Come To The "Champagne Air" Changing Promotional Images Of The Kansas Climate, 1854 -1900

Karen De Bres
*Columbia University*, karendb@ksu.edu

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COME TO THE "CHAMPAGNE AIR"
CHANGING PROMOTIONAL IMAGES OF THE
KANSAS CLIMATE, 1854-1900

KAREN DE BRES

Euro-American settlers poured into Kansas during the second half of the nineteenth century, and there they encountered a hostile and unpredictable climate. Rainfall patterns were erratic, and the extremes of temperature were both demanding and daunting. Countering these conditions, or at least tempering them, became a task for a variety of individuals and organizations. The work was straightforward: to transform the image of Kansas in order to attract prospective immigrants. As historian Carl Becker wrote, this was not easy:

Until 1895 the whole history of the state was a series of disasters, and always something new, extreme, bizarre, until the name Kansas became a byword, a synonym, for the impossible and the ridiculous, inviting laughter, furnishing occasion for jest and hilarity. "In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted" became a favorite motto of immigrants worn out with the struggle, returning to more hospitable climes; and for many years it expressed well enough the popular opinion of that fated land.¹

Many of the problems that beset nineteenth-century Kansans were common to settlers across the Great Plains. Not surprisingly, some of the solutions proposed to deal with the problems were common across the Plains as well, and readers may find echoes of their own states' experiences in those of Kansas.

Kansas, like other states, was eager for new settlers. Attracting them hinged on overcoming the many reports of adverse conditions that filtered out from the state. Promotional materials, which portrayed the Kansas climate, resources, and landscape in optimistic tones, were a common medium used to smooth the

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Karen De Bres holds a Ph.D. in geography from Columbia University. Her research interests include the geography of the Central Plains, cultural geography, and the history of science.

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rough edges of the physical environment. In this essay I examine such promotional literature, evaluate the strategies pursued by the “climatic spin doctors” of the time, and discuss the continuous refashioning of the Kansas climatic image during a complex social and environmental history. Books, pamphlets, and folders from 1854 to 1900 were selected for examination from the extensive collection of the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka. These materials are representative of the Plains and particularly of Kansas promotional literature as a whole.

The essay is divided into three sections. The first describes the Kansas climate, provides an overview of the more popular of the nineteenth-century climate-change theories, and reviews nineteenth-century Kansas settlement. The second section presents accounts of the Kansas climate from the promotional literature and describes the different approaches used to make Kansas’s climate attractive. The third section analyzes three general stages in the promotional literature and explains the ways in which the Kansas climate were discussed in each. The counties of Riley, Dickinson, Ellis, and Gray, and their county seats of Manhattan, Abilene, Hays, and Cimarron, were chosen as the focus of this essay because they represent different periods of initial settlement, different forms of the Kansas economy, and different physical environments.

KANSAS CLIMATE, CLIMATE THEORIES, AND FRONTIER SETTLEMENT

Kansas, in the center of the contiguous forty-eight states, is located 37 to 40 degrees north of the equator and between 95 and 102 degrees west longitude. Throughout its 400 miles of east-west extent, Kansas changes from the moderate elevations and humid conditions of the lower Missouri Basin in the east to the High Plains in the west adjacent to the eastern slope of the Rockies. Its continental climate means that it is subject to extremes of temperature. Moisture comes often from the surface winds blowing from the Gulf of Mexico, and rainfall averages between forty inches per annum in the east to about fifteen inches in the southwest (Fig. 1). The Great Plains is characterized by a wide range of weather conditions that result from the distance of the Plains from the moderating effect of any major body of water and from the presence of the different air masses that frequently alternate in their dominance of the region.3

When Kansas became a territory in 1854 it did so under the requirements of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Both territories were to be admitted to the Union as either free or slave-owning states, depending upon the vote of their citizens. Because of this condition, various immigration societies were established to promote Kansas settlement as a moral imperative. When Kansas achieved statehood in 1861, thirty-four of the current 105 counties were organized, including Riley and Dickinson Counties. Between 1861 and 1874 another thirty-five counties were added, including Ellis. The most westward arc of counties was organized in the 1880s and 1890s, including Gray County. Settlers could obtain land through the Preemption Act of 1841, the Homestead Act of 1862, the Timber Culture Act, and from the Office of Indian Affairs, from individuals, and from the railroads, which had been granted land along their rights-of-way by the federal government.

Between 1854 and 1900 seasonal temperatures and precipitation totals in Kansas were quite varied. One of worst droughts in Kansas history began in 1859 and lasted until 1868 in the settled parts of the state. “Droughty Kansas” became a common expression, and this phrase was of such importance that a Kansas artist, Henry Worrall, drew a charcoal sketch by that name to refute it, showing plump Kansas farmers harvesting gigantic vegetables with a rainstorm in the background (Fig. 2). Worrall’s illustration carried a clear ideological message and later appeared on the cover of the Kansas Farmer, a journal financed by the
state legislature. It is but one early example of the combative nature often displayed by Kansans, exemplifying their desire to defend their state and implicitly their own identity as state residents, against what they viewed as unjust criticism from outsiders.

Another drought began in 1873, and a general economic panic also impeded Kansas settlement and kept the Kansas Pacific Railroad from meeting its bonds. In spite of these conditions, the push to open central and western Kansas continued, with the completion of the two major railroad lines, the Kansas Pacific (Union Pacific) and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe across the state (Fig. 3). But Kansas, like Nebraska, received more bad press the next year because of a particularly severe grasshopper invasion associated with the continuing drought in western Kansas. The boom period for Kansas immigration in the late nineteenth century took place between the 1870s drought and the blizzard that swept through the entire Plains in January of 1886. Another drought revisited western Kansas shortly afterward. Beginning in the late 1880s and continuing until the 1930s, the state experienced milder winters and warmer summers. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, the cyclical characteristics of Kansas droughts already seem clear, but this was not yet accepted in the nineteenth century.

The second half of the nineteenth century was also the period in which daily weather data were first recorded for Kansas and the Plains. Weather data were collected by the US Army in Kansas beginning in 1836 and by the Smithsonian Meteorological Project starting in 1858. During the Kansas territorial period (1855-61), Manhattan, the county seat of Riley County, was the most westward of the Kansas stations for the Smithsonian. The United States Weather Bureau was established in 1870 and by 1874 had ninety-four sites, but only one was in Kansas, at Leavenworth on the Missouri border, which was also the state’s largest city in the 1870s. A site at Dodge City was later established, serving as the sole site for the US Weather Bureau in western Kansas.
at the time. Reliable weather data, then, was of a sketchy nature in Kansas during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Public knowledge of Kansas was often based on newspaper accounts, particularly in papers and articles published in the eastern United States, which focused on sensational events such as floods, blizzards, and insect infestations. Emerging from these accounts were several dominant images of the Plains that were common throughout the country. At one extreme was the negative concept of the Plains as the “Great American Desert.” Two related images labeled the Great Plains as both a “barrier” that must be penetrated and a “passage” to a new world. These images were used to impart the size and the difficulties of crossing the Plains to reach more economically favorable environments. However, the image most useful to nineteenth-century promoters was that of the Plains as a “garden” for new immigrants.

The image of the garden was often employed by nineteenth-century promoters, and the second half of the century witnessed an enormous propaganda effort to redefine the Kansas climate as a positive resource for prospective residents. But the success of such boosterism was directly threatened by reports of drought. Farmers would not settle where they believed conventional farming techniques would fail. To reassure prospective farmers, as well as other would-be residents, promoters advanced several theories of increasing rainfall, and climate-change theories soon appeared in the promotional immigrant pamphlets. All the theories suggested that precipitation in the Plains was rapidly increasing and that there were fewer extreme weather events such as floods and tornados (cyclones). Credit for the first theory of “rain follows the plow” belongs to Samuel Aughey and his assistant, C. D. Wilbur, of the University of Nebraska. Nebraskans, also eager for new settlers, devised...
the Timber Culture Act, which was supported by individuals who maintained that tree growth would cause more rainfall. Breaking the prairie sod, some thought, would also increase rainfall. Building telegraph wires and railroads were also proposed as rainmakers because of "the effect of the electrical currents running on rails and wires."

Settlement on the Plains was closely tied to railroad construction, and those railroads that had received large land grants to aid in construction promoted it strongly. In Kansas, while seven railroad companies received land from the federal government, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad and the Kansas Pacific Railroad received the largest grants. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe received 2,944,788 acres and the Kansas Pacific 3,925,791 acres. Both companies set up promotional programs, published pamphlets, and employed agents to encourage settlement from the United States and Europe (Fig. 4). These company efforts were aided by dwindling amounts of inexpensive land back east. The number of residents in Riley, Dickinson, and Ellis Counties (Gray County was not yet formed) more than doubled.

Observing the degree of acceptance in the popular mind of the new image of Kansas, Horace Greeley said, "[S]ettlers are pouring into . . . Kansas by carloads, wagon-loads, horse loads daily because of the fertility of her soil, the geniality of her climate, her admirable diversity of prairie and timber, the abundance of her living streams and the marvelous facility wherewith homesteads may be created."

Settlement in Kansas continued rapidly until 1874-75, the years of the worst of the grasshopper infestations in the Central Plains and the last of the Indian raids. After 1875 the young state prospered. The state census of 1875 listed 528,437 persons, and the federal census listed 996,096 in 1880, the greatest increase in any five-year period in the state's history.
Despite Kansas’s reputation for drought in the more western parts of the state, corn and wheat farmers arrived in large numbers. Corn acreage nearly doubled between 1875 and 1880, and wheat acreage trebled. Farmers were a vital part of the state’s economy, except in the southwest, which was still largely in the hands of the cattlemen.

The prosperous years continued well into the 1880s, as the immigration wave reached the 100th meridian and all the Kansas counties including Gray were organized. By 1888 the state’s population reached 1,514,000. The next year, however, the state’s population declined for the first time, to 1,464,914. Some counties were harmed by the blizzard of January 1886, which effectively ended the days of the cattle kingdoms on the Plains. Another important factor in the population decline was the large debt held by Kansas farmers. At the time of the 1887 general crash, undercapitalized farmers had mortgaged 69 percent of all Kansas land and the average per capita debt was about $347, four times the national average. According to the 1889 *Annals of Kansas*, the population loss that year was “accounted for by emigration to Oklahoma and the end of the ‘boom.’” The next year the state’s population again declined, to 1,423,485. The *Annals of Kansas* reported that a period of intense heat between June and August virtually destroyed the state’s yearly corn crop. During the rest of the 1890s Kansas’s population fluctuated between 1.3 and 1.4 million. The frontier had closed, and the Kansas boom was over.

**LANDSCAPE AS EXPECTATION**

Various ethnic immigration societies and federal immigration boards, as well as state
immigration boards, were intensely interested in persuading people, especially farmers, to move to Kansas. Railroads also wanted to sell millions of acres of land and establish both freight and passenger haulage. Similar groups and individuals were at work throughout the Plains. Today, such circumstances might have resulted in a barrage of advertising in the mass media. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the media was ordinarily represented by pamphlets, books, or folders that might contain a few hundred words of often highly suggestive description (Fig. 5).

Examples from the surviving promotional literature can be categorized into three themes and stages. The first was characterized by writers who either had not been to Kansas or who were very recent arrivals. These were often individuals who were trying to encourage new settlement generally. The second was dominated by paid employees of the railroad companies and state organizations. Their work was complicated by the growing public perception of Kansas as a state that commonly experienced drought and other severe forms of weather and by mounting evidence from the US Weather Service, among others, that rain did not follow the plow. These documents are also characterized by the greatest variety of arguments against drought as well as against the reoccurrence of drought. By the third stage, another drought and another economic recession had taken place, and the paid promoters’ descriptions of the state’s climate and the prospects for settlers became more general, more muted, and some would say, more realistic.

1854-1867: INVENTING A CLIMATE FOR A NEW TERRITORY AND A NEW STATE

Both Riley and Dickinson Counties were organized during the territorial period. Both had economic functions representative of their times. Riley County, established in 1855, had as its county seat Manhattan, which became the home of the state agricultural college. Dickinson County, founded in 1857, had as its county seat the city of Abilene, which became best known as one of the early cattle towns. Both towns were established before the coming of the railroad and both managed to secure railroad lines by the mid-1860s. The Kansas Pacific came first, beginning construction in 1863, first following the Kansas River and then heading west toward Hays in Ellis County. Without rail transportation, Kansas could not develop beyond a self-sufficient agricultural economy, and every town tried to anchor itself to one or more railroad lines. Immigration pamphlets were also published on behalf of both counties.

The earliest promotional books and pamphlets in Kansas are dated 1855-56, when the
territory was first opened for settlement. At this stage, writers used their own lack of experience of Kansas climate conditions to their own advantage, frequently contrasting Kansas weather very favorably with that of southern New England, the source area for new immigrants at the time. The New England Emigrant Aid Company was the preeminent town-founding organization in territorial Kansas, established to bring in “Free Staters.” This group was instrumental in founding Lawrence, Topeka, and Manhattan. In the company’s pamphlet, Thomas H. Webb, its secretary, admitted to his lack of personal experience but nevertheless optimistically compared the climate in eastern Kansas with that of southern New England. Here the idea of “temperate Kansas,” which would appear in many other immigration pamphlets, is first introduced. Webb wrote, “[W]e believe, as a general rule, the variations there (in Kansas) will be less frequent and extreme than they are liable to be in this section of the country.”

The next year Sara Robinson, the wife of an Emigrant Aid Company leader, directly attacked the “Great American Desert” image of Kansas, saying that the continental travelers in the 1840s and 1850s had found this route to be one of “beautiful rolling prairies.” Like Webb, Robinson immediately stressed the mild nature of the climate, saying that “two weeks of cold weather is called a severe winter.” Robinson’s husband was also an important figure in the new Republican Party, whose 1856 campaign chant, “Free Soil, Free Labor, and Free Men,” was often applied to territory in the Plains. The Republican Party supported the continued expansion of free-state land (as opposed to slave-state land) populated by yeomen farm families. In the 1850s then, the open denial of the desert image of Kansas could be tied to Republican Party allegiance. Environmental images had been altered not by science but by politics, and after statehood, also by economics.

Samuel Crawford, the state’s first governor after the Civil War, also encouraged immigration to Kansas by praising the Kansas summer breezes, so much so that they were referred to as “Crawford’s zephyrs” in his promotional book, The State of Kansas, a Home for Immigrants, first published in 1865. There, he said,

The winters are short, dry and pleasant with but little rain or snow. . . . At the close of February we are reminded by a soft gentle breeze from the South, that the winter is gone. . . . During the summer there is always a cool refreshing breeze which makes even the hottest days and nights pleasant and delightful.

Promotional literature published in this first stage was characterized by a tactic that is useful when presenting arguments about an unknown situation to an audience that has no other sources of information: a reliance upon authority. In other words, you should believe what we are saying because you can “trust us.” Not surprisingly, the first materials were written by the sorts of individuals looked upon as providers of the best information then available—the wife of a political leader who had recently moved to the territory (Robinson), the secretary of an important immigration society that hoped to establish Kansas as a free state (Webb), and a state governor (Crawford). It was in the interest of all these parties to praise the Kansas climate and present it as an excellent one for farmers, and all did so, even Robinson, whose interest in the settlement of the territory was tied to a moral imperative regarding slavery. In addition to basing their arguments on the credibility of the source, the materials portrayed Kansas’s climate as “temperate,” with very mild winters, and hot summers offset by “cooling breezes.”

1867-1886: KANSAS CLIMATE EXTOLLED BY “SCIENCE”

In the early 1870s Ellis County was the most westward county in Kansas. The settlement of this county, now bisected by Interstate 70 in
the west-central part of the state, illustrates several common themes in Kansas immigration history. The association of Kansas with the image of a "passage" was typified by Ellis County, as it contained the main trail west to Denver during the 1860s and was protected by Fort Harker (1864-78), Fort Wallace (1865-78), and Fort Hays. Whereas settlement in the more eastern counties of Riley and Dickinson had at least partially preceded the coming of the railroads, settlement in Ellis County was tied largely to the route of the Kansas Pacific. Hays itself became a boom-town with the arrival of the Kansas Pacific in 1868.

By 1877 Hays's population reached almost 6,000, a peak it would not reach again until the twentieth century. During the same period many immigrant colonies were organized throughout the Plains. Ellis County, like Riley and Dickinson, was the destination of several colonies of European immigrants, mainly from Germany, Russia, and Sweden. Some colonies, especially those that experienced immediate difficulties with the Kansas climate, were failures, such as the Danish socialists' brief experiment outside Hays and the attempt by a Scottish merchant to establish an extensive cattle- and sheep-ranching business in his new town of Victoria, also in Ellis County. That venture was a failure, but when the lands were bought by new German Russian immigrants to whom the prairie life and its erratic climate were more familiar, Hays became the trading point for a large wheat-growing area, assisted by its location on the Kansas Pacific. In Ellis County the Kansas Pacific actively promoted the sale of its lands to foreign immigrants, but no concessions seem to have been made for cultural differences; the surviving pamphlets in German are merely translations of the English originals.

Several techniques were employed by a variety of individuals, especially railroad employees, to encourage a positive view of the Kansas climate. The two most common were an appeal to scientific knowledge, either through the use of figures or by other means, and an appeal to positive imagery linked to Kansas, which presented the state as a place where farmers could find prosperity. With the publication of A Sketchbook of Riley County, Kansas—the Blue Ribbon County in 1881, the local Manhattan newspaper, the Nationalist, managed to incorporate both techniques. The authors, writing twenty years after the well-known droughts of the 1860s and 1870s, still felt obliged to address that issue, but downplayed their effects by reference to statistics:

It is true that Kansas is subject to occasional drouths. The rainfall is not as great here as in some localities—but there are many who know that too much rainfall is as hurtful as too little. By reference to meteorological tables, printed further, it will also be seen that our most abundant rains come in the season of the year that they are most needed, viz: spring and summer; and it is a well known fact that our soil can stand drouth better than that of most eastern States.17

Such arguments are representative of the second stage of promotional materials, which dominated the 1870s and 1880s and which sometimes focused on the "misrepresentation" of the Kansas climate in the national press and frequently on its "improvement" since settlement. In his article "Newspaper Images of the Central Great Plains in the Late Nineteenth Century," Baltensperger discusses the different objectives of editors from central Massachusetts, central Illinois, and eastern Nebraska compared to those of land promoters. Editors published information about events they considered "newsworthy," such as droughts, floods, and insect infestations. According to Baltensperger, as distance from the Plains increased, the detail and accuracy of available information about the Plains environment decreased.18

A common tactic among the immigration pamphlet writers was to admit a weakness but
then refer to either maps, tables, or a scientific authority to contradict the severity of the problem. This might present the reader with a disarmingly “honest” approach to the “known facts” about Kansas weather. Another tactic, which appealed to the scientific or technical interests of prospective immigrants, was what I would call the “centrist theory of climate,” or latitudinal determinism. Here again, pamphlet writers mentioned several of the potentially dangerous characteristics of the Kansas climate as they relate to agriculture, ostensibly to present an impartial opinion, but these “problems” were quickly resolved by reference to either common sense or to scientific knowledge. Wayne Griswold, the author of a 1871 pamphlet, even alludes to this tactic in the subtitle of Kansas, her Resources and Developments, or the Kansas Pilot Giving a Direct Road to Homes for Everybody, Also the Effects of Latitude on Life Locations, with Important Facts for all European Emigrants. Griswold was one of the great Kansas climate spin doctors, for he managed to create an impression that the Kansas climate contained aspects of good health, good science, and even of physical excitement!

There is a peculiar atmosphere to Kansas, whether purer, drier, or containing more oxygen I can not say, but it has a most exhilarating effect on the system. It might be called champagne air. . . . The State of Kansas lying between thirty seven and forty degrees north latitude is just in the right position to avoid all extremes of heat and cold; also for a mild climate with no protracted winter.19

This centrist or latitudinal argument was taken up by another pamphleteer in 1878, who wrote that Kansas is south of the cold and bleak influence of northern temperatures, and north of the depressing heat and humidity of the lower States. Both for location and climate influence it is the happy, equable mean between the two extremes. . . . [W]estern Kansas is pre-eminently the paradise of the lungs.20

Immigrants to states and territories were considered part of a complicated system of commercial exchange, and their arrival was one of the principal sources of revenue and growth. The Kansas Immigration Bureau, founded in 1867, used the appropriations given by the state legislature to print pamphlets and folders praising the state’s agricultural resources. The bureau’s stance from the beginning was both defensive and ebullient. In 1871, more than ten years after the famous drought but three years before the worst of the grasshopper plagues, a pamphlet published by the bureau said that “the climate and soil of Kansas have put to shame all the vile slanders put upon them in the early days. . . . Not only the practical farmers but also the statisticians have found the rainfall of Kansas is equal to the most favored section of our country.”21 The role of applied science in persuading farmers to move to Kansas was also considered by members of the state government. After Governor George T. Anthony suggested that the Kansas State Board of Agriculture would be the most effective agency to disseminate practical materials to prospective immigrants, the board’s biennial reports included glowing reports of the state’s agricultural resources for the rest of the nineteenth century.

Pamphlets were sometimes produced in an effort to stop an economic decline. As a college town as well as county seat, Manhattan’s economy was somewhat protected from the vagaries of the local and national economy. Abilene was not so fortunate. Joseph McCoy settled upon Abilene as the site for a train depot to ship Texas cattle east and the cattle trade flourished there between 1867 and 1871. The town’s fortune went into decline with the passing of its “cow town” days, and local businessmen and the Chamber of Commerce produced several pamphlets in an attempt to encourage growth. The First National Bank of Abilene printed A Gem: Abilene, the City of
the Plains, the Centre of the Golden Belt. The section on climate from this 1887 publication attempted to create an attractive image for prospective immigrants:

The climate of Kansas is exceptionally salubrious; winters mild and open; the summer heat is modified by a perpetual refreshing breeze, while the summer nights, are cool, refreshing, even charming. Of late years Kansas has had less disaster by cyclones than many smaller eastern states. The average elevation above tidewater for the entire state is 1,050 feet. The rainfall has become quite as regular and abundant as needful. The average annual rainfall has increased very much in the last fifteen years and the official record for seven years places it at nearly thirty-five inches per annum.

Here too are the same descriptions seen in earlier examples of this literature, with a discussion of the moderating influences of the summer heat by perpetual breezes (“Crawford’s zephyrs” again), the denial of any snow or low temperatures in winter, an avowal that rainfall had improved recently, and reference to official records to substantiate all claims.

Abilene and part of Dickinson County were also located along the Kansas Pacific Railroad line. The great success of a farmer along the line in Dickinson County became an advertisement for Kansas Pacific lands. By 1874 T. C. Henry had planted 10,000 acres of wheat, half along the railroad tracks, and conductors began pointing out his fields to their passengers as those of the “Kansas wheat king.”

Since the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad was also selling land in states other than Kansas, their promotional books and pamphlets often discussed the benefits of climate-change theories in a wider regional context. In 1880 B. C. Keeler presented another version of the “rain follows the plow” theory in a book with the appealing title Where to Go to Become Rich, which discussed the agricultural lands of Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico. Keeler maintained that the rain line was moving westward and would continue to do so if the population kept moving. For the best effect, areas must be thickly settled because the rain line, or the line running north and south, east of which sufficient rain falls every year for agricultural purposes, has moved west steadily, year by year, at the rate of about eighteen miles per annum, keeping just ahead and propelled by the advancing population. . . . It was formerly supposed that the one-hundredth meridian would be the fixed rain line, and that all country west of that would never be devoted to agricultural purposes, but would be kept back by nature for stock raising, for which it is splendidly adapted. But even this theory is disappearing for the rain line continues to move west.

The Kansas Immigration Bureau’s pamphlet of 1883, written by commissioner of immigration G. B. Schmidt, focused, like many others, on the advantages of Kansas’s central location, particularly in terms of latitude. According to Schmidt, the “thirty-ninth parallel, which has been the thread upon which as on the necklace of the world has been strung the jewels of wealth, culture, plenty, luxury and refinement, passes directly through the state of Kansas, through the fertile Arkansas Valley.” Schmidt described the climate as “healthful beyond comparison.” The use of colorful images to emphasize the wealth that awaited (hardworking) farmers in Kansas was a common tactic used by writers of promotional materials. Here the author uses the image of the thirty-ninth parallel as a visible sign of prosperity, another example of latitudinal determinism.

The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe promotional literature began in 1873, shortly after the railroad line was completed and had received its share of government land. Not surprisingly, there was a good deal of rivalry.
between that railroad line and the Kansas Pacific. In 1875 the Santa Fe followed an earlier example of the Kansas Pacific and organized a railway excursion for newspaper editors, designed to change the adverse reputation of "drouthy Kansas" and her grasshopper plagues. In return for the free trip, the railroad hoped for kind words about the Santa Fe lands from the newspaper editors. Included on the excursion were the state's governor, Thomas Osborn, Senator John Ingalls, and the secretary of agriculture, Alfred Gray (these last two gave their names to Gray County and its one-time county seat). The pamphlet that resulted from this excursion received the modest title The Best Thing in the West, Strong and Impartial Testimony to the Wonderful Production of the Cottonwood and Arkansas Valleys. This excursion was designed, according to the authors of this pamphlet, to "correct the erroneous impression that the grasshoppers were making a widespread and general devastation through Kansas." Here again the pseudo-scientific argument of the advantages of a centrist climate are invoked, this time by an editor from Iowa: "[T]he state of Kansas lies between 37 and 40 in latitude, Iowa lies between 41 and 44 degrees north latitude. It is evident then, that Kansas is free from the extreme cold of our winters." The Santa Fe literature of the period also incorporated the notion of the westward progression of the rainbelt as well as the evocatively termed "golden mean." This rainbelt was created by a localized version of what is now referred to as the hydrologic cycle.

Promotional literature published by the railroads dominates the second stage, as the railroads had a good deal of land to sell to prospective settlers as well as the budgets to do so. Promotional materials reached their apotheosis during this stage. Published during the land-boom period, between the recessions of America's Gilded Age, they are exuberant examples of American enthusiasm, seductiveness, and sheer nerve. Immigration societies, individuals, and railroads companies all employed similar techniques of "scientific explanation" and attractive metaphors. The railroad companies may appear to be the most brazen, if only because their views of the "best lands" are always those for sale by the railroad! The publication of climate-change theory as "fact" is unsettling to modern readers. Although some "experts" in this period were politicians, others were drawn from a wider variety of fields and included newspaper editors and amateur scientists. As in the first stage of promotional literature, there is very little discussion of the negative aspects of the Kansas climate.

1887-1900: "WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS?"

The final stage of nineteenth-century promotional immigration materials in Kansas coincided with the closing of the American frontier, the end of many of the cattle kingdoms in the American West, and the refutation of the climate-change theories. The lack of rain was a crucial characteristic of this stage because a significant drought took place from 1888 to 1895. The more muted claims by the authors of the immigration pamphlets reflected these changing times. Population generally increased during this thirteen-year period, which witnessed the settlement of the most westward of the Kansas frontier counties to be organized, including Gray County. Its settlement is used to illustrate some of the common immigration themes of this period in Kansas. Riley County's population, which was 10,408 in 1880, had reached 13,828 by 1900. In Dickinson County the population also grew, from 15,621 in 1880 to 21,816 by 1900. Ellis County saw an increase from 6,183 to 8,626. Gray County, the final county under consideration, reached 1,264 by 1900.

Farmers who arrived in southwest Kansas in the 1870s planned to use the farming methods that were customary in eastern Kansas and east of the Mississippi. During the early 1870s, rainfall was sufficient for conventional agriculture and occasionally even plentiful. Dodge City in 1877 reported twenty-eight inches of
precipitation. Tomayko believes that settlers were unprepared for the realities of the western Kansas climate because most of the information about the area was popularized during a period of unusually good farming weather. This, he said, was not a case of deliberate misinformation by promoters "but rather the dissemination of information gathered over too short a period of time."26

In 1887 Asa T. Soule, a New York promoter, laid out the town of Ingalls in Gray County, named for the long-serving US senator from Kansas. As the originator of the Eureka Irrigation Canal Company, Soule had the Arkansas River dammed at Ingalls and built a ninety-six-mile canal. The locals referred to this project as "Soule's elephant," for it was supposed to irrigate 40,000 acres of Ford and Gray Counties from the Arkansas River. More than ninety miles of canal were dug between 1884 and 1887, as well as fifty miles of lateral extensions from the main channel. The project failed because similar canals upstream in Colorado drained most of the water and the area was badly affected by the drought of the late 1880s and early 1890s. Soule also attempted to make Ingalls the county seat of Gray County, resulting in one of the better-known "county seat wars" of western Kansas. One man died during an attempt to move the official records between Cimarron and Ingalls. The county seat shifted back and forth between Ingalls and Cimarron (the largest settlement in the county) until 1891, when Cimarron became the permanent county seat.

By this time the claims made by writers of promotional pamphlets became more vague and were less likely to be as bold as those of earlier years. Critics of the "rain follows the plow" and other pseudo-scientific theories of increased rainfall were becoming more vocal. Henry Gannett of the United States Geological Survey questioned the theory in an issue of Science in 1888.27 He was joined by Cleveland Abbe and William Moore of the U.S. Weather Bureau.28 Even the Kansas State Board of Agriculture admitted its dishonesty in describing Kansas's agricultural potential. In 1895 the board returned almost entirely to its original mission of supplying agricultural information and left the promotion of Kansas to others.

The Kansas Immigration Bureau had also begun to modify its tactics. By the 1890s the bureau had experience in emphasizing certain attributes of the Kansas climate while omitting others. It is during this decade that Kansas first became associated with sunshine and sunflowers. According to the Bureau in 1890, "Kansas can truly claim a greater amount of sunshine than the Eastern states."29 An 1898 pamphlet published by the Santa Fe Railroad, entitled What's the Matter with Kansas?, freely acknowledged the negative identity possessed by the state during this period. Nevertheless, using a barrage of statistics showing populations and yields (for example, Gray County had a population of 1,105 and produced 33,348 bushels of winter wheat), the pamphlet's authors still spoke optimistically about the prospects for hardworking farmers.30 Given the half century of recorded history of the environmental problems experienced by Kansas farmers, as well as the arguments against the theories of increasing rainfall, it is not surprising that the claims for the desirability of Kansas's climate for farming, especially in western Kansas, were becoming more muted. By 1902 Charles Harger, an Abilene newspaperman, could say that while in earlier periods Kansans had tended to extremes "from extravagant eulogy to bitter abuse," the newly named sunflower state "is being pictured to the world as it is."31 The various images of Kansas show a progression from the amusing exaggeration of Worrall's "drouthy Kansas" to the idea of the "golden mean" to a more realistic but still attractive identification as the "sunflower state," which is reminiscent of the wonderfully warm climate first promised to the immigrants by Webb and Robinson back in the 1850s.

CONCLUSION

Writing in 1881, during the peak of the Kansas land boom, the author of a Santa Fe
Railroad pamphlet said that

The successful development of the resources of a state or nation, especially if it be an agricultural one, is dependent more on the climate than on any other cause, excepting perhaps the enterprise and intelligence of its people. The climate is the first and great consideration of every seeker of a new home, and if this is not satisfactory neither soil, nor timber, nor water, nor any other advantage can be.32

Writers of promotional materials for Kansas immigration frequently alluded to what they described as the “healthy attributes” of the Kansas climate. The higher altitude of the western plains was often mentioned, as was the purity of the air, which one writer called “champagne air.” Often these characteristics were contrasted with what were then called “the miasmas” rising from the lower, wetter regions. It is ironic that while lowlands and floodplains were associated with such all-too-real nineteenth-century terrors as typhoid and cholera, the dry, pure air of central and western Kansas was associated with aridity and drought. While praising the one, such writers were, to a careful reader, implying the other.

Much of the promotional literature was produced to discredit the series of negative stereotypes of Kansas that became commonplace. Kansas first came into the popular mind as “Bloody Kansas” during the territorial period, then as “Drouthy Kansas” in the 1860s, when the state was well known for its droughts. Finally, by the end of the nineteenth century, the image of Kansas became one of a dry, wind-swept area where a farmer and his family “busted,” and either returned east to the “wife’s family” or moved on to what was hoped were literally greener pastures. Immigration societies and the railroads claimed that “stickers” had more character, and anyway, they had sought not the indigent as farmers and settlers but hardworking people of some capital. In other words, it was a classic case of what we now call “blaming the victim.”Such ideas were countered by the young William Allen White in an essay about pioneers giving up the struggle in Gray County, first published in 1895. White defended the returnees, saying:

There came through Emporia yesterday two old fashioned “mover wagons” heading east. . . . These movers came from western Kansas, from Gray County, a county which holds the charter from the state to officiate as the very worst . . . most desolate spot on this sad old earth. They had come from the wilderness only after a ten years’ hard, vicious fight. . . . For ten years they have been fighting the elements. They had seen it stop raining for months at a time. They had heard the fury of the winter wind as it came whining across the short, burned grass, and their children huddling in the corner. They have strained their eyes watching through the long summer days for the rain that never came. They have seen that big cloud roll up from the southwest about one o’clock in the afternoon, hover over the land, and stumble away with a few thumps of thunder as the sun went down. They have tossed through hot nights wild with worry, and have arisen to find only their worst nightmares grazing in reality on the brown stubble in front of their sun warped doors. They had such high hopes when they went out there, they are so desolate now—33

This is the tragic side of frontier settlement of Kansas at the end of the nineteenth century. The immigration boosters and promoters appealed to the ready willingness of the immigrant to believe that the “Great American Desert” had been transformed or that it had never existed. Potential settlers and Americans in general believed that the Plains would and should be settled, so it is not surprising that little criticism of these promotional efforts can be found. The promoters were supported by the country at large, which gave an added vitality and credibility to what now appear to be outlandish claims about Kansas’s climate and its other resources. Americans in
1890 were still taken with the myth of the “happy yeoman” and with the plow as the symbol of individualism, hard work, and prosperity. Such mythologies may have worked successfully in more humid eastern areas, but in the western Kansas of a century ago they sometimes had tragic consequences. Today our inheritance of inappropriate land uses and more than 100 counties in a state with a stagnating population are the result of the hyperbole and wishful thinking woven by the promoters and spin doctors of the second half of the nineteenth century.

NOTES

I thank David Kromm, professor emeritus of geography, Kansas State University, and the editor and three anonymous reviewers of the Great Plains Quarterly for their useful comments.


7. See, for example, David M. Emmons, Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), for a thorough discussion of this topic, including the role played by Samuel Aughey.


19. Wayne Griswold, “Kansas, Her Resources and Developments, or the Kansas Pilot Giving a Direct Road to Homes for Everybody, Also the Effects of Latitude on Life Location, with Important Facts for All European Immigrants (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and Co, 1871), pp. 49, 54-55.


25. Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe, Kansas as It Is: The Best Thing in the West, Strong and Impartial Testimony of the Wonderful Production of the Cottonwood and Arkansas Valleys (Topeka, 1875).


