

Technology, Mechanization, and the Life and Death of a Kansas Common Pasture

The Story of the Westmoreland Common Pasture, Westmoreland, Pottawatomie County, Kansas,
1860-1940

Researched and written by Travis J. McCoy

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

Kansas State University

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Dr. MJ Morgan

I. Introduction

Imagine for a minute that you are a young boy or teenager, living in a small rural village or hamlet. It is 5:00 am and the rooster crowing outside your family's cottage wakes you up to only a faint stirring of light in the east as you pull on your trousers and boots. Why are you up so early? Well, it is time to milk Daisy, the family dairy cow. You head to the small barn or shed behind your family's cottage and greet Daisy with a bucket and a milking stool to sit on. The milk shoots easily into the bucket as a stray cat walks in to lap up any spilled milk.

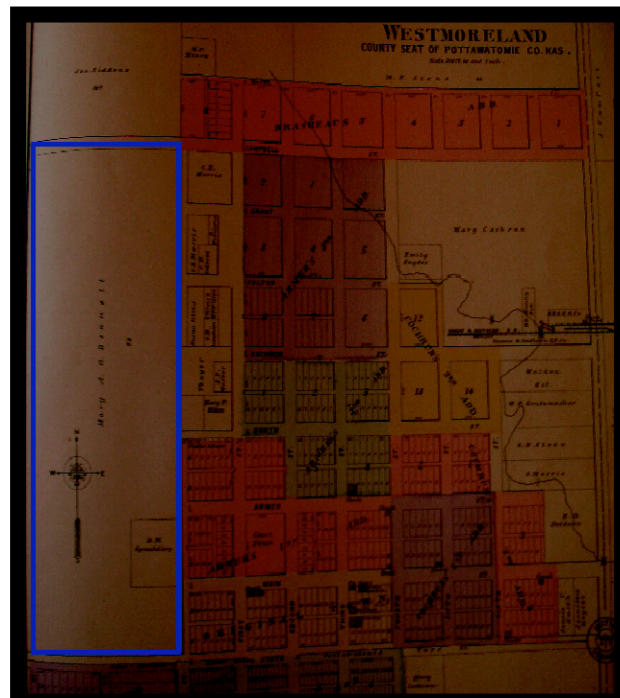
Ten to twenty minutes later the milking is finished, and the bucket is taken to the house to be kept in the ice box. You let Daisy out of her stall and she already knows where she is heading, so you don't really have to encourage her. She walks up the narrow streets towards the big gate that opens into the village common. You open the gate and turn her out with the other cows from town so she can enjoy a glorious day of grazing, napping, and grazing again.

Around five or six in the evening, you return to the pasture, where Daisy and some of the other cows are waiting to be brought back to their barns and be milked again. So, you repeat the process and give Daisy a little corn for a good day's work. You take the milk up to house and get ready for supper, knowing that tomorrow your day will begin early again.

This was the common routine for the family milk cow in a town that had what was called a common pasture or city pasture as it may have been called in later years. While commons

were used extensively in medieval England and colonial America,¹ the presence of one in the late 19th century Midwest is particularly interesting.

The subject referred to here is the Westmoreland common pasture located on the west side of Westmoreland, Pottawatomie County, Kansas, as seen in figure 1 below.²



**Figure 1. This is a map of Westmoreland, KS in 1900. The town is well established at this point and the area outlined in blue in the Common Pasture.
Source: Standard Atlas of Pottawatomie County, Kansas, 1900.**

The pasture was used primarily from the 1860s when area settlement was growing, until the 1940's when home milk delivery became more popular, and the need for a family dairy cow

¹ Common pastures were used extensively in Europe starting in the 12th century, especially in England. "Common Land," accessed May 3, 2010, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O48-commonland.html>.

² The County Atlas shows the pasture as a large lot on the west side of town, bordered by State St. on the south. *Standard Atlas of Pottawatomie County Kansas* (Chicago: Geo. A. Ogle & Co. Publishers and Engravers, 1905).

became less. The pasture was likely Bluestem prairie, which grows very well in the rich soils formed from limestone beds in the Flint Hills region where the pasture is located.³

The historical and agricultural significance of the Westmoreland common pasture is extensive. Common pastures can still be found in parts of Europe, a remnant of medieval times when the Lord or Earl gave a parcel of land to be used by the peasants for their livelihoods.⁴ Similar arrangements were made in the British Colonies of North America before the Revolution; common pastures were laid out in places such as New England, where British influence was particularly large. The Boston Common still survives, and is used as a park currently.⁵

Questions remain for the Westmoreland common pasture, such as, why was it founded so far west and years after British influence in colonial times? Why was its use discontinued? What can we learn about the people and history of the area through studying the pasture? The focus of this report is to attempt to answer some of these questions and others, as well as shed light on an otherwise unknown subject.

Mechanization and industrialization led to the demise of many cultural practices in place during the settlement period (1840-1900). Inventions such as the gasoline motor made profound changes in rural America, and especially in agriculture. No more did farmers have to rely on a team of horses or mules to get to town or to put crops in the ground with. Change was on its way. The use and eventual disbandment of the Westmoreland common pasture can be directly tied to industrialization and mechanization of agriculture and transportation.

II. Settlement of Westmoreland and Early History

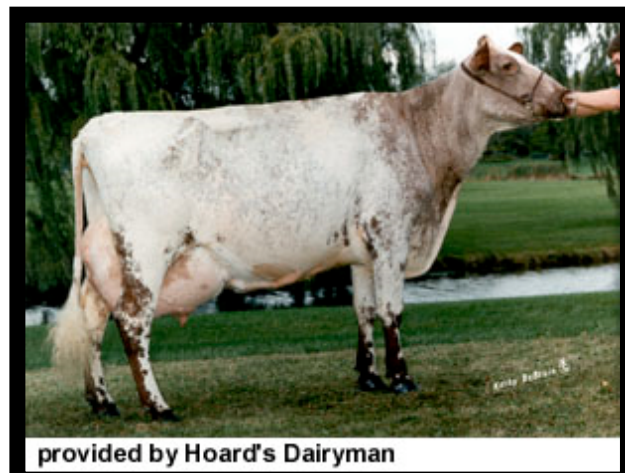
³ All of Pottawatomie County was Bluestem prairie at the time of settlement except the southern part near the Kansas River where northern floodplain forest prevailed. Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), Map #5.

⁴ "The first commons were usually woodland or rough pasture for the villagers' animals in medieval England." "Common Land."

⁵ Ibid.

The town of Westmoreland was settled primarily by American, German, and Irish immigrants in the 1860s and 70s. The town was officially established in 1867⁶. As a stop on the Oregon-California Trail, the town had a substantial number of settlers stop in the area between the years of 1850 and 1900. In 1860 farmers comprised 58% of the labor force in the United States.⁷ Also at that time there were just over 2 million farms, with an average acreage of 199 acres.⁸ Agriculture was booming, but not necessarily in terms of production; millions of farms were needed because of the small amount of crops and livestock that each farmer was able to produce.

Many farmers who settled in the area brought all they had with them in covered wagons, and behind the wagon walked a spare yoke of oxen, a team of mules or horses, and of course, the family milk cow. The cow was probably a Milking Shorthorn (Also known as a Durham, seen in figure 2 below).



provided by Hoard's Dairyman
Figure 2 A Milking Shorthorn Cow. This breed provided transportation, milk, and meat to early pioneers and likely played a key role in the settlement of Westmoreland.

Source: Hoard's Dairyman, <http://www.hoards.com>.

⁶ Michael J. Zabel, *Go West More Land*, (Published by Author, 2005. 2nd Ed.), p. 33.

⁷ Economic Research Service, "A History of American Agriculture, 1607-2000," accessed May 4, 2010, <http://www.agclassroom.org/gan/timeline/index.htm>.

⁸ Ibid.

These cattle were native to England, and introduced into the United States in 1783.⁹ It is also likely that the oxen pulling the wagon were Shorthorns. The Shorthorn breed was a favorite of pioneers and known for its hardiness, dual-purpose ability (meaning that it could be used for milk and for meat), and for its pulling ability.¹⁰

The settlers of Westmoreland likely brought a strong hearth-culture¹¹ of milking with them. Families needed milk to raise children and to cook with. They did just that as they brought cows with them and established the common pasture so that all the cows that stayed in town could enjoy the benefits of pasture grazing. German families also brought a strong hearth-culture of milking.

What about the European influence of common pastures? We know that common land was in high use in England dating back to the 12th Century. Peasants used common lands to graze livestock, gather peat or firewood, fish, and hunt. Certain rights were extended to peasants who had the permission of the Lord or Earl to use the land. “These are rights to take the produce from land of which the right-holder is not the owner, for example a right of pasture.”¹² These traditions and practices were later brought to the New World in colonial times; large areas of land in colonial America were used for Pasturage and also for defense.¹³

Interestingly enough, these traditions continued and appeared again in the formation of the Westmoreland common pasture. The pasture was likely laid out after the start of Westmoreland itself (post 1867)¹⁴, because farmers in the area had their own land to graze their

⁹ Oklahoma State University Board of Regents, “Breeds of Livestock-Milking Shorthorns,” accessed May 3, 2010, <http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/cattle/milkingshorthorn/index.htm>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ In reference to Zelinsky’s Rule stating that cultural practices and values are brought by the first settlers in an area. Dr. MJ Morgan, “Zelinsky’s Rule and Hearth Culture”(lecture, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, January 19, 2010).

¹² “Common Land.”

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Zabel, Michael J., *Go West More Land*.

stock. The pasture was most likely fenced from the start to keep cows from wandering off or joining other herds. Split rails with limestone corners might have been used originally, or a limestone wall might have been built to retain the cows. The latter would have been much more labor-intensive, especially on a pasture that large.

Management was probably minimal; the cows did the grazing and likely did much to keep weeds and small trees from coming up. The fence would have been maintained by locals, and at least one boy or teenager would be in charge of bringing all the cows to and from the pasture twice a day at milking time. The cows were used to being milked and docile in nature, a boy or teenager was all that was needed to bring the cows up when it was time to go.

III. 1900 and the Golden Age of Small Towns

As the century turned, Westmoreland was at its peak settlement and life was good in rural America. Immigration had tapered off with most of the land in Kansas being settled by 1890.¹⁵ Mechanization and industrialization was beginning to have a significant effect on agriculture and the daily lives of people living in rural areas.

Barbed wire was probably the first major technology that had an impact on rural America and for the Westmoreland Common in particular. Glidden barbed wire was first patented in 1874 and by the 1880's and 90's much of the once open range was fenced in to prevent lost livestock and crop damage.¹⁶ The common pasture in Westmoreland was probably fenced in barbed wire around this time, as it was easier to maintain and to construct than earlier fences.

The invention that sounded the death-knell for many small towns may or may not have had such an effect on the Westmoreland common pasture. When Henry Ford developed the first

¹⁵ "A History of American Agriculture, 1607-2000."

¹⁶ Ibid.

affordable automobile in 1903, it paved a road of change for many small towns. The common pasture was probably affected minimally at the beginning of automobile use; families still needed milk and so the milk cow stayed too.

It was not until much later when commercial dairying became prominent that the automobile (with an insulated bulk tank) was used to expand the dairy industry. Cream separators came into wide use from 1890-1895.¹⁷ This allowed families and farmers to separate the cream from the milk, making the milk less rich and allowing the cream to be easily made into butter, cheese, and ice cream.

IV. The Depression, WWII, and the Final Days of the City Pasture

The common pasture at Westmoreland was used throughout the beginning of the 20th century. Tom Hart, a resident of Westmoreland, remembered it being used in the 1920's and 1930s when he was growing up. Tom worked as a substitute driver for the cows and he remembered there being about half a dozen cows being driven to and from the common pasture. Residents that had cows at the pasture were John Perry, Bill Hoffman, the Brookens, and the Moore's.¹⁸

The Great Depression (1929-1939) was a tough time for many Americans, and especially farmers. Whether or not the times had an effect on the common pasture at Westmoreland is uncertain, however it would be fair to assume that it was kept in operation. "Dairy farming in the 30's was still small-scale and involved a lot of hand-labor."¹⁹ The Dust Bowl area was

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Field notes from visit with Tom Hart, January 28, 2010.

¹⁹ Ahrens, Lily, "Dairy's Social History: Dairy in Our Culture," St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN, accessed May 4, 2010, http://www.stolaf.edu/depts/environmental-studies/courses/es-399_home/es-399-05/Projects/dairy_research/socialhistory.html.

further west and although the drought was widespread, Pottawatomie County and the rest of Northeast Kansas suffered much less.²⁰

The Second World War saw many rural families broken as their sons and daughters answered the call of war. Many young men had to leave farming behind them to join the service. How did this affect the common pasture? Well, many of the people who did the milking were probably husbands and sons, but wives and daughters probably knew as well or learned very quickly. What the war probably did most to hurt the continued use of the pasture was a rapid advancement in technology.

Old methods and technologies were being replaced and by the end of the war, dairying was beginning to switch over to commercial farms with large milking parlors and hundreds of cows. By now, pasteurized milk that was sold in bottles and delivered by a milkman was beginning to outpace raw milk in consumption.²¹ Later, bottles were discontinued and the majority of all bulk milk was sold in cartons and plastic jugs as it is sold today.

So the use of the common pasture finally ended when commercialized dairy operations took over, now it lays dormant, grown up with grass, weeds, and trees as shown in figure 3 below.



Figure 3. A current photograph of the north side of the Common Pasture facing south. Cottonwood and locust trees can be seen beyond a rusty barbed wire fence.

²⁰ Online Highways LLC., “The Dust Bowl,” accessed May 5, 2010, <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1583.html>.

²¹ “Dairy’s Social History: Dairy in Our Culture.”

It is easily seen that the use and eventual disbandment of the Westmoreland Community Pasture can be directly tied to the industrialization and mechanization of agriculture and transportation. The automobile, pasteurization of milk, commercialized dairy operations, and rural milk delivery all in a way eliminated the necessity of such a common pasture. It is unfortunate that so little has been written or recorded about this interesting agricultural and historical phenomenon; all that remains is what people can remember and what we as historians can piece together from the past.

It is unlikely that a common pasture like this will ever be used again, especially when a trip to the grocery store is cheaper than buying a cow and feeding her. Commercial dairy operations have reached absolutely huge proportions in compared with the dozen or so cows that the average farmer would have milked in the early 1900s. An operation of less than 100 cows is considered small by most standards today, with places like California boasting commercial operations of hundreds. Anyway, it is interesting to study the old ways of doing things and to think about the kind of work and hard labor our ancestors had to do to get us all where we are today. We have a lot to be thankful for.

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