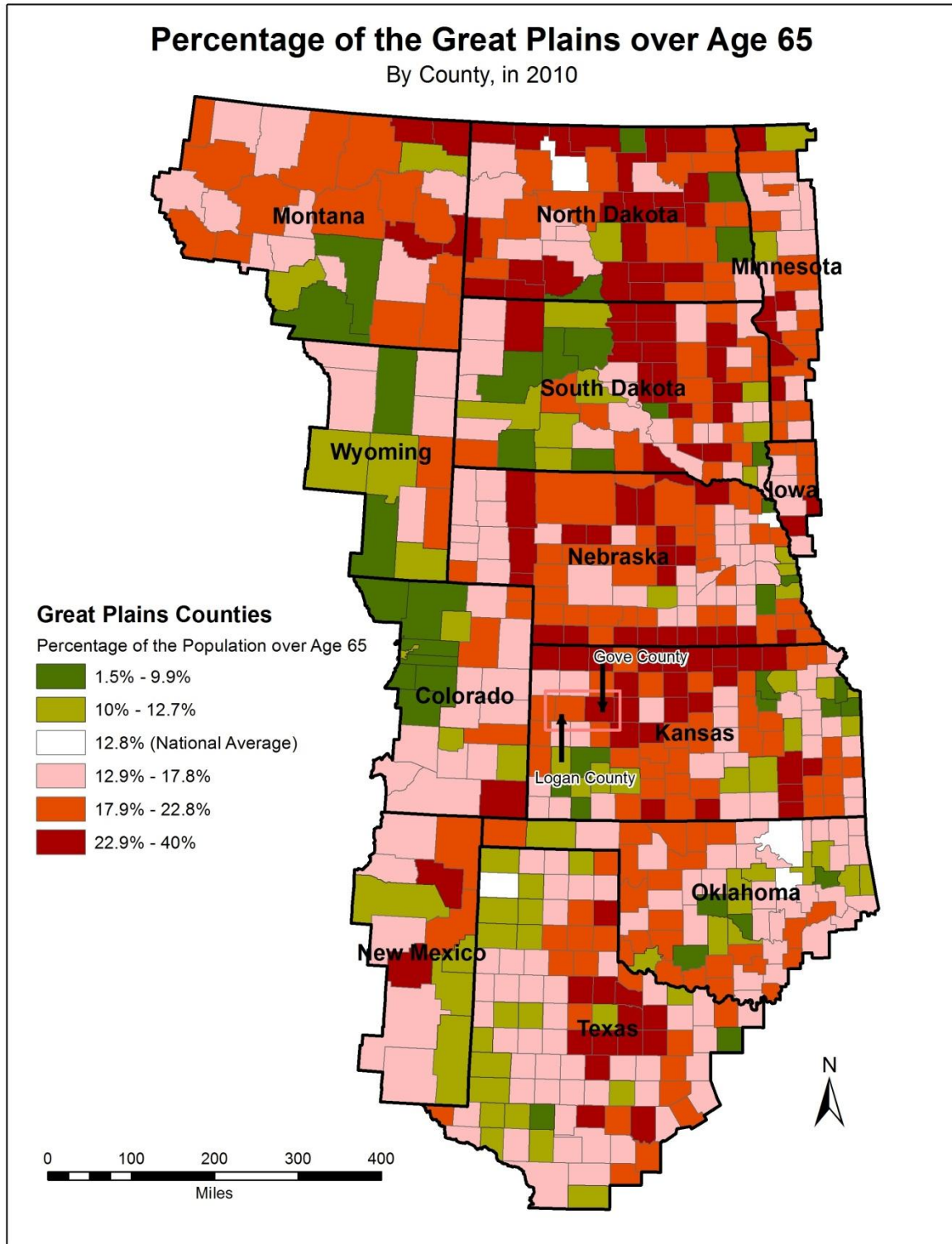
**Figure 3.2 Population Density of the Great Plains by County in 2005, with Logan and Gove Counties Highlighted**

Data Source: United States Census Bureau, 2010. Cartography by author. Cartographic extent based in part of the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*; Wishart, 2004.

completed in Wyandotte County in 1863. By the spring of 1869, the rail line traversed the entire east-west expanse of the state passing through what would become Logan County a mere eleven miles north of Russell Springs. The Kansas Pacific opted for a more direct route between the eastern part of Kansas and Denver, as opposed to the more convoluted trail following the meandering Smoky Hill River. Once freight and passengers could be sent through the region by rail, the Smoky Hill Trail became obsolete and a relic of the past (Funk, 1958; Clark, 1987).

Despite the presence of a reliable trade and transportation route, railroad settlements did not spring up overnight in what would become Logan County in the 1870s. This decade was marked by cattle droving from Texas to the major railheads along the Kansas Pacific farther east. Transient ranchers required fewer permanent centers of trade compared to resident farmers. Subsequently, villages were slow to develop in western parts of the state during this decade. The lack of markets coupled with prolonged droughts led a number of settlers, who entered Logan County to farm in the 1870s, to be disheartened by the climate (Shortridge, 1995). Most of the earliest European-origin settlers in Logan County departed after a few years of crop failure. It should also be mentioned that settlement at this time in western Kansas was noteworthy for conflicts between the existing Native Plains tribes (e.g. Cheyenne) and the encroaching European-American settlers. Native American raids made farming difficult for potential newcomers. It was not until the 1880s that a new settlement began.

After the organization of Logan County in 1887, there was an automatic call for the naming of a county seat. In anticipation of such a possibility a rash of townsites popped up upon the map in the hopes that one would become the county seat, making its owners and residents wealthy. On September 2, 1885 Oakley was founded. The following March the Western Town Site Company established Winona (pronounced wy-NOH-nuh). And in 1887 the Union Pacific



**Figure 3.3 Percentage of the Great Plains Population over Age 65 by County in 2010, with Logan and Gove Counties Highlighted**

Data Source: United States Census Bureau, 2010. Cartography by author. Cartographic extent based in part of the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*; Wishart, 2004.

Town Site Company founded Logansport. Not to be outdone, the village of Russell Springs also submitted a bid to become county seat. On December 2, 1886, the Pioneer Town Site Company re-founded Russell Springs and resurveyed the town for a more adequate city platting, one befitting of a courthouse and all of the accompanying businesses and accommodations associated with a proper Kansas county seat.

Russell Springs was in an excellent position to bid for the title. It was home to over 200 residents, it was the oldest permanent settlement in the county, and most importantly, the town was centrally located. In anticipation of the county's organization in September, it was determined that an election would be held on August 27, 1887 to name a temporary county seat. The towns of Logansport, Oakley, Russell Springs and Winona all vied for this title. So sure that it would be named, not only the temporary county seat, but the permanent county seat, the town of Russell Springs held a celebratory cornerstone-laying ceremony for its county courthouse on July 4, 1887. Russell Springs did win the temporary seat election, and on December 22, 1887 it won the second election to determine permanency (Clark, 1987). In the process of the elections, the county found itself divided into two camps. There was the Oakley-Logansport contingent, and the Russell Springs-Winona contingent. Support for Russell Springs won in the 1880s because the county's population was fairly evenly distributed. Choosing a county seat located near the center of the county made sense for all parties concerned. This distribution of the population, however, would not last into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The golden age of Russell Springs was short lived. Though it had recently won the title of county seat, by the end of the 1880s it was eclipsed in terms of economic vibrancy by the towns located along the Union Pacific Railroad line in the north of the county. The Union Pacific enters Logan County in its northeastern corner at the town of Oakley and continues westward towards

Fort Wallace and Sharon Springs in neighboring Wallace County (Figure 1.2). Between Oakley and Fort Wallace the route passes through the northern Logan County towns of Monument, Page City, Winona, and McAllaster.

The Smoky Hill River bifurcates Logan County. The land south of the river is topographically rugged and rocky. Although it is unsuitable for crop cultivation, it is more favorable for cattle-ranching. Because cattle ranching in the West typically requires large operations with vast expanses of land, only a small resident population is required for farming ten sections. North of the Smoky Hill River, beginning with the bluff upon which Russell Springs is situated, the land is much flatter and ideally suited for the cultivation of dryland wheat and sorghum. Farming in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century was not mechanized and large families were needed to make farming ventures profitable. To aid in the planting and the harvesting of such a labor-intensive industry, large families with an average of four children were typical (Wyckoff, 2002). This land use pattern resulted in a population imbalance in Logan County with the northern townships vastly more populous than the southern townships. In the 1880s the largest Logan County settlements each had between 100 and 300 inhabitants, but by the 1930 Federal Census, the Union Pacific towns of Oakley and Winona had 1,159 and 329 residents, respectively, Russell Springs had only 141 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1930). There were no other sizable communities to the south of Russell Springs. By the 1950s Logan County residents would eventually come to question the wisdom of having a county seat located so far away from the center of the county's population. Geographic centrality only provides equal access if the population distribution is equal.

According to the 1960 Census, Logan County had a population of 4,036 people with 2,190 residents in Oakley, 393 in Winona, and 93 in Russell Springs (U.S. Census Bureau,

1960). The city of Oakley had grown steadily over the past half century, and it had finally reached the point where 54% of the county's population resides within its borders. By contrast, Russell Springs continued to shrink in population. It was home to less than 3% of the county's population. The Russell Springs school district, which for the past decade had typical graduating classes of fewer than five students, was struggling to meet state attendance requirements and faced consolidation with nearby Winona (Funk, 1960).

For the first time since 1887, community boosters in Oakley felt confident that the town, though located far from the geographic center in the northeastern corner of the county, had the votes necessary to relocate the county seat. The campaign for relocation of the county seat began in the August of 1960. A group of Oakley officials petitioned for an election to be held on October 18, 1960. In order to successfully force the relocation of the seat, the State of Kansas demanded a 60% majority of registered voters to approve of such a measure. The final results of the election were 1,441 (64.1%) in favor of relocating the seat to Oakley, 783 (34.83%) against the relocation, and 24 (1.07%) null or spoiled ballots (Funk, 1960). Oakley seemingly achieved a victory. However litigation was drawn out for three years (*Gove County Republican-Gazette*, 1960). After a number of appeals and a variety of different legal arguments, the Kansas State Supreme Court ruled in favor of Logan County and upheld the results of the 1960 autumn election (Funk, 1960-63).

Factions within the county that were similar to those formed in the 1887 election surfaced. The threat of violence was even in the air when in 1963 a group of men from Oakley entered the town of Russell Springs with a moving truck to confiscate the county records (Funk, 1963). To this day it is a point of contention between Russell Springs and Oakley that the movers chiseled the two vaults out of the brick walls of the 1888 courthouse causing what was claimed



to be irreparable structural damage (suggested through interviews). Luckily, no acts of physical violence actually took place. The records were safely removed to the basement of a storefront building (Stetz-Penney's Department Store) procured by the Oakley Chamber of Commerce on Center Avenue. In 1964 a \$367,000.00 bond issue was passed to fund the erection of a new courthouse, which was completed in 1965 under the architectural design of the firm of Keine and Bradley. This structure is still in use by the county today (Funk, 1963; Figure 3.4).



**Figure 3.4 Logan County Courthouse, Oakley, Logan County, Kansas**  
September, 2012. Photographed by author.

Following the relocation of the county seat to Oakley, the community of Russell Springs has struggled to retain its small population. In almost every Census year following 1960, the town's population had decreased. In 2012 Russell Springs has only 24 residents (compared to 93 residents in 1960). The declining population of Russell Springs cannot be explained only by the loss of the county seat; however, the loss of the county seat is one significant piece of the town's story of decline. When the town lost the seat, its importance waned. Fewer people visited the town, and businesses including the café closed. Because of the lack of jobs and economic opportunity, it became increasingly difficult to attract working adults with families to the small town. Without families with children, the Russell Springs school district consolidated with

Winona before the end of the 1960s. In the 1980s the post office ceased operation. The most culturally and economically significant feature of the community is the old Logan County Courthouse building, which is today the Butterfield Trail Historical Museum. Other than the small community church in Russell Springs, this museum is the major driver of tourism and place identity of the small town, according to community residents (Melvin and Kathy Herschberger; Russell Springs Township, Logan County; June, 2012). It serves as Russell Spring's link to the past, a meeting place for residents to visit, and a community events center (Figure 3.5).



**Figure 3.5 Old 1888 Logan County Courthouse, Russell Springs, Logan County, Kansas August, 2012. Photographed by author.**

Russell Springs is not the only town or township to lose population. Today Logan County has eight townships with 50 residents or fewer including the Township of Russell Springs. Lees Township, the county's least populous, covers an area of 72 square miles and has only 5 residents (Figure 5.7). Winona Township is also declining. In 1965, it along with Monument, Page City, and McAllaster were bypassed by Interstate 70. This major transportation corridor was originally surveyed to follow the path of United States Highway 40, which parallels the Union Pacific tracks. However, in the late 1950s, the planned course of Interstate 70 was shifted so that the highway takes a northern turn from Oakley to the town of Colby, effectively bypassing most of northern Logan County (Funk, 1959). The absence of the state's major east-west transportation and tourist traffic, previously known to Highway 40 communities in Logan County, has meant the loss of a number of automobile-related service industries. With the lack of that vital income and related economic opportunities, the population of Winona has fallen from a 1960 level of 393 persons to the present 2010 total of 162 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1960).

By comparison, Oakley has fared slightly better than its old rival. In the census year (1970) following the seat relocation, the town grew from its 1960 level of 2,190 people by 7% to a total population of 2,337 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1970). That growth was not augmented but maintained in the 1980 Census. Unfortunately for Oakley, the town's population is currently below its 1960 level with 2,045 inhabitants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; Table 3.1). Oakley is fortunate in that it is the only town in Logan County to enjoy close proximity to an interstate. I-70 takes a northwestward bend at Oakley connecting the town with Colby and Goodland to the north and northwest. This situation provides Oakley with automobile traffic which has facilitated the need for service businesses, such as Mittens gas station, and tourist motels. Such income provides Oakley with wealth uncommon to other Logan County communities. The town has also

experienced economic success as a farm distribution and equipment center, supplying goods and services to farmers, ranchers, and rural families in Logan, Thomas, Sheridan, and Gove counties.

Recently, oil and natural gas exploration has lead to the promise of potential mineral wealth.

**Population Change in Logan County and Incorporated Logan County Towns**

Year	Logan County (Total)	Percent Change (from Previous Census)	Oakley	Percent Change (from Previous Census)	Russell Springs	Percent Change (from Previous Census)	Winona	Percent Change (from Previous Census)
1880	-		-		-		-	
1890	<b>3,384</b>		<b>176</b>		-		-	
1900	<b>1,962</b>	-42	<b>269</b>	53	-		-	
1910	<b>4,240</b>	116	<b>681</b>	153	<b>82</b>		-	
1920	<b>3,223</b>	-24	<b>768</b>	13	<b>115</b>	40	-	
1930	<b>4,145</b>	29	<b>1,159</b>	51	<b>141</b>	23	<b>324</b>	
1940	<b>3,688</b>	-11	<b>1,138</b>	-2	<b>198</b>	40	<b>317</b>	-2
1950	<b>4,206</b>	14	<b>1,915</b>	68	<b>161</b>	-19	<b>382</b>	21
1960	<b>4,036</b>	-4	<b>2,190</b>	14	<b>93</b>	-42	<b>393</b>	3
1970	<b>3,814</b>	-6	<b>2,337</b>	7	<b>83</b>	-11	<b>293</b>	-25
1980	<b>3,478</b>	-9	<b>2,343</b>	0	<b>56</b>	-33	<b>258</b>	-12
1990	<b>3,081</b>	-11	<b>2,045</b>	-13	<b>29</b>	-48	<b>194</b>	-25
2000	<b>3,046</b>	-1	<b>2,173</b>	6	<b>32</b>	10	<b>228</b>	18
2010	<b>2,756</b>	-10	<b>2,045</b>	-6	<b>24</b>	-25	<b>162</b>	-29

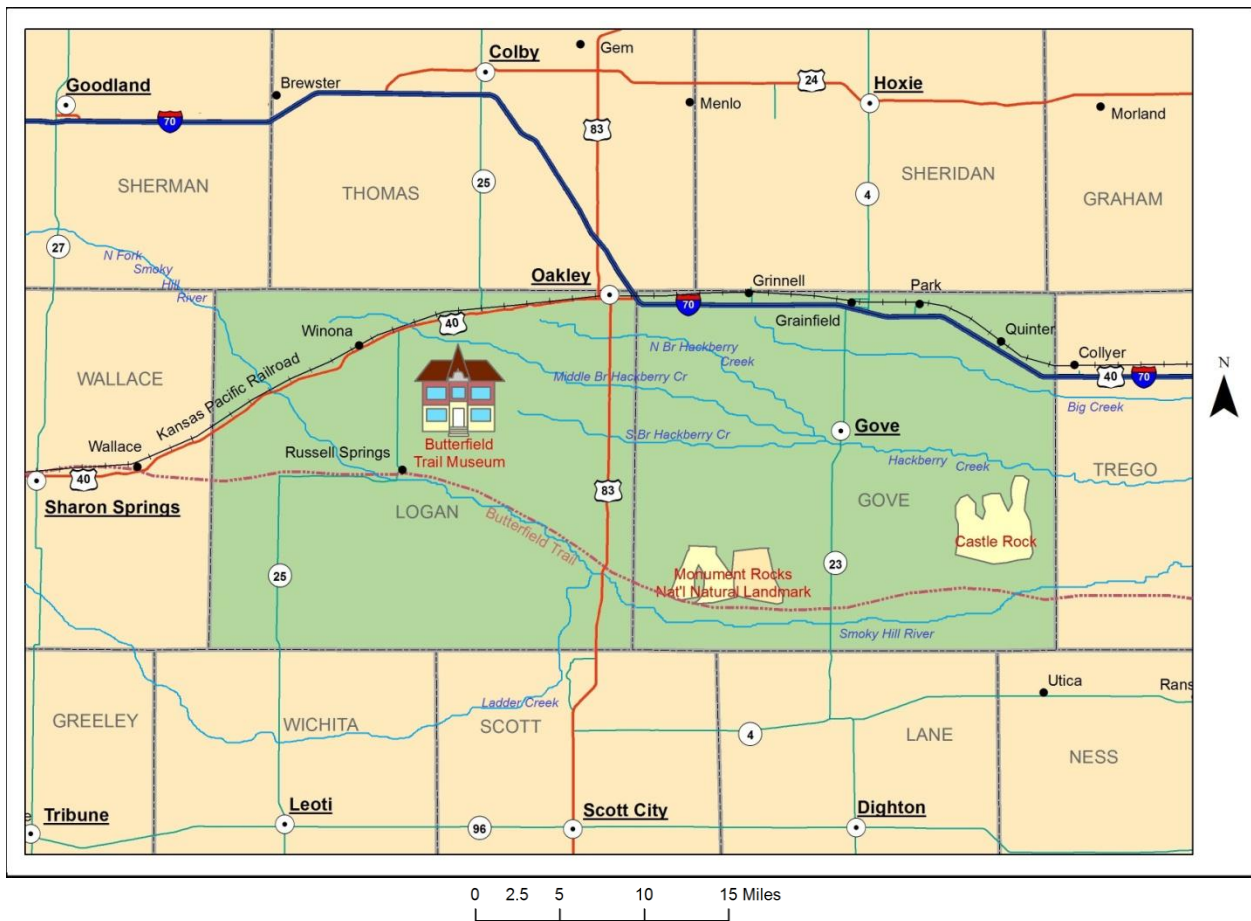
**Table 3.1 Population change in Logan County [1880-2010] US Census Bureau.**

According to a member of the Oakley Economic Development Board, the presence of oil and natural gas could mean prosperity for Oakley in the next few decades similar to what is being experienced in northwestern North Dakota this decade (Steve Golden; Oakley Township, Logan County; June, 2012).

It is difficult to ascertain whether or not the seat relocation helped Oakley in the long run. The perception of the relocation and the implications of those perceptions will be discussed in chapter four. It is, however, apparent to outside observers willing to ask gentle questions about the county seat that the rifts and divisions that developed in Logan County between Russell Springs supporters and Oakley enthusiast in the 1960s are still present in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## History and Geography of Gove County

Gove County shares a remarkably similar story to that of Logan County. As the two counties share a common boundary (Gove County is bound on the west by Logan County for 30 miles; Figure 3.6), both counties share geographical and climatic characteristics. Each is situated along the valleys of the Smoky Hill River and Hackberry Creek (and the valleys of the Hackberry's three constituent tributaries in Logan County). Due to this geography, transportation patterns in the 1850s and 60s developed in the area based on east-west routes that followed the more easily traversed valley flatlands. The majority of those who passed through this area



**Figure 3.6 Logan and Gove counties, Kansas general reference**  
Cartography by author.

entered from the east from starting points like Independence and Kansas City, Missouri and Leavenworth, Kansas en route to destinations in the west such as Denver and the gold mining

towns of the Rocky Mountain Front Range. Railroads would ultimately replace early overland trails such as the Smoky Hill, which also crossed Gove County. The east-west oriented pathway of the Kansas Pacific Railroad was operational in both counties by the late 1860s (Tuttle and Tuttle, 1982).

Because the rainfall patterns for Logan and Gove counties are essentially the same, both counties are suited for dryland wheat farming and cattle ranching. However, one major distinction exists in the geography of Gove County when compared to Logan County. Gove County has more land devoted to farming agriculture than Logan County. This is because the Smoky Hill River Valley becomes more rugged in southern Logan County, making the lands there better suited for cattle-ranching. Cattle-ranching has historically supported fewer homestead residents than wheat farming. Therefore, although both counties are sparsely populated in their southern reaches, the population of Gove County is slightly more evenly distributed.

Located farther to the east than Logan County, Gove County is slightly older than its western neighbor. It was formally organized by the state legislature in Topeka one year before Logan County on September 2, 1886. Gove County was first created in 1868 in anticipation of a rush to settle northwestern Kansas. It was named in honor of Captain Grenville L. Gove of the Eleventh Kansas Cavalry (Tuttle and Tuttle, 1982).

Gove County too was crossed by the Smoky Hill/Butterfield Overland Dispatch Trail, and as a result in the mid to late 1860s it was dotted with trading posts, feed stations, and animal-care stops that at one time possessed populations of 10 to 20 residents. Located in the southern part of the county along the Smoky Hill River, none of these trail settlements developed permanent populations. By the 1870s they had been virtually abandoned. By 1869, James N.



Paul surveyed Gove County, and the first settlers to immigrate to the county permanently were mostly single men such as George von Dehsen and Charles A. Sternberg. Sternberg laid claim to survey sections in the eastern and central parts of the county. No substantial European-American settlements in the county existed, however, until the late 1870s when the county's first permanent settlement of Buffalo Park began its growth along the railroad as a trade station (Tuttle and Tuttle, 1982).

Following the completion of the Kansas Pacific Railroad line between Salina and the Colorado Territory border in 1868, two new counties, Wallace and Gove, were relatively devoid of human settlement and ready for European-style development. It was the hope of the state legislature that the rail line would attract townsite companies, business people, and homesteaders within the year (Hudson, 1985). However, this westernmost stretch of the Kansas Pacific's territory proved to be a section of the state a bit less suitable for settlement, compared to the eastern and middle portions of Kansas (Shortridge, 1995). European-Americans in the east were still concerned with the threat of raids from the Plains Indian tribes and the severe droughts that hampered 1870s wheat crops. Eventually settlement of the area slowly spread westward as eastern counties had fewer and fewer tracts of land available for homesteading (Shortridge, 1995). By 1878, the very idea of land availability was the major driver of immigration into the area (Shortridge, 2004). People who had no concept of where Gove County was, or what the land in this part of Kansas was capable of producing agriculturally, began moving there in droves by the mid 1880s. In 1885 five towns existed in Gove County, all bursting at the seams with community boosters determined to make their town the county seat and dominant city for the county (Tuttle and Tuttle, 1982).

Similar to the neighboring counties of Trego and Sheridan, Gove County was a highly

favorable county for wheat cultivation when weather conditions were suitable. The land was relatively flat, well drained (free of bogs and marshes), and absent, in general, of rocky soils. As a result, the majority of the survey sections delineated in the 1860s for Gove County were sold to prospective farmers. This is in contrast to Logan County, where primarily only the northern half of the county was suitable for crop cultivation. Though the northern third of Gove County grew in population with greatest rapidity in the 1880s, benefited as it was by its proximity to a railroad line, the south and middle sections of the county also experienced population growth in the 1880s. Farming communities and trade centers supplying goods and equipment to the surrounding farmers began building up in all corners of the county.

By the mid 1880s, various cultural groups established settlements along the Union Pacific rail line, including the towns of Quinter, Buffalo Park, Grainfield, and Grinnell. Buffalo Park was the oldest community, originally established as a mail and trade station between Denver and Salina. Buffalo Park, which abbreviated its name to Park officially in 1950, began its growth in the early 1880s. It developed predominantly into a German town settled by German Catholic families from the Volga River Valley of western Russia. To this day the town has only one church and that is the Sacred Heart Catholic Church. Due to its ethnic and religious heritage, Park developed a reputation for social and fiscal conservatism. The community also places high value on education, another characteristic associated with its German ancestry. Park boasts the county's first school (Tuttle and Tuttle, 1982). By 1886, the community stood a fair chance of being named the county seat.

Grinnell and Grainfield are the second and third oldest permanent communities in Gove County. Grinnell is located in the northwestern corner of the county near the town of Oakley, and Grainfield is located in the center of the northern part of the county just one mile south of the



Sheridan County line. Both towns had railroad station sites and witnessed population growth and economic development in the early 1880s. Grinnell was home to the county's first post office, established in 1870. Initially, Grinnell faced adversity, in part, because of community infighting. The townspeople could not agree on a permanent site for the business district, and subsequently some businessmen and women were less inclined to settle in a community lacking harmony. Grainfield was platted in 1879, and like Grinnell was settled by emigrants from the central Midwest. States like Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana provided most of the settlers to these two villages along with some families originating from Germany and the Netherlands. Both Grinnell and Grainfield are home to primarily Catholic and Methodist adherents. Of the two, Grainfield was better situated to make a run for the title of Gove County seat in 1886 (Tuttle and Tuttle, 1982).

The final Union Pacific Railroad town is Quinter, located in the northeastern corner of Gove County. Quinter, first called Me-lo-te Switch by the rail line, saw its growth in the late 1880s when it was chosen as the new townsite for a group of Christians who followed the teachings of the Church of the Brethren. Formed in the 1700s by Radical Pietists and Anabaptists, this church is a German denomination associated with plain dress and pacifism similar to that practiced by the Mennonites and Quakers. In line with the town of Park, Quinter's religious and ethnic heritage bolstered the tradition of fiscal conservatism so pervasive in northern Gove County. Quinter was a weak candidate for county seat in this time in the county's history.

In the southern part of the county, other communities such as Orion, Alanthus, Teller, and Jerome also existed, but these towns were neither situated near a railroad nor the center of the county. They therefore only existed to serve the surrounding homesteads, and each settlement

individually never amounted to more than a town of a handful of residents. None was established or large enough in the 1880s to vie for the seat. All four would later become ghost towns as the surrounding rural areas depopulated in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

One town, however, located ten miles away from the Union Pacific Railroad line would grow in its political strength and become a strong competitor in the county seat race. That community was the town of Gove, the dream of a man who lived 650 miles away in Davenport, Iowa. E. A. Benson founded the Gove Improvement Company in 1885, and in August of that year he travelled to western Kansas to survey the town. He chose the site of Gove City, today commonly called Gove, because of its location near the fertile lands of the Hackberry Creek and its situation only three miles north of the true center of the county (Tuttle and Tuttle, 1982). This was an obvious move on the part of Benson to garner support for Gove becoming the county seat because it was centrally located. The town's name was even selected as a ploy to gain support in a county seat election. Benson's plan worked so well that in the September of 1886, Gove was named temporary county seat. The election for permanency was held that October and Buffalo Park, Gove, Grainfield, and Jerome would all submit their names for consideration on the ballot.

For the September and October of 1886 the newspapers around the county, primarily those produced in one of the prospective permanent county seats, reported on the magnificence of their respective communities. Various offers were made to entice county electors. For example, the Bank of Grainfield announced that it would provide the county commissioners with \$7,200 for the erection of a courthouse and new recording materials. Gove offered the use of the 1885 Benson House Hotel as the county's new courthouse. The small town of Jerome, realizing its efforts to gain the county seat were futile, ultimately placed its backing behind Gove. The competition in Gove County was relatively mild compared to a number of other counties in

western Kansas (DeArment, 2006). The election results went in the favor of Gove, which received 480 votes. Buffalo Park received 218 votes, Grainfield 174, and Jerome one (Tuttle and Tuttle, 1982). The winner was accepted without question, or at least without litigation, and the Benson House on Broad Street in Gove became the county's courthouse. This structure, originally built as a hotel, is still used as the Gove County Courthouse today. Having inherited an existing structure, the people of Gove County, particularly those of the northern half, consider it a matter of pride that theirs is the only county in Kansas never to have constructed a courthouse. After a number of renovations in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, an onlooker would be unlikely to properly identify the building as the state's third oldest courthouse, see to the left of Broad Street below (Figure 3.7).



**Figure 3.7 Broad Street in Gove, Gove County, Kansas**  
May, 2012. Photographed by author.

At the time of the 1900 Census, the five largest towns of Gove County were all relatively the same size with populations of around 100 to 200 residents each. Some minor shifts and swings took place during the next century, but this population size remained constant for Gove, Grinnell, Grainfield and Park. At the time of the 2000 Census, all three towns had between 100

and 330 citizens. Quinter is the only town in Gove County to experience more significant growth. For its first census year (1910) the town was already the largest incorporated community in the county with 450 people. And by the turn of the last century (2000), it had just under 1,000 inhabitants (Tables 3.2 and 3.3).

Following the county seat election of the 1880s, an attitude of amiability developed among the towns of Gove County. There were no overt signs of ill will between Gove and the other four sizable railroad towns (later Route 40 and today Interstate 70 towns) in the north of the county. Some of the smaller more rural settlements in the county did not survive into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as they were poorly connected to emerging trade routes. Yet as automobile culture took root and transportation corridors advanced local economies, a large shift took place in Gove County that saw the towns of Quinter, Park, Grainfield, and Grinnell outgrow the county seat town of Gove. However, for the past 125 years no single community has become significantly large enough to lay a more valid claim to possessing the county seat. According to an interview with local historian Ramon Powers, Quinter comes closest to exercising greater power in the county due to its size; however, it is simply not large enough to outnumber, or outvote, the other communities of Gove County combined (Ramon Powers; Topeka, Shawnee County, Kansas; May, 2012).

There were two major forces at work in Gove County in the past century that explain its different population dispersion and county seat situation. The first is that because of the equal spacing of the communities in the northern part of the county, no single community has ascended to economic primacy. Each town serves as an economic center of trade for the surrounding area. Some communities developed specialty industries to attract a broader clientele; yet no single town has a wealth of specialty services or industries that would place it in a state of greater

importance. For example, for years Grinnell had the only furniture store in Gove County. Quinter has the county hospital and one of the county’s two high schools. Gove has the county seat, and Grainfield has the county’s second high school. However, no town is truly self-sufficient. This condition is discussed by Albert and Mary Tuttle in their history of Gove County:

“[F]ive small towns remained to struggle for dominance. This is a rather unique feature of our county and has affected the course of its history somewhat, for no one town has emerged as the population center as in some surrounding counties. It has been both its strength and its weakness as the five towns jockeyed for power and prestige through the years. It kept privileges and burdens fairly evenly divided over the county. . . . No one town has been able to dominate the county, either politically or economically, thus far. It has tended to restrict the growth and development of all towns, as the competition between the towns has been keen.” (Tuttle and Tuttle, 1982: p 26).

Interestingly, because of this situation, a subsequent strengthened sense of community has developed across the county that does not exist to the same degree in neighboring Logan County. This development will be discussed in the following chapter.

<b>Population Change in Gove County and Incorporated Gove County Towns</b>						
<b>Year</b>	<b>Gove County</b>	<b>Percent Change (from Previous Census)</b>	<b>Gove</b>	<b>Percent Change (from Previous Census)</b>	<b>Grainfield</b>	<b>Percent Change (from Previous Census)</b>
1880	<b>1,196</b>		-		-	
1890	<b>2,994</b>	150	<b>118</b>		<b>99</b>	
1900	<b>2,441</b>	-18	<b>162</b>	37	<b>115</b>	16
1910	<b>6,044</b>	148	<b>196</b>	21	<b>309</b>	169
1920	<b>4,748</b>	-21	<b>132</b>	-33	<b>290</b>	-6
1930	<b>5,643</b>	19	<b>241</b>	83	<b>343</b>	18
1940	<b>4,793</b>	-15	<b>284</b>	18	<b>341</b>	-1
1950	<b>4,447</b>	-7	<b>206</b>	-27	<b>371</b>	9
1960	<b>4,107</b>	-8	<b>228</b>	11	<b>389</b>	5
1970	<b>3,940</b>	-4	<b>172</b>	-25	<b>374</b>	-4
1980	<b>3,726</b>	-5	<b>148</b>	-14	<b>417</b>	11
1990	<b>3,231</b>	-13	<b>103</b>	-30	<b>357</b>	-14
2000	<b>3,068</b>	-5	<b>105</b>	2	<b>327</b>	-8
2010	<b>2,695</b>	-12	<b>80</b>	-24	<b>277</b>	-15

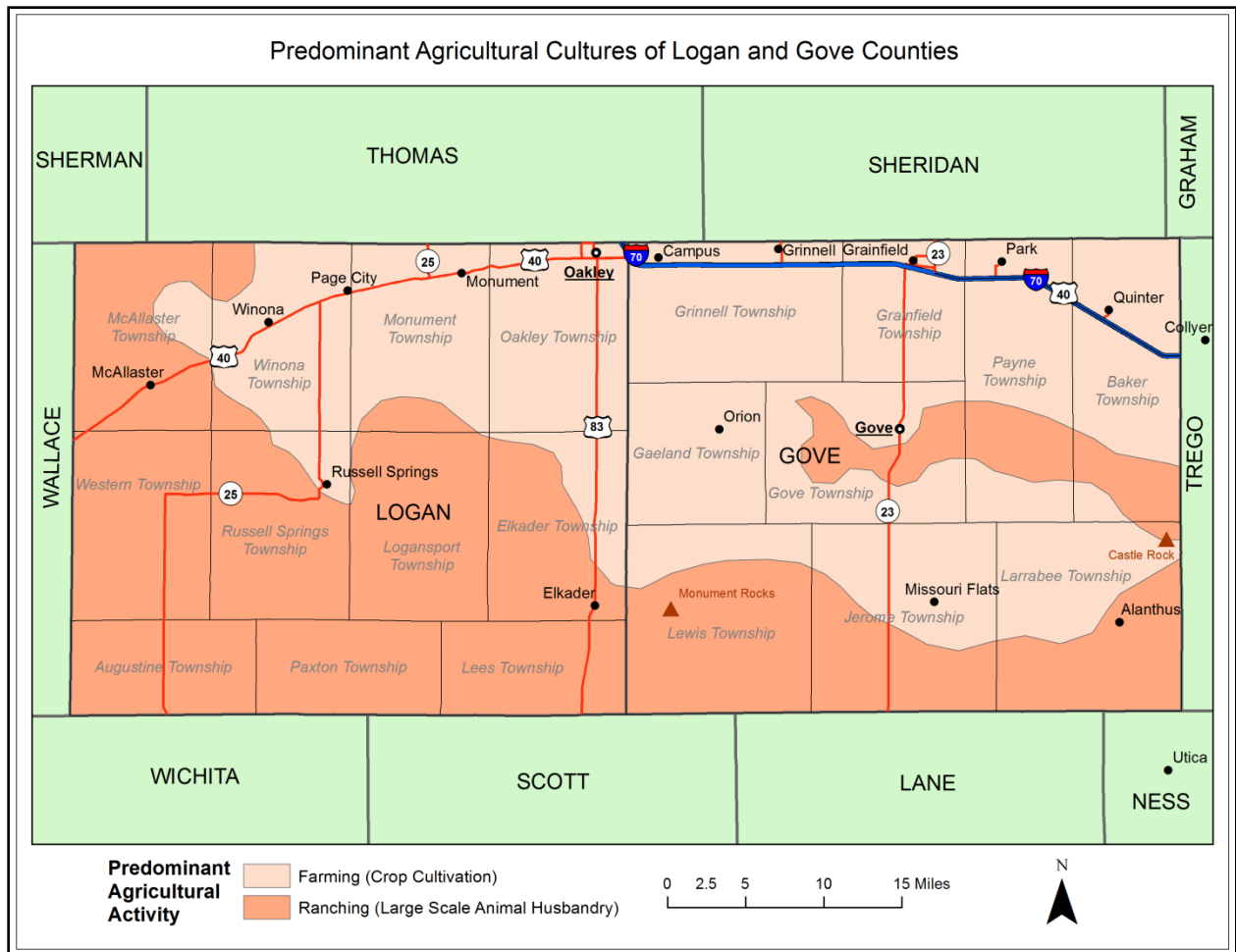
**Table 3.2 Population change in Gove County, Gove, and Grainfield [1880-2010] U.S. Census Bureau**

**Population Change in Gove County and Incorporated Gove County Towns, Continued**

Year	Grinnell	Percent Change (from Previous Census)	Park	Percent Change (from Previous Census)	Quinter	Percent Change (from Previous Census)
1880	-		-		-	
1890	-		-		-	
1900	-		-		-	
1910	-		-		450	
1920	162		-		383	-15
1930	303	87	-		570	49
1940	289	-5	-		481	-16
1950	364	26	223		741	54
1960	396	9	218	-2	776	5
1970	449	13	178	-18	930	20
1980	410	-9	183	3	951	2
1990	348	-15	150	-18	945	-1
2000	329	-5	151	1	961	2
2010	259	-21	126	-17	918	-4

**Table 3.3 Population change in Grinnell, Park, and Quinter [1880-2010] U.S. Census Bureau**

The second force at work in Gove County in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to cause its different population distribution and to maintain its county seat at Gove can be traced to its natural landscape and its arability. Compared to Logan County, much more of Gove County is suitable for crop cultivation (Figure 3.8). Because of this, through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century a sizable rural population existed in the county’s southern half. This enabled the development of rural communities such as the area called Missouri Flats located ten miles south and three miles east of Gove. Though the population in this section of the county is waning today, there still exists a perception amongst the county’s older residents that Gove remains near the center of the county’s population. Though in reality, the town is situated between the more populous townships along Interstate 70 in the north and the rural sparsely-populated townships of the south. This establishes the basic patterns that have shaped historical perspectives and perceptions regarding the role of the county seat in this county today.



**Figure 3.8 Agriculture Activity in Logan and Gove Counties**  
2013 TerraMetrics Imagery, 2007 Census of Agriculture. Cartography by author.

With a review of pertinent county seat history concerning the rural Great Plains established and the historical backgrounds of these two counties illustrated, I move to a discussion of this specific study by explaining the methods employed in my research. The following chapter explains my interactions and research endeavors in Logan and Gove counties.

## Chapter 4 - Methods

For my thesis I gathered information from Logan and Gove counties employing three different methods: on-site informal interviews, archival research, and landscape analysis.

Without question, the most important method for gathering information for this study was the interview process with Logan and Gove county residents. The archival research and landscape analysis informed my study to a lesser extent.

On-site informal interviews and conversations with local residents from the county seat towns, non-county seat towns, and the rural farming and ranching areas of Logan and Gove counties proved vital to my understanding of this area. The central purpose of this thesis is to analyze how different social groups interpret the role, or perceive the importance, of the county seat town. After acquiring IRB approval, I communicated with local residents to inform my research. In order to paint a full portrait of the understanding that residents develop with their county seat, I consulted Logan and Gove county residents inside and outside of the two current county seat communities. In-person interviews gave answers to all three of the central questions to this case study.

To address my first research question (what are the different understood or perceived roles played by the county seat in these two counties?), I gathered information on how residents in both counties interact with their county seat. I asked residents of both counties how often they visited the county seat in a year, what they typically did on a trip to the county seat, and generally how they felt about their county's seat. Answers to these questions provided insight into how residents assign meaning to what a county seat is and how they understand the role of the county seat within their county community.

To acquire answers to my second central question (do different segments of the



population, or cultural groups, in these two counties interpret the role of the county seat in different ways?), I asked general questions about history that lead to more specific responses about local cultural differences. I asked interviewees to explain to me a bit about their county's past, particularly as it pertains to the county seat and different population groups. This would commonly result in an explanation from the interviewee for why the county seat was relocated in Logan County and why the seat remains in Gove in Gove County. These explanations developed into descriptions of different segments of the local population and how they viewed the county seat town. It soon became evident to me that these groups disagreed with one another, usually based on cultural characteristics. For example, by conducting interviews in Logan County, I became aware of a cultural divide between farmers and ranchers who interpret the role of the county seat in completely different ways.

For addressing my final question (which cultural traits, conventions, or beliefs, if any, have the greatest impact on how an individual interprets or understands the role or significance of the county seat?), I gathered information from interviews until I developed a sense of the cultural norms of each major population segment. I looked at the religious beliefs of the Volga Germans in Gove County, the traditions of the elderly in rural Logan County, and the practices of the farming population around Missouri Flats, among other population segments. Through this vein I was able to identify four broad cultural groups in these two counties and the traditions of each that have an effect on perceptions of local governments.

I began interviewing individuals in Logan and Gove counties in May of 2012. My earliest interviews materialized as I formed acquaintances with a number of community leaders and business people by visiting both counties that spring. By requesting the names and phone numbers of other possible sources of information from my initial contacts, I expanded my base

of interviewees in a process called *snowballing*. For Logan County my initial contacts were the librarians at the Oakley Public Library and the volunteers at the Butterfield Trail Museum in Russell Springs. In Gove County my initial contacts were the employees at the Gove County Courthouse, Courthouse Annex, and Historical Society in Gove and the editors of the *Gove County Advocate* in Quinter. I then met and interviewed individuals outside of this initial pool of residents by visiting community gathering spots such as cafés, retirement homes, and commercial stores in all eight incorporated towns of the two study counties.

As I became aware of different cultural populations, such as the Volga-Germans of northern Gove County, and different local interpretations of the role of the county seat, such as those developed by ranchers in southern Logan County, I expanded my base of interviewees by seeking contact with different cultural groups. I sought interviews from individuals who reside in the eight incorporated towns of my study area as well as the more rural unincorporated areas of the two counties. This was in order to ensure that all cultural groups in both counties informed this research.

When I began my research, I was particularly concerned with the idea that age would be a significant factor in determining an individual's attitude towards the county seat. This was in part due to existing place attachment literature that suggests that age is key factor in determining one's perceived place within a community (Tuan, 1974; Smith and Cartlidge, 2011). As a result I was determined to seek interviews from the young (ages 20 to 39), middle-aged (ages 40 to 64), and older-aged (ages 65 and older) alike. Once I became aware of the nuances among approaches after a few dozen interviews, I divided the interviewee pool into three age groups. I attempted to achieve a representative distribution for those three age cohorts referenced in the table below (Table 4.1). During my initial rounds of interviews I also sought an even distribution between

men and women. However, through the interviewing process it became apparent that gender was not an important factor in how an individual interacts with the county seat.

By the early fall of 2012, when I concluded my research activities, I was successful in gathering information from a total of 36 individuals residing in Logan County and a total of 55 individuals residing in Gove County (Table 4.1).

### Source of Interviews

County Name	Incorporated Town or Township Name	Total Individuals Interviewed	Aged 20-39	Aged 40-64	Aged 65-Above
<b>Gove</b>	<i>Gaeland Township</i>	1	0	1	0
	<i>Gove</i>	27	6	15	6
	<i>Grainfield</i>	3	0	0	3
	<i>Grinnell</i>	6	0	2	4
	<i>Jerome Township</i>	1	0	0	1
	<i>Park</i>	2	1	1	0
	<i>Quinter</i>	15	2	8	5
	Total	55	9	27	19
			<b>100%</b>	<b>16.36%</b>	<b>49.09%</b>
<b>Logan</b>	<i>Monument Township</i>	3	0	1	2
	<i>Oakley</i>	16	4	9	3
	<i>Russell Springs</i>	12	0	2	10
	<i>Western Township</i>	1	0	0	1
	<i>Winona</i>	4	1	3	0
	Total	36	5	15	16
		<b>100%</b>	<b>13.89%</b>	<b>41.67%</b>	<b>44.44%</b>

**Table 4.1 Numbers of Those Interviewed by Location of Residence and Age**

For information regarding the histories of these two counties, I consulted archival resources such as newspaper articles and historical society documents. Such works provide an understanding of the historical background of the community. The local narratives developed by the newspaper editors in these two counties are evident in the form of articles of historical interest (special centennial and sesquicentennial papers) that appear in the only two newspapers currently produced in Logan and Gove counties. A selection of articles from the *Gove County Advocate* (published in Quinter) and the *Oakley Graphic* (published in Oakley) provide the

information for these local narratives and community histories. Newspapers that are no longer in publication, but are archived in the Logan and Gove County historical societies, such as the *Gove County Republican-Gazette*, also proved to be important resources. Literature from the historical and genealogical societies of the towns of Gove and Russell Springs similarly produced valuable historical background information.

For the newspaper articles, I primarily focused my attention on publications from the time of the county seat relocation in Logan County. I began searching through archived copies of the *Gove County Advocate*, the *Gove County Republican-Gazette*, and the *Oakley Graphic* dating back to the October of 1958 for any articles dealing with county history, county seat conflicts, or local government developments. This was achieved by searching for article titles hinting at such topics in a methodical page-by-page perusal of all three papers. I ended my search for such articles with the summer of 1968 editions of all publications. In addition to articles dating from this ten-year span I sought special centennial and sesquicentennial publications from these newspapers. The special editions highlighted community history and the significant changes that took place. Though I relied heavily upon the interview process to address the three central questions for this thesis, my archival research laid the foundation for my understanding of the Logan and Gove county narratives.

Landscape analysis was also an informative element for this research. Though not as singularly valuable as the interviewing component of my methodology, the role of landscape interpretation in my research is noteworthy. The cultural landscape can be a key factor in understanding a person's relationship with their surroundings. Kevin Blake explores the many different types of physical signs upon the human landscape that can develop from such relationships in his 2002 article "Colorado Fourteeners and the Nature of Place Identity." He

finds tangible manifestations of place identity in the form of community logos and commercial symbols, in the case of communities and the mountains around them (Blake, 2002). I found similar symbols in my study area. This would include the preservation of particular community buildings, such as the old Logan County Courthouse in Russell Springs (Figure 4.1a) or the physical location of the Gove County Historical Society (Figure 4.1b) located in the town of



**Figure 4.1a and b Old Logan County Courthouse, Russell Springs, Logan County, Kansas and Gove County Historical Society, Gove, Gove County, Kansas**  
May, 2012. Photographed by author.

Gove rather than in the larger town of Quinter. Such structures obviously hold an important role in the human landscape that would suggest a significance to the status of the county seat. Items such as business names and community signs touting the county seat town were also revealing elements of the landscape. This method of reading the landscape was employed in conjunction with personal interviews. Any findings attributed to this method are based on my own personal observations as well as my interaction with residents who helped interpret the landscape with their own understandings and attitudes.

While my research employs the use of three methods of information collection, I rely heavily upon the interview process for the majority of my findings. This research is human-oriented and is concerned with understanding how current rural populations in both counties interact with the places that are county seat towns. The informal semi-structured interview is a natural tool for such an endeavor. I use archival research and landscape analysis to bolster my study and strengthen my interview findings. These secondary methods helped me to form a well rounded, in depth view of Logan and Gove counties. In the following chapter I will discuss my results and shed light on how cultural characteristics inform perceptions and understandings of the rural county seat town.

## **Chapter 5 - Results**

The role of the county seat in Logan and Gove counties varies by individual. However, there are distinct patterns among different segments of the population within these two counties which inform how an individual interacts with the county seat. This is the most important result of this thesis and its central argument. In this chapter, as I assess the current role of the county seat for residents of the rural Great Plains, I examine how the population interacts with the county seat. Specifically, I begin by looking at the role of age. It becomes evident that an individual's generational habits affect how an individual interacts with his or her county seat. This is followed by an analysis of the affects that religious background, can have upon how people perceive the county seat. Next I examine how different land use practices can impact an individual's interaction with the county seat by exploring the differences between farmers and ranchers in Logan County. Finally, I examine the influence that an individual's relative location within these counties plays upon an individual's attitudes towards the significance of the county seat. Specifically, I explain how different town sizes, levels of political connectedness, and feelings of marginalization influence how groups regard the county seat.

### **Age**

Logan and Gove counties have shared experiences through the course of western Kansas history. For example, people in both counties lived through the Great Depression, Dust Bowl, World War II, and the economic highs and lows associated with wheat and cattle production in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Therefore, the same age groups or generations, which are commonly identified by such broad defining events, can be identified in both locations. Because of particular circumstances, each generation has its own lens for interpreting what a county seat means to them. I begin this section by discussing some of the age-related characteristics that

have an input on the perception of the county seat and how different age groups ascribe to different understandings of what a county seat is or should be.

## **Generational Culture**

### ***Aged 65 and Older***

This discussion of age and the corresponding characteristics that affect an individual's perception of a rural county seat town starts with the segment of the population that is aged 65 and older. Not surprisingly, this age cohort holds the most traditional concept of what a county seat means, a concept that is similar to what Jackson writes about in his 1950s description of Optimo City. This generation roughly corresponds to those born prior to and during World War II. The Population Reference Bureau divides this cohort into two groups. They are referred to as the "Good Warriors (born from 1909 through 1928)" and the "Lucky Few (born from 1929 through 1945)," the former of which is sometimes identified as the "Greatest Generation" (Carlson, 2009). This generation was born into a time of relative hardship with their birth period encompassing such events as the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and the first and second World Wars. As a result this generation finds value in maintaining economic stability by making due with spending little on government agencies. For Gove County, this would entail maintaining the county seat at the town of Gove. And, for both counties it would involve seeking limited expenditures in the existing county seats of Oakley and Gove.

Generally speaking the oldest age cohort in Logan and Gove counties is comfortable with having conditions in their county communities remain the same. In Gove County this means keeping the county seat in Gove and avoiding the topic of possibly relocating the county seat to the larger towns of Quinter or Grainfield. When asked if the Gove County seat should ever be moved to a more accessible location near the county's population center, ninety-year-old Oneida



Tuttle Press responded, “It [the county seat] should stay at Gove. It’s always been at Gove and has no business in Quinter. Quinter doesn’t need the courthouse. It [Quinter] already has the hospital, and it’s doing just fine on its own.” (Oneida Tuttle Press; Quinter, Gove County; May, 2012). Ms. Press is a resident of Quinter who grew up in a rural area south of town in the Baker Township. She takes a common nostalgic stance when it comes to the county seat. She has always known the Gove County seat to be Gove, and to have that changed would signify to her the loss of some of her childhood memories and her sense of tradition that accompanies that. “It’s hard to see so much change from the way things were. Gove isn’t hurting anybody by having the seat, so just let ‘em keep it.” (Oneida Tuttle Press; Quinter, Gove County; May, 2012). Rather than seeking the title of county seat for her town, Ms. Press, like most her age, prefers to see the maintenance of the status quo so that both Quinter and Gove each will have at least one viable economic foundation. For Quinter, that is the county hospital, high school, and interstate highway, and for Gove, that is the courthouse and county office buildings.

Based on the nineteen interviews I conducted with people aged 65 and older in Gove County, and the sixteen I conducted in Logan County, it is widely accepted among this oldest generation that the county seat title means life for its town. That is to suggest that without the title of “seat” the towns of Gove and Oakley would struggle even more than they already do for survival and relevance in the depopulating rural Great Plains. The presence of a courthouse in a community provides jobs for county workers who must exist to serve the county wherever the county seat may be. Furthermore, those who are 65 years of age and older understand the courthouse and other county government buildings act as a necessary physical location to serve the people. In their understanding, the *courthouse*, as this generation refers to either the county courthouse or county government buildings, inherently attracts a certain level of traffic to its

county seat town every week. This traffic originates from all corners of the county and facilitates commerce in the county seat town. County residents who are patrons of the “courthouse” will spend time in the county seat to do some shopping and dining, which is the economic “lifeblood of a small western Kansas town” (Verle Mendenhall, Gove Township, Gove County; May, 2012). In Gove County this means shopping at the County Seat Café and Grocery Store, a community owned cooperative. In Oakley, older residents of the county’s rural farmsteads, when visiting the county courthouse, will typically shop at the small grocery store, visit the bank or post office, and call upon old friend.

Courthouse patrons typically know the county employees, or they have a friend who lives in the county seat. Those of this age cohort fondly regard the social aspects of visiting their county’s seat and are less likely to regard a trip to Oakley or Gove as an inconvenient chore:

“I like to physically be able to go to the courthouse when I need something done. I’ll go inside, and the people there know me. There’s no line, and business there takes no more than twenty minutes no matter what you’re doing. Plus, I like to see the people who are working there. It’s just a friendlier way of doing things. You don’t get that kind of service in Denver, I know that much” (Dennis Dawson; Grinnell Township, Gove County; July, 2012).

This statement encompasses an understanding of the small Great Plains county seat as a convenient and amiable place. This oldest age group, specifically those who live outside of the county seat town, values the county seat for purposes of nostalgia, convenience, and friendship. For this generation, a visit to perform trivial county business can become an important social opportunity for catching up with acquaintances and loved ones. The majority of those interviewed in Logan and Gove counties who live outside of the county seat who are 65 years of age or older will visit the county courthouse roughly twice a year, for paying taxes and renewing license plates. This is not a troublesome task in most of their evaluations. Many find their visits pleasurable as they enjoy the convenience offered by rural county government.

### *Aged 40 to 64*

The next generation of Logan and Gove county residents that stands out via the interview process are people aged 40 to 64. This age group corresponds to the generation identified by the Population Reference Bureau as the “Baby Boomers (born from 1946 through 1964)” as well as the first half of “Generation X (born from 1965 through 1982).” The generation delineation that was evident to me ends with people born in roughly 1972. According to the Population Reference Bureau, both the Baby Boomers and Generation X are associated with periods of post-war peace and great prosperity. These people are focused on and inspired by economic drivers, and are therefore more likely to make decisions based on their own economic wellbeing and convenience (Carlson, 2009).

Those interviewees who were middle aged took a more practical and slightly less traditional approach to the county seat compared to the older generation. One working mother in Grainfield remembered, “I’ve had to go down there [to Gove] to do some county work, and I forgot a paper, or something like that, and I had to drive all the way back home to fill all the forms out the right way. That can be a real pain. It took up my whole day, and I lost hours of work” (Kay Haffner; Grainfield, Gove County; September, 2012). Many of the people in Logan and Gove counties who are aged 40 to 64 are still in the labor force or are married to someone in the labor force. This generation also represents a large portion of the population that has at least one child who has emigrated from Logan or Gove counties to live in an area with more economic opportunities. These two conditions have a great deal to do with a person’s approach to the role of local government. The primary concern for people of this generation regarding the the county seat is one of economics. This generation is interested in how the seat affects their work schedule, and how the decline of their county’s and county seat’s population affects their

children's potential for economic stability in the future.

In Gove County, there is a contingent that views Gove as a community with little relevance in and few economic prospects to offer younger generations for the future. Wayne Cook, a Gove seed supply distributor, is one such individual who hopes his children will have a different life in the coming two decades. When asked, his response to the question of the prospect of his daughter inheriting and continuing her father's business following his retirement, Mr. Cook responded, "I would strongly advise her against it. There is no future here in Gove. This town is dying, and there won't be a courthouse here in fifteen to twenty years. I want my kids to be happy, and they won't be happy in a dead town" (Wayne Cook; Gove, Gove County; May, 2012). Some small business owners in the county seat town of Gove predicted the consolidation of Gove County with another nearby larger county within the next twenty years. While Wayne Cook is not representative of all of Gove County, his pessimistic prediction about the future of his county's seat are well rooted within the concerns of his generation's interest in economic decision making.

Most middle aged residents of Gove County who live outside of Gove, particularly those in the northeastern corner, are more likely to view the county seat location as a nuisance or inconvenience rather than as an economic boon to a town. For these individuals the remoteness of Gove has most likely affected their work schedule adversely at least one time. Some, too, ascribe to a *pessimistic* outlook when it comes to the future of their county's government. I use the term *pessimistic*, because throughout all of my interviews in both Logan and Gove counties, I did not encounter anyone who wanted to see Gove County consolidated with a neighboring county. Such a consolidation would likely benefit a neighboring county, of the eight surrounding

counties, to the detriment of Gove County. This would signify the loss of local government for Gove County residents as well as the inevitable demise of their small county seat town.

### *Aged 20 to 39*

The final generation that I delineate based on the common interview responses are between the age of 20 and 39. This group corresponds with the Population Reference Bureau's established definition of the second half of "Generation X (born from 1965 through 1982)" and the "New Boomers (born from 1983 through 2001)." These generations are associated with higher levels of education as well as greater difficulties finding employment in the workforce (Carlson, 2009). This suggests that modern technology and time management are valued by those of this age group. This generation represents a large portion of the population that has at least one school-aged child at home. Education level, unemployment, and the existence of at-home dependents all have a great impact on this generation's approach to the role of the county seat, as each factor can relate directly to the convenience of local government. The primary concern for people of this generation regarding the role of the county seat is how the seat affects their work schedule, and how the seat affects their children's lives.

I interviewed a young couple with children who own a grocery store in the Gove County town of Grainfield. They were actively involved in a number of online enterprises in which community shops around Gove County worked together to sell their goods on the internet. I asked them to explain to me their interaction with their county seat, and their feelings towards the Gove community. This was their response:

Jordan McAlister: So, what is your connection to the Gove County seat? How often do you go there?

Nichole Godek: Well, we rarely have to go down to Gove. We don't really have a reason to. With kids in school and work during the day, it's not really an

easy trip to make to Gove, so if we need to take care of something with the county, we go online first.

Dan Godek: We went there once or twice when we first bought this place to take care of the property title, but since then we have taken care of everything online. I even renewed my driver's license in Hays one week when I needed to pick up something for the store over there.

Jordan: So how would you feel if Gove were no longer the county seat?

Nichole: I grew up here, in Gove County, so I don't want to see that happen. I don't want to see Gove dry up and close all of its businesses. We are trying to encourage the businesses down there to do what we are doing and placing our store online. That could really help some of the struggling shops on Main Street. But I don't think that I have ever considered what would be lost if we [Gove County] were forced to consolidate with another county. I guess it wouldn't be terrible.

Dan: I'm not originally from here, so I don't think that I feel a strong connection to Gove, but I don't necessarily want to see the county seat moved.

Jordan: Would you experience a sense of loss if the county seat were not located at Gove? Is there history that would be lost?

Nichole: There would be. We don't want to see that happen, but we don't really see the trend of younger people using the internet to avoid trips down there stopping. We haven't really thought about the consequences of not having a county seat 10 minutes away, but maybe an hour away at Colby.  
(Nichole and Dan Godek; Grainfield, Gove County; September, 2012)

After speaking with the Godeks, I feel that I better understand the position of young adults in the rural Great Plains. Just like the previous two generations, members of this age cohort do not necessarily want to see their county or county seat changed. However, there are more pressing concerns of family and economy that make the heritage and history of Gove and Oakley far less relevant to their lives. Also, when questioned about the possibility of their county consolidating with a neighboring jurisdiction, few of this age group were aware of how such an event would impact their lives.

The Logan and Gove county residents who are aged 20 to 39 are by far the most technology and convenience driven segments of both counties' populations. The Godeks are representative of this characteristic. Rarely will a member of this age cohort make a special trip

over an hour to visit their local county courthouse to pay their taxes or renew their automobile tags. This generation uses the internet and takes advantage of the state and county websites that allow them to manage their county interactions digitally. While the previous generation (aged 40 to younger than 65) is slowly warming to the idea of completing county transactions online, this generation is already quite familiar and comfortable with having a digital county seat.

Also in contrast to the previous two older generations, if a member of this younger generation of adults does for some reason visit the county seat, he or she will not practice what has become the cultural norm for the older generations of making social calls to friends in the area. They are less likely to visit with acquaintances in Gove or Oakley, and they usually will not stop to patronize the local cafes in Gove or Oakley as the older two generations are prone to do. This generation marks the beginning of the de-socialization of the rural county seat as well as the digitalization of the county courthouse.

Different generations approach the Great Plains county seat in profoundly different ways. Though, obviously, not every interviewee of a particular age came to the same conclusions, three age classes presented themselves as distinct when it comes to perceptions of what a county seat should be and how significant it is. Those who are 65-years-old and older hold a more traditional interpretation of what a county seat should be based more closely to the role described by Wood (2007), Shellenberg (2004), and Jackson (1997). They prefer the seat to maintain a location in the geographic center of the county rather than the population center of the county to allow equal access to rural and urban county residents. They also took traditional stances on visiting the seat as an important occasional social activity. The middle aged, or those who are aged 40 to younger than 65, view the location of the county seat in more practical economic terms. They ask themselves, what would be the cost of updating and maintaining existing or new county

property?, what is the most convenient location of the county seat for the greatest number of residents?, and how can local government run at its most efficient rate? The social aspects of visiting the county seat are also important to the middle aged, but convenience is crucial. And the third age group comprised of young adults who are aged 20 to 39 is less concerned with the traditional economic and social roles of the county seat from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. They are focused primarily on their own preferences for convenience. It is this generation that is vastly more technologically savvy than its predecessor generations, and as a result, this segment of the population has had the greatest impact on the digitalization of the county seat.

### **Religious Background**

Both counties have their own ethnic and religious characteristics based in large part on historic settlement patterns. This section discusses how a person's religious background can frame the role of the county seat. Clearly, some counties in the American Great Plains have a greater presence of ethnic and religious diversity than others. That is the reality for Logan and Gove counties, which makes both counties useful case studies that are representative of the region as a whole.

In both counties, though more pronounced in Gove County, there exists a cultural division between two distinct groups of people with European-American ancestry. The first group is composed of European-Americans identified by James Shortridge as the descendants of many different European peoples who migrated to Kansas throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century from primarily Midwestern states such as Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, and Nebraska. This group is culturally assimilated, predominantly Protestant, and commonly self-identifies as "American." The second group is comprised of the descendants of Europeans who emigrated directly from Europe to settle parts of western Kansas in the 1880s and 1890s. Though both groups immigrated to Logan and Gove counties at the same time period, this second group is much more linked to



the old-world values of their ancestral homeland. Mostly from Germanic territories, this second group is populated with members who are either Catholic or who are associated with one of the Churches of the Brethren. The division between European and Midwestern American cultures is common in much of Kansas and other plains states including Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota (Shortridge, 1995). These religious identities influence individuals' views of the role of the county seat. Religious stances, particularly those found in northern Gove County, have fostered political outlooks that prize frugality and preservation over exorbitant spending and modernization. Just as in any corner of the nation, these political ideologies formed through religious standpoints inform the ways in which individuals perceive their local government (Cherry, 2004).

### **Ethnic German and Volga-German Population**

Gove County has a high proportion of German-American and Volga-German-American citizens (Anderson, 2004; Laegreid, 2004). Germans and Volga-Germans immigrated to Gove County in large groups the 1880s and 1890s establishing the railroad stop of Buffalo Park as a predominantly German-speaking Catholic community (Tuttle, 1982). There, education was emphasized (McQuillan, 2004) and hard work and thriftiness were valued above all.

Ethnically German, originating in Hessen, Rhineland, and the Palatinate regions of Germany, the Volga-Germans lived in the Volga Valley of southwestern Russia from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They immigrated to the United States due to their loss of privilege granted under the reigns of Catherine the Great and Tsar Alexander I. Subsequently, they were unable to sell their lands in Russia and came to the Great Plains without money to purchase large tracts of land (Laegreid, 2004). This relative poverty led to the development of shared communal cultural characteristics and the foundation of organizations in

Gove County that helped to strengthen the economically disadvantaged. Dependence on one's neighbors over dependence on a government entity is an important cultural characteristic of Volga-German communities. This includes the value of caring for one's ethnic kinsmen in the form of benevolent church organizations and immigration clubs. Such communal closeness is characteristic of the Volga-German communities of Kansas, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. These structures are no longer so strong in Gove County today, yet the cultural cohesion that grew from them remains. Logan County, though populated with a number of people with German ancestry, does not have a German contingent that is so culturally well defined.

A non-German resident of rural southern Gove County explained that, "Those Germans in the north [of the county] are thrifty people. They don't want to spend more than they have to on anything. So there's no way they are going to vote for a measure to move the county seat so that we'll have to spend hundreds of thousands [of dollars] on a new courthouse in Quinter" (Mark Coberly; Missouri Flats, Gove County; September, 2012). It is the common perception throughout the non-German community of Gove County, which is much less of a cohesive community compared to the German-American population of the county, as well as the German-American community, that the German population in and around Park, Grainfield, and Quinter have created an atmosphere of political fiscal conservatism that pervades the entire county. This has led to a desire to seek fiscal responsibility and to seek means to limit local government expenditures. This applies to the concept of possibly relocating the Gove County seat from Gove to the more populous town of Quinter. It is the perception that because of fiscal conservatism, associated with traditional Volga-German culture, the people of Gove County generally approach the county seat as an entity to be valued and maintained. Modern facilities in a more urban

setting, such as Quinter, are not as valuable to the population as making do with what already exists.

This is not the case in Logan County. There, the German-American population is not primarily of Volga-German ancestry. The non-Volga-Germans migrated to the United States with more wealth. They typically emigrated directly to the United States from Germany proper after selling their land or homes. They came to this country with more disposable income and were, therefore, less dependent on community organizations to sustain their livelihood in the New World. Consequently, they were less dependent on their own German community, they were less community oriented, and more open to assimilation into Midwestern Anglo culture. Traditional German thriftiness, or the perception of its existence, did not have an effect on the issue of relocating the Logan County seat in the early 1960s. Whether an actual German cultural trait of having an aversion to exorbitant expenses actually exists in Gove County, or not, I interviewed a number of residents of German and non-German backgrounds alike who expressed their belief in such an ethnic trait. Therefore the perception of such an attribute seems to affect how some in Gove County approach the role of the county seat.

### **Religious Ideologies**

The religious backgrounds in both counties provide examples of how spiritual beliefs can affect one's approach to local government, and both counties provide examples of religious cultural norms in the American Great Plains. Logan County is representative of Great Plains counties where the largest proportion of religious adherents are members of a mainstream Protestant faith such as the Baptist, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and specifically in the case of Logan County, Methodists. Logan County is fairly typical in Kansas, as over 50 percent of the state's counties claim a majority of Methodist adherents. Because the Methodist Church is a

large denomination in the United States, it can be considered a faith somewhat more encompassing of different political ideologies, at least within the rigidity of church directives. Therefore in Logan County, when the county seat was relocated due to economic reasoning, residents do not make the argument that religion had much of an effect on the local perception of what the county seat is or should be.

In Gove County, a number of different religious ideologies are present. Gove County is representative of a Great Plains county where smaller Christian denominations influence local culture. In northern Gove County, the early presence of a German community at Buffalo Park beginning in the 1880s attracted other German settlers to the area. Park grew to become the Catholic center of the county with a strong German Catholic contingent (Figure 5.1). In the late 1880s and early 1890s, the town of Quinter attracted a group of Anabaptists from the Deutschophone, or German-speaking, world. This population is a socially and fiscally



**Figure 5.1 Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Park, Gove County, Kansas**  
April, 2012. Photographed by author.

conservative group associated with plain Mennonite-style dress in accordance with traditionalism. It has created three congregations in present-day Quinter, which include the Church of the Brethren (Figure 5.2), the Dunkard Brethren Church (Figure 5.3a), and the Conservative Brethren Church. A fourth Protestant group with a strongly conservative ideology, the Reformed Presbyterian Church (Figure 5.3b), also has a small number of adherents in Quinter. These four churches represent a plurality of churchgoers in the largest city in Gove County. All four preach self reliance and a suspicion of government agencies. For example, in



**Figure 5.2 Church of the Brethren, Quinter, Gove County, Kansas**  
September, 2012. Photographed by author.



**Figure 5.3a and b Dunkard Brethren Church, Quinter, Gove County, Kansas and**  
**Reformed Presbyterian Church, Quinter, Gove County, Kansas**  
September, 2012. Photographed by author

the Reformed Presbyterian Church, “Church members are not allowed to vote for a candidate in an election unless that person pledges to uphold the directives of the [Reformed Presbyterian] church. Most of the time, that means that we don’t vote” (Dorothy Graham; Quinter, Gove County; June, 2012). Because of this mindset, Quinter is generally understood throughout the county as an unlikely candidate for attempting to wrest the county seat title away from Gove.

### **Land Use**

In both Logan and Gove counties, though more pronounced in the former, there is a cultural divide that exists between farmers and ranchers. I present this cultural divide as a land use difference, and I explore the disparate approaches to the significance of the county seat among people in these two professions.

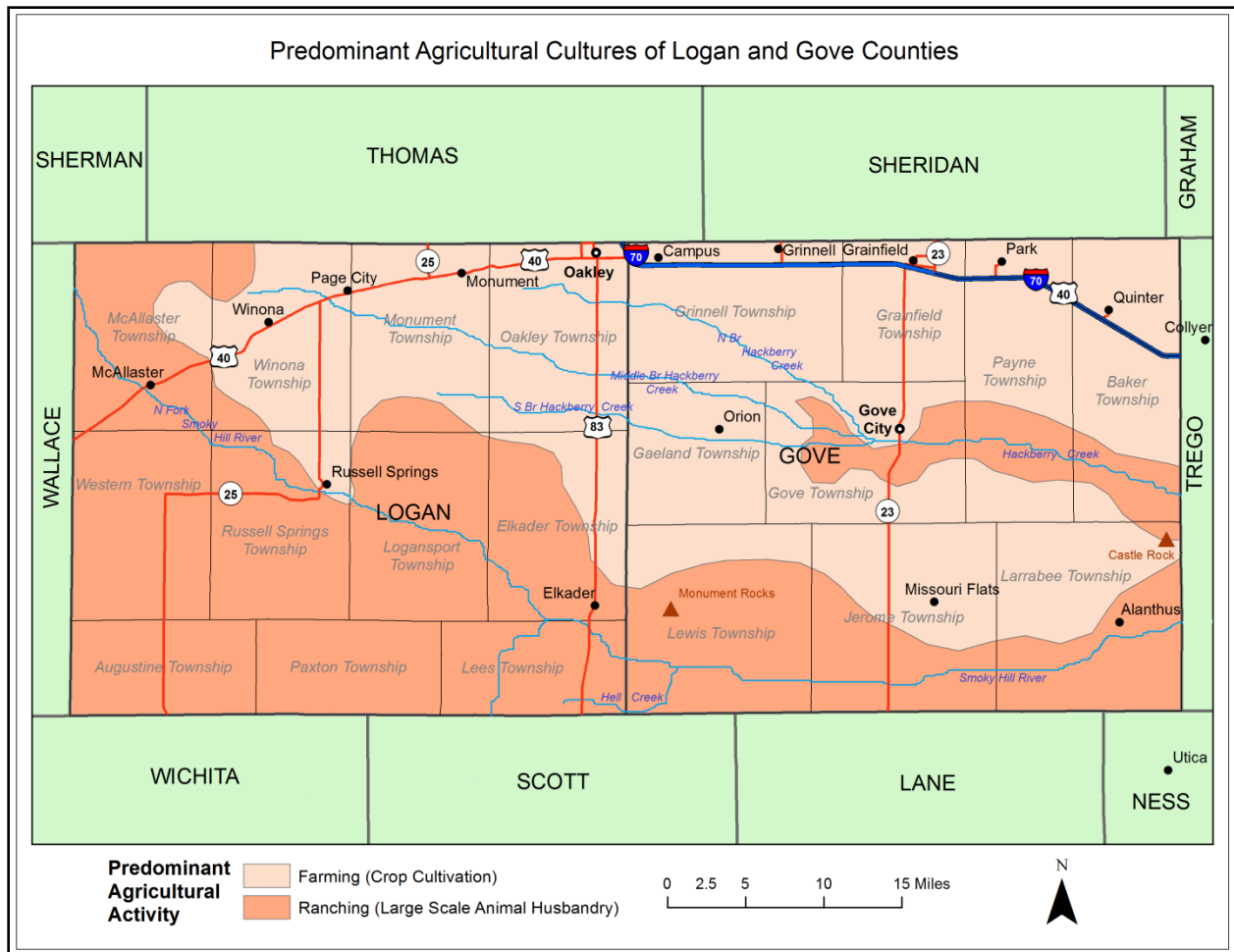
The farmer/rancher divide is common throughout the Great Plains and is a frequently exhibited theme in some popular nonfiction accounts of the region such as Timothy Egan’s 2006 *The Worst Hard Time*. In this work concerning the frontier populations of northwestern Texas, the Oklahoma Panhandle, and western Kansas, Egan states, “Nesters [homesteading farmers] and cowboys hated each other; each side thought the other was trying to run the other off the land. Homesteaders were ridiculed as bonnet-wearing pilgrims, sodbusters, eyeballers, drylanders, howlers, and religious wackos. Cowboys were hedonists on horseback, always drunk, sex-starved” (Egan, 2006).

The cultural divide between farmers and ranchers is present from North Dakota to Texas. This case is especially true in the High Plains subregion between the 100<sup>th</sup> Meridian and the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains where for a century residents, land promoters, crop cultivators, and livestock ranchers have argued over the validity of whether or not the land was better suited for raising cattle or raising grains. The “Great Desert,” as the Great Plains was initially named by Stephen Long in 1820, and later lengthened to the “Great American Desert,”

(Nichols, 1980) was settled in great numbers by European-American ranchers in the decades following the Civil War. These migrants were attracted to the area in large part due to the vast fenceless expanses of grass. Ranching is well suited for the High Plains as the precipitation range of 12 to 20 inches received in the region annually is just enough to sustain the natural vegetation that supports limited herds of cattle (Hudson, 2004). Despite the climate, land promoters touted mankind's ability to dominate disagreeable landscapes through science. Beginning in the northern plains in the 1880s and continuing southward into the 1920s, community enterprises were established to build new towns and attract new settlement on the plains. These organizations began promoting crop cultivation as a means of attracting more people. It was argued that "the rain would follow the plough," and special classes offered by the Federal government were available in High Plains towns like Dalhart, Texas and Boise City, Oklahoma to teach new settlers how to farm in such an arid environment (Egan, 2006).

In the 1880s and 90s, ranchers in the High Plains began to feel as if their livelihood was under siege. The free rangeland, once open to all, was beginning to be fenced in and sectioned off by farming property owners who did not care for herds of livestock trampling their crops. In some High Plains counties, farmers would ultimately come to dominate the landscape, while in others, farmers found crop cultivation too unpredictable, leaving the land in the hands of large ranch owners.

The existing dynamic of farmers and ranchers in conflict over land use existed in both Logan and Gove counties in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. However, farming would ultimately spread over the majority of Gove County. To this day, though ranching is present and economically vibrant, Gove County has a fairly even distribution of farmers and their families inhabiting all corners of the county. Yet due to the topography of Logan County, with so much of the central



**Figure 5.4 Agriculture Activity in Logan and Gove Counties**  
 2013 TerraMetrics Imagery, 2007 Census of Agriculture. Cartography by author.

and southern portions of the county comprised of land that is uneven and difficult to till, the county developed a more divided agricultural landscape (Figure 5.4).

In both counties, the townships that have the most farmland are also the most populous, while the townships with the most ranchland exhibit low populations (Table 5.1). However in Logan County, only three of the county’s eleven townships have a population of over 100 people. All three of these townships are located in the area that is dominated by farming. The other eight are within the ranching realm. Russell Springs Township, the former home of the county seat, is not located within the part of the county where crop cultivation is the dominant agricultural activity. The northern part of Logan County is flatter with a generally consistent



County Name	Township Name	Population	Predominant Agricultural Activity
<b>Gove</b>	<i>Baker</i>	1,291	Farming
	<i>Gaeland</i>	52	Farming
	<i>Gove</i>	173	Farming and Ranching
	<i>Grainfield</i>	369	Farming
	<i>Grinnell</i>	399	Farming
	<i>Jerome</i>	97	Farming and Ranching
	<i>Larrabee</i>	61	Farming and Ranching
	<i>Lewis</i>	7	Ranching
	<i>Payne</i>	246	Farming
	Total	2,695	
	<b>Logan</b>	<i>Augustine</i>	22
<i>Elkader</i>		8	Ranching
<i>Lees</i>		5	Ranching
<i>Logansport</i>		7	Ranching
<i>McAllaster</i>		25	Ranching
<i>Monument</i>		141	Farming
<i>Oakley</i>		2,185	Farming
<i>Paxton</i>		28	Ranching
<i>Russell Springs</i>		50	Farming and Ranching
<i>Western</i>		43	Ranching
<i>Winona</i>		242	Farming
Total		2,756	

**Table 5.1 Township Population and Predominant Agricultural Activity**  
U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; 2013 TerraMetrics Imagery, 2007 Census of Agriculture.

elevation between 3,000 feet at the Gove County line in the Oakley Township and 3,200 feet at the Wallace County line in the McAllaster Township. The land there is better suited for crop cultivation, and as a result the culture there is comprised of farming families and cooperatives. The central and southern part of the county is traversed by draws such as the Hackberry Creek tributaries, Hell Creek, and the Smoky Hill River which have eroded the area's chalky soils (Figure 5.5). The elevation in this southern part of the county ranges from roughly 2,600 feet in the river valleys to 3,300 feet atop the buttes of the small canyon systems. The landscape in this section is not suitable for crop cultivation, and this part of Logan County has long remained a ranching area. Ranching has traditionally required fewer workers than farming, and



**Figure 5.5 Rugged Southern Logan County Ranchland, Russell Springs Township**  
May, 2012. Photographed by author.

subsequently, the southern two thirds of Logan County have far fewer residents than the northern third. Conversely, farming has traditionally required more laborers. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as fewer and fewer farm laborers were needed, the surplus population emigrated to towns and cities. The people inhabiting the small towns in Logan and Gove counties, in large part, migrated to these towns from farming areas. Today many town-dwellers have personal (and sometimes familial) connections to farming areas. As a result the farming sections of the county are much more oriented toward smaller centers of population like Gove (Figure 5.6), Grainfield, Oakley, and Quinter than the ranching segments of both counties (Tuttles, 1982).

This has led to a farming culture versus ranching culture divide in Logan County, which has affected the way in which residents interact with local government in the form of the county seat. Today southern Logan County residents, with the experience of a ranching background, approach county government in a very specific way; they believe that the county seat should be centrally located within the county based on the county's geographic area rather than its population. Ranchers, ranch workers, and ranch families are overwhelmingly people who live outside of town (at least in these two Great Plains counties), and this approach favors the more rural areas of the county over the small centers of greater population density.



**Figure 5.6 Gove, as Seen from Kansas State Highway 23**  
September, 2012. Photographed by author.

The relocation of the county seat in Logan County proved an unpopular event within the townships of the county which are more heavily populated by ranchers. When asked about his feeling about the 1963 county seat relocation from Russell Springs to Oakley, one southern Logan County resident with a ranching background stated, “They never cared about us down here [in the southern part of the county]. We’re mostly just ranchers down here. They figured we’re used to driving everywhere, as it is. What’s twenty more miles to Oakley going to matter to ‘em?” (Joe Darnall; Russell Springs Township, Logan County; July, 2012). The ranchers of Logan County feel mistreated because the seat was removed from a more geographically central location to what ranchers like Joe feel is a more urban and distant corner of the county.

This is in contrast to the feeling of other rural Logan County residents. The farmers of the northern part of the county are less inclined to view the county seat move from Russell Springs to Oakley as a negative event. “The seat needed to be moved to where most of the people lived.

Russell Springs is a great little town, and we were all sad to see it wither away as it did, but the seat move was a good thing, overall,” recounts one rural northeastern Logan County resident (Joyce Homm; Monument Township, Logan County; June, 2012). The farming portions of the county have traditionally served as home to the majority of the Logan County population, therefore it stands to reason that the people of Monument and Oakley townships would prefer having the county seat located in the center of the county’s population rather than the center of the county’s geographic area.

### **Location and Situation**

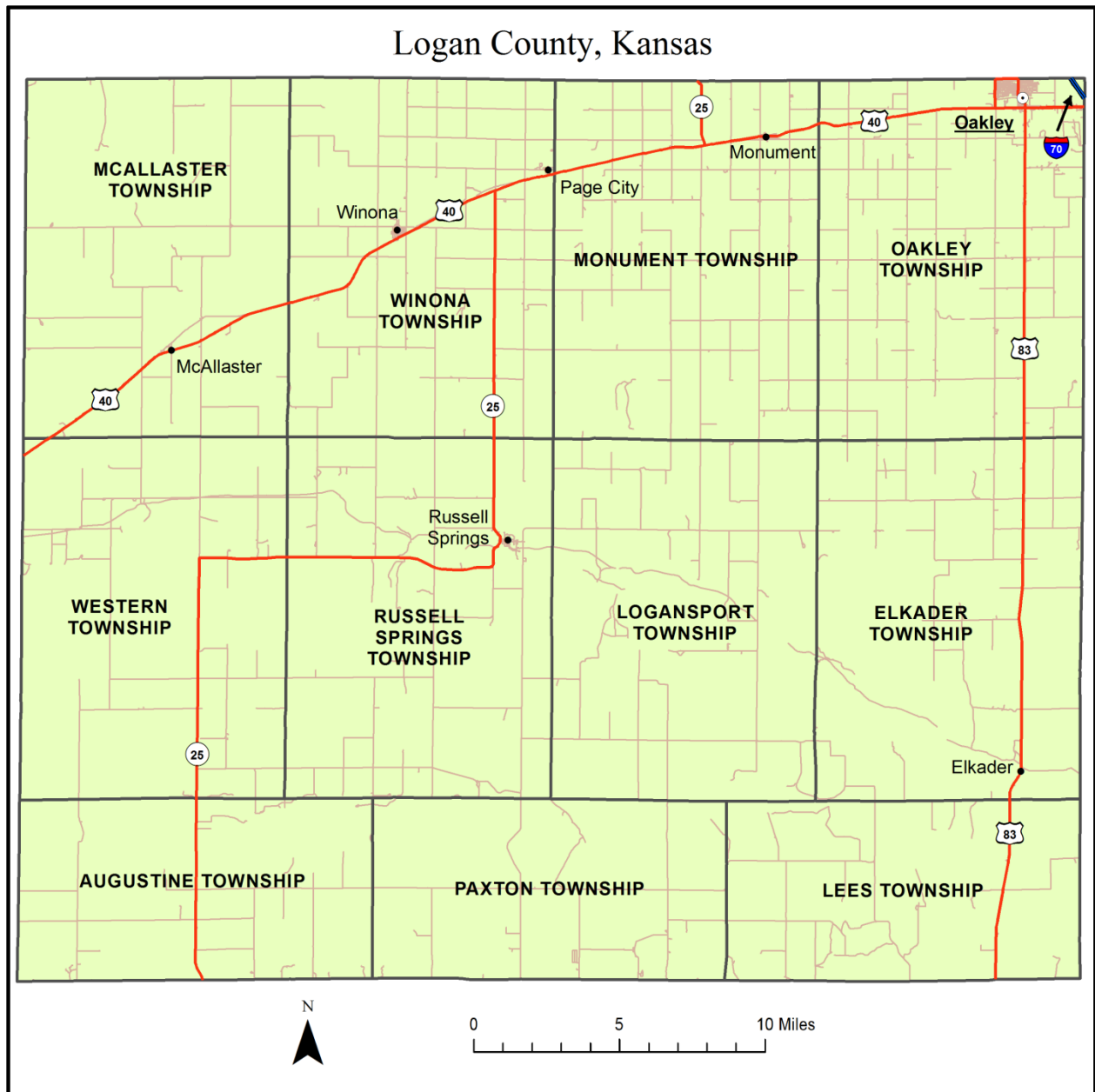
The location of one’s residence, or the situation of one’s town, is an important factor in determining the ways in which a Logan or Gove county inhabitant interacts with his or her county seat. In this final section of Chapter Four, I discuss the different approaches to the county seat formed by residents of different towns within these two counties. I explain how the size of a town, the perception of political power, and feelings of marginalization influence how groups regard the county seat.

One of the crucial factors for an individual’s relationship with the county seat in both Logan and Gove counties is the particular town in which that individual resides. Of the total of eight incorporated towns in these two counties, there are roughly five different approaches individuals have developed for regarding their county seat. Both counties have developed settlement patterns over their past 151 years that have resulted in a more developed, politically powerful northeast and a less developed, more rural middle and south or periphery. In Logan County, this has resulted in Oakley dominating the county’s culture, demographics, economy, and politics. In Gove County the result has been less dramatic, yet it is clear that the towns of northern Gove County have more economic and political clout than do the less populated townships of the southern two thirds of the county.

## Logan County

Logan County is home to two distinct mindsets regarding the proper role of the Great Plains county seat. Not surprisingly, these areas of the county closely match the divisions created by the county's 1960 county seat relocation election. The people of Oakley and Monument townships judge the county seat's significance based on its economic vitality. This approach is associated with the 20<sup>th</sup> Century county seat. It understands the county seat not only to be the governmental focal point of the county, but also a key market center for the surrounding area. The residents of the county's remaining nine townships (Figure 5.7) share a more traditional interpretation of what a county seat should be, which is a rural geographically-centered community similar to Gove.

Residents of Oakley today are typically pleased that the county seat was relocated to their community in the early 1960s. The Oakley residents I interviewed, all expressed their contentment with the seat relocation. When questioned about the movement of the county government from Russell Springs to Oakley an Oakley librarian said, "I am glad that we [Oakley] got the county seat back then. Because of that, Oakley grew. Russell Springs was already dying years before the courthouse was moved here. They couldn't handle the county seat like we can. We have restaurants, banks, a grocery store; they had nothing. And now if I need to go to the courthouse, I just drive a few blocks instead of 20 miles down the road to Russell [Springs]. It's a good thing for convenience and the [local] economy." (Patricia Keyes; Oakley, Logan County; July, 2012). Another Oakley business owner accounts, "If we didn't have the county seat, we would probably have a similar economy to what we have now, except the jobs created by having the courthouse here wouldn't exist [in Oakley]. Having the county seat strengthens a small town, just that much more. It, maybe, helps us [Oakley] by bringing in a few



**Figure 5.7 Logan County General Reference**  
Cartography by author.

more dollars, but the real importance is that having the county seat gives the town [Oakley] a bit more regional importance. That was what was at stake in the 60s; not really economic importance, but just the power to be called a county seat.” (Steve Golden; Oakley, Logan County; July, 2012). I gathered that most Oakley residents, and residents of northeastern Logan County were pleased that the seat had relocated in the 1960s. Having the seat in Oakley

translates to more convenience for the majority of the population, provides a economic opportunities for the town, and can mean regional significance for Oakley, which towns like Russell Springs and Winona do not have.

Residents of the smaller communities of Russell Springs and Winona generally approach the county seat town of Oakley with suspicion and a healthy dose of weariness. The people of both towns still harbor some negative feeling over the seat relocation and reminisce about the days when the western and southern portions of the county had a little bit more power by holding the county's government. I found that Winona and Russell Springs residents still experience feelings of exclusion and marginalization from Oakley. One Winona resident accounted, "Now we're the low man of the totem pole. They've got the school, ours [Winona's] is near to closing, thanks to them [Oakley]. They've got the businesses, they've got the traffic from [the] Interstate, and now they've got the courthouse," (David Wright; Winona, Logan County; September, 2012). He, like many of the western and southern reaches of the county voiced the opinion that the county would have been better served had the seat remained in the more geographically centered Russell Springs. Mr. Wright's mindset reflects his feeling of existential outsidership from within the Logan County community (Relph, 1976).

The tensions that exist today between Oakley and the southwestern communities of the county are remnants of the bitter feelings that resulted from the 1960 relocation election. One former resident of Logan County remembers that once the county seat was moved a number of families in that community ceased patronizing Oakley stores and businesses. "My family continued to shop in Oakley, but some of my dearest friends would have nothing to do with Oakley [businesses]. They would go there for courthouse business, but they would go out of their way to shop in Colby or Sharon Springs rather than spend money in Oakley. The community was

divided and the wounds were deep. I was sad to see the courthouse moved, but what were we going to do. They outnumber us, plain and simple.” (Mike Baughn; former resident of Monument, Logan County; September, 2012). Mr. Baughn’s stance illustrates the feelings within many of the western townships of Logan County that the function of the county seat was and is regarded as an instrument of equality. Prior to the removal of the county seat to Oakley, the balance of power was more evenly distributed geographically. Oakley was the economic power of the county; yet a significant amount of political power was perceived to be held in Russell Springs as long as it could maintain its title as capital. Once the title was taken from it, the political and economic power of the county shifted to where the population resided.

In Logan County the major division between locations within the county that seems to affect a resident’s view of, relationship with, or approach to the county seat and its role is that between the more developed northeast and the less developed southwest. Oakley is the most important town in Logan County due to its size, political power, and economic viability. It forms the focal point of the central demographic and economic region of the county. This area includes most of Monument and Oakley townships. The adult residents of these two townships historically vote in a similar manner on local political issues (e.g. the 1960 county seat relocation election; Funk, 1960), send their children to the same school, and shop at the same venues in Oakley. The remaining nine townships comprise the county’s more rural southwestern region.

### **Gove County**

In Logan County there are two geographic areas that have created distinct understandings of what the county seat should be. Yet, in Gove County there are three areas that exhibit distinct approaches to the county seat. These subsections include the northeastern portion of Gove County encompassing the towns of Grainfield, Park, and Quinter; the town of Gove and its



surrounding hinterlands; and the communities at the geographic and political edge of the county including Grinnell and Missouri Flats (Figure 5.8).

Within Gove County, people who live in the towns of Grainfield, Park, and Quinter share a similar outlook relating to the role of the county seat. Based on what I gathered through the interview process, the residents of northeastern Gove County generally want the seat to remain in



**Figure 5.8 Gove County General Reference**  
Cartography by author.

Gove. This group views the title as a necessity for the survival of the very small town of Gove. Overwhelmingly, when I played devil's advocate and presented Gove County residents in and around Grainfield and Quinter with the argument that logically the county seat would better serve the greatest number of people from one of the larger towns, I was quickly reminded that no one was particularly interested in such a prospect. One Quinter resident sharply informed me, "Any talk about moving the county seat from Gove to Quinter is just hearsay. We're happy to see the seat remain in Gove for as long as there is a Gove County." (Roxanne Broeckelman; Quinter, Gove County; April, 2012). This point of view is expressed throughout the northeastern part of the county. After offering another similar argument designed to appeal to one's logical cognitive processes in favor of a seat relocation, I was told by a Grainfield man, "Why would we want the seat to be up here on [the] Interstate? We like our small seat. Going down there [to Gove] is no big deal; and it [having the county seat] keeps Gove alive. If all five towns in Gove County can keep something to keep them alive, I think most people in the county will be for it. We have a school and Quinter has a school to keep 'em alive. Park has the Catholic Church, but Grinnell doesn't have much to keep it going." (Marvin Beougher; Grainfield, Gove County; May, 2012). Mr. Beougher's sentiment is indicative of the feeling of community that pervades Gove County. For most northeastern Gove County residents, including Beougher, the goal is for each Gove County town to succeed. Therefore, the county community, in general, stands in support of maintaining the county seat in Gove, if that will ensure the town's immediate survival.

The people of Park take a similar approach, as was exhibited to me during an interview at the town's only service station. There a Park businessman related to me his perspective, "We're [Park is] kind of a little guy here. Most of our kids either go to school at Wheatland [in Grainfield] or Quinter. We want to see the seat stay in Gove, but we're too small to have much

of a say in that. But I don't think it's going to happen [the seat relocating to Quinter]." (Joe Smith [pseudonym]; Park, Gove County; May, 2012). Park residents understand that they have only a small voice within the Gove County electorate, however they too are generally content to see the county seat title benefit Gove, in its limited capacity. Although Gove is not flourishing with the influx of economic activity once associated with the county seat title in the previous centuries, the town's survival is still linked to its political position of minor significance within its county. Those who reside in the towns of Grainfield and Quinter (and Park to a lesser extent) feel that their communities are a bit more economically and politically stable due to their size, access to transportation networks like Interstate 70, and school systems. Therefore, to have the county seat relocate to one of these communities would be less beneficial to the overall county community because such a move would be detrimental to Gove. This concept is not lost on the Gove County residents whom I interviewed in Grainfield, Park, and Quinter.

The people of Gove have a similar outlook to those of Grainfield and Quinter, but with a slight difference. Gove residents enjoy having their county's seat in a more rural setting as the convivial, small-town nature of their seat is an important part of their place identity (Gilbreath, 2007). To the people of Gove, the ideal role of the county seat is more akin to the initial "Virginia" model discussed by Schellenberg. To the people of Gove, the seat should be a small pastoral farming village where urban concerns such as economic vitality are not nearly as important as a strong sense of community. Marcia Roemer of the Gove County Historical Society explains, "It's great to be able to walk to the county offices and right away you can speak to Christy [Tuttle in the County Deeds Office], or if you go to the courthouse you can go right up the stairs and see [Judge] Barbara [Werner]. We love having the courthouse here, and I would say that most people in the county, especially Grainfield and Grinnell, feel the same way."

(Marcia Roemer; Gove Township, Gove County; May, 2012). Gove is linked to Grainfield due to the school consolidation that took place in 1969 among Gove, Grainfield, and Park to form the Wheatland School District. Because most of the children in Gove have gone to school with the children in Grainfield for years, most people in both towns have expressed to me a strong feeling of community between the two towns, which are a mere ten miles apart.

Although the majority of the people I interviewed in Gove are pleased that their town is small and friendly, these same individuals were saddened by the continued decline of the local population. Because of the decline, the residents of Gove expressed concern over the idea that outside forces might seek to relocate the county seat to a town located along Interstate 70 with a larger population. Daryl Kopriva, a farmer who lives just outside of Gove explained,

“Every now and then, some group from Topeka [State of Kansas Government] tries to take something away from us. Last time it was the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] office. But the whole county rallied together to keep the office here [in Gove]. The next big thing will be someone coming along to tell us that the county seat needs to be in Quinter, or maybe even Grainfield. We would probably all come together to see that the seat stays here [in Gove] too. People are worried sometimes that they’re going to move the county seat to Quinter, but I don’t see it happening. We’re a rural county and we’re a conservative county, and we’re happy to see things stay the same.” (Daryl Kopriva; Gove Township, Gove County; May, 2012).

It is apparent that Gove residents feel somewhat under-siege at times due to the perceived existence of a threat from the state government (referenced above as “Topeka”) to see the county seat moved to a more populous town.

While in Gove at the County Seat Café (Figure 5.9), I was introduced to a woman in her 70s who had lived in Gove for most of her life. When I explained to her that I was seeking interviews for a thesis relating to the Gove County seat, she quickly and aggressively said to me, “Just leave it [the county seat] here; it’s not hurting a single person here.” (Anne Dow [pseudonym]; Gove, Gove County; May, 2012). This interaction summed up the feelings of



**Figure 5.9 County Seat Café and Grocery Store, Gove, Gove County, Kansas**  
May, 2012. Photographed by author.

alienation experienced in this community. She felt that I, as a community outsider, had an interest in seeing the county seat relocated to a town like Quinter. I was told that without the title of county seat, Gove will struggle for survival, and may even possibly cease to exist following such a devastating blow to its local economy.

Gove residents do regard the county seat title as being rather significant to their town's future. Without the seat, the jobs created by the county offices, and the steady flow of traffic into the town from county residents performing county-related business, the town may lose the need for a post office. The closure of the post office could result in the closure of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) office. And that could cause a chain reaction of closures leading to the end of the café, the grocery store, the library, the yarn store, and more. Yet some in Gove claim that this process of closures started in their town in the 1960s when the community was forced to close the doors to its school and consolidate with Grainfield. Tom Broeckelman, the editor to Gove County's only newspaper, stated, "People think that the town [Gove] would die without the seat, but it's actually the other way around. The town died first a long time ago, and then it will lose the seat." (Tom Broeckelman; Quinter, Gove County; April, 2012).

Unfortunately for the town of Gove, by some estimations it may be too late to prevent the removal of the county seat to a larger town. To people like Mr. Broeckelman, the role of the county seat is linked to economic prosperity, or at least economic stability, and a “Virginia” model county seat has no place in the Great Plains in 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The final area of the county that has a different take on what it means to be a Great Plains county seat is comprised of the politically weaker and marginal communities of Grinnell and (the rural non-incorporated settlement of) Missouri Flats. Though located in opposite sides of the county, these places share a number of parallel concepts concerning the county seat. The residents of these towns interact with Gove similarly and understand the role of the county seat to be more traditional. This traditional role involves maintaining the location of the county seat in the geographic center of the county rather than the population center of the county. Both Grinnell and Missouri Flats residents regard themselves as marginalized within the county community, especially by the towns of Grainfield and Quinter. Therefore they seek to preserve the balance of power within the county by supporting Gove over the towns of northeastern Gove County. When questioned as to whether or not the county would be better served to have a larger county seat, the people of these two communities have expressed to me their interest in seeing the county seat remain at its current location. To Grinnell and Missouri Flats residents, this will allow for the continued ease and friendliness of county business interactions at the county office or courthouse in Gove. One Grinnell resident stated, “I love going down to Gove. I get to see friends at the courthouse, and it’s kind of special to have our county’s seat in such a small town. I love having it there [in Gove], and I don’t want to see it moved to Quinter. That would be a longer drive for us [in Grinnell] anyway.” (Judy Hart; Grinnell, Gove County; August, 2012).

A great many of the residents in Grinnell expressed to me a feeling of being marginalized

within the Gove County community. This is especially the case following the school unification that took place over the course of the past five years (2008-2012). The education boards in Grinnell and Grainfield decided in a long process to maintain a jointly operated high school in Grainfield and a middle school in Grinnell. This resulted in the closure of Grinnell High, which had been a close competitor to Wheatland High School in Grainfield in the realm of athletics. This has resulted in battered emotions in the town and a great feeling of loss and alienation within the county from the perspective of Grinnell residents. One mother in Grinnell explained, “It just happened too fast for us. We felt like we had no say on the issue, and all of a sudden, we lost our school. My kids have graduated, but a lot of parents have decided to take their kids to school in Oakley [in Logan County] rather than have them go to Grainfield. Those school rivalries ran deep and too many parents over here feel like outsiders in the county anymore.” (Elaine Moellering; Grinnell Township, Gove County; August, 2012).

The residents in the rural community of Missouri Flats expressed to me their interest in maintaining the county seat in Gove. One Missouri Flats farmer, with ancestral roots that date back to the beginning of the community in the late 1800s, explained, “Well it [Gove] is closer to us geographically. Gove’s just ten miles north, but Grainfield is 20 [miles] and Quinter is an extra 13 [miles from Grainfield].” The same gentleman explained to me the feeling of marginalization Missouri Flats experiences. “We’re pretty much outnumbered down here. It’s just a few farm families. It’s the north of the county that has all of the people and the power. If they decide to take the county seat, we won’t be able to do much about it in Gove or Missouri Flats.” (Mark Coberly; Jerome Township, Gove County; September, 2012).

Just as in Logan County, Gove County residents also make a distinction between those who live in a town and those who live in the country outside of an incorporated community. This

affects the way in which residents perceive the significance of their county seat. The difference in Gove County, however, is that it does not have one town in a position of primacy over the others (Tuttles, 1982; Gilbreath, 2007). The town of Quinter is unquestionably the largest in Gove County with 918 residents, but its strength is diminished by a number of factors.

According to county historian Ramon Powers, who grew up in Gove County and now resides in Topeka, the conventional wisdom within Gove County is that the electorate of Quinter is outnumbered by the combined electorate of Gove, Grainfield, Grinnell, and Park. Powers says, “Gove County is a little different than its immediate neighbors. In Sheridan, Trego, Logan, Lane, Ness, Scott, and Thomas counties, the largest town *IS* the county seat. But this isn’t the case in Gove County, which has a bunch of small towns that hold each other in check for political dominance.” (Ramon Powers; Topeka, Kansas; June, 2012). It is his perception that this has led Quinter to be politically submissive to the desires of the rest of the county. Though a valid point, I found this argument to be only a piece of the complex reality that is the world of Gove County politics.

Through my assessment of the different approaches to the county seat by different cultural segments in Logan and Gove counties, it is evident that there are a number of factors that contribute to a resident’s perception of the role of their county seat. Age, ethnicity, land use, and town location and situation all have a significant impact on an individual’s understanding of their county seat’s significance. Based on these four approaches, a rural Great Plains resident is more or less likely to understand the role of their county seat as central to their life. I will discuss the implications of these perspectives in the following concluding chapter.



## Chapter 6 - Conclusion

This thesis seeks to identify the role or significance of the county seat town in two western Kansas counties (Logan and Gove). The study is truly more valuable than a simple analysis of the role of local government towns, because it reveals the complexities of rural Great Plains society. Many different cultural groups exist in rural America and by analyzing how people in counties the size of Logan and Gove interact with local county seats, one can begin to discern some of the cultural traits most valued to these groups. It can be used as a base to build a greater understanding of the different cultural values among disparate populations in the United States.

It may seem intuitive that American residents of rural locations will regard a local government center (i.e. a county seat) with greater reverence. It may also seem intuitive that such an individual will likely assign a county seat community greater value within the scope of his or her life compared to an urban dweller. However, this study suggests that such assessments are far too general and more likely false, as the reality is much more complex. This thesis makes the case that individuals in rural areas of the American Great Plains approach the county seat community from a multitude of perspectives which commonly correspond to that individual's cultural heritage and geographic background. Of particular note are the age, religious background, and land-use divisions among rural residents.

In both counties generational traits among residents significantly inform how a resident perceives a county seat. Older residents regard the county seat not only as an important governmental center, but also as a social space. They seek to conduct all of their county obligations through offices located in the county seat. At the same time, and more importantly, they spend time fostering interpersonal relations. Joy Rogge shared, "I always loved going to

Russell Springs from the farm, back when it was the seat. We would make a whole day out of it. We would usually visit a few of Dad's friends, and see people we had known for years [who worked] at the courthouse. And then we would eat at the cafe for lunch. It was fun, and so much more personal. Lines [at the courthouse] didn't exist, and the people there knew your name.” (Joy Rogge; Russell Springs Township, Logan County; June, 2012). As Smith and Cartlidge (2011) learned, this generation has a strong attachment to the county seat. Younger residents approach the county seat from a totally different perspective. To them, the county seat is primarily a center of government. If and when they visit the county seat, their most important consideration is convenience – they don't want to spend any more time in the county seat than required.

The different perspectives among differing age groups reflect the technological changes that have occurred over the past 150 years. During the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, people's lives centered around the county seat. It was not only the largest market place in the county, but everyone needed to travel there for all types of governmental business. As transportation technology improved, the importance of rural county seats began to diminish. Paved roads and interstates changed the dynamic of the county seat. People no longer needed to travel to the county seat for all governmental business, because far-flung areas were now able to offer some governmental services.

The greatest changes to the county seat took place within the past three decades with the development of the *digital county seat*. Today fewer and fewer people in Logan and Gove counties actually need to physically travel to the towns of Oakley and Gove to complete county business. Instead they can complete those transactions remotely. License plates can be ordered online and delivered by mail, and county taxes and appraisal negotiations can be dealt with via e-

mail. The mere act of renewing one's driver's licenses has shifted away from the small county seat town. Now registered drivers can renew their driver's license at any department of motor vehicles location within the State of Kansas. Many young residents in Gove County reported visiting Hays to renew their driver's license. This enabled them to combine travel time to shop at the larger retail stores available in that economic hub of the northwestern part of the state. Because Gove does not have such retail stores, there was no question to some as to where they would prefer to go for their license renewal.

When asked if relocation of the seat would make a difference in their lives, most young people were receptive to the idea. As Kay Haffner indicated, "I guess I've never thought about what consolidation for a whole county would mean. Maybe it would be a good thing. I just didn't even know that that was a consideration." (Kay Haffner; Grainfield, Gove County; September, 2012). Other young residents looked at the prospect of relocation as a positive step for their county. Patricia Keyes said, "It wouldn't be so bad to have to go to Hays or Colby once in a while, if the county seat were to be moved. We're already used to driving long distances for larger grocery stores and shopping, as it is, every other weekend." (Patricia Keyes; Oakley, Logan County; June, 2012).

A second way in which local residents vary in their perspective of the county seat is religious background. Gove County has a large Volga-German population that is fiscally conservative rooted in their German Catholic heritage. They are most intent on spending money wisely; therefore, any efforts to move or consolidate the county seat are met with strong opposition within that segment of the population. By comparison, in Logan County the religious foundation of the population is less focused on fiscal concerns. Perhaps that best explains why residents there relocated their county seat in the 1960s.

Finally, one of the most surprising results to emerge from my research centered on differences among land use patterns. The northern part of Logan County and most of Gove County is dominated by farming. Here residents are more concerned with the economic vitality of the county seat, as opposed to a county seat's more convenient location. According to my research, farmers prefer a county seat with markets for the products they buy and sell. On the other hand, ranchers in southern Logan County are more interested in a centrally located county seat.

In addition to recognizing the greater implications that this study highlights, it is also a valid exercise to recognize what this study communicates about the changing role of the county seat in American geography. My research findings support and reinforce what has previously been published in geographic literature by Dietz, Hudson, Jackson, and Schellenberg. To a specific segment of society, the county seat still represents a more familiar and social form of government. These people believe their county seat is one of the nearest embodiments of government in the rural Great Plains with a more direct and immediate impact on daily life. This is in contrast to an often distant state or national capital city like Topeka and Washington, D.C. For some people in the rural Great Plains the role of the county seat town has changed little during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and remains a source of community pride and historical significance as well as a place for social interaction. However, to a growing segment of society, the county seat is far less important today than it once was. Whether or not this trend of the general waning of significance of the American county seat will continue, remains to be seen. Despite the possibility of rural county seats in the coming 20 years possessing little importance in the lives of locals, I assert that today the rural American county seat remains valuable. The title of *county*

*seat* is still an important title to maintain for a community, and the idea of the county seat remains an important social, economic, and cultural construct.

### **Jeffersonian and Agrarian Ideals**

Some scholars have associated the shifts that have occurred in the Great Plains in the past five decades to a rigid adherence to Jeffersonian ideals that date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. This thesis has built, in part, upon the work of Aaron Gilbreath who studied the changing nature of Gove County's demographics in 2007. It is his contention that because of place myths and agrarian ideologies, places in the Great Plains like Gove County have hindered their own development by maintaining only those industries that benefit agriculture. My thesis does not focus on what has grown or stunted the population or economy of these two counties. However, this agrarian ideal can inform how residents perceive the role of their county seat. It can also help to understand why some patterns have developed.

Gilbreath (2007) makes the argument that economic hardships have resulted from the Jeffersonian ideal, which is the popular place mythology (or ideology) for Gove County in particular. This can be transferred to the prominence of the county seat in both Logan and Gove counties, in part, because the county seats in both counties have been affected by this Jeffersonian ideal. In Logan County, a significant percentage of the population wanted to maintain the peaceful bucolic setting for the county seat in Russell Springs. In Gove County, it is the fear of some that someday their pastoral county seat could be "urbanized" by relocating the courthouse to Quinter or another town along Interstate 70. Gilbreath implies that because the place myth of an idealized agrarian society exists in a county such as Gove, certain businesses that would benefit the local economy have been prevented from entering the community. Facilities such as factories, manufacturing plants, and state-run prisons are not as welcome in

places like Gove County as farmers and ranchers are because there are people in the community who want to maintain the rural nature of the county. The lack of fresh industry and new jobs has arguably contributed to population decline, which could be linked to the further decline of small county seat towns such as Russell Springs and Gove. In conjunction with the rise in technological developments (such as internet use) and a shift away from a social county seat alluded to previously, the Jeffersonian idealism of Logan and Gove counties has an impact on the changing role and the significance of the county seat. To Gilbreath, as long as residents adhere to the ideals of a purely rural yeomen farmer lifestyle, county seats in the rural Great Plains could continue to shrink and wane in importance.

For some, this is not necessarily a concern. The populations of the counties of the Great Plains have been in decline for decades, and this revelation is not a novel concept. However, this condition is troubling for a number of Great Plains residents, as the county seat, or county government represented by the seat, provides a greater voice for rural communities. That Logan and Gove counties exist separately from their neighbors gives the people of each county more control over their futures. If county seat consolidation occurs, Logan and Gove counties stand a great chance of being marginalized within a much larger northwestern Kansas county. Concerns over such an occurrence were expressed by Dennis Roemer of Gove in one of my interviews. “If consolidation actually happens, my vote becomes lost in a sea of other northwestern Kansas votes. Who’s to say that my county’s hospital wouldn’t be closed, or my kid’s school [district] would be consolidated. As it is now, Gove County can determine its own future, but if we’re lumped in with Logan, Sheridan, and Thomas counties, they’ll outvote us. The way things are now, gives us some degree of power over our destiny, and those people arguing for consolidation don’t see that.” (Dennis Roemer; Gove, Gove County; May, 2012).

Throughout the interviewing process in the summer of 2012, I did not encounter a resident of Logan or Gove County who sought county consolidation. Residents of the rural Great Plains enjoy the relative freedom that their county government allows them. The concept of consolidation is as unpopular in northwestern Kansas as it proved to be in Nebraska and North Dakota in the past 20 years (Nasser, 2009; Krause, 1996). However, there are a number of Logan and Gove county residents who feel consolidation is inevitable. I typically ended my interviews by asking the interviewee where he or she anticipated their county seat would be located in 20 years. I also asked how they felt their town or county would fare in the event of county consolidation. Forty-five percent predicted inevitable county consolidation and the subsequent loss of their political voice within the next two decades. This would effectively silence a population accustomed to controlling its own local government for over 150 years. In Gove County, residents regard most attempts to relocate the county seat away from Gove as a step in the direction of a larger, county consolidation. In Logan County, where most people view the county seat as an economic hub for the rest of the county, some residents fear that their county's proximity to the larger town of Colby will facilitate a simple consolidation. In their minds, this would likely result in a marked decline in Oakley's economic vitality. These concerns stem from the appreciated and understood history of nearby Russell Springs, which lost its seat title and never recovered. However, this study reveals the complexity of the situation in Russell Springs. Though such a dramatic decline is unlikely in the event that Oakley does someday lose its title as county seat, Oakley's economic future would likely be challenged.

It is not the intent of this thesis to make a prediction as to whether or not consolidation is likely for either county. However, if history is any indicator of the future, I feel comfortable stating that any move toward consolidation would be greatly unpopular in the rural Great Plains.

Such a move by a state government would require great care and tact. Yet, I can make the case that the remaining population of the Great Plains would be adversely affected if consolidation were to take place, as the independence of these communities would be reduced. The populations of these counties, which have been accustomed to making decisions for themselves for the past 125 years, would be lost in a larger conglomerated county. Effectively, many rural peoples would be disfranchised.

### **Future Studies**

For future research in this realm of the perception of the role of the county seat, I believe that it would be valuable to focus attention on the differing significance levels that county seats have for residents in urban and suburban settings around the country. The ways in which residents interact with their county seat is highly dependent on one's generation as well as one's location of residence. In order to better understand how the role of the Great Plains county seat is different, it is important to understand how that role is differentiated in disparate settings. Furthermore, it would be valuable to study similarly populated counties, with county seats of varying sizes in other cultural provinces within the Great Plains. The Southern-influenced cultures of Oklahoma and Texas may have slightly or significantly different ways of dealing with the role of the county seat community compared to the Scandinavian and German-immigrant-influenced cultures of North Dakota and Minnesota. All are considerations necessary for a clearer understanding of what it means to be an American Great Plains county seat town in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.



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