

Free land programs revisited: A case study of four Kansas communities

by

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B.S., University of North Dakota, 2016

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Geography  
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2018

Approved by:

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## Abstract

Over the past century, the mechanization of agriculture, the rise of the automobile, youth out-migration, and a variety of other factors have led to the population and economic decline of once-booming small towns across rural America, and especially the Great Plains. As a result, schools, churches, and services have been forced to close or consolidate; in many cases, entire towns have vanished. A variety of state and federal mitigation practices have been put forward, often to no avail or limited success. This has caused some communities to take matters into their own hands, including the initiation of land giveaways — programs in which an applicant receives a residential lot on which they are required to build a house to designated specifications and live in it for a given number of years. In Kansas alone, 27 communities have employed such a program, and in most other Great Plains states and provinces, at least one community has done the same. The programs were initially a media curiosity, and major news outlets, including *USA Today*, made small towns across Kansas famous by featuring them on the front page of their publications. Some of the most recent scholarly literature, published in 2007, pointed to “impressive” results in reversing a century-old trend. That was over a decade ago, however, and more recent news publications have been more pessimistic. This research is based on interviews and conversations with five program directors and local decisionmakers, four new residents, and a newspaper editor in the communities of Marquette, Ellsworth, Mankato, and Lincoln, Kansas, to determine what has changed in these communities, what makes some programs more successful than others, what challenges the programs have faced, and whether locals think the programs are a success. These programs have not reversed the 100-year-old trend of rural decline, but, in some communities, they have caused small population and construction booms bringing new money into the community and have delayed the closing or downsizing of

community institutions. In short, the programs have proven to be a short-term solution to a long-term problem.

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## Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the direction, unending expertise, and invaluable help and support of my committee members, Drs. Lisa Harrington and Morgan J. Morgan. Thank you both so much for believing in me and helping me through the last two years.

Thank you, also, to the public figures, program directors, politicians, local decisionmakers, newspaper editor, new residents, and people around town who agreed to be a part of this work. They include Steve Piper, former mayor of Marquette; Stacie Schmidt, executive director of the Smoky Hill Development Corporation; Anita Hoffhines, former director of Ellsworth County Economic Development; Chris Rhea, city administrator of Mankato; Kelly Larson, executive director of the Lincoln County Economic Development Foundation; and Linda Mowery-Denning, editor-publisher of the *Ellsworth County Independent/Reporter*. Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedules to share your perspectives and discuss this fascinating and important topic with me.

Finally, I need to thank the people of the University of North Dakota's Department of Geography and GIScience for supporting me and helping me develop into the geography student I am today, and the college instructor I am about to become. It was during my time in North Dakota that I first gained an interest in ghost towns and rural decline. On a road trip across the state, I stumbled upon the ghost town of Arena, in Burleigh County, a bustling hub of activity 100 years ago that has since completely depopulated. Only a collapsing church, derelict grain elevator, and a few abandoned houses remain. I was struck by the town, and how empty, quiet, and seemingly postapocalyptic it was. I determined I needed to study what is making so many towns disappear and what can be done to try slowing it down. It is what inspired me to write this thesis.

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to the original homesteaders — the “peoplers of the Plains,” attracted there by free land over a century ago with hope and great expectations for the future. They inspired the modern free land programs found throughout the Great Plains and beyond today, and were among the founders of the communities where they take place.

The homesteaders of the Great Plains include my great-great-grandparents, Theodore and Amelia “Molly” Hübner. They were Prussian immigrants who claimed their 160 acres on June 11, 1897, near Berlin, in the northeast quarter of section 24, Wano Township, LaMoure County, North Dakota.

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Across rural America, and especially in the Great Plains, rural decline, a socioeconomic phenomenon, has been transforming once-bustling communities into ghost towns over the past century. Many small-town main streets now resemble the rough, emptying neighborhoods of inner-city Detroit more than the idyllic, quaint streets of Andy Griffith's Mayberry that one may envision when thinking about small-town America. In some parts of the Great Plains, exploring any main street in a given small town will almost always show empty storefronts and crumbling structures — indicators of a more prosperous past. This phenomenon has led to the abandonment of houses, churches, schools, businesses, and, in Kansas alone, about 9,000 communities (Morgan 2012 and Bruntzel 2010).

Rural population decline is a complex situation, but most scholarly work on the subject cites mechanization and automation, changing farm structure, natural decrease, environmental degradation, and youth out-migration as major causes (Bailey and Ransom 2014; Berger 1979; Kandel and Brown 2006; Robinson 1959; White 1994; and Wood 2008). These factors have been persistent for the past century and show no indication of slowing or stopping. Various state and federal initiatives have been put forward, but most have had limited success or have failed completely (Brooks 2017; Lu 2007, 76; and Wood 2008).

Because of the lack of results from state and federal initiatives, communities have taken it upon themselves to ensure their survival (Lu 2007, 76). Most of these communities were originally populated because of free or cheap land made available by the Homestead Act of 1862 and railroad companies. Some inventive communities have sought inspiration from the same program that brought their ancestors to the Great Plains and have begun to offer free land giveaways (Figure 1.1). Each community is different, but programs typically offer a residential



Figure 1.1: Billboards advertising free land programs, both for residential and commercial/industrial purposes, across the Great Plains. Clockwise from top right: along 27<sup>th</sup> Street in Wilson, Kansas, August 2017; along U.S.-160 in Argonia, Kansas (note how “free” in front of “one acre lots!” has been painted over), September 2017; along I-70 in Flagler, Colorado, June 2018; along U.S.-56 in Marion, Kansas, September 2017; and along ND-66 in Drayton, North Dakota, June 2018. All photos by Karl Bauer.

lot, an acre or less in size, and require an application, construction of a house, and continued occupancy of that house for a given number of years.

Free land programs exist across the Great Plains, from Manitoba to southern Texas, but no state has embraced them as much as Kansas, where 27 communities have or had a program in place. Multiple newspaper articles, news reports, and a scholarly paper have argued that initial results have been “impressive” and “encouraging” (Lu and Paull 2007, 74 and 79). The programs have been the subject of intense media attention, especially as they were first beginning in the early to mid-2000s. Small towns in rural Kansas found themselves on the front page of *USA Today* and the townsfolk were appearing on the Today Show (Eck 2005). Over the past decade, however, interest, both in the realm of scholarly work and the media has slowed. Recent publications tend to be more pessimistic. One article from Reuters went so far as to say some small Kansas “towns cannot [even] give land away” (Murphy 2012).

Because of this change of direction and changes in these communities, an update to previous work is needed, along with gained perspective from communities that have received less media attention. One major change occurred in Marquette, one of the communities featured in this work, and in Lu and Paull’s (2007) work over a decade ago — the community lost its school in 2014. In this thesis research, I hope to answer:

- Why were these free land programs started in the first place? If they are no longer active, why did they end?
- What role did the media play in the outcome of these programs?
- Have there been any changes in the communities since the last studies were published over a decade ago?

- What successes, failures, and challenges are free land programs experiencing, and what makes some communities more successful than others?

To accomplish this, I reached out to and interviewed five local decisionmakers affiliated with four programs in seven communities,<sup>1</sup> asking them about how the program was started, what has changed within the community, what role the media played, and whether they thought the community was better off as a result of the program. I also sought additional insight from new residents, a newspaper editor, and a retired extension agent.

This study contains six additional chapters. The next chapter focuses on the literature concerning rural population and economic decline and the various mitigation efforts employed to reverse it. The third chapter provides a history of modern free land programs. The fourth chapter outlines the methods used in this study. The fifth chapter outlines the results from the interviews and conversations with local decisionmakers, program directors, new residents, and longtime residents. The sixth chapter summarizes the main ideas, discusses limitations, and present ideas for future research based on this work.

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<sup>1</sup> The “Welcome Home Program” in Ellsworth County consisted of four communities: Ellsworth (the county seat), Holyrood, Kanopolis, and Wilson.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

This chapter discusses the literature, concepts, and background surrounding the inception of free land programs. It begins by outlining the historical setting, including the Homestead Act of 1862, which laid the framework for the mass settlement of the Great Plains. Next, it discusses the causes of rural population decline. Then, it shows how some communities have vanished because of rural population decline. Finally, this chapter discusses mitigation strategies and their limitations. The next chapter gives a history of the free land programs.

### **2.1: Settlement and Early Decline on the Great Plains**

No history of Kansas, or the Great Plains in general, would be complete without focusing on the effects of the Homestead Act of 1862. The law allowed settlers to stake a claim on a 160-acre lot (or one-quarter section), which, after making improvements, including building a house, living in it, and farming the land, was theirs (Bauer 2012, 9).<sup>2</sup> This act allowed for the transfer of most of the Great Plains from public to private hands (Robinson 1959) in an effort to populate the newly admitted western states and territories (Wood 2008, 41). In the end, 2 million people claimed 270 million acres across 31 states, but most of this land was in the Great Plains (Wood 2008, 41-42). As the West was opening for settlement, the federal government also granted land to railroad companies through the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862. The railroad companies, in turn, sold the land at a low rate to settlers to fund the railroad construction and build up a future customer base. Homesteaders accounted for 25 percent of the settlers in Kansas, and those who bought cheap land from railroad companies accounted for another 10 to 15 percent (Wood 2008, 41-42). As of 1995, only 0.92 percent of Kansas's land area was owned by the state or federal

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<sup>2</sup> No relation to author



governments, which is the smallest proportion out of all 50 states (Natural Resources Council of Maine). Several other states with low percentages of land owned by the state and federal governments are also in the Great Plains.

This free land, along with the cheap railroad grant land, attracted newcomers from across America and Europe, resulting in the rapid populating of the Plains. Advertisements meant to draw in settlers frequently exaggerated the local environment. One advertisement promoting railroad lands in southwestern Kansas touts the region's "abundant water" and "woodlands," although in reality, the region has a subhumid climate and lacks trees and surface water (Kansas Memory). Many of the settlers are the ancestors of the people who call the Great Plains home today. Small towns quickly dotted the landscape to act as service, transport, political, educational, and religious hubs for the local farmers and residents.

In the decades following the American Civil War, railroads expanded westward and many existing early towns were bypassed, resulting in the first group of ghost towns in the region. Sherbrooke, North Dakota, is an excellent example. Sherbrooke was platted in 1884, and by 1885, it grew to the point that it became the seat of Steele County, and even hosted a visit from President William McKinley in 1896 (Larson 2013). As railroads expanded west, Sherbrooke expected a connection. In 1887, and again in 1914, rumors surfaced that this connection would arrive, but instead the community of 100 people (1890) was bypassed in favor of Finley, nine miles to the northwest, and by 1918, the county seat was moved there (Wick 1988, 177). Sherbrooke declined quickly thereafter, and its post office closed by 1919. A population of two people was reported in 1972. As of my last visit in September 2015, the town was completely abandoned. Today, only a few foundations and derelict houses remain (Figure 2.1).



**Figure 2.1: An abandoned house in Sherbrooke, North Dakota. Photo by Karl Bauer, September 2015.**

The first two decades of the twentieth century brought an era termed “the golden age of the Great Plains small town” by Morgan J. Morgan, who adapted it from R.B. Fleming’s (2002) article on the “Golden Age of the general store.” She noted that the period just before World War I was the population and economic activity peak for most of the smallest towns of the Great Plains.<sup>3</sup> The 1910 or 1920 U.S. Census shows the highest population for many of these communities, and most of the surviving ones have been declining ever since. Before World War I, the story of small towns is one of openings, economic and population booms, and prosperity. After World War I, it is generally a story of decline and closings. It was during this “golden age” when the

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<sup>3</sup> Conversation with Morgan J. Morgan, professor of history, Kansas State University, December 2017

automobile became a staple in the average rural household. In 1911, 85,000 automobiles were estimated to be on American farms, and by 1920, that number had skyrocketed to 2,146,512 (Berger 1979, 51). This was met with a shift in spatial and conceptual thinking: “Communities came to be thought of in terms of time more than geographical space” (Berger 1979, 79). Farm families migrated into towns and had the newfound ability to commute to the fields (Berger 1979, 80-81). Farmers and those in the smallest towns suddenly had the ability to shop in larger communities, where stores offered greater selection and lower prices (*Eskridge Independent* 1942 and Berger 1979, 98-99). Families also moved into larger towns because of the availability of high schools, so their children could attend them.

One community that fell victim to the rise of the automobile is Bradford, in Wilmington Township, Wabaunsee County, Kansas. Bradford was founded as a stop along the Manhattan, Alma, and Burlingame Railway in 1890. It was located about halfway between the two larger centers of Eskridge and Harveyville. The community quickly grew to include a school, a church, a blacksmith’s shop, a creamery, multiple general stores, and several other businesses (Bauer 2017). In 1900, as many as 100 people called Bradford home (Polk 1900 p. 173). For its first two decades, Bradford was a bustling and growing town, attracting newcomers from across Europe and the United States, uniquely including a substantial population of freed slaves from the American South and their descendants (Bauer 2017). It was the rise of the automobile that an article in the January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1942 issue of the *Eskridge Independent* cited for the decline of Bradford. The article was published following the closing of Bradford’s combined post office and general store, one of the last remaining institutions in the community. The article explains that many country stores, including Mrs. Kopp’s Store (which included the post office) in Bradford, closed “because it takes only a few minutes longer to drive to a larger center”

(*Eskridge Independent* 1942, as cited in Bauer 2017). Enrollment in the local one-room schoolhouse hit a peak of 41 in 1905 and generally declined thereafter. In 1936, just four students remained. The school closed in 1950 and was consolidated with Eskridge (Bauer 2017, 22). Today, the once-bustling community is depopulated and consists of a few abandoned houses and foundations (Figure 2.2).

Despite the grim picture painted by rural decline, not all parts of the rural Great Plains are experiencing this. In fact, the fastest-growing county in the United States between 2010 and 2015 was in this region — McKenzie County, North Dakota, which more than doubled its population in just five years as a result of the oil boom in western North Dakota and eastern



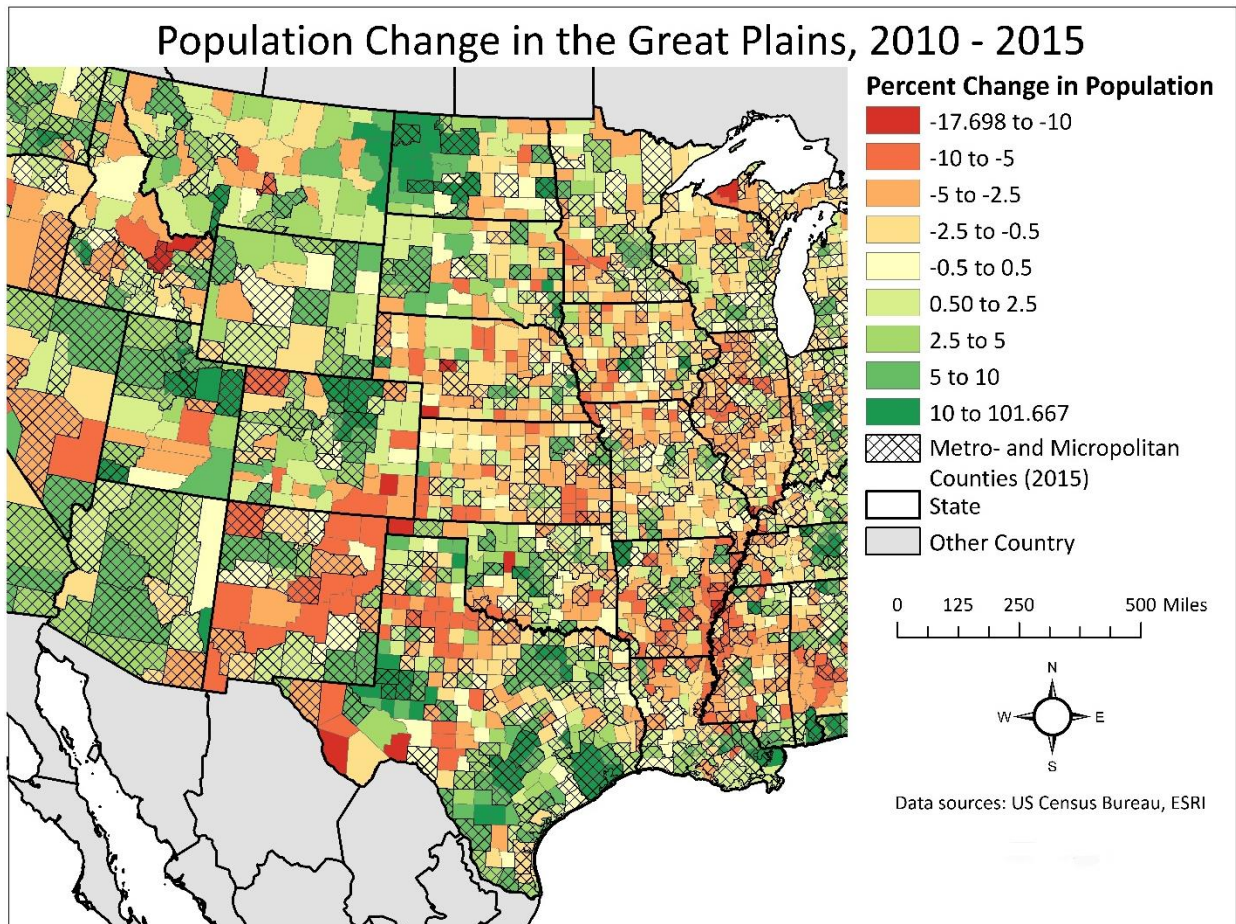
**Figure 2.2: An abandoned house in Bradford, Kansas, believed to have belonged to R.A. Kraus. Photo by author, December 2017.**

Montana. Other counties in the area have also been experiencing growth. For the first time in its history, Slope County, North Dakota, had a growing population. In 1920, 4,940 called it home, but by 2010, this number had fallen to just 727, making it the smallest county in the state and the 20<sup>th</sup> smallest in the country. The 2016 U.S. Census estimate, however, placed its population at 763. Amidon, the county seat, grew from 20 to 21 people over the same period. The “city” had also been experiencing decline beforehand. In addition to areas experiencing growth as a result of resource exploitation, areas on the outskirts of major metropolitan areas, such as Kansas City and Denver, have been seeing growth (Brown 2018). Regional centers, such as Garden City, Dodge City, and Liberal, in southwestern Kansas, have seen growth, as well, resulting from groundwater exploitation (White 1994) and the local beef industry (Brown 2018). Finally, counties on Indian reservations, such as Sioux County, North Dakota, part of the Standing Rock Reservation, and Oglala Lakota County, South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Reservation, have experienced population growth, as well (Figure 2.3).

## **2.2 Causes of Rural Decline**

As noted previously, the rise of the automobile was a major contributing factor to early rural decline. This trend began about a century ago and continues today. Scholars have cited a variety of causes for the persistent rural decline. These include the “too-much mistake,” technology, the mechanization of agriculture, increasing farm size, lack of employment and opportunity, youth out-migration, natural decrease, and nearby larger cities. Stephen White also cites “environmental degradation” (White 1994, p. 32).

The “too-much mistake” is a term devised by Elwyn B. Robinson, the author of the *History of North Dakota*, a 1966 chronology of the state’s history still used as the authoritative source of history in that state. In a 1958 speech titled “The Themes of North Dakota History,” he



**Figure 2.3: Population trends in the Great Plains area between 2010 and 2015. Map by Karl Bauer, April 2017.**

laid out six themes that shaped the way North Dakota became what it was in 1958, and explained the “too-much mistake” as follows:

The pioneers, encouraged by the Homestead Act, cut the grassland into too many farms and too many people moved onto the land. The railroad promoters laid too many miles of track and started too many towns. The lawmakers organized too many local governmental units — townships, counties, school districts, and eventually a complex, overlapping maze of state agencies. [Early settlers] laid out too many miles of roads, set up too many schools, colleges, churches, and banks. There were too many because, after many of the original settlers had left the subhumid grassland, there were too few people to be served and too few people to bear the costs (Robinson 1959).

He summarizes this as “[early settlers were] trying to do too much too fast with too little”

(Robinson 1966, vii). The Homestead Act-imposed 160-acre corn-based style of agriculture that

worked in the moist Midwest was not suited for the more arid Great Plains (Shortridge 2005, 530). Robinson is not alone in stating that too much was expected of and invested into the Great Plains. In a *New York Times* column on Rawson, North Dakota, population six, written 44 years later, Nicholas Kristof (2003) called homesteading and the “oversettlement” of the Great Plains “one of the longest-running and most costly errors in American history.” He echoed calls from Popper and Popper’s (1987) controversial paper, *The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust*, which launched the “Buffalo Commons” idea. The Poppers called for vast swaths of the inevitably depopulating Great Plains to be “deprivatized” (12) and returned to a “pre-White” state (17) — essentially one of the world’s largest wildlife refuges and a home for the American Bison. Peirce Lewis, a noted cultural geographer, wrote that “most small towns in America,” especially the ones resembling Norman Rockwell’s paintings, are “obsolete relicts of a different age.” He continued “there are no more being built today, and unless things in America change radically, there never will be” (Lewis 1999, 181).

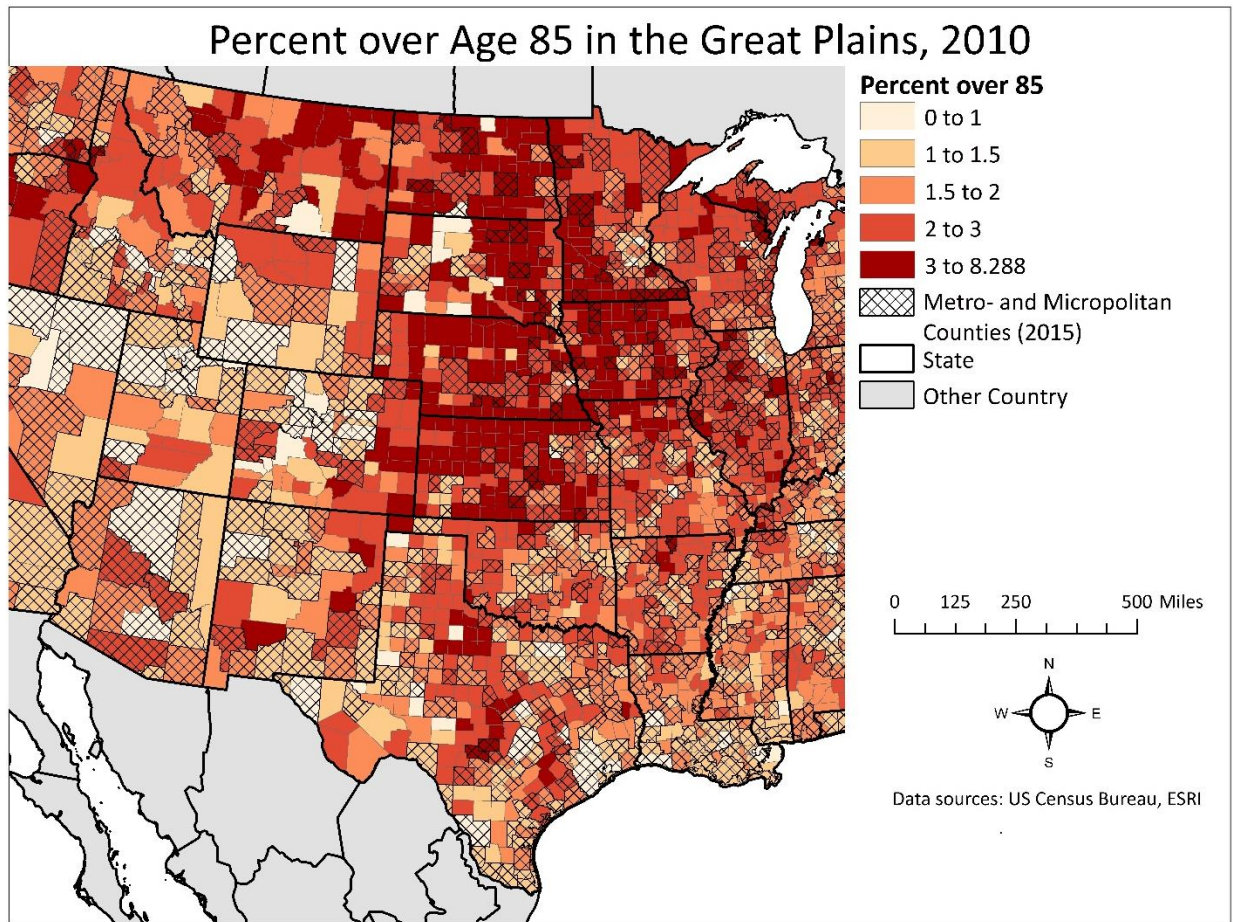
Changes in agriculture are a major force in the economy of the Great Plains. Over the latter half of the twentieth century, farms have grown in acreage, as a result of increased mechanization of agriculture. Farm income and commodity prices have continued to fall and costs have continued to rise (Brown 2018). There has been a decline in the number of mid-size farms and an increase in the number of the smallest and largest farms, which Bailey and Ransom refer to as “the declining middle of American agriculture” (2014, 36-48). The mid-size farms include average family farms that historically defined the culture and economy of the Midwest and Great Plains. Due to the mechanization of agriculture and decreasing crop prices, farms have been increasing steadily in acreage. Increased acreage equals increased efficiency, meaning fewer workers and tools are needed per acre. This helps to cut food prices, but it has increased

unemployment, leading to out-migration (particularly the local youth) and population decline (Lu and Paull 2007, 75). The smallest farms include small-acreage hobby farms located near big cities.

Over the latter half of the twentieth century, an economic shift involving less dependence on agriculture also has taken place in rural America, followed by a shift to service employment. (Bailey and Ransom 2014, 300). This shift has created an environment in which many rural jobs are low-wage, low-skill, part-time, and lack advancement opportunities (Bailey and Ransom 2014, 300). This has led people, especially well-educated and younger people, to look for work elsewhere, usually in metropolitan areas (Kandel and Brown 2006, 197 and 207-211).

Aging and youth out-migration challenge rural areas. The United States and other more-developed countries have aging populations, but this is especially true for rural areas, and particularly so in the Great Plains. The region's population has been older than the rest of the United States since the 1950s (Hautaniemi Leonard and Gutmann 2005, 82). Median age tends to increase with distance from cities (Bailey and Ransom 2014, 304). These areas have some of the highest percentages of people aged 85 and over in the United States (Figure 2.4). As the young people move away, many of the people left behind are the elderly. The elderly have great attachment to their homes — it is where they grew up; often, their home is one of the only places they know. For example, Dr. Arnold J. Bauer (2012) demonstrates this in *Time's Shadow*, a memoir of his early twentieth century youth in rural Clay County, Kansas. He described Clay Center, the county seat, as “an unfamiliar place,” even though it was only 15 miles away. He goes on to say Kansas City was as foreign to his family as London or Paris (Bauer 2012 p. 29-30). The elderly in isolated areas may not have lived anywhere else during their lifetime; they





**Figure 2.4: Percent over 85 by county as of the 2010 U.S. Census. Map by Karl Bauer, April 2017.**

grew up during a time when trips into the nearest larger town were a rare occasion, hence without the same knowledge or experiences of the outside world that today’s youth possess.

As noted earlier, gainful employment and good-paying jobs can be difficult to find in some rural areas. As the young people from rural communities depart for higher education, the chances of them returning and starting families can be slim. They often venture to a metropolitan area or larger city to seek better-paying jobs, a more diverse set of employment opportunities, and a greater range of social activities (Carr and Kefalas 2009). They are the largest group leaving rural America (Brooks 2017, 8, citing Carr and Kefalas 2009). In turn,

they leave behind an environment where churches may hold twice as many funerals as they do baptisms (Adamy and Overberg 2017).

Having a larger city nearby can serve as both a blessing and a curse for rural areas. It can be a blessing, as larger cities provide a wider array of employment opportunities that have led to population increases in nearby small towns. They can also be a curse, however, as locals are closer to major retailers, such as Walmart, and they are less likely to support local stores, which often have less selection and higher prices. Richard Wood, an economist and the author of *Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests*, points to the example of the relationship between Minneapolis, Kansas, and Salina, Kansas. Minneapolis is a city of about 2,000 people located 24 miles north of Salina, a regional hub with about 47,000 people (Wood 2008 p. 92). Minneapolis has seen population growth resulting from newcomers attracted by the town's free land program, lower cost of living relative to Salina, its smaller class sizes in local schools, and its proximity to the services, hospitals, things to do, and employment opportunities of a larger city. While Minneapolis' population has grown, its downtown has experienced quite the opposite. Roughly half of the small city's residents work in Salina, and most of them shop there as well (Wood 2008 p. 94). Salina has a Walmart, a Target, a Kmart, a shopping mall, and a more diverse array of restaurants than Minneapolis. The decline in downtown businesses in Minneapolis combined with an increasing population has turned the city into a "bedroom community" (Wood 2008 p. 94).

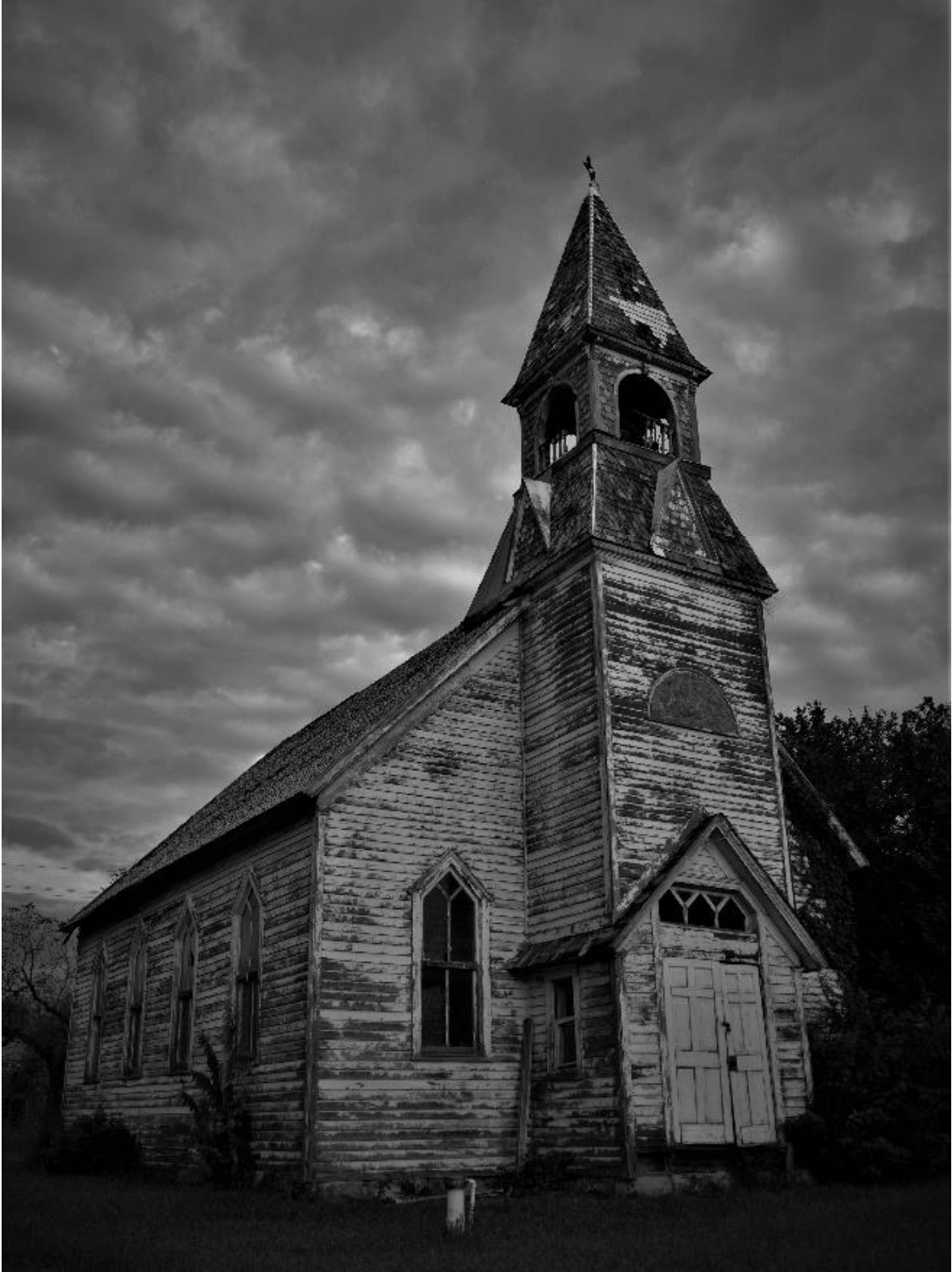
### **2.3 Impacts of Rural Decline**

It is difficult not to see evidence of decline in the Great Plains while driving down virtually any country road, especially in the most isolated areas. Usually, you will see something abandoned, whether it be a house, barn, school, grain elevator, or church (Figure 2.5). On many

small-town main streets, you will undoubtedly see empty storefronts, and sometimes, crumbling edifices of what were once elegant structures. Look at the population of almost any given town, and more often than not, the year of that town's population peak was before 1940. Over the past few years, I have traveled to most corners of the Great Plains, including eastern New Mexico, eastern Colorado, the Texas Panhandle, the Oklahoma Panhandle, western Oklahoma, most of Kansas, eastern Wyoming, western Nebraska, most of South Dakota, eastern Montana, most of North Dakota, northwestern Minnesota, and southern Manitoba. Since my arrival in Kansas about two years ago, I have visited 93 of the state's 105 counties, with the few I have yet to visit mostly being in the far southwestern corner of the state. What I have described above is based on my observations in these areas.

Over the past century, communities across the Great Plains have been grappling with the closing of civil, social, and economic institutions, including their schools, houses of worship, and businesses. Closings are not the only impact, however. Loss of property values is a major concern as well. Omemee, North Dakota, a ghost town in Bottineau County, was featured in a 2005 *Bismarck Tribune* article because of investors buying up cheap lots there. County tax assessors valued each lot within the townsite at \$30 per piece and investors were paying between \$100 and \$1,000 each. The county government is faced with the unique predicament of losing money on taxes — the annual property tax on each lot is 59 cents, and it costs the county more in postage to send out notices and receipts for the lots than it receives in tax revenue (*The Bismarck Tribune* 2005).

Another unique impact of rural decline comes from the village of Monowi, in Boyd County, Nebraska. Most of the buildings are facing collapse, many of the streets are grown over, and the Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad that once brought prosperity to the area



**Figure 2.5: The abandoned Methodist church in Lost Springs, Marion County, Kansas.  
Photo by Karl Bauer, October 2017.**

has long since been abandoned. The village's population was 123 in 1930, but it has fallen substantially since, to just one today (Figure 2.6). The village is the only incorporated municipality in the United States with a population of one (Reuters 2011). That one person is Elsie Eiler, a woman in her eighties, who runs the village tavern and library. She is in the unique position of electing herself as mayor, paying taxes to herself, and issuing her own liquor license. The population was two as recently as the 2000 U.S. Census, but the population declined by half when Rudy, her husband, died in 2004. I spoke with Eiler in June 2018 at her tavern about the decline in her community, and she identified increasing farm size, a lack of "industry," and a general "lack of things to hold people [there]" as the main reasons her community, and the rest of Boyd County have declined so far from their former selves. She elaborated "one farmer farms now what four or five families used to live on." Because of Eiler's unique position, she has been the subject of great international media interest and her tavern has emerged as a tourist destination (Reuters 2011).<sup>4</sup>

## **2.4 Mitigation Efforts**

Over the past few decades, several methods have been employed, or at least, attempted, at the local, state, and federal levels to help mitigate rural out-migration and population decline. These range from bills put before the U.S. Congress to grassroots efforts by concerned citizens. They have been mildly successful, depending on one's definition of success, at their best, and total failures at their worst.

At the federal level, several politicians have unsuccessfully tried to pass new laws aiming to revitalize small towns and rural areas. Byron Dorgan, a former Democratic U.S. senator from

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<sup>4</sup> When I visited in June 2018, three cars were parked near the tavern. The license plates indicated the visitors were from Utah, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota (my vehicle).



**Figure 2.6: The sign on eastbound Nebraska State Highway 12 showing Monowi’s population of one. Photo by Karl Bauer, June 2018.**

North Dakota, introduced the New Homestead Act in 2003 with support from senators in other Great Plains states. It proposed to repay student loans and offer tax credits to those who settle in depopulating areas, such as Regent, North Dakota, where Dorgan grew up (Wood 2008, 140). The bill died, as did his second attempt in 2005, as politicians from larger, coastal states did not share an interest in repopulating the Great Plains (Wood 2008, 141). Jack Zaleski of the *Forum of Fargo-Moorhead* mocked the effort by saying “any effort to repopulate North Dakota is a fool’s errand” (Wood 2008, 8-9). At the state level, various efforts have been employed,

including the Rural Opportunity Zone Program in Kansas. In 2012, Kansas's state government initiated the program by incentivizing recent college graduates to move to rural counties experiencing population decline by offering state income tax waivers and student loan repayments (Brooks 2017, 1). It is similar to what Senator Dorgan proposed, except at the state level. Brooks (2017) found the program was largely unknown, and that students' "participation does not help most achieve future goals and [the incentives] only slightly [outweigh] rural life drawbacks" (p. 69). Brooks observed that it is too early to tell if the program will help grow the population of rural counties (Brooks 2017, 69). At the local level, there have been numerous investments in tourism and festivals, but as Lu and Paull (2007, 76) point out, these have had limited success. Tourism jobs also tend to be low-paying and seasonal in nature. "Elephant hunting" (trying to attract a major employer, e.g., a manufacturing plant or distribution center) and attracting ethanol plants have been another local effort, but have had limited success in increasing population and, once built, have been putting extra burden on local infrastructure (Wood 2008, 42 and Brooks 2017, 10). Some communities are mimicking the federal and Kansas program by offering student loan repayments (Harrison and Raice 2018). Daniels and Lapping (1987) discussed a method of small town revitalization based on triage, the wartime medical aid selection process. Triage focuses on helping those with moderate wounds first, as those severely wounded are likely to perish anyway, and those with non-life-threatening injuries are in less need of immediate help to survive. Daniels and Lapping adapt this method to serve as "small town triage," advocating limited public sector (state and regional governments) funds should first be invested in "smaller, growing towns which could achieve sustained growth with some financial assistance." Second priority would go to "larger, growing towns" and last priority would go to "stagnant towns" (1987, 275-276).

The general lack of real, empirical success from federal and state programs has led dedicated individual communities and organizations to take matters into their own hands, most notably with free land programs (Hrabe 2005). These programs offer a free residential lot to anyone willing to build a house on it to designated specifications in a given amount of time, all in the effort of reversing rural population decline. The free land programs are discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.



## Chapter 3 - A History of Free Land Programs

This chapter discusses the history of modern free land programs and what literature states their impacts have been. It begins with the story of one of the first modern free land programs, an unsuccessful venture in Antler, North Dakota. Later, it discusses the spread of the programs across the Great Plains and beyond. Finally, the chapter discusses what scholarly literature and the media have written on the topic. The next chapter discusses the methods used in this research and details the study sites.

### 3.1 The Story of Antler

Because of the decline and closings across much of the rural Great Plains, dozens of inventive small towns have turned to the same principle that brought their ancestors west — free or cheap land. According to an article in *Time*, this movement among small communities might have started in Antler, North Dakota, a tiny town along the Canadian border, in 1981 (Kadlec 2005, 46).

In 1910, Antler was a booming, young railroad town of 342 people. Seventy years later, in 1980, its population had fallen to just 101 people, and the announcement came that the school would close in spring of 1981. Harley “Bud” Kissner, the owner of a 640-acre farm near Antler, was upset over the news, and he was determined to do something about it (Witt 1981, *AP* 1981 Jorgenson 2017). He bought advertisements in three local newspapers offering free nine- and five-acre plots of his land to anyone who would build a house on it, move in with children, and live there for five years (Kadlec 2005, 46 and *AP* 1981). He received hundreds of phone calls and national press attention (Jorgenson 2017). According to an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, “so many phone calls came at once that the Antler switchboard sparked and smoked and fizzled out, which somehow set off the town fire siren. They still talk about it at The Cabin bar” (Loh

1991, 1). Even after his offer expired, Kissner was receiving 200 applications per day (Witt 1981). Kissner decided to give land to seven of the families who applied. He produced a list of incoming families to the local school board and they decided to re-open the school (AP 1981). This included a Utah family, the Ellises, with seven children, who offered to “sire five more” to help keep the school open (Witt 1981).

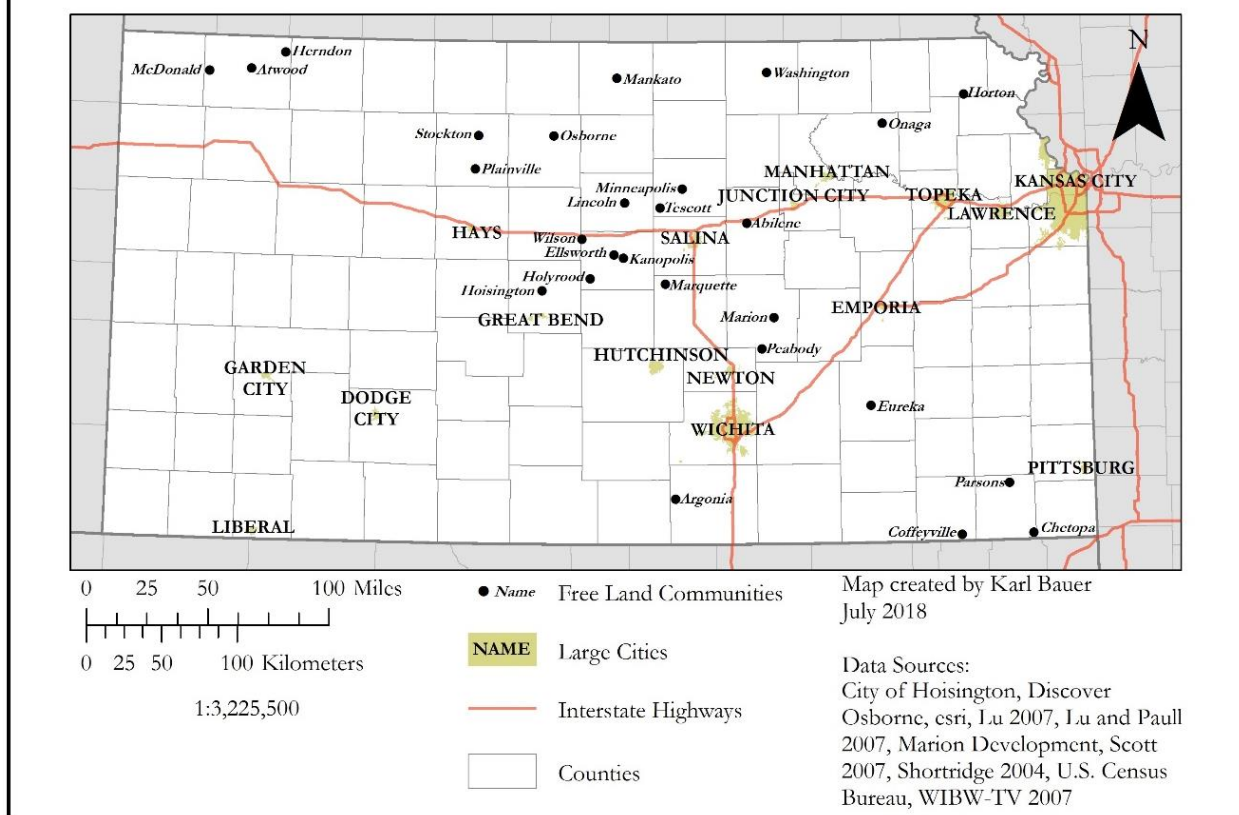
At first, Kissner’s experiment was a resounding success — the school remained open and the population was increasing. A decade later, however, the vitality the newcomers brought to Antler had worn away, and the population continued to plummet (Wick 1988, 6). The school closed in 1987, and the grocery store, filling station, and Catholic church followed shortly after (Loh 1991, 2 and Jorgenson 2017). Only one of the 1981 families, the Ellises, by then with nine children, remained, but they later moved south to Minot after the school closed (Loh 1991, 1 and 3). All the others left within five years and returned the land to Kissner (Loh 1991, 1). The arrival of the new families also created hostility within the community, which caused some of the families who lived in Amtler most their lives to move away, making the population and school attendance issues worse (Loh 1991, 2). Today, Antler is mostly abandoned and has a population of 27, as of the 2010 U.S. Census. It remains an incorporated city with an active post office, albeit with reduced hours. Antler gained national news attention again in 2015 when noted white separatist Craig Cobb, a central figure in the white supremacist “Creativity Movement” religion, attempted to buy property there in the hopes of gaining political control, establishing a white-only enclave, and renaming the community after Donald Trump, someone he “admires deeply” (Glass-Moore 2015).

### 3.2 Expansion

Kissner was likely unaware that dozens of other communities would follow his efforts and initiate similar programs across the rural Great Plains and beyond. These communities, which range from La Villa, Texas, (Kadlec 2005, 43) to Reston, Manitoba, (Laychuck 2016); from Flagler, Colorado, (billboard on I-70 2018) to New Richland, Minnesota, (Kadlec 2005, 43); and from Chugwater, Wyoming, (Kadlec 2005, 43) to Chetopa, Kansas, (Lu 2007, 77) have followed Antler's lead and have started free land programs of their own. The program in Reston, Manitoba, is especially noteworthy, as local officials answered a flurry of calls from "south of the border" immediately after the election of Donald Trump as president — all Americans who had searched for cheap places to live in Canada (Laychuck 2016). It is unclear if any of the Americans have taken advantage of the program. These programs are not limited to the Great Plains and their surroundings, however, as similar programs exist in Maine (Betts 2012), New Brunswick (CBC News 2017), and even as far as Sardinia (Marchetti 2018).

Nowhere have small towns embraced free land programs as much as Kansas, however (Shortridge 2005, 538). Currently, 27 communities (Figure 3.1) are known to either have or had free land programs in operation. Each community is different, as are their programs, but they share several characteristics. While these programs may have been inspired by the Homestead Act of 1862, they are not connected to the federal government and are instead operated by local governments and organizations. Lots are usually an acre (4,046.86 square meters) or less in size, are vacant, and are zoned for residential purposes. To claim the free land, the interested party typically needs to promise to build (or sometimes, move) a house there. There may also be a down payment, which some communities may refund upon completion of the house. Cities usually have requirements about the minimum size of the house that is to be built and detail a

### KANSAS COMMUNITIES THAT HAVE OR HAD A FREE LAND PROGRAM, 2018



**Figure 3.1: Locations of the Kansas communities that have or had a free land program as of 2018. Map by author.**

construction timeline. Sometimes, applicants with children are given preference, in an effort to increase enrollment in the local school. Some programs also include added benefits, such as memberships in the local pool or country club (Shortridge 2005, 530). Even though the lots are being given away for free, they are typically not expensive pieces of real estate to begin with. The free lots in Marquette, Kansas, for example, were valued at \$5,000 each.<sup>5</sup> For some prospective residents, it may be cheaper to purchase an older house and remodel it, than it is to take the free land and build a new house to the required specifications.

<sup>5</sup> Conversation with free land program participant, Marquette, Kansas, June 2018.

### 3.3 Media and Scholarly Attention

There has been substantial media interest in free land programs across the United States and the world, but relatively little scholarly research has been undertaken on them, and what has been published is now over a decade old. These include Shortridge (2005) and Lu and Paull (2007). Other scholarly articles exist, but take a more generalized approach.

Shortridge (2005) began by explaining the history of settlement on the Great Plains and how too much was expected from the land and that the initial population boom was destined to fail, citing Popper and Popper (1987) (530-531). Next, he described some of the failed efforts to reverse rural population decline, including efforts to attract manufacturing and Senator Dorgan's aforementioned efforts (536), and the efforts small towns have made with free land programs (538). Finally, he laid out his view of "the Plains tomorrow." He expressed doubt in the ability of the programs to reverse the decades-old trend of population decline because "Americans live where they want to live" and the rural Great Plains is generally not one of those places (538). He pointed to Hays, Kansas, and other regional centers serving "effectively" as the "seat" for 20 surrounding counties and expected county consolidations in the future (538-539).

Lu and Paull (2007), based on Darci Paull's (2006) thesis research, included in-depth interviews of program directors and new residents in three communities, Minneapolis, Marquette, and Ellsworth, Kansas. The authors conceded that their results were early in the timeline of the free land programs, but argue the preliminary results are "impressive" and "encouraging" (Lu and Paull 2007, 74 and 79).

Although few scholarly works have been written on free land programs, there is an abundance of newspaper articles and news stories to draw from. Most are from the 2000-2010s decade. The programs drew immense local, national, and international media attention. Outlets,

including Telemundo (Miami, Florida), CNN (Atlanta, Georgia), *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), *The Guardian* (London, UK), *Le Point* (Paris, France), and countless others all made a virtually unheard-of move, and descended on small towns in Kansas, especially Ellsworth and Marquette, to learn about the free land and the impacts it is having on the communities.

Some of the earliest articles point to the programs as a curiosity. These articles attracted massive curious audiences<sup>6</sup> and drew people into the communities, including a Las Vegas, Nevada, family who were featured on CNN. The couple heard about Ellsworth, Kansas, through a newspaper article and decided to leave behind their long commutes and “claustrophobic” lifestyle for a small town in the Smoky Hills of Kansas. They were attracted by the less stressful way of life and lack of crime. The husband worked as a truck driver at the time the story ran, and the wife worked as a substitute teacher. Six months into living in Ellsworth, the family was “loving it” (Max 2004), but another article claimed that after they were featured in a French news story (Nexon 2004), they were experiencing “unwanted fame” after moving to a town seeking a quieter pace of life (AP 2004). A cover story in *USA Today* featured a Baton Rouge, Louisiana, family who had a similar story. They too were seeking a quieter environment with less crime (Ritter 2005).

Most of the articles published before 2010 point to initial success. Since then, fewer articles and stories have been published, and what has appeared tends to paint a more negative, pessimistic picture. For example, James MacPherson (2010) published the story of a Miami, Florida, family who moved to Hazelton, North Dakota. They were attracted by the free land program and low cost of living, but found the community to be “cliquey” and closed to outsiders.

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<sup>6</sup> Conversation with Anita Hoffhines, Millwood Realty, Inc., March 2018

The family alleges residents yelled obscenities at them and made threats against their property. They also had difficulties finding and keeping jobs. At the time the article was published, they wanted to return to Miami (MacPherson 2010). A Reuters story from 2012 explains that small towns in Kansas are in such trouble economically that they cannot even give land away, citing their continued population loss despite the free land programs (Murphy 2012).

Since all these articles have been published, Marquette, Kansas, a community heavily featured in the media with one of the most well-known free land programs, still lost its elementary school. An article in *The Hutchinson News*, when explaining the closure, said the free land program “gave the school a boost of children for several years, but those students have [since] grown up” (Bickel 2014). School closures are often a “distressing event” and can cause further out-migration from small towns (Lu and Paull 2007, 76). This is because schools serve not only as an educational institution, but as an expression of a community’s identity and a source of community pride (Schneller 2012, 3). In Gypsum, Kansas, the closure of its high school in 1967 led to the loss of over a third of the community’s population between 1960 and 1970 (Schneller 2012, 9).

While the early articles, such as Lu and Paull (2007), and the numerous popular press articles, paint a detailed picture of the early happenings with the free land programs, by nature, they do not reflect the current situation. These communities have changed since that research was completed and the media interest has slowed. This justifies a renewed look at free land programs in Kansas and whether the initial success has continued.

## **Chapter 4 - Study Area and Methods**

This chapter details the methods used for gathering data and the communities studied in this report. It also explains the rationale made in choosing them, versus the other 20 communities. It also discusses the interviewing process, which questions were asked, and who was interviewed. The next chapter outlines the results of this research.

### **4.1 Methods**

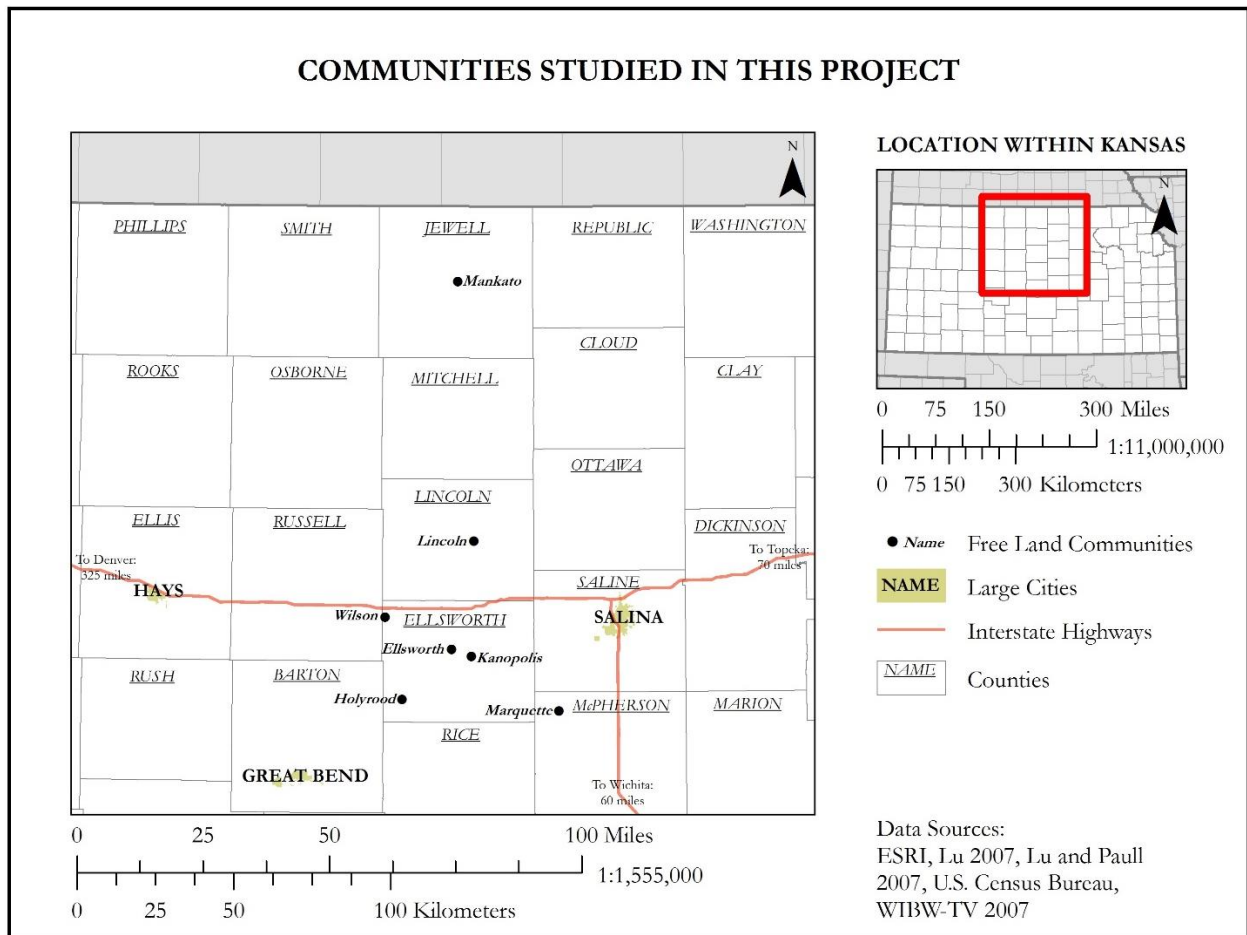
I conducted a semi-structured interview with at least one local decisionmaker or program director in the cities of Marquette, Mankato, and Lincoln, and in Ellsworth County, in central Kansas (Figure 4.1). Two of the programs, Marquette and Ellsworth County, were featured in Lu and Paull's (2007) work, and the other two, Mankato and Lincoln were not. The latter two have received less media attention, as well.

I reached out to the public figures<sup>7</sup> via email (Appendix 1), phone, or by just showing up at their place of business. Participants were told the interview would likely last 15 to 20 minutes, but some ended up lasting nearly an hour. Each of the participants signed and were given copies of an informed consent document, outlining that the research was scholarly in nature, and would be used in publications and conference proceedings. Participants were recorded using a Sony ICDPX370 Mono Digital Voice Recorder and were told the recordings were for "notetaking purposes" and that the recordings themselves would not be published and were for my personal use only. The local decisionmakers and program directors include Steve Piper, former mayor of

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<sup>7</sup> Public figures in the context of this work include politicians, government employees, economic development officials, and newspaper editors. Public figures are identified, program participants are not, as per Kansas State University Institutional Review Board's approval of case 9095.





**Figure 4.1: Communities served by the programs studied in this project. Map by Karl Bauer, July 2018.**

Marquette; Stacie Schmidt, executive director of the Smoky Hill Development Corporation; Anita Hoffhines, former director of Ellsworth County Economic Development; Chris Rhea, city administrator of Mankato; and Kelly Larson, executive director of the Lincoln County Economic Development Foundation.

I asked questions from a list I had offered in advance (Appendix 2), but questions were added or struck out based on earlier responses, the time allotted, and the respondent's level of expertise and experience. I focused my efforts on questions about what has changed in the community to determine whether the respondent believed the program was successful or not, but

also asked about the media attention, why the program was started, and what, if any, challenges the community has faced because of the program.

In addition to the public figures, I reached out to residents, part of four new families in Marquette, by door knocking. Three of them were original participants in the free land program, moving there and building a house in the mid-2000s. The other moved to Marquette in early 2018, buying a house that was originally constructed as part of the free land program. The first residents I spoke with were a retired couple who lived on a farm. Upon hearing about the free land program, they moved to Marquette (population 611) seeking a more “urban” environment. The next two residents were families with young children who already had connections to Marquette. The last resident I spoke with was a widow with young children when she moved to Marquette. She heard about the program on the radio while on a cross-country road trip, and on her way back, decided to stop in Marquette and check out the town. She “instantly fell in love,” and decided to move there from California. I asked them questions about where they lived before, what initially attracted them to Marquette, whether they were satisfied with the move, and if they knew any of their neighbors would be willing to talk to me (Appendix 3). Each of the participants signed and were given copies of an informed consent document, outlining that the research was scholarly in nature, and would be used in publications and conference proceedings. As I was door knocking, I introduced myself as a graduate student at Kansas State University researching rural development issues and said I was not selling anything. I also reached out to a newspaper editor, Linda Mowery-Denning of the *Ellsworth County Independent/Reporter*,<sup>8</sup> and have included communications with a former Kansas State University extension agent, longtime residents of their respective communities who have great local knowledge. I was interested in

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<sup>8</sup> Identified with permission

their opinions of the free land programs, what the community reaction is, and how they think the community has changed.

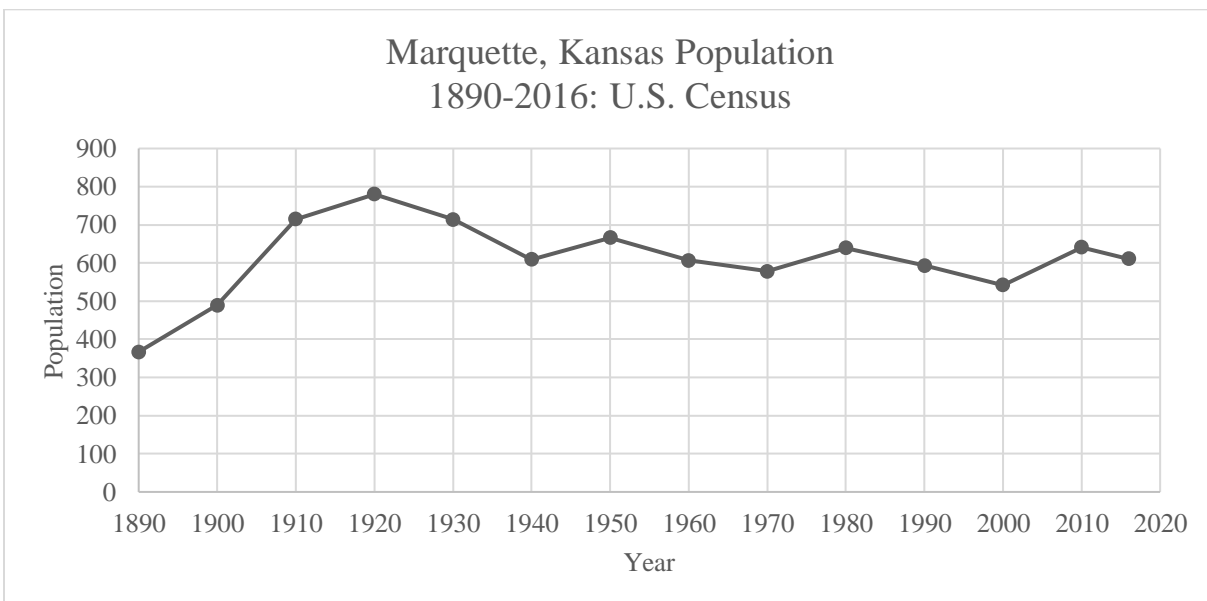
I chose each of these communities for a variety of reasons. First, they are all located in Kansas, the state that has embraced free land programs like no other. Kansas has 27 communities with free land programs, while other Great Plains states may have two or three. Second, they are all located in North-Central Kansas. Most of the 27 communities in Kansas are clustered here, and this allowed for me to easily drive between the communities. The region is also just over a one-hour drive to my home base in Manhattan, Kansas. Third, I wanted to focus on a variety of communities. Two (Marquette and Ellsworth) had been studied before while the other two (Mankato and Lincoln) had not. The same pairs had seen intense media attention while the others did not. I also sought a variety of different types of communities, with small communities such as Marquette and large communities such as Ellsworth. Finally, I chose these communities because of my ability to find willing participants there based on publicly available contact information. When interviewing program participants, I chose to focus on Marquette, because all the new houses are clustered in one neighborhood (allowing for easier walking and door knocking) and because many of the new residents built new houses, unlike in Ellsworth where most bought existing ones. I decided against door knocking in Mankato and Lincoln because the lack of new residents in those places would not insure anonymity among the respondents.

## **4.2 Marquette**

Marquette is a city in McPherson County with a population of 611, as of the 2016 U.S. Census estimate. Of the four programs studied, Marquette is the smallest city and the only one that is not centered in a county seat. The community was organized in 1874 and was settled

largely by Swedish immigrants on land purchased from the Kansas Pacific Railroad (Bruntzel 2010). Marquette is in an area of McPherson and Saline Counties known for its history of Swedish settlement, and several other Swedish communities were started at the same time, including Falun, Smolan, Assaria, Fremont, and Lindsborg. Lindsborg, the largest of the group, is located just to the east, and it is home to Bethany College and a variety of Swedish-themed shops, beds and breakfasts, and restaurants. Salina is the nearest regional center, and it is located 30 miles to the northeast.

Marquette has been experiencing population decline almost uninterrupted since 1920. The community started a free land program circa 2002-2003, which was featured in Lu and Paull’s (2007) paper. Their paper cited “impressive results,” which are evident in the sharp increase between the 2000 and 2010 censuses (Figure 4.2). According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2016 official estimate, this increase has not lasted, and in 2014, the city’s school closed, with students being moved to Lindsborg (Bickel 2014). Many of the town’s children attend classes in Little River/Windom schools, according to residents.



**Figure 4.2: The population trend for the city of Marquette, Kansas. Chart by Karl Bauer, July 2018.**

In Marquette, I interviewed Steve Piper at his deli counter in his family's grocery store. Piper was the mayor of Marquette when the free land program was just beginning. Piper has been interviewed many times by a wide variety of local, regional, national, and international media outlets. I also spoke with four new residents, three of whom were participants in the free land program.

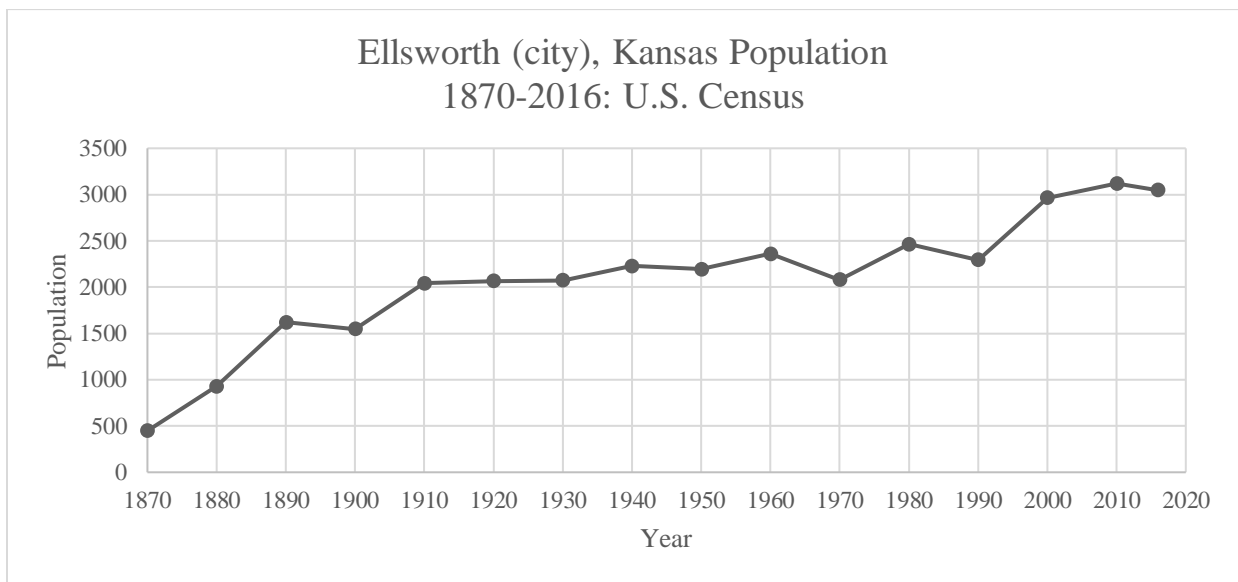
### **4.3 Ellsworth County**

Ellsworth County has a population of 6,328 as of the 2016 U.S. Census estimate. Ellsworth (city), the county seat of Ellsworth County, is where most of the activity surrounding the free land program existed, although programs were also in place in Holyrood, Kanopolis, and Wilson, smaller cities scattered throughout the county. Ellsworth (city) has a population of 3,047 as of the 2016 U.S. Census estimate, making it the largest of the communities studied. The city of Ellsworth began with a small frontier fort, established by Second Lieutenant Allen Ellsworth in June 1864. The fort was abandoned and moved by 1866, but the name stuck (Bruntzel 2010). By 1867, a town was started nearby and it was incorporated in 1868. It quickly grew thereafter, serving as a hub for supplying food and liquor to nearby Fort Hawker, and most famously, as a wild west cowtown, complete with numerous brothels and saloons. According to Bruntzel (2010), "early Ellsworth prospered from the Texas cattle trade from 1869 to 1875, from [railroad] construction, and from [1,500] soldiers and government employees stationed four miles away at Fort Hawker." Fort Hawker is in what is now Kanopolis. After the cattle drives ended, the city suffered economically, but overall, has continued to prosper. The opposite has been happening to the county overall, as its population has been declining since 1920. Today, major employers in the city of Ellsworth include manufacturing, the local hospital, and the Kansas Department of Corrections' Ellsworth Correctional Facility. The correctional facility

was dedicated in 1990 and as of August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, it houses 927 inmates between its two units (Kansas Department of Corrections 2018). Ellsworth also boasts several manufacturing facilities, including Great Plains Manufacturing, that draw commuters in from other nearby communities.<sup>9</sup> Salina is the nearest regional center, and it is located 35 miles to the east.

Ellsworth is the only city of the 27 that reached its highest ever population in 2010, and it is also the only one maintaining its population. The city was featured in Lu and Paull’s (2007) paper, which cited “impressive” results. These are evident in the slight increase in the community’s population between 2000 and 2010 (Figure 4.3). The population has since declined slightly, according to the 2016 official U.S. Census estimate.

In Ellsworth, I interviewed Anita Hoffhines, former director of Ellsworth County Economic Development. She currently works as a real estate agent with Millwood Realty, and I met her at her real estate office in Downtown Ellsworth. Like Steve Piper in Marquette, she has



**Figure 4.3: The population trend for the city of Ellsworth, Kansas. Chart by Karl Bauer, July 2018.**

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<sup>9</sup> Email communications with Linda Mowery-Denning, editor-publisher of the *Ellsworth County Independent/Reporter*, July 2018

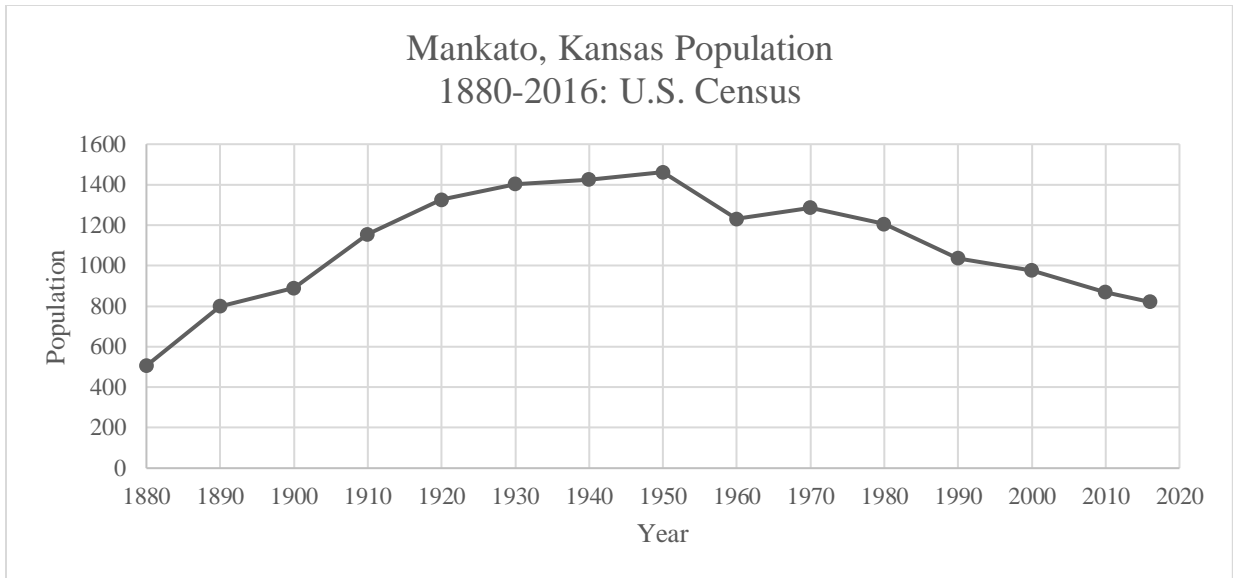
been interviewed by a wide variety of media outlets. She keeps a scrapbook of all the news articles she has been mentioned in (that she knows of) and she has begun to write a book on her experience running the program. She is sentimental about the program and considers her time running it as a major part of her life. I also communicated with Stacie Schmidt, executive director of the Smoky Hill Development Corporation and Linda Mowery-Denning, editor-publisher of the *Ellsworth County Independent/Reporter*.<sup>10</sup>

#### **4.4 Mankato**

Mankato is the county seat of Jewell County and has a population of 821, as of the 2016 U.S. Census estimate. The city was incorporated and named for the much larger city of the same name in southern Minnesota (Bruntzel 2010). It is the most isolated of these four communities, in terms of distance to the nearest regional hub, Salina. Salina lies about 90 miles to the southeast. In Mankato, I interviewed Chris Rhea, the city administrator, in his office at the city hall. He has worked in such capacity for just over a year. He said the community's free land program has received virtually no media attention, and he was a participant of the free land program himself. The city has been experiencing decline almost uninterrupted since 1950 (Figure 4.4), and according to Rhea, has been grappling with an aging population.

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<sup>10</sup> Both identified and quoted with permission.



**Figure 4.4: The population trend for the city of Mankato, Kansas. Chart by Karl Bauer, July 2018.**

## 4.5 Lincoln

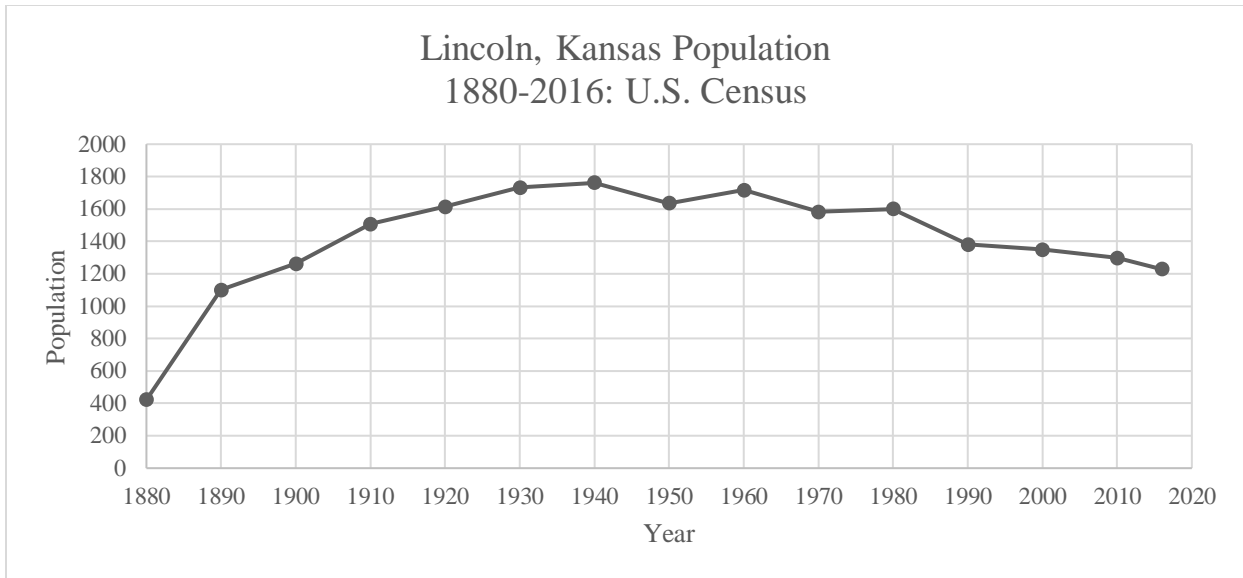
Lincoln (legally, Lincoln Center) is the county seat of Lincoln County and has a population of 1,229, as of the 2016 U.S. Census estimate. The city was first platted in 1871 (Bruntzel 2010). Lincoln is home to a manufacturing facility for U.S. Tower, a firm that constructs mobile, fixed, and telescoping communications towers for the U.S. military, among other clients. The facility serves as a major employer for the area, and there is a sign near the facility reading “Help Wanted Apply Inside” (Figure 4.5) Lincoln is located about 40 miles northwest of Salina, the nearest regional hub — just slightly farther than Ellsworth. In Lincoln, I interviewed Kelly Larson, the executive director of the Lincoln County Economic Development Foundation, in her office in the county’s historic stone courthouse. She has worked in that capacity for about four years. I also have included communications with a former Kansas State University Extension agent who has lived in Lincoln County for virtually her entire life. Lincoln did receive media attention, notably from Hispanic-American media, but not quite to the extent that Marquette and Ellsworth did. The city is the only one of the four studied to have spent



substantial resources advertising its program, including the installation of billboards on nearby Interstate 70. The city’s population has been falling almost uninterrupted since 1940 (Figure 4.6), and according to a long-time Lincoln County resident, it is because there is nothing to keep the young people there.



**Figure 4.5: US Tower’s manufacturing facility in Lincoln. Note the “Help Wanted” sign on the right side of the photo. Photo by Karl Bauer, June 2018.**



**Figure 4.6: The population trend for the city of Lincoln, Kansas. Chart by Karl Bauer, July 2018.**

**Table 4.1: The various requirements for new houses each community specifies. Table by Karl Bauer, July 2018.**

| Program          | Requirements for a new house   |
|------------------|--|
| Marquette        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Construction must be started within 180 days of receiving the lot and be completed one year later</li> <li>• Minimum 5:12 roof pitch</li> </ul>   |
| Ellsworth County | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Must be built within two years of receiving the lot</li> <li>• Minimum of 1,000 square feet</li> <li>• Minimum 5:12 roof pitch</li> </ul>   |
| Mankato          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Must be built within two years of receiving the lot</li> <li>• Minimum of 1,200 square feet</li> <li>• Minimum 3 bedrooms</li> <li>• Minimum two-car garage</li> <li>• Minimum 5:12 roof pitch</li> <li>• Minimum 18 inch overhang</li> </ul> |
| Lincoln          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimum of 1,300 square feet</li> <li>• Minimum 5:12 roof pitch</li> <li>• Minimum 12 inch overhang</li> </ul>  |

**Table 4.2: Details of each program’s background, results, and participants. Table by Karl Bauer, July 2018.**

|                                     | Marquette   | Ellsworth County  | Mankato   | Lincoln   |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Year program established            | c. 2001/2002  | August 2003   | 2006  | October 2004  |
| Population in 2000                  | 542   | 6,525   | 976   | 1,349   |
| Population in 2010                  | 641   | 6,497   | 869   | 1,297   |
| Population estimate in 2016         | 611   | 6,328   | 821   | 1,229   |
| Lots made available                 | 80  | 23  | 21  | 21  |
| Lots still available                | approx. 50 (some new residents took more than one lot)                                      | Countywide program ended c. 2005, but some lots still available in Wilson                                 | approx. 17 (unofficial plans for senior housing on some of the lots)                  | approx. 19 (unofficial plans for senior housing on some of the lots)                      |
| Results                             | 30 new homes  | 30 new families with 50 children attracted  | Four new houses   | Two new houses  |
| Challenges/ Problems/ Controversies | Special assessments, school closed  | Loss of school land, frustration over media attention   | Lack of media attention, few applicants   | Wasteful spending, flooding, few applicants   |
| Study Participants                  | Four new residents and grocer/former mayor  | Current economic development director, realtor/former economic development director, and newspaper editor | City administrator  | Economic development director and a retired K-State extension agent                       |
| Website                             | <a href="http://www.frelandks.com/availableland">http://www.frelandks.com/availableland</a> | kansasfreeland.com (deactivated)  | <a href="https://www.mankatoks.com/free-land">https://www.mankatoks.com/free-land</a> | <a href="http://www.lincolnks.org/housing.html">http://www.lincolnks.org/housing.html</a> |

## **Chapter 5 - Results**

This chapter details the findings of this research. It is organized based on the research questions (Chapter 1). It begins by answering how the free land programs were started, and what led the communities to take such an action. Next, it discusses the role the media played in the success of the free land programs. Finally, this chapter discusses changes within the communities, the challenges and successes the communities experienced, and what success means to each community. The next chapter discusses the limitations, conclusions, and potential future research stemming from this project.

### **5.1 Initiation of the programs**

Each of these communities started their programs at different times, and for different reasons. Marquette was the first of these four communities to launch a program, and was probably the second community in the state, after Minneapolis, to start a program. According to the former mayor, Steve Piper, the program in Marquette started circa 2001-2002 and it was a response to the town rapidly losing population and the school being “on the edge of closing.” He also remarked that it was “mainly just to keep the town going.” Community leaders wanted to attract people to the community, but there was a lack of available building lots. The city purchased a 50-acre farm on the west side of town and divided it into 80 residential lots. According to Piper, the city decided to “give them away instead of sell them.”

The program in Ellsworth County started shortly after Marquette’s did, in August 2003. Like Marquette, it had an overarching theme of attracting new residents, but the call to action also came from the school. A budget issue in the local school district led to the proposed layoff of a popular music teacher. The community rallied behind him, and eventually, the position was continued for an additional year, but at half-time. The superintendent demonstrated that in order

to avoid the budget issues, they would need more students, because at that time, each student was worth about \$6,000 in state funding for the school district. Ellsworth County Economic Development, a non-profit volunteer organization, got involved with the issue and made declining enrollment its “primary point of focus,” according to Anita Hoffhines. One of the board members heard about the program in Minneapolis, Kansas, and in Hoffhines’ words, “we stole their idea... It was a good one.” The land given away in Ellsworth was owned by the school board and was originally intended to be the site of a new, larger school. Hoffhines explained “the district realized they could put that land to better use by offering it and attracting families with children into the Ellsworth area, because if they couldn’t recruit new children into the schools, there wouldn’t be a need for a new building.” According to Linda Mowery-Denning, editor-publisher of the *Ellsworth County Independent/Reporter*, at least one school board member was “not especially pleased” with the decision. The land consisted of 10 residential lots. The city also donated land consisting of six lots. The program also initially secured one lot in Wilson, one lot in Holyrood, and five lots in Kanopolis. The 23 lots were “all within city limits and all within established residential neighborhoods.” In addition to the free land, the community offered down payment assistance to families who enrolled children in the local schools in the amount of \$1,500 for the first child, \$750 for the second, up to a maximum of \$3,000 per family.

The program in Mankato started later, in 2006. When I interviewed Chris Rhea, he explained that the program started because of a meat-packing plant leaving town. The plant had originally anticipated expanding, and Mankato required more housing stock for the additional workers. As part of a community development block grant, an addition with infrastructure was put in place on the east side of the city. Rhea continued “shortly after that planned expansion

and that development occurred, they pulled out of town. And so, we were left with an addition that had a lot of infrastructure put in, without, you know, any real use for it.” As a result, the city desired to put the land to “good use,” so a resolution was put in place offering the lots for free, in an effort to make the “land more desirable.” Rhea said the two main purposes of the program are “to increase the local tax base and to provide the ability to develop good housing in the city.”

Like Mankato, Lincoln started its program later and it was not in response to save a community institution. According to the city’s website, the city council approved the program in October 2004 (City of Lincoln, Kansas 2018). Kelly Larson said she believes it started as a panacea for several of the issues facing the community, including a lack of available housing, a lack of housing options, a lack of an employment pool for local manufacturers, a shrinking tax base, and a declining population.

## **5.2 The role of the media**

A simple web search of “free land in Kansas” will result in an unending plethora of news pieces relating to several of the communities that initiated these programs. This is a result of the massive media attention these communities received, especially in the mid-2000s. Local newspapers, regional and national news outlets, and even international magazines all descended on these communities, especially Marquette and Ellsworth, and ran articles on them. Of the four communities I studied, three of them (Marquette, Ellsworth, and Mankato) did little to no advertising on their own dime, and virtually all the publicity the programs received came from outside sources.

When I asked Steve Piper if the local government advertised the program, he chuckled and said the media did all the advertising. He elaborated:

I was mayor, and I was on television, from the CBS Evening News to Wichita TV stations, probably about 25 times, and we didn’t ask for any of it. It just came to us! It

was the craziest thing you can imagine! One little newspaper article [was written] in the Hutchinson newspaper, and a producer in Chicago for CBS News happened to read it. He called us up, and they sent a full-blown news crew out here and did a story. Dan Rather was still on the CBS News, and we were on his program one evening... We had over 400 phone calls by the next day, and then it just went on from there — ABC World News Tonight and the Today show had us on there, Home and Garden TV did a program on us and filmed a family building their new home, and newspapers — *USA Today*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times* — they’ve all run stories on us. I [also] did an interview with National Public Radio... It was absolutely nuts, all the publicity. They just kept coming and coming. We never expected that, but that’s what sold our program.

The city of Marquette’s government did no advertising on its own, and news of the program spread like wildfire. This created challenges for the community, and Piper cited a Telemundo story. He explained there was a “translation error” in the story that made the program appear to offer free houses instead of just the lot. He said one family from Miami, Florida, packed up “everything they owned” in a van and drove to Marquette. They lined up at his deli counter in his grocery store expecting a free house, and he was forced to explain to them that there were no free houses. He connected them with a pastor in Salina who led them to a shelter. Piper does not know what happened to them after that. The media attention also brought people to Marquette seeking to “make money off the deal,” but according to Piper, “we saw through that pretty quickly.” Even though media attention has since slowed, Piper says, “there’s still people calling every week or so.”

Like Marquette, Ellsworth County was the subject of immense media attention. Hoffhines keeps a detailed scrapbook of every news piece that she knows of that features her, and it includes 71 stories from the early- to mid-2000s, ranging in source from the *Ellsworth Independent/Reporter* and *The Salina Journal* to CNN and *The New York Times*. Ellsworth County Economic Development did little advertising on their own and, like Marquette, relied on free publicity from the media to disseminate news of its program. Unlike Marquette, however, Hoffhines said her group actively sought media attention:

We created a website and then, um [chuckles] the chamber gal and I at the time we were just brainstorming and were like we're just gonna be silly and we're gonna send it out to every famous person we know. [laughs] So, we sent it to media outlets, like a news release, and information, and a link to our website, and we sent out to Oprah, and you know, [laughing] just any person we could find, because we figured people know people, and somebody's looking for a story, and... baboom baboom. Oh yeah, it was huge. It was huge. And the Internet helped. You know, you think about it, 10 years before that it would have been completely different. But the fact that we had the Internet and we had a website that I built... It was total fun.

When asked what role the media played, Hoffhines replied "Ugh, gosh! You can't believe it, I mean I was live on NPR in Chicago... I was in *The Wall Street Journal*, Armed Forces Radio came over, Telemundo... I mean it was a huge, huge thing for me to be involved in." She went on to liken dealing with the unending media attention to "a master's degree in public relations on the fly." She contends that she went out of her way to be helpful to the media, and as a result, they published stories highlighting the community that she felt were positive, accurate, and detailed.

Mankato and Lincoln have received far less media attention than Marquette and Ellsworth. Chris Rhea of Mankato said that in his time working for the city, there has been "no" media attention. The only promotion of the program there is on the local chamber of commerce website. Rhea did say that even though there is no media interest, the people who call the city offices expressing interest in the program all hear about it from a source other than the chamber's website. Lincoln received some media attention, notably from Hispanic-American media, and Kelly Larson said the community was "slammed" and "inundated" with calls. The city, unlike the other three communities, invested in advertisements, including two billboards along nearby Interstate 70. These have not led to the results that Marquette and Ellsworth have seen.



### 5.3 Changes in the Communities

These communities have undergone several changes since the programs began, but much remains the same and populations continue to decline. The public figures I interviewed in Ellsworth, Mankato, and Lincoln all thought the changes in the community since the program has begun have been minimal. The same cannot be said for Marquette, however.

In Marquette, Piper conceded that there have been changes in the community, namely that “church attendance is down,” “[businesses] everything is always in danger of closing,” and most importantly, the school closed in 2014. On the school’s closure, Piper paused and said “losing the school hurt, [and] that knocked us down pretty good,” and “without the school, it [has] been harder to draw people in[to the town], but there’s always hope.” Everyone in Marquette that I talked to has expressed frustration, sadness, or some combination thereof concerning the school’s closing. Lu and Paull (2007, 76) discussed how “distressing” a school closing can be in a community and Schneller (2012, 3 and 9) described how they can lead to substantial population declines. It is still unknown what impact the closure of Marquette’s school will have on the community in the years to come.

Linda Mowery-Denning, editor-publisher of the *Ellsworth County Independent/Reporter*, expressed that the free land program in Ellsworth has been beneficial for the community’s housing market. She explained that when she first moved to Ellsworth in 1999, there were only two houses on the market, one being too expensive and the other being too small. She eventually found a house, but she heard about it from someone who was planning a move. Since then, Mowery-Denning claims the market has changed drastically, from a seller’s market to a buyer’s market. As of July 19, 2018, 26 properties are for sale in Ellsworth, according to Zillow. She

credits the free land program and other initiatives in the community for creating more housing availability.

## **5.4 Challenges and Successes**

All four of the communities in this study have benefited in some way from the free land programs, and all but one of the public figures I interviewed expressed that their community is, in general, better off because of the program. In total, the programs have brought 30 new homes to Marquette, 30 new families with 50 children to Ellsworth County, four new houses in Mankato, and two new houses to Lincoln. These programs did not come without their drawbacks and challenges, however.

When I interviewed Steve Piper in Marquette, he made it clear that the program was overall beneficial to the community, despite the school's closure. He said the program served its purpose, because "it kept the school open several [more] years." He also added:

"we built about 30 new homes, and you figure there were 225 homes to start with, that was more than a 10 percent increase in homes all around, so that was a big boost, and it raised the tax base up, so the city was able to get more money,"

or at least more money than it would have without the program. In a city as small as Marquette, the construction of 30 new houses in about a decade is quite substantial. Finally, Piper added "we need another influx of 30 new homes built" and "you can always use more people." The population has returned to its pattern of decline, but it is still higher than when the program started in the early 2000s. The program in Marquette is ongoing and the city plans to continue giving away lots until there are no more to give away. According to Piper, there has been some "turnover" among the owners of the newly constructed houses, but most of the new residents "have been good for the town, [and] have acclimated into the community." Piper added there "haven't [been] any new homes built for a while, but people are still inquiring" about the

available lots. All four of the new residents in Marquette that I spoke with said very few of the original “takers” of the free land remain, and many of the newly built homes have been sold. As I explored the Westridge Addition neighborhood, where the new houses are located, in May and June 2018, there was one house with a for sale sign in front.

A challenge from Marquette’s program comes from the new residents. Two of them expressed frustration over the city government. One resident said they felt the city government seemed “cliquey,” while the other expressed frustration over property taxes. The resident reported they felt that for the “high” property taxes they pay, they should receive more benefits, including a paved road. The resident complained about the dust coming from the current gravel road. Another issue this resident brought up regarded the school. The resident’s children attend classes in Little River/Windom, although Marquette lies within Lindsborg’s school district, and the resident expressed frustration over their taxes going to a school where their children do not attend. According to all four of the residents I spoke with, after Marquette Elementary closed, roughly half the city’s children attend classes in Lindsborg, while the other half attend classes in Little River/Windom. One resident expressed that this has led to a feeling of division in the community.

Ellsworth, like Marquette, saw a substantial amount of new people in the community, but unlike in Marquette, most did not build new houses and instead bought existing ones. The program is credited with bringing new money into the local school and growing the city’s population to its highest point yet. Stacie Schmidt echoed what Anita Hoffhines had said about the success of the program and offered her take on Ellsworth County’s future:

“All in all, Ellsworth County is in a good position for the future, because of its progressive nature, and because we have been intentional in our planning, from infrastructure to diversity. We have many manufacturers here that supply employment opportunities, and we have a great quality of life. With that said, just like any rural

community, we must not be complacent. We are fortunate, but must continue to look forward to the future in planning and building our community, to sustain what we have and continue to maintain our population.”

According to Hoffhines, the program ended 13 years ago because of how it totally “consumed” her. She explained:

“It was so successful as far as responses from the world, like you can’t believe, I mean we were on Telemundo... I’m saying that the amount of personnel time that it was taking to attract the people was overwhelming and we weren’t getting anything else done.”

In a way, the free land program there was a victim of its own success.

Mankato has not seen as much growth as Marquette or Ellsworth, but Chris Rhea still believes the program is successful and has benefitted the community. Only four houses have been built on 21 available lots. These lots would likely be vacant if the program had not been put in place, and according to Rhea, the city of Mankato is small enough that the property tax revenue gained from them is “not insignificant.”

Lincoln has seen even less growth than Mankato, and it is the only community where the public figure I interviewed admitted controversy surrounding the program. The city built two paved cul-de-sacs (Figure 5.1) in a subdivision consisting of 21 lots, along with utility hookups. In order to fund the program, the city took out a 15-year bond to build the streets and connect utilities to the new subdivision. The economic development board also put two billboards on Interstate 70 reading “FREE LAND.” Even with all the expenditures and investments, only two of the available 21 lots have houses on them. According to a long-time Lincoln County resident, one of the houses belonged to a former (now deceased) mayor and the other is a “bank house.”

Larson explained the controversy as:

“The program has kind of left a bad taste in a lot of peoples’ mouths. You know, because here it is, ten years later, and 90 percent of the lots are still vacant. It hasn’t really done what the goals of the program were, and in the meantime, the city is paying on a bond, a

very large bond, for this program that hasn't panned out, so that's kind of put a burden on the city's finances. The naysayers at the beginning are saying 'I told you so' and the people who were very much for it are saying a 'you know, we took a swing, and we didn't hit' kind of thing."

An additional controversy comes from the location of the free land lots. Yauger Creek runs along the east side of the subdivision, and as a result, the water table is higher. This has led to flooding concerns, and one of the homeowners relies on two sump pumps to keep their basement dry. Even during periods without heavy rain, when the sump pumps have failed, the basement has flooded. According to Larson, some long-term Lincoln residents remarked that they would never have built there because of the flooding concerns. Larson also said she is unsure of what



**Figure 5.1: One of the two cul-de-sacs built in Lincoln. Note the fire hydrant at the far end, indicating infrastructure has been installed. Yauger Creek runs through the line of trees just beyond the end of the pavement. There are unofficial plans to construct senior housing here. Photo by author, April 2018.**

will happen to the free land program in the future, but she expects it to remain in place at least until the bond expires in 2023. After that, she speculates that the program might end, or that restrictions on the types of houses to be built might be relaxed. She said there are unofficial plans to put a nursing home on eight of the lots. A long-time Lincoln County resident confirmed this.

Controversies in the other communities have been relatively minor. When I asked Steve Piper if there was any controversy around the program, he replied “nah, not really, [but] there’s always gonna be someone around town concerned about costs.” The only controversy he pointed to that had arisen from the program was that some families were unaware they had to pay assessments on the property. He explained that it was “all in black and white” and the controversy eventually blew over. He added “there’s always a few bumps in the road with something like this” but everything has a way of working out. Anita Hoffhines shared a similar sentiment with Steve Piper, saying “some of the people around town were afraid, but you know, some of them are afraid of their shadows...” She went on, however, to highlight some community concerns. One was that the program would draw people in who just saw free land as a way to escape financial difficulties and marital issues elsewhere, and they would just bring them to Ellsworth. Hoffhines said she had telephone conversations with prospective residents about these issues, which she called “sidewalk therapy.” Another controversy stemmed from stories Telemundo ran. According to Hoffhines, they sparked an “overwhelming” number of phone calls:

“What happened was our phone lines were so busy that people, mostly from Florida, were Googling people — like businesses in town — and were randomly calling the pharmacy, and the barber, and just randomly calling people who had Spanish-looking names, asking them about the program, and they’re like ‘we don’t know anything about the program, call Anita!’ [and they’d say] ‘well the line is always busy,’ so word got back to me that people didn’t want people calling them randomly...”

Despite the controversy and the inconveniences to locals, Hoffhines credits the Telemundo story for bringing three new families into town, and in the end, everything worked out for the better.

Chris Rhea did not know of any controversy surrounding the program in Mankato.

## **Chapter 6 - Discussion and Conclusion**

This chapter discusses the general conclusions and findings of this research, followed by its limitations, how this research can be used, and what further research can be done in the future.

### **6.1 Major Conclusions**

Free land programs are clearly a short-term solution to a long-term problem. With that said, these programs are far from failures. It is difficult to call these programs failures, since only two of the four studied entered with a specific goal in mind. In Marquette, it was to keep the school open, and in Ellsworth, it was to prevent school downsizing. Mankato's program started to make use of existing infrastructure and Lincoln's started to increase housing stock for a local manufacturer. Marquette and Ellsworth both met their goal and succeeded in some way, as Marquette got to keep their school for another 10 years or so that it would not have otherwise, and Ellsworth brought about 50 children into the community. Mankato can claim success because of the increased tax revenue from the four new houses constructed because of the program.

It is also not necessarily true to say communities cannot even give away land. While studies (Brooks 2017 and Carr and Kefalas 2009) point out survey respondents' negative perceptions of rural life, each of the three active programs continue to generate interest. Marquette, Mankato, and Lincoln's local governments still receive calls on a regular basis. While this interest rarely leads to an application, and even more rarely, the construction of a house, it does show people want to, or are at least marginally interested in moving to small towns. Saying these communities "cannot [even] give away land" (Murphy 2012) does not reflect the entire reality of the situation. It is also easy to point at these programs and say they have not been substantially reversing rural population decline. While this is true, it was never



the goal. In Ellsworth, for example, Anita Hoffhines said they did not want rapid growth in the community, citing infrastructure concerns and a potential shift in the nature of the community.

The most important item to realize from this research is that these free land programs are a short-term solution to a long-term problem. These programs do not address the root causes of a century of rural population decline (rise of the automobile, mechanization of agriculture, environmental degradation, increasing farm size, etc.), and therefore, cannot be expected to reverse it. Instead, they continue the generally failing trend of offering incentives, albeit a more creative, eye-catching method in this case.

Perhaps the biggest success from the free land programs is the attention it gathered, as Hrabe (2005) suggested. People from across the United States and the world learned about an issue, rural population decline, that they probably never would have heard about otherwise, thanks to the intense media involvement. People started seriously looking at rural Kansas as a place to live, even though the vast majority never made the move. Still, thousands of people at least looking at making a move is more than the region has seen in decades.

## **6.2 Limitations**

Potential biases are a concern in this research because program directors are understandably not about to announce to the world that a project they have been working on for the last 15-20 years is a failure. It is entirely possible that they can spin statistics in their favor to make a sluggish program appear that it is performing better than it actually is. I would argue the impacts of biases in this paper are minimal, however, as one of the four program directors, Kelly Larson of Lincoln, was forthcoming about the expense, lack of enthusiasm, controversies, and limited success of her community's program.

Another limitation comes from the fact that this study looks at only four of the 27 programs scattered across Kansas. Every community is different, but in my travels across the state, I have visited all 27, and the apparent outcomes of these programs are similar to what I have found in the four communities I studied in-depth. Tescott, in Ottawa County, for example, appears to have a similar story to Lincoln. The city constructed a cul-de-sac on the outer fringe of the town and, as of my most recent visit in June 2018, only one house had been constructed out of a handful of available lots. I am satisfied that if I had done more in-depth research in other communities, I would have found similar stories to the ones I had already heard, and my conclusions would not change. Finding someone willing to be interviewed was a struggle in this research. In total, I contacted 10 local decisionmakers and program directors in eight communities. I heard back from just five, the ones included in this study.

This research is also limited because it does not give as much special focus to the opinions of the participants as other research has done. I would argue, however, that this work has already been done by scholars, including Lu and Paull (2007), and many media outlets from around the world. The constant barrage of attention led to “unwanted fame” for one family in Ellsworth (AP 2004). I felt this sentiment as I was door knocking in Marquette, a resident told me to “get out” and instructed their dog to chase me. I visited Marquette on numerous occasions from April to June 2018 at various times of day on different days of the week. I knocked on several doors neighbors said belonged to free land program participants, but I never received an answer.

### **6.3 Further research**

Free land programs are a dynamic issue, and every program is different. There is a wealth of potential research to be conducted. One idea stems from all the existing research so far

having been conducted in Kansas. Programs exist, or at least existed, in most of the Great Plains states and provinces, and their surroundings. These include Texas, Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, Wyoming, North Dakota, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. I would be interested in seeing research on the programs in the Canadian Prairie provinces, Minnesota, and North Dakota to see how the more extreme climate (relative to Kansas) is a factor in attracting and keeping new residents. MacPherson's (2010) article mentioned a Florida family who had relocated to North Dakota was struggling with the Winter. There are also programs in Maine and the Canadian Maritime provinces, and I am unaware of any research conducted there to see if those programs have seen any success. There are also programs in Italy, one of which in Sardinia gives away a ruined, old house for one Euro (~US\$1.20) (Marchetti 2018). The program is still young, but it would be interesting to see if the program increases the community's population or if it attracts any tourism.

Media attention was a major factor in Marquette, Ellsworth, and other communities' ability to draw newcomers into their community. These communities saw reporters visit from across the world and had major American television stations broadcast from their communities — events otherwise virtually unheard-of in small-town Kansas. A study of the media attention would make for unique research, studying how the communities were presented, how locals felt about the media attention, why some communities saw more media attention than others, why the media attention slowed down, and how, if at all, the media attention continues to affect these communities.

## **6.4 Recommendations**

First and foremost, these programs need to have dedicated leadership, community support, and a welcoming nature for them to work. Programs, such as those in Marquette and

Ellsworth, where the community rallied behind the school, are more successful than others, such as Mankato and Lincoln, which did not start with a common, community-rallying goal. Once the new residents are set to arrive, locals need to help them settle in and find a job, as Ellsworth did. Programs cannot be successful if there are a lack of gainful employment opportunities nearby.

Second, communities need to seek out and be welcoming of media attention. In Marquette and Ellsworth, both program directors said the media was instrumental in the success of their program. It provided free advertising to national and international audiences and generated great interest in the programs. While Marquette's encounter with mass media attention was by chance — a Chicago reporter who happened to see an article in the *Hutchinson News* — Ellsworth actively sought out media attention. Communities need to be prepared for the media attention and need to be accommodating to it in order for their program to achieve success.

Finally, communities need to be realistic about their expectations with these programs. These programs do not address the issues that led them to a depopulating state in the first place and act as a bandage solution. They cannot be expected to reverse a century of decline in just a few years.

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## Appendix 1

Email sent out to program directors:

Subject: Interview request – free land program

Greetings \_\_\_\_,

My name is Karl Bauer and I am a graduate student at Kansas State University researching rural population and development issues. For my thesis work, I am exploring free residential lot programs, including their history and effectiveness. Part of my research is based on interviewing program directors and local decision-makers.

I am inquiring as to whether I could interview you, or others on the decision-making side of your community's free land program. If you have any connections among the people who have taken advantage of this program, I would be interested in speaking to them, as well. These interviews would best be performed in person, but could be done by phone or email. The interview will take about 30 minutes.

This study is designed to improve understanding of free land programs and rural population and economic development issues. Most of the work done on free land programs is in the realm of the media; this study is designed to provide a more detailed and scholarly understanding. The results of this study will be published online in the coming months and will be presented at professional meetings.

Your participation is completely voluntary, but I hope to be hearing from you soon. I am available to visit your community and conduct the interview at any time on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, or Sundays. Just let me know of a day and time that works for you. If you would like, I can send you a copy of the interview questions beforehand.

If you have questions about this study, please contact me, at 651-████-████ (kfbauer@ksu.edu), or my supervisor Dr. Max Lu, at 785-████-████ (maxlu@ksu.edu). If you would like to see of the results of this study, let one of us know and we will provide a summary once when the study is completed. If you have concerns about this project, please contact Kansas State University's University Research Compliance Office at 785-532-3224 (comply@ksu.edu).

Thank you. I look forward to an appointment and speaking with you.

Karl Bauer  
Master's Student – Dept. of Geography  
Kansas State University  
1071 Seaton Hall

## Appendix 2

### Questions asked to program directors:

1. Why did the community start a free lot program?
2. Where did you get the idea for the “free” land program?
3. Are any of the institutions in your town, like schools, stores, or churches, in danger of downsizing or closing? Have any closed recently? What impact has this had on your community?
4. When did the program begin? Is it still active?
  - If ongoing
    - How often do you receive applications?
    - How many lots were made available for the program? How many were taken? How many are still available?
    - How long is the program expected to stay in place?
    - Do/Did you prioritize applications from families with children?
  - If the program ended
    - Why did the program end?
5. What are the details of the program? Is there a minimum house size? Are there any additional benefits to the new residents?
6. How has the program been promoted or advertised?
7. What role, if any, has the media played?
8. Was there any controversy around the establishment of this program?
  - [If so] Has the controversy lingered, or have residents embraced the program?
9. How many (if any) new families have come here since the incentives began?
  - Have any new businesses opened since the program began?
10. Overall, how has your community changed since the program began?
11. How concerned are you for the future of your town? What do you think it will look like in 10 years? 20 years?
12. Do you have any connections among the new residents?

## Appendix 3

### Questions asked to free land program participants and new residents in Marquette:

1. How long have you lived in Marquette?
2. Where did you live before?
3. How did you hear about the program?
4. There are 26 other communities across Kansas with similar programs. Why did you choose Marquette?
5. Would you have moved here without the land giveaway?
6. Is there anything you do not like about Marquette?
7. Knowing what you know now, would you still move to Marquette today?
8. Did you find employment here? If so, where? How long is your commute?