

DESERT VERSUS GARDEN:
THE ROLE OF WESTERN IMAGES IN THE SETTLEMENT OF KANSAS

by

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B. S., KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY, 1960



A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History, Political Science, and Philosophy

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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PREFACE

An uninhabited and relatively unknown West influenced American thought and action throughout the period of westward movement. The unfamiliar, treeless plains west of Missouri intensified the impact and resulted in the formation of an image of a "Great American Desert" east of the Rockies. This study is an evaluation of the effects of this pre-conceived notion and its modification on the time and nature of settlement in Kansas, the central province on the eastern edge of the High Plains.

I am indebted to the staff of the Kansas State Historical Society Library at Topeka where much of the needed material was made readily available. I also wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Charles N. Glaab and Dr. Philip M. Rice for their patient guidance in the preparation of this thesis.

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CHAPTER I

ASSERTION OF THE DESERT, 1800-1854

A Desert is Born

The public belief in a garden embracing the interior of the United States populated by the small, independent farmer who drew virtue, an abundant living, and a sense of democracy from his cultivation of the soil influenced the steady westward advance across the continent. As settlement reached the bend of the Missouri River in the early nineteenth century, the Myth of the Garden met its first serious challenge. Facing it to the west was an equally strong but diametrically opposed intellectual construction: the idea of a Great American Desert of indefinite bounds stretching over most of the territory from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean.¹

In 1800, little was known in official circles concerning the vast wilderness beyond the Mississippi. After his visit in 1540-1542, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, the most important of the Spanish explorers to reach

¹Discussions of the Great American Desert may be found in: Ralph C. Morris, "The Notion of a Great American Desert East of the Rockies," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XIII (September, 1926), 190-200; Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 174-183; Walter P. Webb, The Great Plains (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), pp. 152-160; Frank H. Spearman, "The Great American Desert," Harper's Magazine, LXXVII (July, 1888), 232-245; Frank W. Blackmar, "The Mastery of the Desert," North American Review, CLXXXIII (May, 1906), 676-678; Robert G. Athearn, High Country Empire (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1960), pp. 3-26, and "The Great Plains in Historical Perspective," Montana, VIII (Winter, 1958), 13-29.

this area, had reported favorably on its geography and climate.² However, in telling the king of his trip to Quivira, in the location of present-day Kansas, Coronado mentioned deserts where Indians wandered like Arabs.³ This judgment may have referred to the lack of inhabitants rather than the character of the terrain; but regardless of Coronado's intent, this brief mention may have been the seed of the myth of a desert.⁴

The debates over the purchase of Louisiana in 1803 revealed little knowledge of the Spanish explorations. Opinions expressed in Congress and by President Jefferson were vague and varied. Senator James Jackson of Georgia and Representatives Jacob Crowninshield of Massachusetts and James Elliot of Vermont were certain of its agricultural potential. On the other hand, Representative Thomas Griffin of Virginia doubted the value of the territory, fearing that this ascribed "Eden of the New World" would become a cemetery for many Americans.⁵ Jefferson acknowledged the barrenness

²George Parker Winship, "The Coronado Expedition, 1540-1542," Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896), p. 582; Herbert E. Bolton, Coronado: Knight of Pueblos and Plains (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1949), p. 297; Webb, Great Plains, p. 106.

³Winship, Coronado, p. 582.

⁴Judging from Coronado's otherwise favorable description, this conclusion might be reached. Webb stated this opinion in Great Plains, p. 107.

⁵U.S., Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, 8th Congress, 1st Session (1803), XIII, 33-42, 439-466. Other reasons for opposition to the acquisition were the destruction of the balance between Eastern and Western states, too dispersed a population to control, and increased value of labor and decreased value of land due to sparse settlement east of the Mississippi. Reasons in favor of acquisition included its value as a home for the Indians, prevention of foreign colonization, and a barrier to invasion from the West.

of the terrain, the obscurity of its boundaries and the lack of accurate description; but he was confident of its fertility.⁶

In the twenty years following the purchase, three official expeditions added an immense amount of information regarding Louisiana. The journey of Lewis and Clark, requested by President Jefferson to find a route of commerce to the Pacific, was the first of these. As they journeyed from present-day North Dakota to the Rockies, Lewis and Clark were impressed by the lack of trees, the dry river beds, and the probable uselessness of the soil due to a shortage of water. Although their adherence to the river valleys diminished the value of their descriptions of the countryside, their pessimistic views were certain to affect the conception of the region in the Eastern mind.⁷

The second official expedition, the Rocky Mountain expedition of Zebulon Pike in 1808-1809, may have provided the real foundation for the Myth of the Desert. In his journal published in 1810, Pike characterized the country between the great bend of the Missouri and the Rocky Mountains in colorful, if unfavorable, terms:

These vast plains of the western hemisphere may become in time equally celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa; for I saw in my route, in various places, tracts of many leagues, where the wind had thrown up the sand, in all the fanciful forms of the ocean's rolling wave, and on which not a speck of vegetable matter existed.

⁶ Ibid., Appendix, 1498-1526; H. A. Washington (ed.), The Writings of Thomas Jefferson (Washington: Taylor and Maury, 1854), IV, 494-495, and VIII, 33.

⁷ Elliott Coues (ed.), History of the Expedition Under the Command of Lewis and Clark (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1893), I, 302, 314, 325.

Major Pike was impressed, as Lewis and Clark before him, with the lack of timber on the plains which he believed was due to the sterility of the soil and the lack of water. The one advantage of this huge desert, in the eyes of Pike, was that it would assure the continuance of the Union by keeping the population compact.⁸

The Yellowstone Expedition of Stephen H. Long in 1819, following the Platte River to the Rockies and returning by way of the Arkansas and Red Rivers to the Mississippi, reinforced the Desert Myth. Dr. Edwin James, chronicler of the Long expedition and a student of botany and geology, published his journal in 1823 confirming the existence of a great interior desert. This barren wilderness lay west of 96° west longitude, according to James, and was characterized by sandy, sterile soil and the absence of trees. He felt the area was "almost wholly unfit for civilization, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence." James agreed with President Jefferson and Major Pike, however, that this vast desert might prevent over-extension of our population and invasion by an enemy from the West.⁹

A map of the Far West, appearing with the Long report, made the desert a reality in the American mind. It lay between the Arkansas and Platte Rivers from the Rocky Mountains east to approximately the

⁸Major Zebulon M. Pike, An Account of Expeditions to the Sources of the Mississippi and Through the Western Parts of Louisiana... (Philadelphia: C. and A. Conrad and Company, 1810), Appendix to Part II, p. 8.

⁹R. G. Thwaites (ed.), Early Western Travels, 1748-1846, XIV: Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains Performed in the Years 1819 and 1820 (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1905), 132-148.

ninety-eighth meridian. Major Pike had laid the groundwork for the myth; with the Long report and map the American desert became a general assumption.¹⁰

In the evaluation of the territory west of the Mississippi up to this time, it can be observed that the capacity of the region was closely associated with the presence or absence of trees.¹¹ The absence of trees would be expected to affect keenly a people leaving the forests for the first time, as were the Americans, to enter an open expanse of treeless plains; and this condition later required much explanation before the area was settled. By the same token, the propitious characterizations of the same tract of land by Coronado and other Spanish explorers can largely be explained by their previous acquaintance with a treeless and arid region. In addition, the Spanish were not concerned with agricultural potential as were the Americans.¹²

It might also be observed that from a scientific viewpoint these expeditions could not justify any conclusive judgments. The Lewis and Clark excursion included no one qualified to judge accurately the nature of the country, and in none of the three expeditions were adequate rainfall

¹⁰ Long's map entitled, "Country Drained by the Mississippi: Western Section," is reproduced in Thwaites, Early Western Travels, XIV.

¹¹ U.S., Debates and Proceedings, ibid., Appendix, 1503. Jefferson here associates the lack of trees with soil that is too rich. Lewis and Clark, Pike, and Long, on the contrary, blamed this lack on sterile soil as previously cited. Both of these views were conjectural and without scientific basis.

¹² Great Plains, pp. 96, 107. Webb points out that the contrast which so powerfully struck American observers was hardly apparent to the Spanish who had explored this country earlier. They were accustomed to the drier, less timbered Spanish terrain and could take plains country in their stride. They did not investigate the possibilities for agricultural development, because they preferred ventures with large, quick returns.

records kept or systematic soil classifications made. Each moved rapidly over the simplest routes available, recorded its observations only briefly, and left accurate, scientific description to subsequent visitors.¹³

The Desert Elaborated

These accounts of an American desert did not fall on deaf ears. Influential journals and newspapers of the day accepted the reports of these explorers as authoritative. An editorial appearing in the American Journal of Science in 1823 expressed regret upon finding that a vast sandy desert stretched five hundred miles east of the Rockies, "a frightful waste, scarcely less formidable to men and animals than the desert of Zahara...."¹⁴ An article in the North American Review differed only on the size of the desert.¹⁵ The New York American reported the existence of immense, treeless steppes west of the Missouri not unlike the deserts separating fertile regions of the Old World. This pathless waste, concluded the author would be a natural limit to colonization.¹⁶ The soil of the immense American plains extending to the Rockies, according to the Gazette de France in 1827, is hard and unyielding and covered with withered grass which even the hungry cattle refuse.¹⁷

¹³An examination of the journals of these expeditions will verify this conclusion. This point was also made in Allan Nevins' Fremont: Pathmarker of the West (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1955), pp. 74, 81; and in Webb's Great Plains, p. 143.

¹⁴"Expedition of Major Long and Party to the Rocky Mountains," American Journal of Science, VI (1823), 374-375.

¹⁵"Major Long's Second Expedition," North American Review, XXI (July, 1825), 182.

¹⁶New York American, February 27, 1828.

¹⁷Ibid., September 25, 1827.

Several early witnesses substantiated these reports. Both Henry M. Brackenridge, a traveler, and Thomas Nuttall, the English naturalist, saw a resemblance to the African deserts. Mr. Nuttall was slightly more optimistic about future settlement than was Brackenridge who saw no possibility for agriculture on the dry, sterile soil. Robert Stuart, telling of his trip eastward from Astoria, and James O. Pattie, who saw much of the West as a fur trapper, agreed on the sterility of the plains.¹⁸

The 1830's and 1840's produced a host of new evidence to verify earlier reports of a desert. Both of the Nathaniel Wyeth expeditions of 1832 and 1833 were responsible for pessimistic accounts. To John B. Wyeth, the cousin of the captain, the Missouri Territory was a vast wilderness, much worse than Palestine and comparable to the deserts of Arabia. John K. Townshend, a highly-respected scientist accompanying the second Wyeth expedition, labeled the Platte Valley a sterile, inhospitable desert. Rufus B. Sage and Edwin Bryant, both having journeyed to the Pacific Ocean in the late 1840's, concluded that the lack of rain would make the plains uninhabitable by civilized man. George Ruxton added, as an obstacle to settlement, the presence of incessant storms which sweep the plains.¹⁹

¹⁸ R. G. Thwaites (ed.), Early Western Travels, 1748-1846, VI; Journal of a Voyage up the River Missouri Performed in 1811 (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1904), 153, 161; Ibid., XIII; Journal of Travels Into the Arkansa Territory During the Year 1819, 272; Philip A. Rollins (ed.), The Discovery of the Oregon Trail: Robert Stuart's Narratives of His Overland Trip Eastward from Astoria in 1812-1813 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), pp. 212-239; Timothy Flint (ed.), The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie (Cincinnati: E. H. Flint, 1824), p. 260.

¹⁹ John B. Wyeth, A Short History of a Long Journey from the Atlantic Ocean to the Region of the Pacific (Cambridge: Printed for

Thomas Farnham presented in his account, published in 1843, a new development in the notion of a desert. The area bounded by the western tier of states on the east and the Rocky Mountains on the west he named the "Great Prairie Wilderness." This tract Farnham divided into three geographical provinces, the third of which lay just east of the Rockies-- a "burnt and arid desert whose solemn silence is seldom broken by the tread of any other animal than the wolf or the starved and thirsty horse which bears the traveler across its wastes."²⁰

Perhaps Washington Irving, in his *Astoria* which appeared in 1836, gave the most forcible impulse to this view of the West. Based on adventure stories of trappers and traders as well as a brief tour on the prairies in Missouri and Arkansas, this book adds little to an accurate description of the plains.

This region, [he wrote], which resembles one of the ancient steppes of Asia, has not inaptly been termed The Great American Desert. It spreads forth into undulating and treeless plains and desolate sandy wastes, wearisome to the eye from their extent and monotony.... It is a land where no man permanently abides, for at certain seasons there is no food for the hunter or his steed. Such is the nature of this immense wilderness of the Far West, which apparently defies cultivation and habitation of civilized life. Some portions of it along the rivers may partially be subdued by agriculture; others may form vast pastoral tracts like those of the East, but it is to be found that a great part of it

John B. Wyeth, 1833), pp. 29, 81-82; E. G. Thwaites (ed.), Early Western Travels, XXI: Journal of John K. Townshend, 173; Rufus B. Sage, Scenes in the Rocky Mountains and in Oregon, California, New Mexico, Texas, and the Grand Prairies (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1846), p. 36; Edwin Bryant, What I Saw in California (London: Richard Bentley, 1849), p. 80; LeRoy R. Hafen (ed.), Ruxton of the Rockies (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), p. 286.

²⁰R. G. Thwaites (ed.), Early Western Travels, XXVIII: Farnham's Travels in 1839, 108-109.

will form a lawless interval between the abodes of civilization, more like the wastes of the ocean, or the deserts of Arabia, and like them be subject to the deprivations of marauders.²¹

The adventures of Captain Bonneville, whose journal was presented to Washington Irving in 1843, convinced him that no agriculture was possible in the wilderness beyond 102° west longitude.²²

Francis Parkman, the historian, pictured in colorful terms a barren expanse covering hundreds of miles between the Arkansas and Missouri Rivers and extending four hundred miles east of the Rockies. This trackless wilderness he agreed was truly "The Great American Desert."²³

Numerous travelers over the trail from Missouri to Santa Fe after 1820 gained first-hand knowledge of the West. Josiah Gregg, a participant in the Santa Fe trade for several years beginning in 1831, published his Commerce of the Prairies in 1844. In this widely-read report, Gregg saw the border land along the Kansas Valley as far west as Council Grove as excellent, fertile land. West of this, however, the land would be chiefly uninhabitable. Most of the soil he considered sterile, and all too dry for cultivation. Yet, Gregg's hopeful western outlook suggested to him the possibility of a change of climate which would make future settlement possible.²⁴

²¹Washington Irving, Astoria (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1895), I, 312-313.

²²Washington Irving, The Adventures of Captain Bonneville (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1895), I, 30.

²³Francis Parkman, Jr., The California and Oregon Trail (New York: George P. Putnam, 1849), p. 81.

²⁴Josiah Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies (New York: Henry G. Langley, 1844), I, 48-49, and II, 191-192.

In 1846 other first-hand reports of the region beyond civilization were forthcoming. Susan S. Magoffin made the trip over the Santa Fe Trail with her husband, Sammel. She regularly recorded the shortage of vegetation, water, and wood; until at Bent's Fort, in present-day Colorado, complete destitution of vegetation prevailed. The journals of soldiers under Stephen Kearny and Alexander Doniphan during the same year tell of the dry prairie, the heat, the dust, and the lack of water which tormented them on the march to Mexico.²⁵

The Western Journal and Civilian published the report of Francois des Montaignes' journey on the Santa Fe road in 1853. This traveler agreed with Gregg that Council Grove, one hundred forty-five miles from Independence, was a natural barrier between the arable lands and the barren plains of the Great West. West of this line he saw:

...those wide and desolate wastes upon whose scanty and threadlike creeks vegetation seems to pause, whilst its representatives the delicate willow and the moaning cottonwood seem to denote by their rare appearance, the only spots within the landscape where it can eke out at best, but a precarious existence.²⁶

The official exploration of the Red River in 1852 gave opportunity for new information concerning the West, but the prevailing image was not challenged. Captain Randolph B. Marcy reported to Congress that at 101°

²⁵ Stella M. Drumm (ed.), Down the Santa Fe Trail and Into Mexico: The Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin, 1846-1847 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926), pp. 47, 57, 58, 72; Jacob S. Robinson, A Journal of the Santa Fe Expedition Under Colonel Doniphan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1932), pp. 2-20; Ralph P. Bieber (ed.), Southwest Historical Series, III: Journal of a Soldier Under Kearny and Doniphan, 1846-1847 (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1935), 119-164.

²⁶ Francois des Montaignes, "The Plains," Western Journal and Civilian, X (April, 1853), 69-73.

west longitude the arable land gave way to barren and desolate wastes. A narrow belt of forest crossing from the Arkansas to the Brazos, called the Cross Timbers, was his division between the agricultural land of civilization and the prairie land of the savage.²⁷

The infrequent mention of the American desert in popular literature no doubt indicated its acceptance by the public. The occasional reference to such a desert at mid-century most often came from travelers. The Oregon emigrants and Forty-Niners, though little interested in the intermediate area, often told of hardships of the journey from the Mississippi River to the Pacific coast.²⁸ A writer from Fort Laramie warned emigrants that no civilized settlements could exist over one hundred and fifty miles west of the Missouri River, because west of this were only sandy plains. He foresaw an uninhabited desert stretching five hundred miles between the Missouri River and the Rockies "as long as the world stands."²⁹

Asa Whitney's suggestion for the building of a Pacific railroad aroused interest in the nature of the intervening territory. One writer saw in the timberless mountains and deserts which such a road must cross the greatest barrier to its construction. Another believed that the means for building from Independence were not available due to the Indian lands

²⁷Randolph B. Marcy, Exploration of the Red River of Louisiana in 1852 (Washington: Senate Printer, 1854), pp. 92-93.

²⁸New York Tribune, July 22, 1849; September 4, 1849; September 14, 1849; October 7, 1849; October 20, 1849.

²⁹Ibid., September 11, 1849.

which had been interposed west of the states and the worthless nature of the terrain west of Indian lands.³⁰

Beginning in the 1820's and continuing through the 1840's, the school geographies and atlases incorporated the American desert as a part of the West. The Woodbridge and Willard geography of 1824 and the Carey and Lee Atlas of 1827 showed the Great American Desert covering an indefinite territory in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Indian Territory, and Texas. Timothy Flint's The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley, published in 1833, likened much of the country beyond 98° to the Great Sahara. T. G. Bradford's Comprehensive Atlas in 1835 pictured the desert on a "Map of the United States." These conclusions were verified by Morse's System of Geography in 1840, Smith's "Map of North America" in 1849, and Goodrich's Comprehensive Geography and History in 1850. Many other school texts and maps followed these general assumptions. A noticeable feature of these presentations was the indistinct size and location of this desert. In the public mind this tendency toward vagueness was magnified, and the desert often grew in size and intensity.³¹

³⁰The Frontier Guardian (Kanesville, Iowa), December 26, 1849; New York Tribune, June 6, 1850.

³¹These sources were listed in Blackmar, North American Review, CLXXXII, 678-679; Morris, Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XIII, 194; and Webb, Great Plains, p. 193. Other sources listed which plainly mark the "Great American Desert" include:

- 1826 Goodrich, Geography
- 1831 Olney, Quarto Geography
- 1835 Mitchell, Accompaniment to the Reference and Distance Map
- 1844 Smith, Geography
- 1846 Disturnell, Mapa de los Estados Unidos de Mejico
- 1850 Goodrich, Primer of Geography
- 1852 Smith, Quarto School Geography
- 1858 Stieler, Stieler's Hand-Atlas ueber alle Teile der Erdo und ueber das Weltgebande

The Desert Meets A Challenge

The Great American Desert was created in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, and the next thirty years provided its growth and elaboration. During this time the desert became the predominant conception of the West, taken as a certainty by most of the public. Yet, not everyone could agree that the West was a vast expanse of sterile wilderness. Even some first-hand observers deviated from this view.

John Bradbury, an English naturalist who visited the upper Missouri region with Henry Brackenridge in 1811, gave a much more favorable report than did Brackenridge. He visualized a beautiful agricultural country in the West, discounting the prevalent idea that the western prairie would never be civilized.³²

Bradbury's views were substantiated by trappers, fur traders, and others intimately acquainted with the West. Jacob Fowler, trapper and fur trader, who traversed much of the West in 1821-1822, repeated at short intervals his praise of the rich soil over a large area which had been proclaimed desert. Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, and W. L. Sublette confirmed Fowler's description after a fur trading trip to the Rocky Mountains in 1830. After working among the Indians in the vicinity of the Kansas River, Isaac McCoy was certain that no state of the Union could equal the fertility of the Osage and Neosho Valleys. The diary of an American pioneer

³² John Bradbury, Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811 (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1817), p. 239.

settler on his way to Oregon in 1845 left no impression of a desert although mentioning the scarcity of wood and water.³³

Newspapers of the late 1820's occasionally showed doubt concerning the nature and extent of the desert. One writer extolled the wisdom of President Jefferson in purchasing an almost boundless tract of fertile land. Another reported upon returning from the West that it far exceeded his expectations. Still others emphasized the beauty and potential for future settlement possessed by our western lands.³⁴ Most such reports came from westerners who were more optimistic about future expansion than were the Americans along the Atlantic coast. However, these more favorable opinions were exceptions; for the Great American Desert held sway.

Then in the 1840's the burst of expansionism that was soon to extend our boundaries to the Pacific brought a serious assault on the desert idea. Efforts to bind the Pacific coast to the United States through the media of transportation and communication were increasing the knowledge of the area interposed between. In addition, some realized the interdependence of railroads and settlement in a region far from the markets.

³³ Elliott Coues (ed.), The Journal of Jacob Fowler (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1898), pp. 12-27, 164-169; Dale L. Morgan, Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1953), p. 346; John F. McDermott, "Isaac McCoy's Second Exploring Trip in 1828," Kansas Historical Quarterly, XIII (August, 1945), 426-427; R. G. Thwaites (ed.), Early Western Travels, XXX: Palmer's Journals of Travels Over the Rocky Mountains, 37-60.

³⁴ Independent Patriot (Jackson, Missouri), March 4, 1826; New York American, July 31, 1827; August 8, 1827, March 10, 1829; July 17, 1829.

Three important movers in the expansionism of the era were largely responsible for the attack upon the desert: John C. Fremont, William Gilpin, and Thomas Hart Benton. These three pioneered in an attempt to extend the Garden of the World westward to the Rockies.

Due to the increased Oregon migration of 1841 and the need for forts along the way, John C. Fremont of the Topographical Corps was authorized to map a trail west of the Mississippi River.³⁵ Through this show of interest, the government could assure itself that the emigration would continue, and thus, bind Oregon to the United States.³⁶ It was at Fremont's insistence that the orders from Lieutenant Colonel J. J. Abert, head of the Topographical Corps, were extended to make the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains the chief object of exploration.³⁷

Fremont's report in 1842, through careful surveys and mapping, afforded for the first time accurate knowledge of the trans-Missouri West. With this and later expeditions to the Pacific, Fremont increased the Oregon emigration; and, at the same time, spearheaded the onslaught against the desert. In Fremont's hands, the Platte Valley became a garden in luxuriant bloom; and the territory drained by the Kansas River became one of unlimited agricultural potential. Fremont's botanist, John Torrey; his

³⁵William F. Zornow, Kansas: A History of the Jayhawk State (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), p. 62.

³⁶Nevins, Fremont, p. 85.

³⁷Thomas H. Benton, Thirty Years View (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856), II, 478; Nevins, Fremont, p. 88.

cartographer, Charles Preuss; and his paleontologist, James Hall, substantiated his story, although in terms less forceful.³⁸

The well-publicized Fremont reports had widespread influence and became a useful tool of the expansionists. The value of his explorations and his ability as an officer favorably impressed President Polk.³⁹ In Congress, Lewis Linn of Missouri commended Fremont's accomplishments and secured the printing of extra copies of the first report. The expedition, according to Senator Linn, had proved conclusively the fertility and beauty of the territory west of Missouri; and the excellent facilities of the Platte Valley for emigration to the Far West were beyond dispute.⁴⁰ Thomas Hart Benton frequently cited Fremont's reports in his arguments for westward expansion. Advocates of a central railroad to the Pacific used Fremont for ready reference.⁴¹

Despite Fremont's accomplishments, it has been said that the West owes more to William Gilpin than any other American. Although this may not be the unequivocal truth, Gilpin's speeches and writings were influential in the development of the West. Friend of Andrew Jackson, West

³⁸ Brevet Capt. J. C. Fremont, Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-1844 (Washington: Blair and Rives, 1845), pp. 37, 48, 84, 107-114, 296; Erwin and Elisabeth Gudde (ed.), Exploring With Fremont (Norman: University Press, 1958), p. 24.

³⁹ Milo M. Quaife (ed.), The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845-1849 (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1910), I, 412.

⁴⁰ U.S., Congressional Globe, 27th Congress, 3rd Session (1842-1843), XII, 389-390.

⁴¹ U.S., Senate Miscellaneous Document, 31st Congress, 1st Session, No. 25 (1849-1850), I, 1-4.

Point Cadet for one year, officer in the Seminole War, editor of the Missouri Argus, secretary of the Missouri General Assembly, an intimate of the Benton family, lieutenant colonel of the Missouri Volunteers in the Mexican War, first governor of Colorado Territory, William Gilpin was a prominent speaker and writer about the West for forty-five years.⁴²

After a trip west with Fremont in 1843, Gilpin added his testimony that the Great American Desert was nonexistent. In letters published in government documents in the 1840's, in magazine articles of the 1850's, and in public addresses published in 1860 and revised in 1873, Gilpin preached the destiny of the American people to subdue the continent. The Great Plains, according to Gilpin, were the object of a radical misapprehension in the popular mind.

These Plains are not deserts, but the opposite, and are the cardinal basis of the future empire of commerce and industry now erecting itself upon the North American Continent.... They are calcareous, and form the Pastoral Garden of the World.

In order to fulfill their destiny, the American people must build a great central railway to the Pacific as the connecting link between Europe and Asia, Gilpin continued; and this would support and be supported by the pioneer farmers moving westward. So it was that William Gilpin,

⁴² Short discussions of the life of Gilpin are found in the following: Bernard De Voto, "Geopolitics With the Dew On It," Harper's Magazine, CLXXVIII (March, 1944), 313-323; William E. Connelly, "Characters and Incidents of the Plains," Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1907-1908 (Topeka: State Printing Office), X, 113-114; Edwin L. Sabin, Kit Carson Days, 1809-1868 (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1914), p. 220; Smith, Virgin Land, pp. 35-43.

the "John the Baptist" of the West, joined John C. Fremont in the onslaught against the desert.⁴³

These two disciples of the West influenced and were influenced by Thomas Hart Benton, the leading champion of westward expansion in Congress for thirty years following the death of Thomas Jefferson. Father-in-law of Fremont and personal acquaintance of Gilpin, Senator Benton was confronted constantly with their observations of the West. Devoted during most of his life to the mercantilist concept of the United States as the passage between Europe and Asia, he finally turned his attention to the internal development of the trans-Mississippi West. In a speech before the House of Representatives in 1855, Benton told of the fertility and beauty of the West, describing in some detail all the country between the Missouri frontier and the Pacific along a central route. He foresaw the rise of great seats of commerce and empire in the interior comparable to the Tyres and Sidons of former times; and along the Kansas River, he envisioned a soil as rich as that of Egypt giving rise to a great civilization. Over the whole route he could find no mountains, hills, swamps, or deserts to be encountered. The eyes of Fremont and Gilpin had provided Benton with a vivid, if unrealistic, image of the West.⁴⁴

Through the combined efforts of such influential western prophets the Myth of the Desert was brought under serious question as evidenced by the popular literature of the late 1840's and early 1850's. Proponents

⁴³William Gilpin, Mission of the North American People (2nd Ed. Rev., Philadelphia: J. E. Lippincott and Company, 1874), p. 72.

⁴⁴U.S., Congressional Globe, 33rd Congress, 2nd Session (1855), XXIV, 73-82.

of a central railroad route found the world's finest soil for almost three hundred miles west of the mouth of the Kansas River. From this point to the Rockies, the soil remained fertile, although with less timber and water; and the entire expanse held excellent opportunities for the settler. Pioneer farmers on the eastern border of the desert made themselves heard in the East. In their efforts to entice more farmers to move westward, they talked of unsurpassed fertility, climate, and beauty west of Missouri. Emigrants to California and Oregon frequently agreed that the plains were rich and well-grassed, not arid and sterile as they had expected.⁴⁵

Such efforts notwithstanding, the Myth of the Desert retained its grip for several more years. The interest in and promotion of Oregon and California diverted attention from the great middle region and focused it upon the Pacific Coast. Conscious efforts were made by some to minimize the value of the wilderness from Missouri to the Rockies for political and commercial reasons. East coast shippers fighting to dominate the California trade could see no virtue in crossing the interior by railroad.⁴⁶

Consequently, in 1854 the American desert resolutely held control of the public mind. In a period of two decades an image so persuasive

⁴⁵J. Loughborough, "Pacific Railway," Western Journal and Civilian, II (September, 1849), 386-436; New York Tribune, May 11, 1849; July 22, 1849; July 9, 1850; The Weekly Tribune (Liberty, Missouri), July 2, 1852, October 8, 1852; New York Times, September 22, 1851.

⁴⁶Frank Heywood Hodder, "Genesis of the Kansas Nebraska Act," Proceedings, Wisconsin Historical Society, 1912 (Madison: State Printer, 1913), p. 70; The Weekly Tribune (Liberty, Missouri), October 15, 1852.

had been impressed upon the people that it remained a reality in the American mind until mid-century and in some quarters until the end of the Civil War. The myth was so completely assimilated that further scientific investigation seemed unnecessary, and results of systematic tests were treated with indifference. From 1820 to 1850, therefore, the region to the west was a very real desert in the minds of the people, uninhabitable and undesirable; and westward movement ground to a standstill at the bend of the Missouri.

The Myth of the Desert was born at the hands of the early official explorers; its elaboration and growth came at the hands of later explorers, travelers, and journalists whose words fell upon the receptive ears of an imaginative public; and its decline and destruction came at the hands of railroads, land companies, opponents and exponents of slavery, and land-hungry settlers at the end of the Civil War, armed with a weapon tried and proved for over half a century--the Myth of the Garden.

This story occupies an undeniably strategic place in the history of the settlement of Kansas, as it does for much of the trans-Mississippi West; for it was on the eastern border of Kansas that settlement paused, as if held back by a great wall, not to regain its momentum for over a quarter of a century.

CHAPTER II

BATTLEGROUND OF THE MYTHS, 1854-1865

The Opening of Kansas

The pessimistic view of the trans-Missouri West was challenged infrequently until the influential expansionists made themselves heard in the 1840's. Even these ardent spokesmen could not quickly dispel the desert myth which had been nurtured and expanded for forty years since its conception. In fact, an effective challenge to the idea of a desert in the area which was to become Kansas developed only after the formation of Kansas Territory in 1854. Then, for the next decade, desert and garden struggled for control of the public mind with abandon. Reality was shoved into the background, as the battle raged unabatedly in the realm of imagination, promoted by those to whom the settlement of Kansas meant gain or loss.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, opening for settlement a large portion of the Great American Desert, was a triumph for the western expansionists in Congress. It was the outcome of a project formulated a decade earlier, thwarted by a Congress which saw the West as a perpetual wilderness inhabited by the savage, and delayed until the sectional struggle brought increasing complications.

The increased Oregon emigration by 1843 had convinced the far-sighted--such men as Benton, Gilpin, and Fremont--that the sanction and

protection of the government along the route were requisites if we were to dominate the Pacific Coast. The organization of Oregon Territory and the Indian country east to the states was proposed in Congress by the expansionists David Atchison of Missouri and Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois as early as 1844. Since these bills were not considered in 1844, Douglas introduced a similar bill the next year with the primary purpose of organizing Oregon. To provide an outlet to this destination, provisions were included for organizing the intervening Indian country. From this time, Douglas kept the issue before Congress to prevent the continued settlement of Indians on the route to the Pacific until action would be taken on the bill.¹

After 1848 emigration across the Indian country multiplied as thousands of Americans sought gold or homes on the coast, and the demands for a safe route through organized territory increased in due proportion.

¹James C. Malin, "The Motives of Stephen A. Douglas in the Organization of Nebraska Territory: A Letter Dated December 17, 1853," Kansas Historical Quarterly, XIX (November, 1951), 321-353; and The Nebraska Question, 1852-1854 (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, Inc., 1953), pp. 16-19; Robert W. Johannsen (ed.) The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1961), pp. 268-272. This is the text of a letter from Douglas to the St. Joseph Convention of January 9, 1854 and published in the St. Joseph (Missouri) Gazette, March 15, 1854. Douglas here states that he has kept the Nebraska Bill before Congress "with a direct view of arresting the further progress of this savage barrier to the extension of our institutions, and to authorize and encourage a continuous line of settlements to the Pacific Ocean." This line of settlement, according to Douglas, is necessary to "develop, cherish, and protect our immense interests and possessions on the Pacific." In addition to removal of the Indian barrier and establishment of a line of settlements, Douglas stated a belief that many railroads and telegraphs connecting East and West were necessary to guarantee the future of the Pacific Coast.

Bills for the organization of Nebraska were introduced in 1848 and 1851 with no results. The issue was finally debated in Congress in 1852, but rivalry over Pacific railroad routes complicated the issue and assured its defeat. Douglas proposed a substitute for the Nebraska Bill in January, 1854, which would create two territories and leave the way open for northern or central railroad routes. This was finally passed in Congress; and the President approved it on May 30, 1854.²

The Kansas-Nebraska Act organized the Indian country north of the thirty-seventh parallel into two territories, Kansas and Nebraska. The repealing of the Missouri Compromise left to the settlers the status of these territories concerning slavery.

Although a combination of factors no doubt motivated Douglas to sponsor this bill, it was consistent with his devotion to Manifest Destiny. He was a constant champion of the political economic, and social expansion of the American nation. His life's desire was the development of the West, and the organization of Kansas and Nebraska served this purpose well by paving the way for a Pacific railroad along a northern or central route.³

²Proposals of a Nebraska Bill and debate thereon may be found in the Congressional Globe, 28th Congress, 2nd Session (1844), XIV, 41; ibid., Appendix, 44; 29th Congress, 1st Session (1845), XV, 690; 30th Congress, 1st Session (1848), XVII, 56; 32nd Congress, 1st Session (1851), XXI, 80; 32nd Congress, 2nd Session (1852), XXII, 47, 540; 33rd Congress, 1st Session (1854), XXIII, 221.

³The motives of Douglas in sponsoring the Kansas-Nebraska Act have been subject to considerable debate. Several prominent historians of the 1800's, including Henry Wilson, Hermann von Holst, James Schouler, and James Ford Rhodes, saw this move as a political effort to gain

Kansas was born, then, of the desire to improve communications with the Pacific Coast. The primary interest was the binding of the soil along the west coast to the United States east of the Mississippi. In attaining this goal, the expansionists had opened a vast tract of land in between about which little accurate knowledge was available. Now the early unfavorable reports were certain to be verified or disproved by the travelers and settlers who would enter. However, the firmly-entrenched

southern support for the Presidency. This view was widely held by contemporaries of Douglas. This explanation was systematically rejected by George F. Milton in The Eve of Conflict: Stephen A. Douglas and the Needless War (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1934), pp. 144-150. Diverse attempts have been made to identify other motivating factors. Frank H. Hodder developed the view that Douglas was vitally interested in having a Pacific railroad along a central route. Since this could be accomplished only by the organization of the Nebraska area, according to this view, Douglas formed a coalition with Atchison to get the southern support needed for passage; and repeal of the Missouri Compromise and popular sovereignty to determine the status of both territories were forced upon him in return for this support. Hodder presented this view in two articles, "Genesis of the Kansas-Nebraska Act," Proceedings, Wisconsin Historical Society, 1912 (Madison: Historical Society, 1913), pp. 69-86, and "The Railroad Background of the Kansas-Nebraska Act," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XII (June, 1925), 3-18. James C. Malin has followed this Hodder thesis in his book, The Nebraska Question, 1852-1854 and in "Indian Policy and Westward Expansion," Bulletin of the University of Kansas, Humanistic Studies (Lawrence: Kansas University, 1921), II, 261-358. Robert R. Russel owes much to this view in Improvement of Communication With the Pacific Coast as an Issue in American Politics, 1783-1864 (Cedar Rapids: The Torch Press, 1948). Allen Johnson in Stephen A. Douglas: A Study in American Politics (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908), sees Douglas in the same light. Milton agrees that this view is the most convincing, although he believes a variety of factors were involved. Johannsen, Letters of Douglas, pp. xxv-xxvi, feels that Douglas was motivated by two factors: the principles of manifest destiny and popular sovereignty. Douglas believed the country could expand to its potential, according to Johannsen, only by applying popular self-government to each area. If the Union was to be preserved, slavery would have to be decided at the local level. There is considerable evidence in this collection of letters to substantiate this view. A penetrating analysis of these and other conflicting interpretations is Roy F. Nichols, "The Kansas-Nebraska Act: A Century of Historiography," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XLIII (September, 1956), 187-212.

desert concept would provide a severe test even for the deluge of information soon to be provided.

A Battle of Images

Settlement had conquered every obstacle to steady advancement across the continent until Missouri became a state in 1821. However, west of Missouri lay a great desert created by the explorers and early visitors; and westward movement halted in the face of these pessimistic notions of the country beyond.

Although the desert concept was questioned by a few early travelers, the first serious challenge came at the initiative of the expansionists in the 1840's. This group in Congress, under the leadership of Douglas, convinced the majority that organized territory west of Missouri was essential to the future security of the Pacific Coast. As a result, Kansas Territory was legally opened for settlement in 1854. Little of the land was actually available to the settler at the time, and the demand for Kansas land was small due to the still widespread belief that it was part of a "Great American Desert."⁴

The nature of the Kansas-Nebraska Act made the breakdown of the desert image a necessity. Since the status of Kansas regarding slavery was to be determined by those who settled it, opponents and exponents of slavery alike stood to gain by convincing people of their views that the territory had great potential.

⁴Paul W. Gates in Fifty Million Acres: Conflicts Over Kansas Land Policy, 1854-1890 (New York: Cornell University Press, 1954), p. 3, points out that there was no land for sale when Kansas was opened and that the whole eastern part was covered by Indian reserves.

Even before the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, a group of antislavery men of Massachusetts saw a way to triumph under its terms. Since the question was to be decided by the people, the only thing necessary to win a victory was to persuade enough people with free-state principles to migrate to Kansas to overwhelm the competing proslavery element. To accomplish this, the New England Emigrant Aid Company was organized; and other similar societies appeared in the East.⁵ This emigrant aid movement inaugurated by antislavery leaders produced anger and widespread agitation among the proslavery people that led to counter efforts to stimulate migration from the South.⁶

People in both sections were urged to go to Kansas for patriotic and moral reasons as well as for personal gain. No argument that could be used to prove to possible colonists from either section that the territory was a beautiful country with abundant resources, fine climate, and productive soil was omitted. Antislavery correspondents who went to Kansas

⁵Edward E. Hale, Kansas and Nebraska (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1854), p. 219; Charles Robinson, The Kansas Conflict (Lawrence: Journal Publishing Company, 1898), p. 23.

⁶New York Tribune, June 19, 1854, told about the organization of a society in Jackson County, Missouri dedicated to making Kansas a slave state. At the same meeting, a Committee of Correspondence was established to inform the people of the South about the advantages of Kansas. The Tribune also reprinted articles from the Savannah (Missouri) Sentinel on June 3, 1854, and the St. Louis Intelligencer on June 6, 1854, telling about the hundreds of people preparing to enter Kansas. Greeley printed these articles to alert the antislavery forces to the task at hand. Sara T. L. Robinson, Kansas, Its Interior and Exterior Life (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Company, 1856), pp. 9-12; and Robinson, Kansas Conflict, pp. 16-25, tell how the proslavery forces organized "Blue Lodges," "Friends Societies," "Sons of the South," and other societies to combat the Aid companies.

tried to show that natural conditions were unfavorable to slavery, but also that there was great danger that slavery would be established if northerners remained apathetic. Proslavery writers, on the other hand, demonstrated the great possibilities of growing hemp and other crops with slave labor if southern colonists would settle the land before the abolitionists arrived.⁷

One of the organizers of the New England Emigrant Aid Company, Edward E. Hale, published a book in 1854 showing that Kansas was the most desirable area on the continent open to emigrants. Although Hale had not visited Kansas, he concluded from the reports of Fremont and others that Kansas was a settler's paradise of inexhaustible resources. A large portion of the territory would produce excellent grains and vegetables, according to the author; and the remainder would support a thriving pastoral economy.⁸

⁷Descriptions of Kansas appeared in newspapers everywhere. Many of these are located in Thomas H. Webb's, Kansas Scrapbook. Dr. Webb, secretary of the New England Emigrant Aid Society, compiled sixteen volumes of clippings from northern and southern newspapers of the period from May, 1854, to September, 1856. These volumes are now in the Kansas State Historical Society Library in Topeka. Specific examples of descriptions from the antislavery viewpoint, outside of Webb's collection, are the following: Max Greene, The Kansas Region (New York: Fowler and Welk, 1856); C. W. Dana, The Great West (Boston: Wentworth and Company, 1858); and William P. Tomlinson, Kansas in 1858 (New York: H. Dayton, 1859). Examples of the proslavery promotion, in addition to the many in Webb's Scrapbook, appear in Kansas Weekly Herald (Leavenworth), March 2, 1855; March 16, 1855; and March 23, 1855. The New York Tribune, January 27, 1855, and July 24, 1854, reprinted advertisements from the Washington Sentinel and the Jackson Mississippian pointing out the advantages of Kansas and its adaptation to slave labor.

⁸Hale, Kansas and Nebraska, p. 227.

Members of the Kansas League of Cincinnati who visited Kansas the succeeding year followed the same pattern. Fremont was quoted at length to show that Kansas was not deficient in rain. In fact, the members felt her resources coupled with her location as a logical point of departure for trade with the Far West would make Kansas one of the most powerful states in the Union.⁹

The next four years produced much of this promotional material for consumption by both North and South. A special correspondent of the antislavery New York Tribune, writing while the proslavery forces controlled Kansas in 1856, showed great concern about the future of such a great territory.

Landscapes of unsurpassed loveliness, soil of unmatched fertility, with the richest natural elements, exhibit the value of the future empire whose fate was tossed recklessly, by unscrupulous politicians, in the scale, to vibrate between the conflicting claims of freedom and slavery.¹⁰

The influential editor of the New York Tribune, Horace Greeley, made his newspaper a powerful organ for the promotion of Kansas. A strong antislavery spokesman, Greeley supported the New England Emigrant Aid Company by word and money. His interest in Kansas was prompted by his desire to join East and West into a strong, united country on the path of commerce between Europe and Asia. In his effort to represent Kansas

⁹C. B. Boynton and T. B. Mason, A Journey Through Kansas (Cincinnati: Moore, Wilstach, Keys, and Company, 1855), pp. 33-40.

¹⁰William Phillips, The Conquest of Kansas (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1856), p. 414.

as an ideal home for the independent farmer, Greeley wrote frequent editorials and often printed letters from the West.¹¹ One such letter from Thaddeus Hyatt of the Emigrant Aid Society told fantastic tales of the productivity of Kansas soil where melons grow four and one-half feet long, radishes as big around as a leg above the knee, beets so large they had to be boiled in a wash boiler, and sweet potatoes almost five feet long.¹²

An examination of this promotional literature reveals a notable lack of careful investigation. The few writers who had actually visited Kansas were familiar only with the eastern edge. Often the descriptions were based on the testimony of such men as Fremont whose desire to expand may have exceeded their power for accurate reporting. Few reporters at this early date were able to see Kansas, not as one homogeneous unit, but as a territory of widely varying characteristics; and those capable of this discernment differed greatly on the nature of the divisions. Some writers pictured a highly fertile, well-watered area for fifty to two hundred miles into Kansas with the remainder being a treeless waste.¹³ Others saw value in the eastern and western extremes of Kansas, but

¹¹The New York Tribune, June 9, 1854; June 13, 1854; June 21, 1854; June 22, 1854; June 30, 1854; July 4, 1854; July 8, 1854; July 12, 1854; July 17, 1854; July 24, 1854; August 10, 1854; August 13, 1854; August 15, 1854; August 29, 1854; September 27, 1854, January 16, 1855; January 27, 1855; April 6, 1855; May 22, 1855; June 11, 1855; June 22, 1855; July 13, 1855; March 18, 1857; April 24, 1857; May 12, 1857; May 30, 1857; July 9, 1859.

¹²Ibid., January 12, 1857.

¹³Freedom's Champion (Atchison, Kansas), March 6, 1858; New York Tribune, June 30, 1854; "The Missouri Valley and the Great Plains," North American Review, LXXXVII (July, 1858), 66-94.

pictured an American desert extending from Nebraska through the middle portion of Kansas into Texas and New Mexico.¹⁴

At any rate, Kansas was undoubtedly well advertised. Probably no new country was ever so widely heard of before the days of modern advertising. However, not all of the reports emanating from the territory were favorable. Many correspondents told freely of the hardships to be endured and of the handicaps in the way of scant rainfall, lack of timber, and high prices. A missionary at Shawnee Mission saw no possibility of moving the Indians westward onto the barren desert extending to the Rockies. Others saw potential in the soil, but their minds were plagued by the lack of timber which they saw as an insurmountable obstacle to settlement. Still others saw Kansas as a parched and baked land unsusceptible of cultivation and suitable only for Indians, wild animals, and rattlesnakes.¹⁵

Settlement Proceeds

The societies organized to settle Kansas with people of their views on slavery had little success in getting people to Kansas and were certainly not a decisive factor in making Kansas free. While some in both sections were fired with the crusading spirit and for that reason went to

¹⁴ Jacob Ferris, The States and Territories of the Great West (New York: Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1856), p. 307.

¹⁵ Daily Tribune (New Albany, Indiana), October 23, 1854; Herald of Freedom (Lawrence, Kansas), May 5, 1855; New York Daily Times, January 18, 1855; May 23, 1857; New York Tribune, June 7, 1854; June 23, 1854; June 29, 1854; July 3, 1854. Many clippings in Webb's, Kansas Scrapbook express these pessimistic notions.

the scene of conflict, great numbers of possible colonists who wanted homes instead of trouble were certainly kept away by the violence and strife that were created by the struggle.¹⁶

An even more important factor in this failure to attract immigrants, however, was the image of Kansas which had been stamped upon the public mind over a period of fifty years. The sudden deluge of promotional material failed to impress the vast majority of Americans. Only over a period of time could the prevailing conceptions be modified.

Consequently, the settlement of Kansas Territory proceeded at a slow pace in spite of the efforts of the promoters.¹⁷ It is significant to note the tremendous numbers that were leaving the older states and coming in from foreign lands to seek homes, fortunes, or adventures in the West, and the relatively small portion of these who found their way to Kansas Territory. The increase in the number of free persons born outside of, but living in, each of the seven frontier states was very great between 1850 and 1860. The smallest increase was almost equal to the total population of Kansas in 1860.¹⁸

¹⁶G. Douglas Brewerton, The War in Kansas (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1856), p. 259. This impression of the Aid Movement has been expressed by Ralph V. Harlow in "The Rise and Fall of the Kansas Aid Movement," American Historical Review, XLI (October, 1935), 1-25; and by Samuel A. Johnson's, The Battle Cry of Freedom (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1954), and "The Emigrant Aid Company in Kansas," Kansas Historical Quarterly, I (1932), 429-441.

¹⁷William O. Lynch, "Population Movements in Relation to the Struggle for Kansas," Indiana University Studies, XI, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1925), 383-404, is an excellent study of the settlement of Kansas during the territorial period.

¹⁸U.S., Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States: 1850. Population, Appendix, p. xxxvi; Eighth Census of the

It is also significant to note the area from which the settlers to Kansas came. All attempts to induce people of the lower South to settle in Kansas resulted in almost complete failure; for in 1860 only 1,007 people from the seven states of the lower South lived in Kansas. The efforts of the Aid Companies in New England were almost as fruitless. The nativity statistics furnished by the census of 1860 show that only 4,208 persons of New England birth were living in Kansas that year. At the same time, New England contributed 100,000 people to Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota between 1850 and 1860.

The Atlantic states lying between New England and South Carolina contributed more than the two previous sections, but nothing decisive. The bulk of the Kansas population came from the more mature states of the Old Northwest; but even these were not primarily interested in Kansas, for they contributed more to other states.¹⁹

United States: 1860. Population, I, 20, 104, 156, 166, 248, 301, 490
544.

	<u>1850</u>	<u>1860</u>	<u>Increase</u>
Michigan	257,006	454,285	197,279
Illinois	507,852	1,005,026	497,174
Wisconsin	242,376	528,704	286,328
Iowa	141,834	483,765	341,931
Missouri	317,018	591,835	274,817
Arkansas	99,591	200,292	100,701
Texas	105,271	268,606	163,335
Kansas	---	107,204	107,204

¹⁹Eighth Census: 1860, I, p. 166. The numbers born in the New England states and living in Kansas in 1860 were: Massachusetts, 1282; Vermont, 902; Maine, 728; Connecticut, 650, New Hampshire, 466; Rhode Island, 180. The numbers born in the states of the lower South and living in Kansas in 1860 were: Alabama, 240; South Carolina, 215; Georgia, 179; Mississippi, 128; Louisiana, 114; Texas, 108; Florida, 23. The contributions of the seaboard states lying between New England and South Carolina to Kansas were: Pennsylvania, 6463; New York, 6331; Virginia, 3487; North Carolina, 1234; Maryland, 620; New Jersey, 499; Delaware, 91. The contributions of the states of the Northwest to Kansas were: Ohio, 11617; Illinois, 9367; Indiana, 9945; Iowa, 4008; Missouri, 11356.

The meager success of the Aid Companies was widely recognized by contemporary observers. "A Western Man" writing to the Kansas Free State showed a somewhat surprising understanding of the situation when he wrote:

Any person that knows anything of Kansas, knows that five out of six inhabitants are from the western states, and four-fifths of them are Free State men and are opposed to the Eastern Emigrant Aid Company from the fact that they look upon it as the primary cause of our troubles.... We could have done as well without the Aid Company as with it....²⁰

This realization that the colonizers had created the conflict in Kansas and contributed little to actual permanent settlement appeared frequently by 1855-1856. Many of these writers commented bitterly on the inability of eastern immigrants to adapt to frontier life as western people could.²¹

A St. Louis editor in 1855 was convinced that the political conflict was largely responsible for the disappointing growth of Kansas:

Emigrants from northern or free states will not go to Kansas because they can get as good lands elsewhere, not cursed by mob law, nor ruled by non-resident bullies. Emigrants from Southern states do not go to Kansas, because they will not put their slave property in peril by taking into a Territory where there is a strong Free Soil element threatening the security of slaves....

The result is, Kansas, the fairest land under the sun is neglected and idle; occupied by a few honest and earnest, but disheartened pioneers.

The fifty thousand emigrants that ought, this season, to have poured into Kansas are not there. The prairie sod remains unbroken.

²⁰Kansas Free State (Lawrence, Kansas), March 3, 1856.

²¹Brewerton, War in Kansas, p. 259; Kansas Free State, April 7, 1855; April 30, 1855; July 9, 1855; March 3, 1856; March 24, 1856; Herald of Freedom, May 12, 1855; April 11, 1857.

The sound of the axe and the whoop of the woodman is [sic] not heard.... 'Dead-dead-dead' may be written on all the country, so deep and disastrous has been the fall from the high hopes of the past year.²²

These observations at the end of the summer of 1855 were true in general for the entire territorial period. The expectations in regard to Kansas were not realized. The number of colonists reaching the Territory was comparatively very small, as pioneers from North and South disregarded appeals to go to Kansas and settled elsewhere for the most part. However, the principal explanation for the modest influx of population eluded this writer and most others. It was not the competition of more attractive and easily accessible frontier areas that kept most westward-moving pioneers out of Kansas. Nor was the political conflict induced by proslavery and antislavery antagonists responsible to any great extent. The chief reason that most immigrants avoided Kansas, even in the face of an intensive advertising campaign, lay in the realm of the imagination. Kansas was part of a very real American Desert of long standing, and as such, remained undesirable and even uninhabitable in the minds of most people in both sections.²³

Regardless of the success of the advertising campaign in terms of settlers, the stark contrast of these descriptions to earlier reports was certain to impress many listeners. These widely publicized accounts

²²St. Louis Intelligencer, quoted in Lynch, Indiana University Studies, XI, 397-398.

²³Lynch, Indiana University Studies, XI, 385, states that lack of commercial and agricultural opportunities was the principal reason for the meager settlement in Kansas.

presented a second major indictment of earlier desert descriptions at least equal in impact to the challenge of the 1840's. Over a period of time, these challenges were responsible for a gradual modification of the image of Kansas as a worthless waste.

Not many people reached Kansas during 1854, but a considerable number arrived during the spring and summer of 1855. However, the year 1855 was a disappointment because of the failure of the expected numbers to appear, because of the bitter political warfare that took place, and because of the severe drouth during the summer which revived belief in the desert.

The favorable climatic and crop conditions of the next two years increased the tide of incoming settlers. In 1856, violence and lawlessness were widespread; as the political conflict reached its height. The strife decreased in 1857, and real prosperity came to the people of the new Territory. More colonists arrived than in any other year before the Civil War. The people of Kansas looked to the future with great expectation as economic and social progress made itself evident on all sides.

The optimism was short-lived, because 1858 brought the effects of the Panic of 1857 to Kansas in full force. Business declined; property prices dropped; and farmers could not sell their crops. Fewer colonists arrived, and many discouraged settlers left the Territory.²⁴

Conditions improved little until the period of the War. The drouth of 1860 confirmed the existence of a desert in Kansas in the minds

²⁴The Kansas Free State; Herald of Freedom; and other newspapers for 1854, 1855, 1856, 1857, and 1858 provide the basis for these evaluations.

of many, while for others serious doubts were created. Although no accurate records of the effect of the drouth on population are available, there is no doubt that there was a decrease. Kansans held out to the point of desperation before asking for aid in the fear that such requests would discourage emigration. Finally, even the Emigrant Aid leaders, Samuel Pomeroy and Thaddeus Hyatt, appealed for aid from the East. Many disillusioned settlers hurried back to old homes, while those planning the journey west changed their plans. As North and South stood on the threshold of open conflict, Kansas remained a distant western province with an unpretentious population and little prosperity.²⁵

Promotion Intensified

Soon after the first trickle of settlers entered eastern Kansas in 1854, newspapers were established to promote Kansas in general and certain locations in particular. In addition, Eastern papers frequently printed letters from enthusiastic western settlers. In the eyes of such prejudiced viewers, Kansas became "the Mecca of the pilgrims from the

²⁵Articles concerning the drouth in Kansas and the need for outside aid were numerous in eastern and western papers. Examples are: New York Tribune, August 22, 1860; October 6, 1860; October 27, 1860; November 6, 1860; December 1, 1860; December 26, 1860; January 5, 1861; February 1, 1861; February 5, 1861; February 16, 1861; February 27, 1861; March 15, 1861; and Freedom's Champion, October 27, 1860; January 5, 1861. Articles were plentiful following the drouth designed to lessen its impact on the Eastern mind. It was explained that such a drouth could be expected in any region once in fifty years. Examples are: Freedom's Champion, August 15, 1863; December 21, 1865; New York Tribune, June 26, 1865; August 1, 1865.

East" and a "Canaan" of the hopes and dreams of emigrants.²⁶ In his desire to settle Kansas, and particularly Atchison, the editor of the antislavery Freedom's Champion praised Kansas profusely:

Our own beautiful young State, clothed in her green leafy robes, and blushing with rich tinted and fragrant flowers--unbounded in her giant resources, and with her prolific and fertile soil richer in internal wealth, in agricultural produce, in mines of iron and coal, than the most exacting might hope to behold, asking for cultivation and for population--with an air and atmosphere as balmy, as pure, and as lifegiving as that which woos and kisses the classic shores of Italy--with a scenery which, although less varied than in more rugged districts, and perhaps less grand and terrible than in mountainous countries, yet is exceedingly picturesque; the swelling surface of the prairies dotted with island groves; beautiful table lands overlooking great rivers belted with luxuriant forests; green flowry plains, and vales of calm, Idyllian loveliness, walled in by the eternal battlements of nature; and gentle eminencies, so small, so delicate, so ethereal, lifting their graceful outlines against the sky, and seeming 'as if God's finger had touched, but did not press.'²⁷

City promoters also joined in the drive to settle Kansas.

Charles C. Spalding, a Kansas City engineer and newspaper writer, published a book in 1858 to describe commercial resources of the city to prospective merchants. In his desire to promote the City of Kansas,

²⁶ Freedom's Champion, August 28, 1858; November 13, 1858; November 27, 1858; March 10, 1860; May 12, 1861; May 18, 1861; December 17, 1863; December 31, 1863; November 9, 1865; Smoky Hill and Republican Union (Junction City, Kansas), January 30, 1862; February 6, 1862; June 19, 1862; January 24, 1863; August 8, 1863; August 15, 1863; December 5, 1863; Kansas Weekly Herald, March 30, 1855; Leavenworth Herald, September 15, 1854; September 22, 1854; January 5, 1855; March 16, 1855; April 6, 1855; June 22, 1855; Junction City Union, April 22, 1865; April 29, 1865; May 13, 1865; September 9, 1865; New York Tribune, May 24, 1856; February 16, 1856; August 22, 1856; February 13, 1858; August 7, 1858; January 7, 1859; March 15, 1859; May 5, 1859; May 25, 1859; July 15, 1865.

²⁷ Freedom's Champion, March 20, 1858.

Spalding proclaimed the potential of Kansas to become the richest in agricultural and industrial wealth of any state west of the Mississippi River. To strengthen his case, he quoted at length from the writings of William Gilpin on the nature of the Great Plains as a whole. He concluded that Kansas City was destined to become a great industrial center on the eastern edge of the "metropolitan granary of America...."²⁸

The discovery of gold in the western part of the Territory in 1858 brought increased publicity to Kansas and was put to good use as bait for prospective emigrants. Prior to this discovery, most advertising pertained to eastern Kansas or to the entire state in general terms. Now effort was concentrated on proving the value of the western half of the state.

Numerous pamphlets appeared on the market as guides to the mines but with the obvious intention of promoting the state. Previous descriptions of Kansas as an uninhabitable desert in its entirety were scoffed away as foolish judgments arrived at hastily and erroneously. These writers often had not seen Kansas but were certain of its nature from reading reports of Fremont and others testifying to the potential of the whole state. The future, they were certain, would witness a blossoming civilization of intelligent, enterprising people in place of the wandering tribes of savages who had roamed across Kansas for centuries.²⁹

²⁸ Charles C. Spalding, Annals of the City of Kansas (Kansas City: Van Horn and Abeel's Printing House, 1858), passim.

²⁹ William B. Parsons, The Gold Mines of Western Kansas (Lawrence: Republican Book and Job Printing Office, 1858), pp. 41-42; O. B. Gunn, New Map and Handbook of Kansas and the Gold Mines (Pittsburgh: W. S. Haven,

With the encouragement of such guides and dreams of fabulous wealth in their minds, many gold seekers turned their faces toward the setting sun and headed for the Pikes Peak region of Kansas Territory. Their optimism often turned to doubt and then disillusionment and anger as they reached the area of scant rainfall. The letters and stories of such first-hand viewers presented a picture of Kansas completely opposed to the popular promotional literature of the day. Discouraged by trials of the journey and small gold findings, these emigrants told of deserts destitute of everything to support life, white with alkali, and strewn with the bones of misled migrants.³⁰

The dispute over the need for and location of a railroad to the Pacific Ocean continued to produce evaluations of the wilderness west of Missouri throughout the 1850's. Sectional interests had by this time gained dominance over promotion of cities and states. A journey by Gwinn Heap to locate lands for Indian reservations produced a complimentary description of Kansas designed to promote a central railroad route. The National Intelligencer reported similar impressions by Fremont on a trip west from St. Louis, and these soon appeared elsewhere as a basis for promoting the central route. The influential Western Journal

1859), passim; New York Tribune, November 25, 1858; November 26, 1858; December 2, 1858, December 6, 1858; December 8, 1858; January 3, 1859; Freedom's Champion (1858-1859); Leroy R. Hafen (ed.), The Southwest Historical Series, XI: Overland Routes to the Gold Fields (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1942), 43.

³⁰Ibid., 260, 266-269; New York Tribune, May 28, 1859; June 27, 1859. These reports were often influenced by a desire to promote a certain route or city.

and Civilian of St. Louis frequently pointed out the potential of the central region for supporting a railroad. As could be expected, frequent letters from Kansas to eastern newspapers put forth similar arguments. The reports of F. B. Meek, F. V. Hayden, and William Gilpin, gave the central plains additional favorable publicity.³¹

The Garden Contested

All the efforts to promote Kansas failed to move a large and important segment of the American population. The favorable descriptions came, not from official government explorers or scientists, but from expansionists and pioneers. Official opinion was not affected, for the most part, by the optimistic western viewpoint expressed in the popular literature of the day. The judgments of the government explorers of the early 1800's dominated the minds of those in positions of responsibility throughout the 1850's, keeping their opinions of the trans-Missouri West in a pessimistic vein.

Asa Whitney's proposal to shorten the route to the Orient by building a publicly-financed railroad to the Pacific rapidly gained

³¹Leroy R. Hafen and Ann Hafen (eds.), Far West and the Rockies Historical Series, VII: Central Route to the Pacific by Gwinn H. Heap (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1957), 83-106, 252-254; New York Tribune, June 6, 1854; June 15, 1854; October 2, 1857; November 6, 1858. The Western Journal and Civilian of July, 1854, recorded the resolution of a Pacific Railroad Convention at Red Bluffs commending the central route due to the great amount of fertile territory crossed. In March of 1855 a speech of Col. Benton before the Boston Mercantile Library Association was printed describing the virtues of Kansas in detail. "The Pastoral Region of the West," Living Age, LIV (September, 1857), 676-679; "Geological Explorations in Kansas Territory," The American Journal of Science and Arts, XXVII (1859), 424-432.

converts after the Mexican War added California to the United States. A greater obstacle was the difficulty of choosing the route to be followed. The sectional issue was growing in intensity, and every enterprising city in the Mississippi Valley aspired to become its eastern terminus.

In 1853, Congress appropriated one hundred and fifty thousand dollars to be used by the Secretary of War in surveying several alternative routes to the Pacific Ocean. The surveyors reported that a northern, a southern, and a central route were equally feasible as far as the engineering problem was concerned. The southern route, however, had the advantage of organized territory through which to pass. This handicap, from which partisans of a northern route suffered, was removed by the organization of the Indian country west of Missouri in 1854.

Jefferson Davis, who as Secretary of War was responsible for the surveys, reported to Congress in 1855 that his investigations would substantiate the existence of an American desert. He stated that early observers were entirely correct in depicting a barren waste stretching 250 to 400 miles east of the Rockies. In this expanse Davis found most of the land to be sterile and the small amount of fertile land to be unproductive for lack of rain.³²

Such an official report was a serious setback to the promoters of Kansas. These findings were taken to heart and elaborated upon by the North American Review in 1856. The writer commended the explorations

³²U.S., House Executive Document, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, No. 129 (1853-1854), XVIII, Part I, 7.

for dispelling many illusions about salubrity of climate and fertility of the plains:

Our rich possessions west of the 99th meridian have turned out to be worthless, so far as agriculture is concerned. They never can entice a rural population to inhabit them, nor sustain one if so enticed. We may as well acknowledge this,--and act upon it,--legislate upon it. We may as well admit that Kansas and Nebraska, with the exception of the small strip of land upon their eastern borders, are perfect deserts, with a soil whose constituents are of such a nature as forever to unfit them for the purposes of agriculture, and are not worth an expenditure of angry feeling as to who shall or who shall not inhabit them.

Hence, the author concluded, the proposed railroad would be forced to traverse for most of its length a country destined to remain forever an uninhabitable and dreary waste.³³

The river and railway surveys of Lieutenant Governor K. Warren during the 1850's qualified him as an official observer of the land from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. He followed the pessimistic line of official thinking by reporting to Congress that most of the land west of the 99th meridian was an irreclaimable desert. East of this he pictured some fertile land along the streams; but west of this, he saw no agricultural potential of any kind.³⁴

The Smithsonian Report of 1858 also contained this cynical view of the plains region. J. G. Cooper, writing about the climate of North America, pictured a "great, treeless and often arid" expanse east of the Rocky Mountains. The fact that even the streams were treeless for 300

³³"The Pacific Railroad," North American Review, LXXXIII (January, 1856), 211-236.

³⁴U.S., House Executive Document, 35th Congress, 2nd Session, No. 2 (1858-1859), II, Part II, 641, 644.

miles east of the mountains was definite proof, according to Cooper, that the soil was inadequate for purposes of cultivation.³⁵

Similar views were presented in Congress during debates on the feasibility of a central railroad route. One member of the House of Representatives viewed the entire area from the Mississippi Valley to the Rockies as a "vast desert," while others could see only minimal value in this central region. It should be acknowledged, however, that these evaluations may have been colored by the desire to finance such a railroad through large gifts of land by the government.³⁶

Contemporary travelers occasionally agreed with the official view of Kansas as an uninhabitable wilderness.³⁷ One such writer expounded upon the effects of the barren plains on human character. He found that people crossing the plains used too much profane language, drank too much whiskey and strong coffee, smoked an excessive amount, and showed little respect for Sunday. He concluded with an interesting analysis of man's nature:

...the majority had seemingly left all their humanity and their morals at home, bringing along their brutality and all the evil propensities of human nature, and those most moral at home were generally the most abandoned abroad....³⁸

³⁵Smithsonian Institution, Annual Report, 1858 (Washington: James B. Steedman, 1859), pp. 269, 277.

³⁶U.S., Congressional Globe, 37th Congress, 2nd Session (1862), XXXII, 1704, 1707, 1908, 2804.

³⁷Rufus Sage, Wild Scenes in Kansas and Nebraska (Philadelphia: G. D. Miller, 1855), pp. 36-37.

³⁸C. H. Clark, A Trip to Pike's Peak (Chicago: S. P. Rounds Steam Book and Job Printing House, 1861), p. 21.

Even Horace Greeley, who had long devoted much time and space to the promotion of Kansas, was somewhat disillusioned by his trip to San Francisco in 1859. To him the western part of Kansas and Nebraska was a picture of barrenness and desolation similar to the Sahara and accurately named "The American Desert." To add to his dismay, he believed the desert was enlarging its borders and intensifying its barrenness. What a shock such words from Greeley must have been to loyal patrons of the New York Tribune who were accustomed to Greeley's optimism concerning the West.³⁹

Such pessimistic reports were seldom seen in popular literature by 1860. Westerners and those in the East with the pioneering spirit usually presented a more hopeful outlook. The authors of a Handbook to Kansas, dedicated to "unbiased reporting," concluded that Kansas was the most inviting field for settlement on the continent. Depending to a considerable extent upon Fremont's explorations, the authors cited the ideal location of Kansas, its "fertile soil, surpassingly beautiful scenery, and delicious climate" as factors certain to make Kansas the garden of the Union.⁴⁰

These advantageous descriptions were not confined to western promoters of Kansas. The Atlantic Monthly recorded a trip to San Francisco in 1864 during which the author foresaw a bright future for Kansas.

³⁹Horace Greeley, An Overland Journey (New York: C. M. Saxton, Barker, and Company, 1860), pp. 98-100.

⁴⁰James Redpath and Richard J. Hinton, Handbook to Kansas Territory and the Rocky Mountain Gold Region (New York: J. H. Colton, 1859), p. 100.

Similarly, a rider over the Smoky Hill route of Butterfield's Overland Dispatch Company was pleasantly surprised by what he saw in 1865.⁴¹

Kansas Achieves Statehood

The opening of Kansas in 1854 signaled the start of open rivalry between North and South to see which section would settle it, and thus, be in position to determine if it should be slave or free. When Governor Andrew H. Reeder called an election for territorial delegate in November, 1854, the proslavery faction won easily with the aid of several hundred Missourians who crossed the border. In March, 1855, the Missourians again appeared for the election of a proslavery legislature.

In the face of this hopeless situation, the antislavery Kansans called a constitutional convention at Topeka in October, 1855, and drew up a free state constitution. This was easily adopted by the people, since the proslavery faction did not participate. Under its terms, a governor and legislature were promptly chosen; and Congress was petitioned to admit Kansas as a state.

Congress, faced with the problem of whether to leave the proslavery territorial government in control or pay heed to the request of the free-state party to admit Kansas as a free state, appointed a committee to inquire into the trouble in Kansas in 1856. The committee reports failed to provide a solution of the vexing problem; and the battle for

⁴¹Fitz-Hugh Ludlow, "Through Tickets to San Francisco," The Atlantic Monthly, XIV(November, 1864), 604-617; Freedom's Champion, August 17, 1865.

Kansas raged, both in Congress and in the territory. Governor Robert J. Walker called an election for delegates to a constitutional convention in 1857, but the free-state men refused to participate. The proslavery element won the election overwhelmingly and framed a proslavery constitution at Lecompton which was accepted. Elections for a territorial legislature in the fall, however, saw the free-state men win. They resubmitted the Lecompton Constitution, and it was defeated. From these votes, it was now obvious that the free-state men were in the majority.

However, President Buchanan, making clear his desire to admit Kansas as a slave state, submitted the Lecompton Constitution to Congress. Led by Douglas, the House defeated this proposal. Finally, a compromise proposal was accepted giving Kansas a third vote on the Lecompton Constitution and admission as a state if accepted. The free-staters again voted it down; and statehood was delayed until population should reach 93,600--the number necessary for a representative in Congress. In consequence, Kansas could not become a state until after a number of southern states had withdrawn from the Union.

The federal census of 1860 revealed a population of 107,204 in Kansas Territory, a sufficient number for statehood. The vast majority of those migrating to the frontier from 1854 to 1860 sought areas other than Kansas, but the efforts of the promoters had induced a small minority to settle its sunny plains.

On January 29, 1861, statehood became a reality. The people who entered Kansas had long since determined that Kansas would be a free

state. This decision resulted primarily from a natural flow of population which brought more colonists to Kansas from Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois than from the entire slaveholding area.⁴²

The Homestead Act of 1862 was a victory for the land reformers who were trying to legislate the garden of the world into the trans-Mississippi West. Its passage was made possible by the secession of the Southern states, but its full impact was delayed by the resulting struggle. During the war, the westward pressure dropped off, as most of the young men were involved in one way or another in the struggle. Settlement proceeded at a slow pace in Kansas, as in other frontier areas; until the end of the war sent a deluge of land-hungry settlers westward.

Conclusion

Several observations may be made regarding the foregoing discussion. First, a tremendous battle was waged between 1854 and the end of the Civil War concerning the nature of Kansas. Views were presented describing Kansas as a total desert and as the garden of the world, and many fell somewhere between.

Second, it is evident that neither side used objective, scientific information to substantiate its views. Rather, the views presented were related more or less closely to the interests of the individual speaking. Thus, those who stood to gain by a central railroad through Kansas pictured

⁴²This view is presented in Lynch, Indiana University Studies, XI, 403-404.

the territory as a garden; and those favoring another route could see only a desert.

Third, there was obviously a difference between the official and unofficial view developing during this period. While the percentage of favorable literature was rising among the travelers and settlers, the official explorers held fast to the view that Kansas would not be susceptible to agriculture.

Although the migration to Kansas was increasing with the favorable literature making its appearance, the real boom of settlement still awaited more complete breakdown of the Desert Myth and universal acceptance of the image of a garden in the West. This would come with the rush of settlement following the Civil War, led by the railroads pushing toward the west coast.

CHAPTER III

TRIUMPH OF THE GARDEN

The secession of the southern states in 1860-1861 determined that the transcontinental railroad would proceed along a northern or central route, thus focusing the attention of the nation upon the plains west of Missouri. The demands upon manpower and resources occasioned by the ensuing conflict, however, prevented any general effort to settle the region.

Between 1854 and 1861, about 100,000 people established their homes along the eastern border of Kansas; and the westward advance was insignificant during the years of the War. At the end of the conflict, the frontier of agricultural settlement ran roughly along the ninety-sixth meridian across eastern Kansas and Nebraska. The vast treeless plains facing the pioneer had for the most part resisted the efforts of hopeful westerners and expansionists to settle them.

The Union victory in 1865 once more turned the energies of the nation to expansion. Pressures for expansion ranged from confidence in the destiny of the nation to cover the continent on the one hand to self-interest of men who stood to profit on the other. The diminution of available eastern land to provide homes for the returning soldiers and landseekers gave additional impetus to the westward movement.

Two conflicting estimates of the potential of Kansas had been in evidence for twenty years before the Civil War. One was a vague folk belief that Kansas would eventually all be cultivated. The other was the general scientific opinion that the Great Plains would always remain an uninhabitable desert. The primary concern of all who stood to gain by the settlement of Kansas was to publicize and elaborate the optimistic western belief and add to it authoritative evidence to combat the scientific opinion of the day. City and state promoters were joined in this task by the railroad builders--probably the most active and successful agents in colonizing the plains.

Railroads and the Garden

The early railroad enthusiasts had used trade with Asia as their principal talking point. After 1849 the emphasis changed to the California trade and potential trade with Oregon, while it was hoped that some business might develop in the great intervening spaces as a few occupants ventured west. After the Civil War, the emphasis of the projectors of transcontinental railways shifted from most suitable termini and "shortest and most practicable" route to the "inland empires" their roads would develop.¹

The idea of building railroads gained wide acceptance in Kansas in the 1850's. The proslavery Congressional delegate, J. W. Whitfield,

¹Robert Russel, Improvement of Communication With the Pacific Coast as an Issue in American Politics (Cedar Rapids: The Torch Press, 1948), p. 324.

demanded aid for railroad builders in the form of public lands. The territorial legislature granted five railroad charters in 1855, sixteen in 1857, and several more in 1859. Although a number of these charters were used after the Civil War, only one was in operation when the war began.

An intensified campaign for federal aid in 1860-1861 led by Edmund G. Ross, a Topeka newspaper editor, and Senators James H. Lane and Samuel C. Pomeroy was a failure; as the war postponed action.

The political and military necessity of communication with the West produced charters for the Union and Central Pacific railways in 1862. When loans and gifts of land failed to bring action, the government in 1864 offered twenty square miles of land in alternate sections for each mile of track and took a second mortgage on its loans. In addition to the federal land grants the railroads could benefit from the state lands made available, as well as assistance from cities, counties, and townships.

At the end of the war Kansas assumed leadership in building railroads to the west as well as to the south. The state jumped from 71 miles of track in 1865 to 1,124 miles in 1870; and by 1890 had nearly reached its peak mileage with 8,706 miles completed.² Two major leaders in building westward across Kansas were the Kansas Pacific and the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe. The Leavenworth, Pawnee, and Western, which later became the Kansas Pacific and Union Pacific, completed forty miles of

²Carroll D. Clark and Roy L. Roberts, People of Kansas (Topeka: Kansas State Planning Board, 1936), p. 45.

construction by 1865; and construction began in earnest when permission was granted to build to Denver. Cyrus K. Holliday's Atchison and Topeka, chartered in 1859, got down to business in 1863 when it received a grant of 3,000,000 acres to build to the western border of Kansas within ten years.

The railroads soon embarked on one of the most comprehensive advertising campaigns the nation had ever seen to educate the people about the plains. Colonizing the land grants would benefit the railroads in two ways. A large sum would, of course, be realized from the sale of these lands to individual settlers, thus providing additional means to extend westward. In addition, the prosperous farms developed on these lands would provide a perpetual and increasing source of traffic revenue.

As an incidental effect, the state and nation were beneficiaries; because these efforts to colonize transformed the fabled arid plains, in the minds of Americans, into a fruitful garden in the West. Thus, the carefully organized campaign of the railroads was largely responsible for the influx of settlers into Kansas in the two decades after the Civil War.³

Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe

The financial difficulties of the Santa Fe were solved largely through the efforts of Cyrus Holliday; and construction began in late

³Ira G. Clark, Then Came the Railroads (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), pp. 42-44, 65-66, 84-90; Athearn, High Country Empire, pp. 168-169.

1868, nine years after the company was chartered. By the close of 1872 the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroad stretched four hundred and sixty-nine miles from Atchison to the Colorado line.

A land office was opened in Topeka in 1869 under the direction of the first Santa Fe Land Commissioner, D. L. Lakin; and appraisement of the land soon began. In 1872, A. E. Touzalin replaced Lakin; and plans were devised for selling and peopling the land grant as quickly as possible. Touzalin's land-selling campaign soon encompassed America and extended to Europe. It was no gross exaggeration when the Santa Fe pointed out to the Kansas legislature in 1881 that:

...notwithstanding that the word KANSAS was, in the minds of the inhabitants of all the Eastern States, synonymous with grass-hoppers, drouth, and starvation; yet, by the unaided efforts of these railroad corporations, an agent has been placed in every town and village in the United States and every city in Europe to correct this impression and talk and plead for Kansas.⁴

Colonel Alexander S. Johnson of the Santa Fe Land Department introduced a new feature in 1875 by inviting three hundred newspapermen of the Midwest to tour Kansas on the Santa Fe line as guests of the company. The trip across Kansas was wisely arranged in June when the country was at its best with large fields of ripening grain, growing corn, and green pastures. The glowing reports of the more than two hundred editors and correspondents who enjoyed the sights and entertainment of the trip did much to break down deep-rooted prejudices toward Kansas. The words of praise helped to counter the unfavorable publicity of the

⁴Memorial of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe...to the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Kansas (Topeka, 1881), p. 20.

drouth and grasshopper plague of 1874. Reports appearing in all sections of the country commented on the "false idea" that a "Great American Desert" covered much of Kansas.⁵

Colonel Johnson gained further favorable publicity with an elaborate display of the state's agricultural products at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. Shortly thereafter, a home-seeker's excursion provided some twelve hundred prospective farmers from the middle states the opportunity to view Kansas first-hand.

The Santa Fe carried its campaign to Europe where the competition among railroads was particularly keen. Advertisements of Kansas lands appeared in European newspapers, and materials printed in many languages were scattered throughout Europe. Full-time European agents, familiar with the language and culture of the people with whom they worked, attempted to divert immigrants to lands in the Cottonwood and Arkansas Valleys. Contracts with steamship companies and travel agencies provided encouragement for aliens to settle on the company lands.⁶

The Santa Fe Land Department successfully negotiated the largest mass movement of foreign colonists, the removal of some fifteen thousand Mennonites from southern Russia to Kansas. Much of this was accomplished through the work of a German-born immigration commissioner, Carl B. Schmidt,

⁵A pamphlet containing these reports entitled Kansas in 1875 was prepared by the Santa Fe. A copy of this is located at the Historical Library in Topeka. The Memorial of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe, 1881, also contains this story on pp. 18-23.

⁶Glenn D. Bradley, The Story of the Santa Fe (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1920), pp. 107-138; L. L. Waters, Steel Trails to Santa Fe (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1950), pp. 218-260.

who traveled secretly among the Mennonites to tell of the wonders of Kansas. The Santa Fe was forced to make many concessions in the form of special trains, reduced land prices, and free shipment of building materials to ward off similar efforts of other railroads.⁷

The Santa Fe advertising materials told people far and wide of the virtues of Kansas in general and the Arkansas and Cottonwood Valleys in particular. Much of this publicity centered around a change of climate which was rumored to be taking place over the state. Through their efforts to promote the selfish interest of the company, these agents did much to create a favorable image of Kansas over a large area.⁸

Kansas Pacific

The Leavenworth, Pawnee, and Western Railway Company, chartered in 1855, finally started construction westward from Leavenworth in 1862. A change of ownership in 1863 brought a change of title to Union Pacific, Eastern Division; and the starting point was changed to Wyandotte. Construction proceeded after a second change of ownership in 1864, and the line reached Denver in 1870 despite constant opposition from the Indians

⁷ Carl B. Schmidt, "Reminiscences of Foreign Immigration Work for Kansas," Kansas State Historical Society Collections, 1905-1906, (Topeka: State Printer, 1906), IX, 487-497; Clark, Then Came the Railroads, pp. 88-89.

⁸ Many Santa Fe promotional pamphlets are on file at the Kansas Historical Society Library at Topeka. Sample titles are:

"Official Facts About Kansas" (Topeka, 1884)

"Where to Go to Become Rich" (Chicago, 1880)

"Le Kansas Sa situation, ses resources et ses products"

"500,000 Acres of the Best Farming and Fruit Lands in the Cottonwood Valley" (Topeka, 1874)

"How and Where to Get a Living; A Sketch of the Garden of the West" (Topeka, 1876)

"A New Sectional Map of the Arkansas Valley" (Topeka, 1883)

and difficulty in getting materials. Meanwhile, the name was changed to Kansas Pacific Railway in 1868; and in 1880 it was consolidated with the Union Pacific and Denver Pacific to become part of the Union Pacific Railroad Company.⁹

The Kansas Pacific Railway followed much the same pattern as the Santa Fe in attempting to colonize its land grant and the surrounding region. Railroad men obviously realized that a profitable business for them would require settlement and cultivation of the entire state, because business from the terminal points was not sufficient.

As the Santa Fe advertised lands in the Arkansas Valley, so the Kansas Pacific advertised the Kansas Valley and its subsidiaries to the west--the Smoky Hill, the Republican, the Solomon, and the Saline. A valley forty miles wide extending westward across Kansas was named the "Golden Belt" and proclaimed to be unsurpassed by any state in climate, beauty, and fertility. These claims were supported by the testimonials of happy owners and an offer of free rides for prospective land buyers to see for themselves.

In addition to such natural advantages, the promoters found a high degree of "intelligence, culture, and enterprise" among the people

⁹The early history of this railroad appears in the following accounts: N. H. Loomis, "Kansas and the Union Pacific," Twenty-Sixth Biennial Report of the Board of Directors of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1909-1910 (Topeka: State Printing Office, 1910), pp. 529-549; George L. Anderson, "General William J. Palmer: A Decade of Colorado Railroad Building, 1870-1880," Colorado College Publication (Colorado Springs: Colorado College, 1936), pp. 1-172; W. F. Bailey, The Story of the First Transcontinental Railroad (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Printing Company, 1906); Henry K. White, History of the Union Pacific Railway (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1895), pp. 38-54; Athearn, High Country Empire, pp. 160-162.

who had made Kansas their home. These virtues were enhanced by "moral and law-abiding patriotism" and Christianity, which made Kansas the finest place in the country in which to live. The "peacefulness" of Kansas was emphasized, no doubt in hope that the lingering memories of an uncivilized, "Bloody Kansas" might finally be laid to rest.¹⁰

In answer to the critics who felt Kansas was too dry for cultivation, experimental crops were planted four hundred and twenty miles west of Kansas City. R. S. Elliott, the Kansas Pacific Industrial Agent, claimed unqualified success in growing wheat, rye, barley, grasses, and trees without irrigation on supposedly useless land. These results were published and distributed for the consumption of all doubtful Americans.¹¹

Promotional material reaching Europe compared Kansas land favorably with land in the country being reached. A pamphlet which was widely distributed in England, Scotland, and Wales, contained testimonials from

¹⁰The following are examples of the many Kansas Pacific pamphlets on file in the Historical Library in Topeka:

"A Geographically Correct Map of Kansas and Colorado," 1878

"Map of the Great Wheat Region of Central Kansas," 1877

"One Million Acres of the Golden Belt Lands," 1887

"The Great Northwest," 1888

"The Magnificent Valley of the Kansas River," 1871

"Lands in Kansas," 1891

Other Kansas Pacific materials would include Josiah Copley's Kansas and the Country Beyond on the Line of the Union Pacific Railway (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1867); W. Weston (ed.), Guide to the Kansas Pacific Railway (Kansas City: Bulletin Steam Printing and Engraving House, 1872); and an article in Freedom's Champion, September 26, 1867.

¹¹R. S. Elliott, Experiments in Cultivation on the Western Plains (St. Louis: Levison and Blythe, 1872), p. 4.

former British citizens telling of superior cattle fed on Kansas grass and corn growing fourteen feet high. The superior Kansas climate was said to be so potent that invalids had been cured by its spell. The class-ridden Englishmen were told of a country completely devoid of class lines. It was standard procedure to promise cheap transportation in order to meet competition from other railroads.¹²

Other Agents of Expansion

The zealous efforts of the railroads in broadcasting descriptions of Kansas resources throughout the nation and in foreign lands did much to dislodge the legend of the desert. Land speculators, townsite promoters, and the local press added their complimentary portrayals; and many cities and counties subsidized publicity programs.

An intensive advertising campaign, sponsored by several Kansas newspapers, gained the support of some influential eastern editors. Editorials in local papers dealt in detail with the resources and advantages of Kansas, including a crop yield per acre exceeding those of all other states and the absence of any wasteland. It was claimed that half as much labor on Kansas soil would produce twenty times as much crop as in the East. Corn stalks twenty-two feet tall, four inches in circumference, and producing ears two and one-half feet long were said to be average on the superior Kansas soil. Kansas was believed to excel also

¹² Angie Debo, "An English View of the Wild West," The Pan-handle-Plains Historical Review, VI (1932), 24-44; Kansas Land and Emigration Company, "Emigration to Kansas, The Glory of the West," 1869.

in the production of fruits and vegetables. One farmer described a sixteen pound turnip he had raised. A first prize for the Kansas display at the National Pomological Convention in 1869 gave Kansas much publicity as a fruit state.

The climate of Kansas, according to the promoters, was no less an asset than the soil. It became a "panacea more potent than the science of physicians and more rejuvenating than the visionary 'Fountain of Youth'." Miasmatic and pulmonary diseases were said to be unknown. If the claims that the water supply was plentiful and the wood supply ample were surprising, the statement that Kansas suffered more from excess rain than from drouth must have come as a shock to the many who had long feared Kansas for lack of these very things. It was pointed out that Kansas receives as much moisture as any of the central and seaboard states, coming for the most part during the growing season.

These enthusiasts concluded that Kansas was destined to become the "Empire State of the West." Not even Illinois could compare with Kansas in climate, soil, beauty, markets, or transportation. The only reason anyone could fail in Kansas, according to these writers, was to attempt to use farming methods from the East.¹³

These local journalists were joined by eastern writers in promoting Kansas. Bayard Taylor of the New York Tribune made a trip to Colorado in 1866 after which he disclaimed completely any desert east of the Rockies.

¹³An examination of two Kansas newspapers revealed many such views. These were the Junction City Union, May, 1866 to January, 1870, and the Atchison Weekly Champion and Press, January, 1866 to December, 1870.

Acknowledging the description of a "Great American Desert" from the border of Missouri to the Rockies in his school geographies, Taylor found instead "a vast garden of splendid bloom" just waiting for cultivation. He passed off the drouth of 1860 as nature's last desperate attempt to resist settlement. That the incentive for Taylor's sanguine characterization stemmed from his desire for a railroad route along the Smoky Hill cannot be denied, but the effects of his favorable advertising were diminished not at all by his motive. Schuyler Colfax gave a similar description in 1866, and his motive was identical with Taylor's.¹⁴

The director of the Kansas Geological Survey in 1866, G. C. Swallow, deviated from scientific reporting to join in promotion of the state. In his preliminary report, he predicted that a teeming civilization would soon replace the buffalo and Indian on the "fabled arid plains of Kansas." Swallow believed as many before him, however, that the timber shortage would prohibit settlement in parts of Western Kansas for many years to come.¹⁵

Dissenting Voices

By no means were all of the opinions of Kansas complimentary after the war. A large segment of the American population, including the scientific minds of the day, remained unimpressed by its virtues. The influential New York Evening Post carried an article in 1865 stating

¹⁴New York Tribune, July 10, 1866; November 30, 1866.

¹⁵G. C. Swallow, Preliminary Report of the Geological Survey of Kansas (Lawrence: State Printer, 1866), pp. 62, 192.

that emigration had advanced to its natural limits in the West, leaving beyond only a great interior desert. A letter printed in the Chicago Tribune in 1870 credited the old geographers with an accurate description of Kansas as the "Great American Desert." The writer believed civilization could be separated from barren waste by drawing a line running north and south through Junction City.¹⁶

A correspondent of the Cincinnati Commercial concluded after a five-year visit in the territories to cure his asthma that many had been misled concerning the land west of Missouri. He felt that any route across the continent would of necessity cross five hundred to one thousand miles of complete desert west of 100°. This one million square mile "American Desert" he attributed to drouth, elevation, and excess chemicals in the soil. In Kansas specifically, he believed the farming and grazing land was more than equaled by dry, sterile plains.¹⁷

Horace Greeley, long a disciple of the West until the revelations of his visit in 1859, was even more pessimistic by 1869. His recollections of the trip brought memories of the solitude and loneliness he experienced in crossing a sterile, dreary waste. He expressed the belief that few "civilized" men would ever live on the plains.¹⁸

¹⁶New York Tribune, October 20, 1865; Atchison Weekly Champion and Press, March 5, 1870.

¹⁷J. H. Beadle, The Undeveloped West (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1873), pp. 50-63, 216-234.

¹⁸Horace Greeley, "The Plains As I Crossed Them Ten Years Ago," Harper's, XXXVIII (May, 1869), 789-795.

These writers were joined by many more with similar ideas.¹⁹

Cynical views of the plains, as was true of the favorable opinions, were often closely related to self-interest. The citizens of the newly incorporated city of Ellsworth, feeling that a railroad connection with Santa Fe would bring prosperity, published a pamphlet in 1868 proposing a change in the Union Pacific route from the Smoky Hill Valley to the Santa Fe Trail. They pictured a very real "Great American Desert" west of Ellsworth which was capable of sustaining only wild animals and roving Indians. They described a barren soil of hard-baked loam for fifty to eighty miles followed by:

...a tract of some two hundred miles of veritable desert, an immense area of sand, barren of timber, and almost so of water, which drifting and changing, in the almost unceasing wind, makes changes in the surface of the country almost as great as those that are related of the Sahara.

A southwest route through the Arkansas Valley, on the other hand, was said to cross rich mineral and agricultural lands well supplied with wood, water, and coal.²⁰

Meeting the Opposition

Promoters of the West, in their efforts to compensate for such genuine opposition, felt constrained to produce more convincing evidence

¹⁹ A. W. Hoyt, "Over the Plains to Colorado," Harper's, XXXV (June, 1867), 1-21; C. W. Betts, "The Yale College Expedition of 1870," ibid., XLIII (November, 1871), 663-671.

²⁰ This pamphlet entitled "The Ellsworth and Pacific Railroad" appeared in 1868 and is on file in the Historical Library at Topeka.

of its potential. Satisfactory answers would have to be provided for certain basic questions. If the soil was rich and the moisture plentiful, why should the plains be devoid of vegetation?

Eastern viewers had been haunted by the lack of trees from the very first glimpse of Kansas. The explanations for this phenomena had been, as could be expected from a forest people, multifarious and without affinity. Some had suggested the soil was sterile, while others felt it was too fertile.²¹

However, the more optimistic chose to believe that some unnatural cause was responsible for the treeless plains. R. S. Elliott, Kansas Pacific Industrial Agent, felt certain the annual prairie fires, rather than moisture or soil ingredients, prevented the growth of trees. If these fires, rumored to be started by the roving bands of Indians, could be stopped, Elliott believed he could establish trees over all the plains.²²

The author of a paper presented before the Association for the Promotion of Science and Art in 1866 suggested that an "unknown agency" had swept the forests from the plains. If new trees were planted and annual fires prevented, according to this writer, forests would soon abound throughout the barren desert.

²¹The viewpoints of many early visitors were presented in Chapter I. After the Civil War many writers were concerned with this lack. (Atchison) Freedom's Champion, December 6, 1866; January 10, 1867; Junction City Union, March 8, 1868; February 11, 1871; W. R. Hooper, "Our Public Lands," Harper's, XLII (January, 1871), 219-223.

²²R. S. Elliott, "Forest Trees in Kansas," The Kansas Magazine, III (May, 1873), 400.

Having shown to his satisfaction that the climate was not responsible for the absence of trees, he proceeded to show that, on the contrary, the absence of trees could be responsible for the arid climate. To prove this point, the writer pointed to Europe and the Cape de Verde Islands where the cutting of forests was followed by drouth and new growth followed by increased moisture.²³

Other writers joined in with authoritative examples. The planting of millions of trees in Egypt was said to have increased the annual rains from six days to twenty-four days, while in Algiers a one hundred percent increase resulted from a similar project. Spain and Persia, formerly flowing with "milk and honey," were said to have been transformed into arid wilderness by removal of trees.²⁴

How could the planting of trees increase precipitation? The report before the Science and Art Association stressed that forests could regulate climate and seasons by several methods. Evaporation would be reduced by retarding the winds; temperatures around roots and branches would be equalized through conduction, and trees would release moisture into the atmosphere. Through these methods, the author reported, humidity would be increased and result in frequent rains in small amounts. As proof that

²³These ideas were presented by C. C. Hutchinson of Ottawa, Kansas, and were printed in the New York Tribune, May 22, 1866.

²⁴F. Hawn, "Influence of Forests on Climate," The Kansas Magazine, III (June, 1873), 485-490; New York Tribune, May 22, 1866; Atchison Weekly Champion, December 2, 1871.

the level of humidity would affect rainfall, he pointed out the general belief that rains follow humid forest belts on the plains.²⁵

After proving the profound effects of trees upon the climate, these writers launched a campaign for preserving the limited timber in Kansas and planting new forest trees. In their anxiety over the lack of trees, these promoters went beyond a change of climate to include changes in human nature:

Trees not only decorate and adorn, but they promote the well-being and comfort of the community. They are civilizers. They advance morals, They minister to the health of a people. They consume the miasmas and exhalations that poison and destroy. The more trees the less poor houses and jails. Men who cultivate trees seldom steal, or commit adultery, or swindle their neighbors with joint stock companies, moonshine railroads and wooden gas pipes. They all become respectable, wealthy, honest folk, and vote the straight Republican ticket.²⁶

The almost overwhelming concern over the nakedness of the plains had finally been met head on, an explanation for the phenomena provided, and finally, the planting and protection of new trees given as the solution. With a sigh of relief, the promoters could point out the far-reaching changes to be wrought including those on the nature of man.

The perplexing problem of treelessness, however, was only a segment of a larger problem in the West--the lack of precipitation. In all

²⁵ New York Tribune, May 22, 1866. Other writers joining in this belief included the New York Tribune, February 12 and February 19, 1870. Articles stressing similar effects of trees upon climate were: John A. Warder, "Forest-Tree Culture," Report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, 1872 (Topeka: State Printer, 1873), I, 60-63; R. S. Elliott, "The Plains," ibid., 1873 (Topeka: State Printer, 1874), II, 253-256.

²⁶ Atchison Weekly Champion, September 10, 1870.

the discussions concerning the cause and effect relationships of trees and climate, the crux of the matter in the final analysis was the shortage of moisture.

The problem had been faced twenty years earlier by Josiah Gregg, a genuine westerner with an optimism not enjoyed by those of more scientific bent. Not content to believe the West would always be dry and barren as he had observed it between Missouri and Santa Fe, Gregg suggested that the climate might change. He believed, in the first place, that rain would often follow a fire or other conflagration.²⁷

Gregg went on to mention that forests had been moving westward slowly, apparently changing the climate so that droughts were becoming less oppressive. Most important of all, he stated a belief that settlement could increase rainfall:

Why may we not suppose that the genial influences of civilization--that extensive cultivation of the earth--might contribute to the multiplication of showers, as it certainly does of fountains?²⁸

This vague folk belief of Gregg persisted through the years among the Westerners, but it received little publicity until the westward rush after the war brought its revival and made it available to an eastern audience. The colonization agents, in their efforts to attract settlers to Kansas, elaborated and publicized this belief.

²⁷Milo M. Quaife (ed.), The Commerce of the Prairies by Josiah Gregg (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1926), p. 193. Thus, he acknowledged belief in the theory of artificial showers.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 202-203.

A letter from A. D. Richardson to the New York Tribune in 1868 showed great confidence that rainfall was increasing as farmers moved into Kansas; and he concluded, therefore, that there was a direct relationship between civilization and the amount of precipitation:

There is a curious logical connection between civilization and Rain. Indians say that the white man invariably brings rain with him. Thirty years ago, the Missourians living on the bank of the river, in sight of what is now Kansas, deemed it uninhabitable on account of the drouth; and those who still survive declare that it was then almost a rainless climate. All remember the great Kansas drouth of seven years ago, and the general fear then prevailing that the new state was too dry for successful farming. The great crops and increasing rain of the intervening seasons have quite dispelled that apprehension among the settlers themselves.

Richardson was certain that the increase of rain would soon produce a cover of forests wherever desired, and the deep black soil would yield a plentiful crop the first year it was tilled. Kansas, he went on to say, is the most beautiful spot in the world with its green prairies interspersed with flowers and threaded with belts of timber along the streams.²⁹

The Surveyor General of Kansas also reported in 1869 that the Kansas climate, and that of the entire West, had vastly changed during the past few years. The remarkable increase in rainfall, according to C. W. Babcock, was unquestionably due to the cultivation of the soil and the planting of forests. He assured all who would listen that the whole "Great American Desert" would soon be well inhabited and shaded by groves of forest trees.³⁰

²⁹Freedom's Champion, June 27, 1868.

³⁰Weekly Champion and Press, January 1, 1870.

The railroads joined in expounding the idea of increasing rainfall with advancing civilization. It was pointed out that settlement and cultivation had exerted an ameliorating effect on the climate in the eastern half of Kansas since 1860. The Kansas-bound settler was advised, however, that he should be careful not to move beyond the rain line which was advancing westward at a rate of eighteen miles per year.³¹

The Smithsonian Report for 1870 included an article on the changing climate written by the Kansas Pacific Agent, R. S. Elliott. Acknowledging a popular belief in climate change, Elliott proposed a variety of causes for such a revolution. One possibility was the growth of plants which covered the earth better than native prairie grasses. The effects of digging, grading, iron rails, steam locomotives, friction of metallic surfaces, poles and wires, and batteries were all suggested as unproved but likely causes. However, Elliott showed skepticism about a permanent climate change, feeling that a cyclical wet phase might be coinciding with settlement to give the impression of a cause and effect relationship.³²

A professor of natural history and meteorology at Kansas University, F. H. Snow, reported to the Kansas State Board of Agriculture in 1872 that certain changes had tended to increase Kansas rainfall in the last twenty years. These changes included plowing the soil, thus retaining more moisture; increasing the timber by checking fires and planting trees; and the gradual supplanting of short buffalo grass with longer and heavier

³¹This theme was emphasized in the Santa Fe materials previously cited.

³²R. S. Elliott, "Climate of Kansas," Smithsonian Report, 1870 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), pp. 472-474.

grasses. Professor Snow acknowledged that positive proof of a permanent increase could not be presented on the basis of a study confined to eastern Kansas and spanning only four years ending in 1872. Regardless of the permanent effects on the amount of rainfall, however, he was certain that these improvements would bring a more evenly distributed and gentle rainfall.³³

Although Bvt. Major George Sternberg of Fort Riley was not certain the climate had changed in western Kansas, he was convinced it could be modified by providing a remedy for the sparse vegetation. Cultivation of the soil and the growth of forests and grass, he assured his listeners, would return moisture to the atmosphere which would reappear in springs, brooks, and clouds. Thus, all the land to the Rockies could be cultivated.³⁴

Another analyst, reasoning that appreciable rainfall is contingent upon a humidity level of at least 70 percent, suggested that a cover of trees and cultivation of the soil would produce the essential relative humidity. This would prolong the advance of storms across the plains and propagate local storms, thus bringing a transformation of the barren plains.³⁵

A writer for the Kansas Farmer agreed that settlement and cultivation would give western Kansas a reliable rain supply as it had done

³³F. H. Snow, "Climate of Kansas," Report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, 1872 (Topeka: State Printer, 1873), I, 397-407.

³⁴Junction City Union, February, 1870.

³⁵Hawn, Kansas Magazine, III, 485-490.

for the eastern part since 1855. However, he believed that this would be accomplished by preventing radiation rather than by increasing atmospheric humidity.

Remove the strata of dry air formed by radiation, by cultivation, trees, etc., and we furnish greater attraction for the electric current, which is a great factor in the rain supply--bring the moist air and earth closer together, cool the air by evaporation instead of heating it by radiation; and when this is done we have made a radical change in the climate.³⁶

A local writer in 1870, although unable to see any increase in the actual amount of moisture since 1860, felt that it had been increased in effect by a more favorable distribution where the soil had been tilled.³⁷

Such ideas showed persistence into the eighties, when one writer stated a fear that rainfall might soon become excessive in Kansas.³⁸ Another writer, accepting the climatic revolution as a fact, believed the change resulted from a combination of factors.

It has rained here always, the difference between the old time time and new being infrequent and more powerful electric storms then, and more frequent but milder rains now. The settlement of the country, the cultivation of good areas, tree planting, railway and telegraph lines, the building of towns and many another cause of atmospheric disturbance, resulting from the domestication of the country have wrought a marked change in the climatic conditions of Kansas. Year by year, the climate becomes more humid, and the native vegetation takes ranker and more luxuriant growth.³⁹

³⁶ Kansas Farmer, October 6, 1880.

³⁷ Weekly Champion and Press, April 16, 1870.

³⁸ L. P. Brockett, Our Western Empire (Philadelphia: Bradley, Garretson, and Company, 1882), p. 865.

³⁹ Handbook of Ford County, Kansas (Chicago: C. S. Bruch Publishing Company, 1887), pp. 4-5.

The drouth of the late 1880's and early 1890's discouraged the hopes of a permanent rainfall increase, but the idea continued to appear occasionally even after the turn of the century. One writer in 1912 concluded that his limited study would indicate "that the rainfall of Kansas, taken as a whole, is on the increase." Acknowledging that climate tends to follow cycles and that rainfall could not continue to increase indefinitely, he nevertheless saw a distinct possibility that cultivation of the soil was bringing "a slight permanent change in the climate."⁴⁰

The wide acceptance of the theory that "rain follows the plow" in the late 1860's and 1870's may have resulted in part from misinterpretation of a cyclical wet phase. It seems significant, however, that the belief in an increase became prevalent when the energies of the nation were focused on expansion; and farming was on the eastern edge of the "desert." This western folklore seemed to express the confidence and optimism about the future of America which pervaded American life after the Civil War. Much of this writing, therefore, was wishful thinking on the part of dedicated expansionists and those who would profit by settlement.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Hamilton P. Cady, "Is the Rainfall in Kansas Increasing?" Kansas State Historical Society Collections, 1911-1912 (Topeka: State Printing Office, 1912), XII, 132-133.

⁴¹ Henry Nash Smith expressed a similar view of this development in his article entitled "Rain Follows the Plow: The Notion of Increased Rainfall for the Great Plains, 1844-1880," Huntington Library Quarterly, X (February, 1947), 169-193.

Westward, Ho

The minatory critics and derogatory literature could not stay the surge of settlement induced by the end of the war and encouraged by the colonizers. These factors culminated in the remarkable boom that rose in the 1870's, pushing settlement far into the interior of the "Great American Desert."

This movement was aided by certain developments that made the country west of Missouri more attractive to immigrants. The Homestead Act of 1862, providing free public land to home-seekers of small means, began to make itself felt at the close of the war. Settlers with ready money could buy land for a few dollars an acre from the railroads, which had received huge grants, or from the holdings of states acquired through the Morrill Act. Never before had public lands been so readily available and easily acquired by the settler.

Another favorable development was the suppression of the warlike plains Indians. A series of treaties, ending in 1868, pacified these tribes and placed them on reservations. Few serious Indian difficulties plagued Kansas settlers after 1869.

Finally, the rapid extension of the railroads across the sparsely populated plains made life there more bearable and attracted town builders and settlers. The railroad, replacing the slow-moving prairie schooner, minimized the task of transporting furniture, building materials, and machines to the new farms. Soon to become important was the connection they provided with a market for surplus products.⁴²

⁴²Clark and Roberts, People of Kansas, pp. 20-21.

It should be kept clearly in mind, however, that these favorable developments would have availed little without the concurrent modification in mental attitude toward Kansas. Only as settlers were convinced that Kansas was a rich farming area would they take advantage of the free land and convenient transportation being offered.

The Kansas Population Boom

One hundred thousand people were scattered along the eastern border of Kansas in 1860, and the farthest point of settlement reached approximately one-third the length of the state. Only twelve counties along the eastern border had attained a population of more than five inhabitants per square mile, and five counties in the extreme northeast had a density greater than fifteen per square mile.

The Census of 1870 revealed an increase in population of 239.9 percent over the preceding decade, and settlement reached the western border. The average density per square mile climbed during this period from 1.3 to 4.5, and all but four counties east of the 96th meridian had a ratio above ten. Between 1861 and 1873, a total of thirty-five more counties were organized.

The panic of 1873, followed by drouth and grasshoppers in 1874, checked the rapid settlement of the Kansas frontier. Still, the state census of 1875 showed a substantial gain over 1870; and only ten counties showed a net loss. After 1875 the recovery of the country increased immigration to a flood.

Between 1870 and 1880 the population increased by 631,697--an increase of 173.4 percent over the previous decennial census figure. The average density reached 12.2 persons per square mile, and only seventeen counties remained unpopulated. Eleven new counties were organized between 1874 and 1880.

By 1875 all public land in Kansas had been surveyed. The amount of public land disposed of to settlers annually reached the two million mark in 1880, and over one million acres were appropriated each year between 1880 and 1884. In 1884 there were over three million acres filed upon, and the fiscal year 1885-1886 the figure reached 5,600,000 before land transactions began to decrease. By 1888 the last counties had been organized in Kansas. The increment of 432,012 between 1880 and 1890 left no county with less than one person per square mile.

The three decades after 1860 had seen an increase of more than one and a quarter million, or over thirteen times the population of 1860--adequate evidence of the Kansas boom. The average density per square mile climbed from 1.3 in 1860 to 17.5 in 1890.⁴³

It is not possible to determine how much of this boom was a direct or indirect result of the efforts of the railroads. It can be shown, however, that the railroad land departments were meeting with marked success. While the population of Kansas increased by 46 percent between 1870 and 1874, thirteen of the eighteen counties traversed by the Santa Fe

⁴³William F. Zornow, Kansas: A History of the Jayhawk State (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), pp. 162-167; See Appendix, Figures 1-7, and Table 1.

experienced an increase of 64 percent. The acreage under cultivation in Kansas increased 21 percent between 1873 and 1874; while in the same period, ten counties along the line of the Santa Fe increased about 30 percent.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The garden was triumphant at last. An agricultural frontier which had remained nearly stationary since 1820 suddenly jumped across all of Kansas and more in twenty-five years, disregarding the realities of nature and warnings to the contrary. The promoters had done their job so well that the settler moved across Kansas under the delusion that Eastern crops and methods would suffice. Thus, the Kansas settler was soon faced with circumstances for which he was unprepared; and the result was calamitous.

⁴⁴Bradley, The Story of the Santa Fe, p. 125; Hilda Smith, "The Advance and Recession of the Agricultural Frontier in Kansas, 1865-1900" (unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of History, University of Minnesota, 1931), pp. 10-11.

CHAPTER IV

DISILLUSIONMENT

The Spell of the Garden

The wave of pioneers entering Kansas before and during the Civil War was almost wholly confined to the eastern third of the state. Since this part of Kansas enjoyed sufficient rainfall to favor a scheme of cultivation similar to parts of the Mississippi Valley, the settlers of this period relied successfully upon crops widely cultivated in the central and eastern states.

A succession of wet years following the Civil War strengthened the conviction that all of Kansas was an interior garden awaiting development, and the indiscriminate invasion of the western two-thirds of the state soon resulted. Encouraged by the ready transportation offered by the railroads, free land under the Homestead Act, and settlement of the Indian problem, thousands of land-hungry Americans made their way to Kansas in the two decades after 1865. These colonists, confident that a lasting climate modification was making Kansas a pioneer's paradise, saw no need to alter eastern Kansas crops or methods to farm on the high plains. They pushed to the western border, beyond the 100th meridian, not knowing or not believing that cycles were characteristic and that they were in an area of meager and variable rainfall.

This expansion met with temporary success largely because the years from 1878 to 1886 were favored with above-average rainfall, but in terms of permanent settlement this post-war penetration of the dry belt was a complete disappointment. The end of the wet cycle in 1887, followed by a decade of scant rainfall, found the western Kansas farmer helplessly unprepared; and the result was tragic failure for many, and at times, mass retreat.

Recognition that Kansas was different from any previously settled region began in the 1860's for some of the more informed and scientific. "Our soil and climate are somewhat peculiar," stated the Junction City Union in 1862, "and hence we must learn more from experience than from observation." The justification for the existence of the Kansas Farmer, according to editor J. S. Brown in 1865, was the sharp deviation of Kansas agriculture from the usual crops and methods. Numerous letters and articles appearing during the year commented upon the impracticability of "the old routine of farming we learned in other states" and the need to adapt to the drier climate.¹

In spite of this recognition by the informed, the methods practiced by the ordinary farmer failed to meet the needs of a semi-arid climate. Early reports from both the eastern and western counties showed that wheat and other small grains were scattered at random over the surface,

¹Junction City Union, February 13, 1862; Kansas Farmer, February, 1865, p. 17; March, 1865, pp. 36-38; April, 1865, pp. 57, 71; July, 1865, 1865, p. 105; August, 1865, pp. 116, 120.

or broadcast, rather than being placed in furrows with the use of a drill.² Farmers were frequently admonished to use the drill for better and more certain crops.³ Late plowing and sowing, likewise, caused no little concern and no doubt brought many crop failures in the dry Kansas summer.⁴ The proper depth for plowing was much discussed; and although no general conclusion was reached, most advice was for deeper penetration of the soil.⁵ The Kansas pioneer, deceived by rainy seasons and former experience, continued to be plagued by these and other careless practices year after year. These methods had succeeded in the East, at least part of the time; but in the West they meant certain failure.

Even more striking evidence of the power of the garden myth comes from an examination of the crops being planted. Although some writers recognized the need for new crops adapted to the hot, dry weather in the 1850's, the basic crops of the East were first among crops in Kansas into

²D. N. Bowers, Seventy Years in Norton County, Kansas, 1872-1942 (Norton: Norton County Champion, 1942), pp. 172-174; Minnie Millbrook, Ness: Western County Kansas (Detroit: Millbrook Printing Company, 1955), p. 142; The Kansas Farmer, July 1, 1863, pp. 69-70.

³Salina Herald, February 24, 1877; May 19, 1877; Abilene Chronicle, May 18, 1877.

⁴Abilene Chronicle, October 27, 1876; June 8, 1877; July 20, 1877; June 27, 1879; March 12, 1880; June 25, 1880; Salina Herald, July 20, 1878; November 16, 1878; September 20, 1879; January 31, 1880; Abilene Gazette, June 6, 1879; August 22, 1879; Junction City Union, September 6, 1879; Kansas Farmer, August, 1865, p. 116; Ford County Republican, March 21, 1888; April 10, 1889.

⁵Kansas Farmer, February, 1865, p. 17; December 1, 1880, p. 377; December 29, 1880, p. 409; Ford County Republican, March 2, 1887; April 27, 1887; March 21, 1888; March 6, 1889; Kansas Farmer, May 7, 1890, p. 107; Salina Herald, April 6, 1882; Abilene Chronicle, June 25, 1880.

the 1880's.⁶ Corn was still the first crop to be planted in the western counties being settled in the eighties.⁷ It far overshadowed wheat in early years, and at times occupied nearly half of the cultivated land.⁸ This dominance led one Western Kansas handbook to comment in 1887, "Corn is king of grains here, as bluegrass is king of herbage in Kentucky and Missouri."⁹ This writer was joined by many who, encouraged by seasons of plentiful moisture, were proclaiming corn as "king" of the "greatest agricultural state of the Union."¹⁰

Reports of successful corn production were accompanied by much promotion and used as final proof that no "Great American Desert" existed

⁶Richard Mendenhall, a Quaker missionary among the Indians, argued strongly in favor of wheat rather than corn in Kansas in 1857. He pointed out that wheat survives nicely in the dry, moderate Kansas winters and matures before the dry summer weather sets in. Although he overlooked some hazards to wheat, Mendenhall showed an understanding of the fundamental difference between Kansas and areas farther east. His advice appeared in the Lawrence Republican, December 20, 1857, and is cited in James C. Malin, Winter Wheat in the Golden Belt of Kansas: A Study in Adaptation to Sub-humid Geographical Environment (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1944), p. 3.

⁷R. R. Wilson and Ethel M. Sears, History of Grant County, Kansas (Wichita: Wichita Eagle Press, 1950), pp. 176-177; Frank S. Sullivan, A History of Meade County, Kansas (Topeka: Crane and Company, 1916), p. 103; Millbrook, Ness County, p. 145; The Bushton News, April 29, 1937; Leonard E. Muir, Elam Bartholomew, Pioneer, Farmer, Botanist (unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of History, Kansas State University, 1959), p. 19.

⁸James C. Malin, "The Adaptation of the Agricultural System to Sub-humid Environment," Agricultural History, X (1936), 124-125, shows that corn occupied nearly half the cultivated ground in Edwards County in 1886; Sullivan, Meade County, p. 103, showed that the first year's crops in Meade County included twenty-five acres of corn harvested for each acre of wheat.

⁹Millbrook, Ness County, p. 145.

¹⁰Ford County Republican, March 23, 1887; June 1, 1887.

in Kansas. The evasive argument that Kansas was never a desert gave way to the idea that settlement had wrought a permanent rainfall increase which was certain to make Kansas a part of the corn belt and rule out dependence upon wheat as a basic crop.¹¹

This belief that man had by his presence modified the vicissitudes of nature is some indication of the unbounded optimism permeating American life, particularly in the West, in the last third of the nineteenth century. A writer tracing Kansas history in 1886 called to attention the fact that "thousands of practical farmers" and "faithful observers" had substantiated a climate change covering all of Kansas.

It can now be stated with absolute certainty that great areas in the western third of Kansas are becoming more fertile; better fitted and adapted to cultivation. The face of the earth has changed with that of the sky, and the hard trampled buffalo-pasture has been transformed, from the Missouri to the Colorado line, into mellow acres covered with high and waving grass--natural meadows, ready for the plow and the following reaper.

The key to this climate change and thus the greatness of Kansas, according to this writer, lay in the character of the early settlers. He felt that their achievements were evidence that Kansans were the most "intelligent, enterprising, sober and law-respecting" people in the country.

These people have wiped a desert from the map of the continent, and replaced it with a garden; and they are harvesting each year, crops exceeding in value the products of all the gold and silver mines of the United States.

¹¹ Ibid., April 10, 1887; April 27, 1887; June 22, 1887; August 3, 1887; November 16, 1887; July 25, 1888; Abilene Weekly Gazette, January 6, 1887; Kansas Farmer, June 10, 1880, p. 177.

Convinced as he was of a permanent improvement, he foresaw none of the unhappiness and failure soon to visit Kansas. He visualized, rather, a continued population boom and a future even greater than the past.¹²

The failure to understand the relationship between the Kansas climate and crops was evidenced also in the fondness for spring wheat for many years. One writer in 1865 considered spring wheat a sure crop, although winter wheat he believed to be risky and uncertain. A discussion leader at the State Farmer's Institute in 1870 recommended spring in preference to fall wheat for similar reasons. The settlers of Kansas, under the impact of the garden image, were using a familiar eastern crop although it was poorly adapted to the sub-humid plains.¹³

Words of Warning

The hopeful attitudes of the Kansas farmer were not shared by all, and he pushed to the western border with unsuited crops and methods in the face of advice to the contrary. The prevalent notion of an "uninterrupted area of fruitfulness" between the Mississippi Valley and California was systematically rejected by W. B. Hazen in 1875. Acknowledging that the early pessimistic accounts were as far wrong as the reports of those now possessing interests in the area, Hazen described the country on five

¹² John A. Martin, "The Progress of Kansas," North American Review, CXLII (April, 1886), 348-355.

¹³ Kansas Farmer, August, 1865, p. 116; Western Home Journal (Lawrence), January 27, 1870.

specific routes to the Pacific. On the route along the 39th parallel, followed by the Kansas Pacific Railroad, he found excellent soil and sufficient rainfall to the 98th meridian at Fort Harker.

But at this meridian a very perceptible change takes place. The altitude grows greater, steadily as we go west, the soil becomes more arid, the native grasses shorter, the streams less frequent; and, after passing Fort Hays, we get beyond the country suitable for agriculture.¹⁴

J. W. Powell produced a study of the plains in 1877 that was more objective and comprehensive than any previously made. He described, as Hazen, an area of widely varying nature instead of one huge desert or continuous garden. He classified the land as irrigable, pasturage, or timber, and indicated how it should be brought into use. He warned that the 100th meridian was the western limit of safe farming. An article appearing with his report rejected the effects of cultivation, prayers, telegraph wires, iron rails, and other artificial means upon precipitation.¹⁵

The Kansas Farmer in 1880 joined these prophets in predicting the need for adaptation in western Kansas. Although expressing confidence that nature had bestowed "rich bounties" throughout all of Kansas, the writer felt certain that only the proper manner of cultivation would guarantee the benefit of these assets in the western part. This could be

¹⁴W. B. Hazen, "The Great Middle Region of the United States and Its Limited Space of Arable Land," North American Review, CCXLVI (June, 1875), 1-34.

¹⁵J. W. Powell, Report on the Lands of the Arid Region (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879), pp. 1-24, 70. A biography of Powell containing a discussion of his report is Wallace Stegner, Beyond the Hundredth Meridian (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954). Powell's contributions to settlement of the West are discussed in some detail in Webb, The Great Plains, pp. 354-356, and 419-422.

accomplished west of the 100th meridian, he continued, only by applying a high degree of intelligence to learning methods essentially different from old farm schooling. The successful western Kansas farmer, therefore, would have to be intelligent, observant, and willing to experiment.

He then proceeded with his suggestions for adaptation, showing an uncommon perception of the failures and needs of Kansas farming. He recommended dry farming methods such as deep plowing and thorough cultivation to conserve the limited supply of moisture, and the planting of drouth-resistant crops in place of crops transplanted from a humid environment.¹⁶

The pioneer disregarded all such counsel, pushing rapidly beyond the 100th meridian to settle all of Kansas in the mid-eighties with no allowance for the decreasing supply of precipitation. The dry years which soon appeared found him growing eastern crops with eastern methods, unprepared psychologically or materially to survive under conditions so drastically different.

Nature Strikes Back

Trouble began to develop as early as 1879 when a dry period began. A western Kansas farmer, viewing the immigration of 1885 and reflecting back to that time, exhibited a skepticism born of experience. How soon, he wondered, would he hear a:

¹⁶Kansas Farmer, October 6, 1880, p. 324.

...doleful yelp go up from all western Kansas..., a cry which... rang out in 1879 and 1880, till the thousands who had filed upon land in Hodgeman, Ness, Ford, Comanche, Meade, and what is now Finney, as well as other counties to the north of them, if not some east of them, abandoned their homesteads and timber claims and returned either to eastern Kansas or to their former homes in states east of Kansas.

He went on to point out, moreover, that such tragedies were unnecessary and could be avoided by adapting to natural conditions. The grazing of cattle and sheep and the raising of drouth-resistant crops such as millet and sorghum he felt would be successful.¹⁷

The reliability of corn cultivation, meanwhile, was coming under serious question. Three successive failures led a writer in 1887 to call for a change either to new types of corn or methods of cultivating it, or the substitution of new crops. The possibility of new crops was the topic of a special convention at Wichita in 1888. Another writer suggested that corn be put aside altogether in western Kansas, due to its unreliability in so dry a climate. In the place of corn, he recommended rice corn, milo, maize, sorghum, cow peas, wheat, and rye--all dry weather crops.¹⁸

Although the uncertainty of corn was becoming more widely recognized, high hopes followed by disappointing crops were perennial occurrences.¹⁹ In 1887, sixty percent of the Kansas corn produced a crop.

¹⁷ Ibid., June 10, 1885, p. 9.

¹⁸ Abilene Weekly Gazette, November 29, 1888; Ford County Republican, September 26, 1888.

¹⁹ The Ford County Republican was full of optimism and belief in a climate change throughout May, June, and July of 1887. In August, discouragement appeared as drouth and chinch bugs reduced the crop. Similar articles were evident in 1888, until the crop was again ruined in August. The Abilene Weekly Gazette showed a similar pattern in 1894 when the corn crop was ruined in August by lack of rain.

In 1890, only half of the Kansas corn crop could be harvested; while ten percent of the planted acreage was harvested in the thirty-one western counties. In some of these counties as much as five thousand acres were planted and not one acre harvested; and in one county 55,000 planted acres produced 1,000 acres of harvested corn.²⁰

With each successive failure, more thought was given to new dry-farming methods and crops. Suggestions for economizing and augmenting moisture continued to appear, and sorghum and alfalfa received increasing attention. The discontented were encouraged to spend their energy making adjustments, and emigrants were criticized for lack of persistence in adapting to unfamiliar conditions.²¹

In spite of all efforts to adapt, however, failure and even disaster awaited many. Drouths beginning in 1887 and occurring frequently during the early 1890's caused a disorderly retreat from the western area. In only two of the ten years from 1887 to 1897 did rainfall reach the normal average established in the preceding years. In five of the dry years there was almost total crop failure. As a result, promotion of the state was rare by 1888; and the "Kansas fever" died in the East, as the disillusioned flocked to their old homes with tales of woe.

²⁰ Kansas State Board of Agriculture, Sixth Biennial Report, 1887-1888 (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1889), XI, Part 2, 11-12; Ibid., Seventh Biennial Report, 1889-1890 (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1891), XII, Part 2, 9. See Appendix, Table 2.

²¹ Malin, Agricultural History, X, 130-131; Ford County Republican, March 2, 1887; October, 1887; March 21, 1888; April 18, 1888; September 26, 1888; January 8, 1889; February 20, 1889; March 6, 1889; March 13, 1889; June 10, 1889.

Population statistics soon reflected the effects of the extended period of dry weather. Kansas lost 179,884 people between 1887 and 1891, and all but seventeen of the one hundred seven counties showed a population decrease during those four years. Between 1889 and 1893, 11,122 farm mortgages were foreclosed; and in fifteen counties 75 to 90 percent of the land was owned by land companies in 1895.^{22/}

The picture in the western part of the state was even worse. Of the nearly 140,000 people residing in the thirty-one western counties in 1888, only about 100,000 remained in 1890--a loss of nearly 30 percent in two years. By 1900 the population of these counties had decreased to 70,000--a 50 percent loss in twelve years. Two western counties, Stanton and Morton, lost nearly 90 percent of their population between 1887 and 1900; and three others lost 80 percent or more.²³

That the railroads and other promoters were highly successful in making Kansas a mythical garden cannot be denied in the face of the evidence. The people who settled Kansas at such a torrid pace questioned neither its desirability as a place to live nor its ability to produce Eastern crops in abundance. No wonder, then, that they were shocked,

²²Topeka Mail, August 15, 1887; Chicago Tribune, July 12, 1891; Topeka Capital, November 9, 1897; Ninth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Industry of Kansas, 1893 (Topeka: State Printer, 1894), p. 705. These citations appeared in Hallie Farmer, "The Economic Background of Frontier Populism," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, X (March, 1924), 408-427.

²³See Appendix, Table 3. Population statistics for the years 1887-1896 and 1900 were taken from the Reports of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture for the years cited.

helpless, and angry to find the stories inaccurate and conditions refuting their beliefs.

The most effective weapon of the promoters was, no doubt, the idea of an increase in rainfall through habitation of a region. All variations of this notion were ruled out in most quarters after the long periods of drouth in the eighties and nineties. Contemporary writers of the 1890's widely recognized the effects of this erroneous assumption on Kansas settlement. "About one-third of our national area is too arid for cultivation," said one writer in 1895, "and thousands have learned by trying to go beyond that line." He pointed out that part of Kansas within this belt had been settled two or three times during wet years only to be abandoned during the dry years which are sure to follow. He acknowledged that this was caused by a "widespread delusion" of "general credence" in the settled portion of the West that rainfall would follow settlement and cultivation.

The whole notion is a fallacy, [he continued], born of the tendency of people to deceive themselves in their own apparent interest, and of the efforts of the railway companies to induce settlers to occupy the vacant lands along their roads. The records of the numerous military posts in the West show that nowhere has there been any appreciable increase of precipitation during any period of ten years as compared with any previous decade.²⁴

Another writer, recognizing that characteristic cycles had misled settlers to believe the climate was changing, estimated that the whole plains area had been settled and depopulated three times by 1891. Each year of plentiful rainfall led many settlers into the area of scant rainfall, and each dry year pushed them back from the questionable area.

²⁴E. V. Smalley, "The Future of the Great Arid West," Forum, XIX (June, 1895), 468-469.

But who can mark the wavering, shifting, eastward limit of the Great American Desert, which may be found now at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, and again at the Missouri River. Where upon the Plains is the line beyond which the westward march of development and improvement may not safely proceed? When ascertained, how shall the limit be made conspicuous and convincing?²⁵

It is scarcely surprising that the invasion of western Kansas was so disastrous. The wet years of the eighties seemed to substantiate all the claims of the propagandists, leaving the Great American Desert a harmless myth. Thousands of farmers entered the new country beyond the safe limits of traditional American agriculture, therefore, without thought of changing crops or methods.

When rainfall became scanty in 1887, the settlers remembered the drouth of the sixties and hoped for a quick change. As the dry years persisted into the 1890's and all attempts to farm ended in failure, the Kansas settler realized that he had been deceived by the unusually wet years and the descriptions of the colonizers. About half of the western Kansas population moved out. Speculators and malcontents were swept away along with many bona fide farmers who could not cope with the environment, leaving behind the hardy few who were determined to succeed at all costs.

The struggle to adjust was severe. Many failed and headed east in discouragement, but others appeared to try their talents. Through a process of trial and error, frequent failure and infrequent success, new agricultural techniques and crops were gradually developed which eventually enabled settlement to master the plains.

²⁵J. W. Gregory, "What of the Desert," Century, XLX (1891), 795-796.

Reoccupation

The rains of 1896 brought a revival of the Kansas boom. Between 1895 and 1900, Kansas gained over 90,000 people; and a million more acres of land were filed upon. The reoccupation was based, however, on a system of agriculture adapted to a region of scarce precipitation. Irrigation, dry farming, and the introduction of drouth-resistant crops made survival possible where thousands had failed in the preceding years.²⁶

The introduction of hard winter wheat by the Russian Mennonites in the seventies revolutionized farming on the plains. Its early maturity helped it resist drouth, hot winds, rust, and grasshoppers; and the yield was greater.²⁷ The acreage in spring wheat failed to keep pace with that of winter wheat, as experience proved its inability to withstand the heat and dry weather. By 1902 over 6,000,000 acres of winter wheat were harvested as compared with less than 50,000 of spring wheat.²⁸

At the same time, corn was being discarded as a reliable crop in the western counties. In the 1880's it was not uncommon to find the corn acreage several times that of wheat in the western counties, while the early 1900's showed wheat acreage several times that of corn in the same

²⁶ John J. Ingalls, "Kansas, 1541-1891," Harper's Magazine, LXXXVI (April, 1893), 696-713.

²⁷ Hugh P. Coultis, "The Introduction and Development of Hard Red Winter Wheat in Kansas," Kansas State Board of Agriculture, Fifteenth Biennial Report, 1905-1906, (Topeka: Kansas Department of Agriculture, 1907), XX, 945.

²⁸ See Appendix, Table 4. Acres of winter and spring wheat for the years 1872-1902 were taken from the Reports of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture for the years cited.

counties.²⁹ By the turn of the century, wheat acreage equalled that of corn in Kansas as a whole, despite heavy corn acreage in the humid eastern section.³⁰

With the help of the Agricultural Experiment Station created in 1887 and the State Board of Agriculture, other new crops were introduced and established. Reports collected in 1891 showed the tremendous success of alfalfa in western Kansas. Soybeans, sugar beets, kafir, and milo also proved themselves in the semi-arid climate.

Irrigation became important, particularly in the Arkansas Valley, after first appearing near Wallace in 1873. Where surface water was scarce, wells and windmills made many acres farmable.

Methods of dry farming were adopted to conserve moisture and lessen the effects of wind in drying out and blowing the soil. Deep plowing,

²⁹Malin, Agricultural History, X, 140-141; Millbrook, Ness County, p. 145; Sullivan, Meade County, pp. 103-130.

<u>Ness County</u>		
<u>Year</u>	<u>Wheat</u> (acres)	<u>Corn</u> (acres)
1885	2,855	4,837
1890	26,907	463
1895	60,569	9,020
1900	55,357	11,173

<u>Meade County</u>		
<u>Year</u>	<u>Winter Wheat</u> (acres)	<u>Corn</u> (acres)
1886	504	12,151
1896	8,954	2,025
1906	24,186	1,675
1908	53,330	14,453

³⁰See Appendix, Table 5. The acres in wheat and corn for the years 1862-1902 were taken from the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, Seventeenth Biennial Report, 1909-1910 (Topeka: Kansas Department of Agriculture, 1911), XXII, 992-993.

pulverization of the soil to act as a mulch, listing in ridges to catch snow, plowing and listing at right angles to prevailing winds, leaving stubble to hold the soil, and summer-fallowing were some of the adaptations in the dry climate.³¹

The reoccupation of the Kansas plains beginning in the late 1890's was obviously not a repetition of previous attempts. The pioneer had learned at a dear price the needs of successful agriculture in this semi-arid land. Frederick Jackson Turner expressed forcefully the plight of the settler who tried futilely to inhabit the plains for many years and finally succeeded with new crops and methods in the twentieth century:

The pioneer farmer tried to push into the region with the old methods of settlement. Deceived by rainy seasons and the railroad advertisements, and recklessly optimistic, hosts of settlers poured out into the plains beyond the region of sufficient rainfall for successful agriculture without irrigation. Dry seasons starved them back, but a repetition of good rainfalls again aroused the determination to occupy the western plains... By 1887 the tide of pioneer farmers had flowed across the semi-arid plains to the western boundary of the state. But it was a hopeless effort to conquer a new province that had won the prairies of the Great Plains. The wave of settlement dashed itself in vain against the conditions of the Great Plains.... It was not until the twentieth century that the defeat was turned to a general victory and the land reoccupied.³²

³¹ Frank W. Blackmar, Kansas: A Cyclopedia of State History (Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912), I, 47-49; Ingalls, Harper's Magazine, LXXXVI, 696-713; Smith, Advance and Recession, p. 71. In Webb's study, The Great Plains, pp. 510-512, he points out the problems of the plains as 1) Transportation, 2) Fencing, 3) Water, 4) Farming. These were solved by the railroad, barbed wire, windmills, and new farm machinery and methods according to Webb.

³² The Frontier in American History (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1958), p. 147.

Even the twentieth century failed to bring final victory. Millions of marginal acres were plowed and planted in the early 1900's, as favorable moisture caused many to forget. After a half century of struggle and adaptation, the drouth of the 1930's revived the dispute as to what could profitably be done in the western counties. Talk of aridity, blowing soil, and perverse climate characteristics in the thirties was strangely similar to that of Zebulon Pike and Stephen Long a century earlier. The final answer to proper usage of the High Plains, sought at so great a cost, was yet to come.³³

Desert or Garden?

The "Great American Desert" effectively halted settlement near the Missouri River until the impetus of the westward movement became an uncontrollable force urging the agricultural frontier onward after the Civil War. As the clamor for settlement of the plains reached a fever pitch, the western promoters resorted to a counter legend equally as inconclusive and elliptical as its adversary: the mythical doctrine of a permanent rainfall increase. The image of an interior garden gave vent to the unrestrained optimism of the time, and the desert was suddenly replaced by this "Garden of the World." Thousands of pioneers, interpreting the years of plentiful moisture as evidence of a permanent change, poured unsuspectingly across all of Kansas in the 1880's. The suffering and devastation which soon

³³Robert G. Athearn, High Country Empire (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1960), pp. 301-302; Lawrence Svobida, An Empire of Dust (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1940), p. 203.

greeted them quickly dispelled the garden, and for the first time the settler faced the realities of farming in a semi-arid region.

Both Desert and Garden failed to materialize in Kansas. Early visitors were overly hasty in condemning the state as a "burnt and arid desert," but later descriptions of Kansas as a "vast garden of splendid bloom" were equally erroneous. Nevertheless, the overpowering force of these images on the American mind, regardless of any resemblance to reality, was a potent factor holding up and then encouraging settlement of the Kansas plains.

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A P P E N D I X

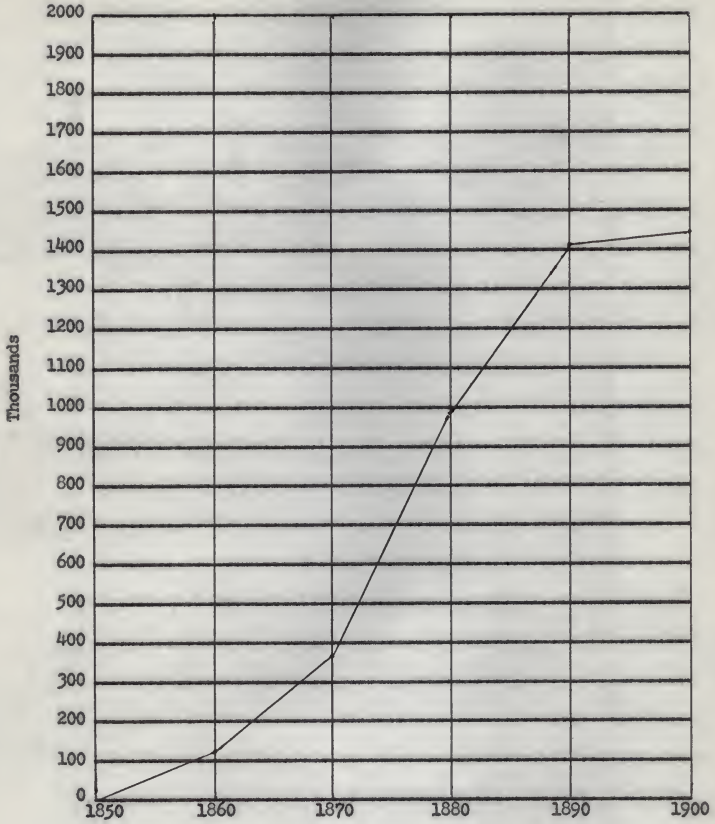


Fig. 1.--Growth of Population in Kansas, 1850 to 1900.

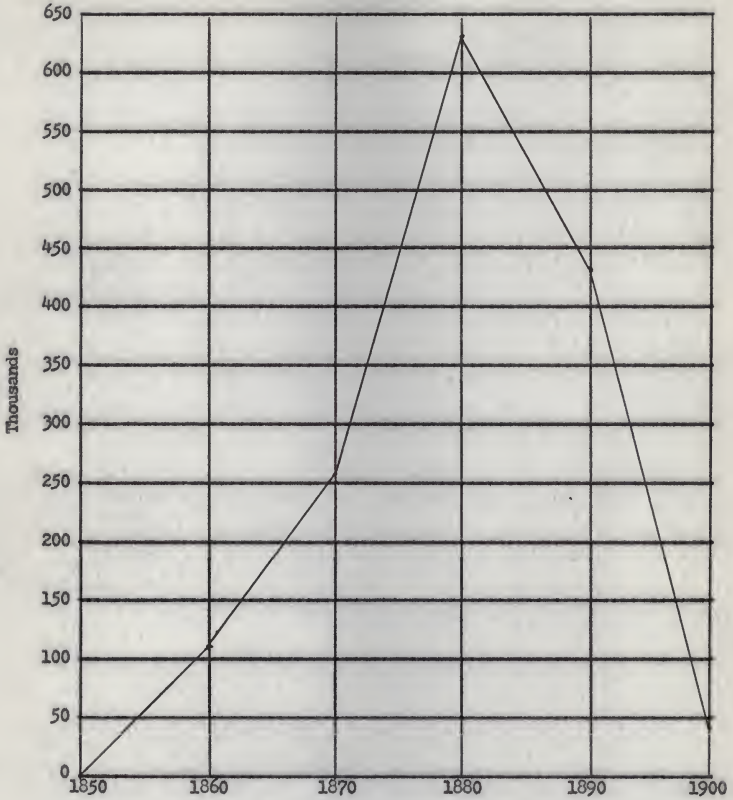


Fig. 2.--Decennial Population Increase in Kansas in Thousands.

KANSAS

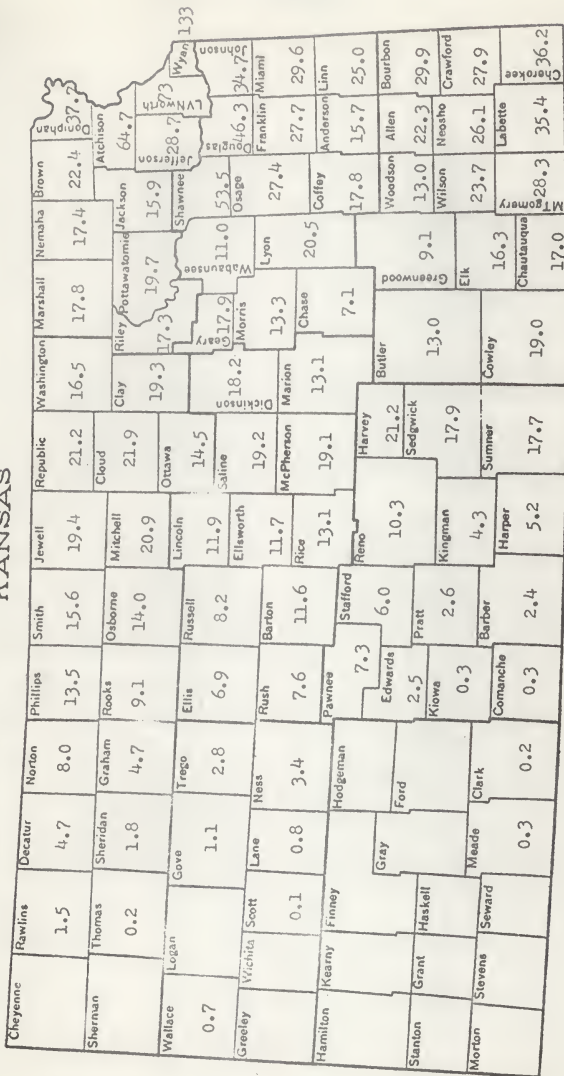


Fig. 5.--Density of Population Per Square Mile by Counties, 1880

TABLE 1
 GROWTH OF POPULATION IN KANSAS^a
 1860-1900

Year	Total Population	Increase Over Preceding Decade		Average Density Per Sq. Mile
		Number	Percent	
1860	107,206	--	--	1.3
1870	364,399	257,193	239.9	4.5
1880	996,096	631,697	173.4	12.2
1890	1,428,108	432,012	43.4	17.5
1900	1,470,495	42,387	3.0	18.0

^aAdapted from the Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930. Population, Vol. I.

TABLE 2

CORN PLANTED AND HARVESTED
IN THE THIRTY-ONE WESTERN COUNTIES OF KANSAS, 1890^a

County	Acres Planted	Acres Harvested
Cheyenne	34,811	6,962
Sherman	31,112	622
Wallace	8,861	177
Greeley	7,694	154
Hamilton	3,984	80
Stanton	3,736	0
Morton	3,660	386
Stevens	7,081	142
Grant	4,717	472
Kearny	2,179	872
Wichita	9,339	1,401
Logan	14,094	282
Thomas	39,451	798
Rawlins	46,055	25,330
Decatur	54,760	1,095
Sheridan	21,177	212
Gove	8,177	164
Lane	4,801	0
Scott	2,281	23
Finney	4,847	2,423
Haskell	5,838	1,168
Seward	4,929	99
Meade	9,451	189
Gray	4,931	493
Norton	70,168	7,017
Graham	22,008	440
Trego	7,022	140
Ness	23,165	463
Hodgeman	5,760	115
Ford	15,582	1,558
Clark	7,791	156
Total	488,017	54,789

^aKansas State Board of Agriculture, Seventh Biennial Report, 1889-1890.

TABLE 3

POPULATION IN THE THIRTY-ONE WESTERN COUNTIES
OF KANSAS, 1887-1900^a

County	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1900
Cheyenne	3214	4927	4499	4386	3786	3622	4868	5044	3729	3641	2640
Sherman	3879	5115	5902	5220	5030	5087	6266	5875	3883	4081	3341
Wallace	2000	2644	2541	2463	2187	2089	2530	2483	1592	1690	1178
Grealey	2641	2641	2079	1250	1123	1026	1345	1321	1035	851	493
Hamilton	2148	1780	2349	2009	1982	1554	1807	1735	1411	1529	1426
Stanton	2864	2216	1695	1031	884	907	985	772	613	471	327
Morton	2560	2618	1600	723	707	574	574	457	388	320	304
Stevens	2662	3000	1865	1404	1181	1056	1144	797	684	688	620
Grant	2716	3000	2125	1307	1148	1033	1330	771	532	494	422
Kearny	2891	2891	2138	1571	1423	1330	1242	1214	1159	1046	1107
Wichita	2607	2989	2668	1825	1417	1544	2040	1677	1438	1431	1197
Logan	3112	3540	2539	3377	2845	2642	3933	2603	2071	2049	1962
Thomas	5629	6174	5445	5532	4069	4467	5032	4415	3512	3456	4112
Rawlins	5923	7012	6981	6723	5358	5327	6101	6217	5702	5079	5241
Decatur	8621	8657	8702	8385	6094	7850	7686	7759	6953	7152	9234
Sheridan	3435	4510	4031	3726	2915	2911	3370	3241	2673	2789	3819
Gove	4113	4363	3637	3089	2370	2215	2409	2368	2126	2043	2441
Lane	3630	3684	2519	2051	1679	1730	2073	1793	1490	1666	1563
Scott	2830	2848	2848	1260	1033	1335	1142	1163	1088	1045	1098
Finney	8084	5294	4300	3346	2951	2901	3388	3553	3553	3505	3469
Haskell	2841	2666	1725	1069	924	908	1015	831	595	580	457
Seward	2551	2150	2620	1502	1047	929	1000	826	826	688	822
Meade	4407	4561	3596	2514	1831	2028	2048	2025	1741	1651	1581
Gray	4896	3959	2891	2419	1773	2251	2050	1503	1256	1249	1264
Norton	11236	11669	10965	10524	7833	8799	9891	9711	8671	9008	304
Graham	5893	5505	5338	5006	4074	4082	4383	4066	3825	4020	5173
Trego	3258	3378	2884	2526	2302	2327	2610	2481	2166	2131	2722
Ness	6696	6865	5305	4947	4121	4332	4790	4501	3785	3970	4535
Hodgeman	4589	4259	3096	2393	2235	2313	2462	2172	1792	1860	2032
Ford	9218	7429	6647	5305	4992	5227	5692	5096	4940	5003	5497
Clark	5079	4281	3231	2342	1945	1924	2004	1724	1529	1433	1701
Total	136223	136625	119751	101225	83259	86320	96210	90194	76758	76619	72082

^aTaken from Reports of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture.

TABLE 4

KANSAS WINTER AND SPRING WHEAT, 1872-1902^a

Year	Winter Wheat (acres)	Spring Wheat (acres)
1872	247,685	64,158
1873	258,393	145,241
1874	438,179	278,026
1875	505,681	237,523
1876	758,600	264,583
1877	857,125	206,868
1878	1,297,555	433,257
1879	1,520,659	412,139
1880	2,215,937	228,497
1881	1,974,693	208,179
1882	1,465,745	137,522
1883	1,480,204	79,098
1884	2,151,868	85,260
1885	1,999,723	90,826
1886	1,674,890	83,503
1887	1,298,619	75,296
1888	1,078,943	41,176
1889	1,505,947	88,338
1890	2,144,065	177,048
1891	3,582,006	151,904
1892	3,820,013	309,816
1893	4,909,972	200,901
1894	4,675,704	165,188
1895	4,056,514	115,457
1896	3,193,635	164,092
1897	3,318,763	125,601
1898	4,505,459	119,272
1899	4,796,129	192,823
1900	4,268,704	109,829
1901	5,248,547	67,935
1902	6,254,747	46,293

^a Taken from Reports of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture for the years cited.

TABLE 5
WHEAT AND CORN IN KANSAS, 1862-1902^a

Year	Wheat (acres) ^b	Corn (acres)
1862	9,360	170,365
1863	16,434	193,597
1864	13,439	186,923
1865	12,768	163,463
1866	12,171	190,858
1867	89,285	211,373
1868	98,525	360,388
1869	151,351	506,198
1870	156,200	505,892
1871	169,433	617,325
1872	185,775	769,636
1873	309,286	1,202,046
1874	716,205	1,525,421
1875	743,206	1,932,861
1876	1,023,183	1,844,454
1877	1,063,993	2,563,112
1878	1,730,812	2,405,482
1879	1,932,798	2,995,070
1880	2,444,434	3,554,396
1881	2,182,872	4,171,554
1882	1,602,997	4,441,836
1883	1,559,302	4,653,170
1884	2,237,128	4,545,908
1885	1,290,549	5,266,034
1886	1,758,393	5,802,018
1887	1,373,915	6,530,392
1888	1,120,119	6,993,207
1889	1,594,285	6,820,693
1890	2,321,113	5,755,691
1891	3,733,910	5,209,234
1892	4,129,829	5,603,588
1893	5,110,873	6,172,462
1894	4,840,892	6,404,705
1895	4,171,971	8,394,871
1896	3,357,727	7,897,575
1897	3,444,364	8,293,819
1898	4,624,731	7,237,601
1899	4,988,952	8,194,561
1900	4,378,533	7,369,020
1901	5,316,482	6,722,973
1902	6,301,040	6,990,764

^aKansas State Board of Agriculture, Seventeenth Biennial Report, 1909-1910.

^bWinter and Spring Wheat Combined.

DESERT VERSUS GARDEN:
THE ROLE OF WESTERN IMAGES IN THE SETTLEMENT OF KANSAS

by

ARNOLD C. PLANK

B. S., KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY, 1960

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History, Political Science, and Philosophy

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1962

Henry Nash Smith has shown that "myths sometimes exert a decided influence on practical affairs." The impact of these images, moreover, is not necessarily affected by the accuracy with which they reflect empirical fact. The profound effects of such preconceived notions, or images, on the time and nature of settlement in Kansas is an excellent illustration of this phenomenon.

The reality of the "Great American Desert" tradition, created and elaborated in the first quarter of the 19th century, is indisputable in the face of the evidence. An agricultural frontier which overcame all obstacles to advance steadily to the bend of the Missouri by 1820 was in essentially the same location thirty years later. The country behind had been filled with population; Oregon and California had appeared across the wilderness, but the westward advance was at a standstill on the edge of the desert.

Scattered voices of challenge arising in the early 1800's grew to major proportions with the expansionism of the 1840's and the Oregon and California migration, but interest in the west coast prevented any sustained effort to inhabit the Kansas region.

Promotion of Kansas produced by opponents and exponents of slavery attempting to settle the state with people of their views failed to dispel fear of the desert. The expected population influx did not materialize during the territorial period, and anxiety about the region to the west kept the limited population concentrated close to the Missouri River. Thus, the myth of the Great American Desert retained its powerful grip,

detering pioneers from Kansas and keeping official policy unfavorable to settlement, until the Civil War demanded the undivided attention of the nation.

At the War's conclusion, the increased desire for land and the availability of improved transportation brought the clamor for settlement of the High Plains to a fever pitch. It became obligatory, therefore, that the sinister influence of the desert legend be once and for all exorcised from the public mind. This task fell primarily to those with a personal interest in the area. Local promoters, land companies, and most of all, the railroads whose very existence depended upon settlement and cultivation of the land, deliberately and systematically attacked the Desert Myth. In order to eradicate the desert legend, however, the promoters resorted to the development of a counter legend as inconclusive and elliptical as its adversary: the mythical doctrine of a permanent rainfall increase.

The "Great American Desert" quickly became a harmless myth; and the fruitful garden which replaced it, in the imagination, was at least equal to any farming area in the East. Thousands of pioneers, interpreting the years of plentiful moisture in the seventies and eighties as evidence of a permanent climate change, poured unsuspectingly across all of Kansas in the 1880's.

Reality quickly dispelled the Myth of the Garden. Failure and devastation soon greeted the Kansas pioneer who, substituting hope for facts, had convinced himself that Kansas was different from the East only

in appearance. After several unsuccessful attempts to cultivate the High Plains, the Kansas farmer returned with new crops and dry farming practices which allowed him to reoccupy Kansas at the turn of the century.