

Kansas

**(Historical Essay on Agriculture and
Rural Life)**

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KANSAS

Kansas, the “Wheat State,” encompasses great variations in climate, terrain, soil, and native plants and animals. Initially the land surface was covered with perennial warm-season grasses, ranging from the tall grasses near the Missouri River to mid grasses in the central portion, and short grasses in the west. Most of the tillable land in the state has a slope of less than 5%, which is ideal for agriculture. Extremes in weather conditions and unpredictable weather patterns throughout the year, droughts, and insect invasions were among the difficulties faced by the early settlers and are still faced today.

Kansas was a part of the lands included in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. The creation of states and territories in the lands immediately to the west of the Mississippi River (Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, and the Minnesota Territory) left no governance for the region lying further west. The remaining part of the Louisiana Purchase was identified as the “Unorganized Territory.” Non-Native American settlement in Kansas assumed a different pattern from the common trans-Mississippi experience. Most frontier areas experienced the movement and settlement of persons at a gradual pace. Kansas, however, was settled by mass migrations that came sporadically. Settlement began in 1819 with the establishment of Cantonment Martin, the first military post in Kansas, on Cow Island (also known as Ilse au Voche by French trappers) near present day Atchison. The twin territories of Kansas and Nebraska were created out of the Unorganized Territory with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of May 30, 1844. This act repealed the provision of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and reopened the slavery question in the Kansas and Nebraska Territories, which was to be resolved by “popular sovereignty.” Supporters for both sides sought to resolve the issue by assuring that their side would have the preponderance of votes. These migrations reached their peak in 1860. The strife and conflicts of this period resulted in the rest of the country labeling the area “bloody Kansas.” Kansas was admitted as a free state on January 29, 1861, just weeks before the outbreak of the Civil War.

The next great migration occurred after the passage of the Homestead Act and the end of the Civil War. This migration peaked in 1872 and 1873, the years in which the first foreign-born immigrants arrived in Kansas. The first of these new settlers were the Swedes, followed by a Mennonite colony. The Mennonites were followed by three important British colonies; Victoria and Runnymede (primarily landed gentry), and Wakefield (primarily farmers from England and Scotland). Although their effect on the livestock industry was great, few of the colonists at Victoria and Runnymede remained in Kansas; the Wakefield colony did gain permanent status. From the end of the Civil War through the 1870s, thousands of ex-slaves came to Kansas; with the exception of the Nicodemus Colony from Kentucky, these people had little money and few clothes. From 1880 to 1900, hundreds of British and French and a few Bohemian families arrived in Kansas. In addition, there were Danes and Norwegians, Dutch and Canadians, Welsh and Irish.

Many settlers were optimistic that the area would become a favored agricultural region, but from 1862 to 1872, little effort was put into developing a vigorous agriculture. The population was small, urban centers were almost nonexistent, and markets were too far away and too hard to reach by horse and wagon on dirt tracks. Most farms operated at a subsistence level. Early settlements were in the east and northeast where water and wood for housing, fencing, and fuel

were available and conditions were similar to the farmers' previous experience. Moving further west, the difficulties were compounded by the general absence of stone and timber, the necessity of digging a well for water, and the difficulty of plowing the prairie sod.

As settlement spread in Kansas, agriculture itself was changing. Plowing the prairie sod and farming on the plains led to the demise of the iron plow and the advent of the steel plow. Farming on the plains produced other agricultural inventions: barbed wire, reapers, mowers, threshers, and windmills. These developments led to larger farms, increased farming costs, and a move away from subsistence farming.

After passage of the Morrill Act, Kansas State Agricultural College (KSAC) was a generator and distributor of technology that increased the productivity and profitability of family farms. The Hatch Act resulted in establishment of the Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station at KSAC to do research, and to adapt and develop technology to meet the needs of the small independent farmer.

The founding of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture (1872) coincided with the spread of scientific agriculture and with other movements to improve conditions for citizens, including the rise of farmers' organizations. Modeled on Britain's Board of Agriculture, the young Kansas Board was both a part of and a catalyst for the formation of many emerging farm groups and for changes in agriculture and agricultural marketing. This Board took a successful leadership role in petitioning Congress for creation both of the U. S. Department of Agriculture with a cabinet-level secretary, and of agricultural experiment stations. The Board also made a number of contributions to Kansas agriculture. The quality of the Board's *Biennial Report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture* was recognized when the *Sixth Biennial Report ...* earned a medal and diploma at the Paris Exposition of 1889. Publications in *The Report of the State Board of Agriculture*, issued from 1916 through 1950, including *Wheat in Kansas* (1921) and *Beef Cattle in Kansas* (1935) and other volumes on grasses, weeds, and other subjects, are considered classics today. Eventually the Board's responsibilities centered on three major areas: promoting Kansas agriculture; providing services to farmers and consumers through inspection and grading of products and improved marketing; and administration of regulatory laws assigned to the Board by the Legislature. The Board was unique among the states as an agricultural department administered by a Secretary who is appointed by a farmer-elected Board with the support of farm groups.

Wheat is primarily a cool-season crop, and does not do well under Kansas summer weather. With the coming of Turkey red, a hard winter wheat first sown in 1874 by the Mennonites, wheat production began to rise, although it was the early 1900s before trial and error in production and variety selection yielded results. Milling hard wheat properly with stone mills was difficult, so steel roller mills were developed in 1878. This and other inventions made hard wheats viable in the marketplace. Organized and active research on wheat began at the KSAC farm in 1874. The establishment of the experiment stations in 1887 was the beginning of well-coordinated research programs.

Native Americans had grown corn and beans to supplement their diet of fish and wild game long before permanent white settlers arrived in 1854, introducing many new crops to Kansas. Among the crops that made brief appearances in Kansas were tobacco, cotton, hemp, flax (for the oil), castor beans, timothy, rape, emmer (“speltz”), pearl millet, sunflowers, and safflower. The transition from subsistence to profit farming resulted in greater interest in selecting crops and methods best adapted for and capable of giving high returns. Corn, oats, barley, and rye played an important role through the 1940s; bromegrass and tall fescue gained popularity, and alfalfa and sorghum began to draw more interest. Among the major developments affecting crop production were improvement of crop varieties, the move from horse and mule farming to more efficient power farming, and the development and use of insecticides, herbicides, and fungicides in the early 1940s. In addition to wheat, sorghum, corn, alfalfa and soybeans emerged as the major cultivated crops. Horticultural crops such as fruit trees, vineyard plants, vegetables, shrubs, flowers, turfgrass, and trees have benefited Kansas since early in its history.

The Civil War years increased the demand for beef from the East. After the war, Southern soldiers returned home and attempted to reach the Northern market with the large numbers of cattle developed in the southwest before and during the war. They started driving large herds north and east to reach Sedalia, Missouri, and the railroad. In 1867, J.F. McCoy found a better route to a railhead in Abilene, Kansas. By 1871, 600,000 head of cattle per year were shipped to Chicago from Abilene. As the railroads pushed westward, Abilene was succeeded by Newton, Wichita, Great Bend, and finally by Dodge City, the most famous of all cowtowns.

The Angus breed was introduced in 1873 by the English at Victoria, Kansas. In 1890, crossbreeding with three English cattle breeds (Shorthorn, Hereford, and Angus) upgraded the Longhorn range cattle. These three English breeds were used for about 55 years to develop the most efficient beef cattle industry the world has known. Cattle grazing in Kansas fits well into a crop rotation system as forage production and livestock grazing help to control soil and water resources. Kansas State Agricultural College contributed greatly to the improvement of the beef cattle industry by training leaders, conducting research, and extending the research to the industry.

Water in Kansas agriculture has always been a crucial factor. Precipitation from year to year and point to point is quite variable and unpredictable. For settlers with little understanding of the erratic nature of Kansas weather, and with farming techniques and crops that were not adapted to the area, the odds of being successful were greatly reduced. The resulting crop failures and other hardships caused 30,000 of the 100,000 early settlers in the eastern part of the state to return to the East. It also resulted in the nickname “Droughty Kansas.” Irrigation farming began in Kansas as early as 1866, but only gained favor during the 1890s. The Board of Irrigation Survey and Experiment was created in 1895 by the Legislature to make a practical test of water supply for irrigation in the uplands of western Kansas. Other legislation was passed over the next 30 years to encourage irrigation. Laws to control water use increased as the population grew. English common law was initially adopted as it was best applied to surface water, but it did not meet the needs of groundwater allocation. In 1945, the Legislature adopted the appropriation doctrine, which spurred the development of water resources because it assured investors of the right to the available supply.

Farm mechanization has had the greatest impact on the rise of Kansas as the leader in wheat and grain sorghum production. One of the early combine pioneers in Kansas was Curtis C. Baldwin, who became associated with the Gleaner combine in Kansas City. Mowers, rakes, and hay presses for hay and forage were succeeded by pickup balers in 1940. In the 1880s, the ensilage cutter led to silos to preserve green feed. The field forage harvester eliminated much of the hand labor required to cut and ensile forage crops.

Flour milling in Kansas encompasses agricultural, technological, business, transportation and social history. By 1900, Kansas had some 357 mills of various capacities. Milling first operated in Kansas on a toll basis, but changed in the 1870s to the exchange system with the development of elevators. Beginning in 1906, KSAC initiated research in cereal chemistry and the milling qualities of wheat. This resulted in the establishment in 1910 of the unique Department of Milling Industry. The leadership of Dr. C.O. Swanson and that of later department heads aided in forming the close relationship between the department and the industry that exists today.

The grain elevator was often one of the first businesses established in western Kansas communities. It survived drought, grasshoppers, economic depressions and railroad abandonment. Kansas farmers first built their own elevators in the 1880s to protest unfair pricing and unfair railroad rules, and to respond to threats from major grain syndicates. The grain cooperatives which soon followed were as interested in reducing production costs through group purchases as they were in the marketing of the grain and other raw products. Problems and disagreements dealing with grading wheat, test weights, and warehousing were pursued by the Kansas Grain & Feed Dealers Association, established in 1896. The Association actively established uniform grades for all markets, a uniform plan of tolerance in protein analysis, and in dealing with unregulated buyers.

The desire of the Kansas farmer for education resulted in a rich publishing tradition by the State, from recruitment materials, e.g. *Kansas, Auskunft uber seinen Ackerbau, Gartenbau und seine Viehzucht* (1884) to the educational and outreach materials of the Agricultural Experiment Station's *Bulletin, Circular*, and others, and the Cooperative Extension Service's *Leaflets, Extension Bulletin*, and *Extension Circular*. These hundreds of titles directly affected Kansas agriculture. The State Board of Health, Board of Irrigation Survey and Experiment, Bureau of Immigration, Geological Survey, Kansas State Agricultural College, University of Kansas and other governmental bodies have all produced publications relating to Kansas agriculture and rural life.

Farm organizations started in Kansas in 1870 with the Grange, which was followed in 1887 by the Kansas Farmers' Alliance. The farm organization movement became blatantly political in 1890 with the forming of the Kansas People's Party. The Populist Party was replaced by organizations that placed emphasis on education of farmers at all levels. Farm organizations provided important support and points around which to rally in much the same way the unions supported laborers. Farmers continued to lobby and to shape state and national policy to protect and promote agricultural interests on the farm, in the schools, and in the Legislature. This history is preserved in such publications as the *Proceedings of the Annual Session of the Patrons of Husbandry, Kansas State Grange, Kansas Farm Bureau News*, and numerous others.

Kansas has always enjoyed a high literacy rate. Most towns supported at least one newspaper during the settlement period and into the early years of statehood. The editorial wars of the rival editors were a source of interest, conflict, and humor. Editors created stick men which allowed them to explore all sides of a question without personally alienating advertisers or subscribers. These early writings of Kansans reflect their opinions and beliefs and leave a living legacy. Margaret Hill McCarter, the first woman to address a national political convention, supported herself and her three children through her writing. Her first novel, *The Price of the Prairie*, was in print for twenty years. Another prolific Kansas writer, Dr. Charles M. Sheldon, was the author of *In His Steps*, which had more than thirty million copies printed by more than fifty different publishers. A picturesque figure in American letters, E. W. Howe, wrote his first book, *The Story of a Country Town*, by the light of a kerosene lamp in 1887. Kansas also produced William Allen White, editor of the *Emporia Gazette*; and Arthur Capper, owner of the third largest publishing house in the country at the time, editor of *The Kansas Farmer*, a governor of the state, and then a United States Senator.