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Joseph V. Hickey

Emporia State University

Charels E. Webb

Emporia State University

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THE TRANSITION FROM FARMING TO RANCHING IN THE KANSAS FLINT HILLS

TWO CASE STUDIES

JOSEPH V. HICKEY and CHARLES E. WEBB

For more than a century the Flint Hills have been a stronghold of the livestock industry, an area of Kansas devoted almost exclusively to the feeding and breeding of cattle. One of the last large segments of tall grass prairie that once stretched from Canada to Texas and from Kansas to Indiana, the Flint Hills region covers some five thousand square miles of rolling hills and narrow valleys in east central Kansas. The Flint Hills embrace all or parts of thirteen counties: Butler, Chase, Chautauqua, Cowley, Elk, Geary, Greenwood, Lyon, Marion, Morris, Pottawatomie, Riley and Wabaunsee (fig. 1).¹

From the time the livestock industry gained control of the Flint Hills until today, there has developed a considerable body of folklore to explain not only why cattlemen so thoroughly dominated the region but also why so few farmers settled in the Flint Hills. Most

popular theories blame the physical environment. According to folk traditions, it was primarily flint rocks that determined the agricultural fate of the Flint Hills. A recent article in the *Kansas City Star* magazine, "The Idylls of the Range," included a typical example of Flint Hills folklore with the added bonus of an Indian story. According to the author, James Kindall:

Preserved from the plow because of its flint-packed soil, the Flint Hills section was regarded as a blessing by Osage Indians displaced for the third time to within its boundaries. The shallow, stony land pleased the Osage chief—its unsuitability as farmland meant the tribe was less likely to have to move again.²

Local folklore grudgingly concedes that during the late nineteenth century some farmers settled portions of the Flint Hills uplands, but it stresses that invariably they failed. Modern ranchers claim the flint nodules broke the farmers' plows and drought and soil erosion destroyed their crops. According to cattleman Wayne Rogler, "A good deal of the land that was plowed up early, between the Civil War

Joseph V. Hickey is associate professor of anthropology and Charles E. Webb is associate professor of geography at Emporia State University.

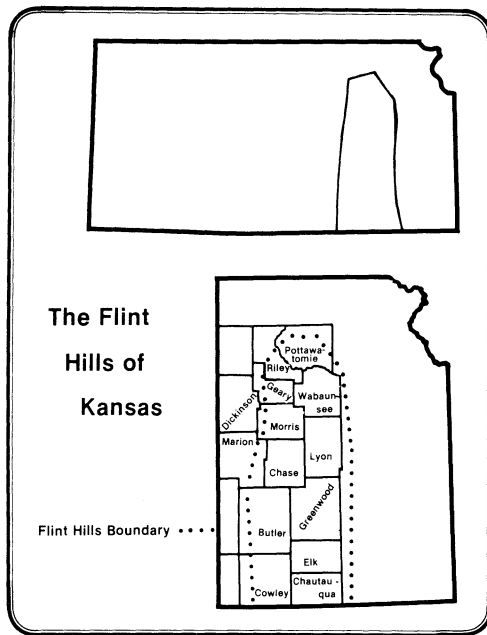


FIG. 1. *The Flint Hills of Kansas.* Courtesy of William Philips.

and 1900, has been turned back to pasture, what we call go-back land and is no longer cultivated . . . There's a lot more grass in Chase County now in acres than there was in 1900 because of the small farms that were deserted and went back to pastures."³

In an early article tracing the development of Flint Hills agriculture, historian James Malin noted that during the early years of settlement in the 1870s there was an especially vigorous debate over whether the region was better suited to farming or to ranching. For their part, livestock interests maintained that most of the land was unsuitable for cultivation. Farmers countered such claims by noting that it was lack of a herd law, not the environment, that limited their expansion, and that if a herd law were enacted, livestock would rapidly give way to farming on all but the roughest of uplands. Malin wrote that "fundamental forces" largely decided the issue. During the 1870s a series of droughts and crop failures indicated a more definite drawing of

the line of demarcation between pasture and wheat country, a process that was largely completed during a Flint Hills livestock boom in the 1880s.⁴

In the mid-1960s geographers Walter Kollmorgen and David Simonett completed a more thorough examination of the Flint Hills physical environment. They found that, although it was fashionable to view the entire Flint Hills as consisting of thin soils and rocky, steeply sloping hills, the environment was actually far more complex. In their study of the Chase County area, located in the heart of the Flint Hills, they discovered that small portions of the uplands were indeed unsuitable for sustained agriculture, but "on the gently sloping to nearly level uplands there were appreciable areas already plowed and more could, if desired, be cultivated under intensive conservation methods." They concluded that the reason few farmers cultivated the uplands "stems as much from a crazy-quilt of historical, sociological, economic, and accidental circumstances as from a modest natural environment."⁵

Although the ideas of Malin and Kollmorgen and Simonett have contributed to our general understanding of Flint Hills history, neither they nor other scholars have demonstrated how the factors they described as being important influenced the agricultural history in any particular region of the Flint Hills. This study seeks to remedy that deficiency. It analyzes the relative importance of environmental, economic, sociocultural, and political factors at different stages in the agricultural history of two Chase County communities—Thurman and Elk.⁶

Thurman, in Matfield Green Township in the southeastern corner of Chase County, like many plains neighborhoods of the nineteenth century, had two distinct social phases in its existence. From 1874, when it was awarded a post office, until 1889 it was a creek bottom neighborhood on Thurman Creek. In response to a population shift, the post office and other institutions were moved several miles east to Little Cedar Creek in 1889.

During the twentieth century, Thurman became a hamlet-neighborhood surrounded by five school districts. The Thurman school closed in 1944 and the community ceased to exist. Elk, a hamlet in the northwestern corner of Chase County, and northeastern portions of Marion County, was also established in 1874, and it too failed during World War II (fig. 2). Since both communities were located in that portion of the Flint Hills where the grazing of stocker cattle became most dominant, it is unlikely that their agricultural histories were typical of the region as a whole. As extreme cases, they are meant instead to highlight some of the general processes that led to the transformation of the region from the domain of small farmers to that of pasturemen and ranchers. We note, however, that as Thomas Isern has pointed out, "The difference between farmers and ranchers was first one of proportion, that is, whether they emphasized feed or grass, and second one of self image."⁷

THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Features most commonly used to assess a geographic region's agricultural potential are climate, soils, topography, and space. The first three interrelated factors help determine the type or variety of products a region may efficiently produce, while physical space places limitations on scale of production. Within these environmental constraints, agricultural land use becomes a matter of tradition, technology, and a variety of other cultural phenomena. An examination of the physical geography of the regions around Thurman and Elk provides a general framework within which to understand the area's agricultural history. Climate in the Flint Hills may best be described as transitional. The Thurman and Elk areas are near the boundary between the Humid Subtropical climate (Cfa) of the southeastern United States and the Mid-latitude Semiarid climate (Bsk) of the Great Plains. They are also located very near the boundary of the Humid Continental climate (Dfa) to the north. According to the Koeppen-Geiger

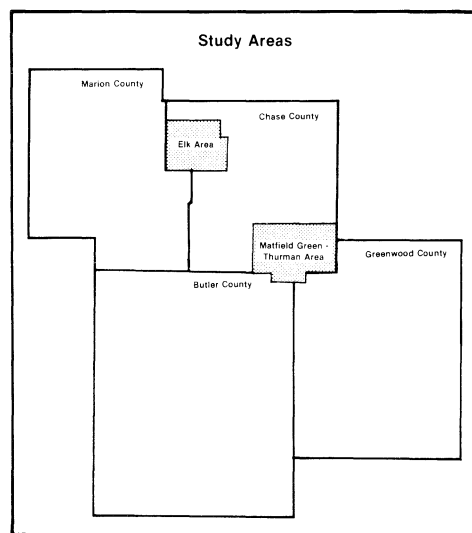


FIG. 2. Study areas. Courtesy of William Philips.

classification system based upon long-term "averages," the area would be classified as Humid Subtropical (Cfa).⁸ Examination of precipitation and temperature data for individual years indicates, however, that the Thurman and Elk areas are definitely not typical of the Cfa. Nearly all of the years have shown periods of seasonal drought and approximately 6 percent of the years have been semiarid. The most frequently occurring climate on a year-by-year basis is Winter-dry Subtropical (Cwa). This Cwa is similar to the Cfa in that both have subtropical annual temperatures and hot summers. Cwa differs from the Cfa because of its uncompensated winter drought, the impact of which may be easily seen in a region's natural vegetation. Cfa climates normally support extensive forests while Cwa climates are marked by tallgrass prairies with tree growth limited to stream margins. Observations of the Thurman-Elk landscape with its expansive bluestem pastures and tree-lined streams leave little doubt as to the area's Winter-dry Subtropical nature.

Climate, particularly growing season and precipitation, is also critical to agriculture in

the area. The average period between the last killing frost of the spring and the first killing frost of the fall is 180 days.⁹ Precipitation, which has ranged from less than 20 inches in drought years to more than 50 inches in the wettest years, is normally concentrated in the spring and early summer, with June usually the wettest month. Total annual precipitation in the area averages 34 inches.¹⁰ In terms of both growing season and precipitation, the area is capable of producing a variety of crops, including sorghums, wheat, and corn. Even the open-pollinated corn grown by nineteenth-century farmers would have been productive in both the bottoms and uplands during most years. Other crops, such as soybeans, sugar beets, and legumes, could have flourished during many growing seasons.

Soils in the region, according to the earlier genetic classification system utilized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, may be divided into two Great Soil Groups: the prairie soils associated with forest-grassland transition zones, and alluvial soils.¹¹ Both tend to be relatively fertile and capable of supporting agriculture with proper use. The uplands, approximately 86 percent of the Thurman-Elk area, are dominated by varieties of "prairie" soil typical of Cwa climates. These soils have neither the high aluminum and iron content of the Gray-Brown-Podzolic soils of the Humid Subtropical southeast nor the strong calcium concentrations of Chernozem soils in the neighboring Mid-latitude Semiarid realm to the west. They tend to have a pH value ranging from strongly acid to neutral.

According to the Chase County Soil Survey, the predominant upland soil in the Thurman-Elk area is the Florence-Labette complex. This series is described as deep, well-drained soils on uplands with slopes ranging from 3 to 15 percent. The A horizons (topsoil) are designated as cherty silt loam and the B horizons (subsoil) as heavy cherty silty clay loam. Coarse chert fragments larger than three inches in diameter make up 10 to 20 percent of the A horizons and 40 to 50 percent of the B horizons. In such soils, "erosion is a hazard

where the grass cover is thin."¹² Alluvial soils of the flood plains and low terraces along the streams, with slope ranging from 0 to 3 percent, are primarily of the Reading series.¹³ These soils are deep, with silt loam in the A horizons and silty clay loam in the B horizons. Land use capability classification for these soils is usually I or II, which is indicative of land well suited to cultivation with slight to moderate conservation practices.

The topography of the Thurman and Elk regions is distinctive. Approximately 14 percent of the area is composed of stream floodplains and low terraces with slopes generally less than 3 percent. The remaining 86 percent of the area is "uplands" with small hills three hundred to more than five hundred feet high and slope gradients from 3 to 15 percent. The uplands, because of the sloping terrain and the propensity of the relatively shallow prairie soils to erode, were more hazardous for tillage. Kollmorgen and Simonett have suggested, however, that farmers using intensive conservation measures and constant vigilance could have produced adequate crop yields on portions of the uplands during most years.¹⁴

The disproportionate ratio of uplands, cherty soils, and a steeply sloping terrain offer a partial explanation for the eventual dominance of ranching over farming in the Thurman and Elk regions. The area's fertile soils, with minimal care of the floodplains and intensive conservation of the uplands, have the capability of producing high per-acre yields of most crops, but the plants most responsive to both the Cwa climate and existing soil characteristics are the intermediate to tall pasture grasses. Early ranchers discovered in the uplands an ideal physical environment for their more "extensive" form of agriculture. They found open space, a natural abundance of nutritious native grasses, water, and a topography suitable for ranching. The only significant environmental limitations would have been periodic droughts and occasional severe winters. Farmers saw the Flint Hills in opposite terms. They perceived the uplands as generally barren and devoid of life. In contrast,

they found that the bottoms not only yielded easily to their plows but closely matched their cultural perceptions of a choice farming environment.

CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Charles Wood has pointed out that the population boom Kansas experienced in the 1860s and 1870s did not extend to most parts of the Flint Hills. According to Wood, a few settlers stopped to take up land in the fertile valleys, but "most by-passed the Flint Hills preferring the rich, deep soiled plowlands further west."¹⁵ Wood's claims are generally supported by data from both the Thurman and Elk regions. During the 1860s and 1870s pioneers filled the narrow creek bottoms, which in both areas accounted for less than 14 percent of the land. Most of the uplands were neither settled nor farmed during the first two decades of farmer settlement.

In order to understand why post-Civil War farmers decided to settle around Thurman and Elk, it is necessary to examine their places of origin and the farming traditions in those areas. As agricultural historian Fred Shannon has remarked, "The migrating farmer of the 19th century . . . sought the climate, vegetation, and soil that reminded him of the most successful experience of his youth."¹⁶ Most Thurman and Elk farmers came from Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana, where they had acquired rather special understandings of the land. To midwestern farmers, the Chase County region would have consisted of only two major environments: creek and river valleys that could be settled and farmed, and a vast upland prairie that was primarily suited to grazing. The bottomlands would have seemed superior to the uplands in every way because they contained water, and timber for cabins and enclosures. Bottomland soils were easier to till and the farmers thought them to be much more fertile than upland soils.

Some early boom literature suggested otherwise. For example, in the 1840s "New-

hall's Guidebook, A Glimpse of Iowa" declared that "many [upland] prairies, both in Illinois and Iowa, have been converted into highly cultivated farms, upon which the 'croakers' of early times predicted that no settler would ever venture."¹⁷ Few Kansas land surveyors seem to have been impressed by such propaganda, for in most areas they priced bottomlands two to three times higher than the best upland fields. There were, of course, rumors in Kansas and elsewhere that under special circumstances the uplands might be more productive than the bottoms. Such reports were usually scoffed at. In 1860 even the editor of the *Emporia News*, who was very interested in promoting land in the surrounding region, was unable to conceal his skepticism when he heard that corn raised in the uplands was more "drought resistant" than bottomland corn. Responding to such a claim, the editor declared, "If this is so, it's worthy of attention; for the bottoms have always been considered far superior for corn, to the uplands."¹⁸

According to Martyn Bowden, by the late 1860s farmers from forested areas were even more likely to avoid the prairie and to settle on wooded bottomlands than in earlier stages of settlement. Midwestern farmers who had relocated in Nebraska and Kansas had accepted with few reservations the traditional belief in the uncultivability of the uplands, or they had "rationalized their own failure to cultivate the uplands into a belief that uplands could not produce good crops."¹⁹

If post-Civil War farmers had a low opinion of prairie uplands, they would have found the Flint Hills uplands even less desirable and would have immediately excluded the steep-sided and round-topped hills from farming settlement, considering the rocky hillsides and bluffs useful only as pastureland. Farmers seem to have cared little that portions of the Thurman and Elk uplands were relatively flat. In the 1860s, flint nodules and limestone outcroppings may have suggested that even those soils were thin and infertile, and it is easy to understand how pioneers, after finding

chert flakes on many hillsides, could have become convinced that they were abundant in all areas of the uplands.

Confined to creek and river bottoms by their cultural beliefs, relatively few post-Civil War farmers settled in either Thurman or Elk. Not only were valleys limited, accounting for less than 14 percent of the land, but potential settlement areas were further reduced by farmers' demands that much of their quarter section, or eighty-acre claim, granted under the Homestead Act, consist of alluvial bottom or first-terrace lands. During the 1860s, farmers generally avoided any valley too narrow for piecing together two forty-acre farms or one eighty-acre patch of bottom.

POST-CIVIL WAR SETTLEMENT

The number of post-Civil War farmers who settled in Thurman and Elk related closely to the bottomlands available in the two areas. Since Thurman did not exist until 1874, we used Matfield Green Township and portions of northern Greenwood and Butler counties as our sample area (fig. 2). During the 1860s and 1870s families in this 142-square-mile area would have considered Matfield Green both their trade area and social center. In the Matfield Green sample area, there is only one major stream with a valley one-half mile or more wide, the South Fork of the Cottonwood River. All other streams, including Thurman and Little Cedar creeks, each six miles long, contain valleys one-quarter mile or less wide. If Matfield's bottomlands are divided equally into 160-acre claims, and each family was allowed to select only one claim, we estimated that the entire 142 square miles could have supported no more than 49 bottomland farmers. The 1870 census showed 30 Matfield settlers, while the 1875 census, which included all families in the Matfield and Thurman areas, listed 55.²⁰

Because Elk competed with a number of small trade centers in both Chase and Marion counties, its territorial boundaries were more circumscribed than those of Matfield Green,

where no competing trade centers developed. Antelope and Lincolnville in Marion County would have marked Elk's western boundary, while Hymer and Elmdale in Chase County would have formed its boundary to the east. Within these limits, and using Elk's trade records, as well as church and school data, to determine Elk's territory, we described Elk as containing 91 sections of land (fig. 2). Most of the farmers settled on Middle Creek with its half-mile-wide valley. Three lesser streams, Stribby, Collett, and Wildcat creeks, accommodated all the rest. By the mid-1870s Elk's valleys were filled, and with only 47 families in the area, farming settlement had largely ceased.²¹

During the early 1870s, as bottomlands became scarce, some Chase County farmers began to modify their opinions about the land. Reports of local upland farming successes were heavily promoted by merchants and others with a vested interest in increased farmer settlement. Chase County newspapers also began to extol the virtues of the uplands. For example, in 1871 one editorial in the *Chase County Ledger* declared:

It is now become a recognized fact that our upland farms are really the best. Practical farmers say crops raised on the uplands are more regular and better average than those raised on the bottom. Small grains always do better, and upland wheat will weigh from 4 to 8 pounds more to the bushel than wheat raised in the bottoms . . . It is a well known fact that the upland in a comparatively dry season retains moisture longer than the bottom by the help of its underlying limestone and clay.²²

There is some evidence that this propaganda worked. In the early 1870s many small farmers began to cultivate portions of the uplands that adjoined their first terrace fields. Many of these "hillside or sloping uplands" proved to be quite productive.²³ It seems likely that small farmers, especially those with several married sons, would have expanded into the

relatively flat uplands had it been possible, but they found their path blocked, not by environmental factors but by politics. One obstacle to upland settlement was the decision of Chase County voters not to adopt a herd law that would have restricted the movements of cattle in the uplands; with limited fencing material and substantial numbers of free-ranging cattle, some owned by local farmers but most owned by large cattle dealers from outside the area, the failure to adopt a herd law made upland farming impossible.

THE HERD LAW AND FARMER SETTLEMENT

Folklore has it that the herd law failed in Chase County because most of its citizens were cattlemen or stockmen-farmers, but this does not seem to have been the case. Small farmers made up the majority of the population. By the 1870s, however, most farmers possessed small herds of ten to twenty head of cattle that, in most cases, they allowed to range freely in the uplands. Thus, many farmers apparently could not decide if the herd law would harm or hurt them, so they voted with cattlemen against the measure.

The advantages and disadvantages small farmers perceived in the herd law are expressed in two 1872 letters to the editor of the *Chase County Leader*. One farmer declared:

Every person in Chase County has seen the Flint Hills. . . . It was never calculated by the all wise creator for farming. . . . A poor man cannot herd his few head of stock and carry on farming. He must sell to some man that can afford to have a herder. The operation of the law is in opposition to the interest of any poor man in this county.

Countering these claims a proponent of the herd law replied:

I can show . . . hundreds of acres of good upland which could be made into good

farms, but for want of good timber to fence with. . . . He [the person opposed to the herd law] says poor men will have to sell their stock to men who can afford to have herders. I have lived in a county where the herd law was in force, where the poor farmers joined together and hired herders . . . and . . . made it a success.²⁴

Failure to adopt a herd law was not the only obstacle to upland settlement. Even before the herd law had become an issue in Chase County, speculator purchases and federal land grants to railroads had removed most of the Thurman and Elk uplands from homestead entry. Small farmers were aware that speculators had purchased portions of the uplands, but it is unlikely they recognized the magnitude of these claims.

THE IMPACT OF RAILROADS AND SPECULATORS ON FARMER SETTLEMENT

At first glance, Elk appears to have been a rather special case, in that two railroad land grants—one to the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe and the other to the Missouri, Kansas and Texas (the KATY)—overlapped in the northeastern corner of the community. The two railroads claimed 81 percent of Township 18, Range 6. This included forty-two of ninety-one sections, or 46 percent of all land in the Elk vicinity.

Approximately twenty sections (22 percent) of Elk's land, most of it bottomlands, were owned by homesteaders and local speculators. The state of Kansas was awarded another four sections (4 percent) for school lands. Eighteen sections (20 percent) were acquired by absentees using cash, agricultural scrip, and military warrants. This left approximately seven sections (8 percent), all of it uplands, for homestead entry.²⁵

It was not railroads but speculators from outside the area who claimed most of Thurman uplands. In the Matfield Green-Thurman area, the Santa Fe and KATY railroads were granted 36 of 142 sections (25 percent) of the

land. Homesteaders owned 13 sections (9 percent), almost all of it bottoms. The state of Kansas removed another 16 sections (11 percent) for common school lands. Land speculators, including Francis Skiddy, a member of KATY's board of directors; Amos Lawrence; and many other less well known capitalists claimed the remaining 77 sections (54 percent). Speculators used cash, military warrants, and agricultural scrip, but most purchases made during the late 1860s and early 1870s were made with scrip.²⁶

It could be argued that neither the railroads nor large-scale entrymen actually blocked the movement of Thurman and Elk farmers into the uplands; the holdings of both groups were placed on the market in the early 1870s, but they found few buyers. We do not know how seriously either group tried to divest itself of its upland holdings, but even if they had promoted them vigorously, there were many factors that would have influenced the farmers' decision not to buy. First, throughout the 1870s Chase County voters continued to resist the herd law, and barbed wire was neither widely available nor was it priced cheaply enough for most farmers' budgets. These two factors alone would have made upland farming risky at best. James Malin has also noted that unfavorable years for grain crops almost became habit in Kansas in the late 1870s.²⁷ Under drought conditions, railroad lands, priced from one dollar to six dollars an acre, and speculator lands, generally priced higher, would have been considered poor investments by even the most optimistic of farmers.

To farmers from outside the Flint Hills, the Thurman and Elk uplands would probably not have appeared as attractive as many lands farther west. To Thurman and Elk farmers, the uplands may have seemed even less desirable, for during the 1870s, before the uplands were fenced, they already had free use of the railroad and speculator lands. Yasuo Okada, in his study of Gage County, Nebraska, has noted that this system benefited both resident and nonresident alike. A settler with

eighty acres of land could use more land without obtaining title to it, while such trespass was also profitable for the nonresident owners, whose land values depended on the prosperity of local settlers.²⁸

The dramatic impact of the introduction of barbed wire to the Thurman and Elk communities provides a twist to western history. In much of the West, barbed wire killed the range cattle industry, denying cattlemen access to grass and water and enabling sodbusters to partition and settle the land. In Elk and Thurman it had the opposite effect. Barbed wire cut small farmers off the grass, and this, combined with droughts and crop failures, led many farmers to accept the high prices offered by cattlemen for their land during the cattle boom of the early 1880s.

In less than a decade, many Thurman and Elk farmers were bought out by cattle syndicates and stockmen farmers who converged on both areas from surrounding counties. The Santa Fe and KATY railroads accelerated the transition from farming to ranching, presumably because one of the main sources of income to the Santa Fe between 1871 and 1885 was the range cattle industry. In 1882 the railroads sold almost their entire holdings in Chase County to two large syndicates—the Western Land and Cattle Company, a Scotch-British firm, and the Eastern Land and Loan Company of Atchison.²⁹ In November 1882, the Western Land and Cattle Company purchased 75,000 acres of Santa Fe land and an additional 20,000 acres from the KATY Railroad; within two years, the company had constructed ninety-four miles of barbed wire fence, much of it forming Elk's northeastern boundary. This land soon became part of the Diamond Ranch, later the 101 Ranch. The new owners used it as pasture on which they could fatten steers raised on a sister ranch in Texas.³⁰

In 1883 the Eastern Land and Loan Company, which was composed of a number of investment bankers, including future governor of Kansas E. N. Morrill from Hiawatha, purchased 100,000 acres of railroad land,

much of it in Chase County and the Thurman area.³¹ Although they sold some of their holdings to local ranchers, they fenced most of their lands and, beginning in 1887, stocked them with transient stocker herds from the Southwest and Texas. As transient cattle began to enter the Thurman area, speculator lands increased in value. A few absentees sold their two or three sections of land to cattlemen or to the Eastern Land and Loan Company. Most, however, retained them or sold them at inflated prices to investors in their home states. These lands, too, were eventually fenced and converted into pastures for transient cattle.

By 1894 most pastures had been enclosed, and the transient cattle industry was well established in Thurman and Elk. Earlier in 1887 the Santa Fe Railroad had constructed two spur lines to transport Texas and southwestern cattle in and out of both areas. One line, which began at the Neva crossing several miles west of Strong City, passed through the Diamond Ranch on Elk's northern border and ran north to Abilene. The other line, east of Strong City, stretched south to Bazaar, a village only a few miles to Thurman's north. Over the next few decades, Bazaar became the largest shipping point for cattle in the entire Santa Fe system. As early as 1890, thirty thousand cattle were shipped in and out of Chase County pastures.³² According to Isern, "The number of cattle shipped in to the Flint Hills swelled year by year until by the 1920s it consistently exceeded 400,000 annually."³³

FARM SETTLEMENT IN THE UPLANDS

Small farmers were not completely excluded from the Elk and Thurman uplands. In 1880, six-and-a-half sections of Elk's most rugged uplands were still available for homestead entry and over the next five years they were claimed by fourteen families, most of them first-generation immigrants from Germany and Prussia, who established the neighborhood of Prairie Grove.³⁴ Poor and

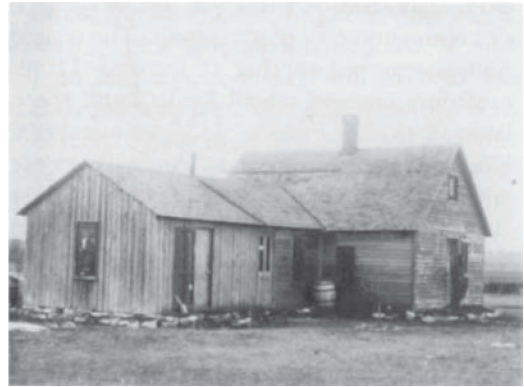


FIG. 3. Postmaster Daniel Eastman standing in the doorway of the Thurman post office c. 1890–1900. Photo courtesy of the Ralph Eastman family.

inexperienced farmers, many of whom seem to have been primarily interested in land speculation, also claimed a small segment of the Thurman uplands. During the 1880s and early 1890s, sixteen farming families purchased common school lands at three dollars an acre on the rocky divide between the Verdigris River and Sharps and Little Cedar creeks. These families formed the "Lone Star Neighborhood," and for several decades they



FIG. 4. The Elk Ladies Aid. Photo courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.

worked for their stockmen-farmer neighbors and farmed their upland quarter-sections with moderate success.

Thurman and Elk reached their population peaks in the early 1880s. At that time Thurman contained fifty-one households, while Elk contained more than seventy. Beginning in 1895, however, both hamlets experienced a rapid decline, and upland farmers were the first to fail. Drought and economic depressions in 1895 and 1913 removed most from the land; their holdings were converted into pastures. Stockmen-farmers and the handful of creek bottom farmers who remained built relatively close-knit and satisfying societies in both areas, but they too were doomed to failure. Rural delivery brought about the closing of the Thurman Post Office in 1909, and the Elk Post Office followed in 1923. By 1930 the general stores in both hamlets had also ceased operation. Competition for pastures, and the Great Depression removed a large number of stock-

men-farmers from Thurman and Elk in the 1930s; they were replaced by tenant farmers or ranch managers. By the early 1940s, only a handful of stockmen-farmers remained, too few to support the schools. When these institutions were closed, Thurman and Elk ceased to exist as viable communities.

CONCLUSION

At the turn of the century, small farming settlements were a prominent feature of the Flint Hills landscape. In Chase County alone, almost a dozen hamlets and railroad villages once dotted the land. Today they either lie in ruins, or as in the case of Thurman, even their foundation stones and cedar trees have been removed to make way for the return of the prairie grasses necessary to the stockmen's livelihood. Fences, constructed on every hill-top less than a century ago, have also been removed in many areas, and the land has



FIG. 5. *The family of Henry Wagoner, one of Thurman's most successful farmer-stockmen. Photo courtesy of Ray and Anna Johnson.*

reverted to a vast uninhabited range much like that encountered by the earliest Kansas pioneers.

The notion that flint rocks determined the economic and social fate of a region as large and as varied as the Kansas Flint Hills functions as folklore, reducing a complex historical reality to a simple truth easily understood and capable of being transmitted from person to person. The belief that flint nodules denied the sodbuster a niche in an environment where rainfall was clearly adequate for farming may also be useful. It not only appears to explain why cattlemen so thoroughly dominated the region's economy, but it also legitimizes their current rights to the land. Modern ranchers believe they are the dominant economic force in the Flint Hills not because they struggled with farmers or any other group for the land but rather, as many of them told us, because the land was meant to be cattle country, and that is the way it will always remain.

Clearly, the area's expansive upland spaces, the hills suitable for range animals, and the abundant supply of nutritious grasses that were productive even in droughts gave cattlemen an advantage over farmers, who over the years had only variable success with their bottomland row crops. But the cattlemen's perceptions of the environment were also an advantage. From the beginning cattlemen recognized the Flint Hills as an "ideal environment" for livestock, thus encouraging many farmer-stockmen, ranchers, and large cattle companies to settle there and without hesitation to expand their operations. The farmers' belief that most of the land was either of little value or was hostile to their needs, of course, had the opposite effect. Their pessimism confined them to a narrow segment of the land, and subjected them to the vagaries of a small niche in the total environment. This inability to recognize the relative complexity of the environment, and to diversify their operations accordingly, inevitably led to the farmers' removal from the land.

Politics, technological change, economic

depressions, and the railroads also contributed to the cattlemen's victory. Less well known, but equally important, as our study has demonstrated, was the role of absentee capitalists. In Thurman and to a lesser extent in Elk, they purchased large segments of the uplands, and although they made it available to small farmers, the large blocks of land involved and the high prices, which were typically two or three times as high as common school lands and even railroad lands, essentially blocked the expansion of farming. Many absentee owners who held on to their lands, and all cattle speculators who purchased land in the uplands, recognized that there were fewer management problems and greater profits in leasing land to cattlemen than there were in dealing with tenant farmers. Moreover, once the land was fenced and contracts were established between owners and pasturemen, there seems to have developed a continuity of absentee ownership that, among some families, has persisted to this day.

In summary, the physical environment was but one of many factors involved in Flint Hills agricultural history. Cultural, political, economic, technological and social factors figured in as well. Ultimately, it was these factors in combination that decided the agricultural destiny of the region.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Western Social Sciences Association in Fort Worth, Texas, April 1985. The authors acknowledge the suggestions and assistance of Thomas D. Isern, James Forsythe, and David A. Henderson during preparation of the manuscript.

1. Descriptions of the Flint Hills include H. R. Hilton, "The Bluestem Limestone Pastures of Kansas," in *Biennial Report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, 1927-1928* (Topeka, 1928), pp. 187-94; James C. Malin, "An Introduction to the History of the Bluestem-Pasture region of Kansas: A Study in Adaptation to Geographical Environment," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 11 (February 1942): 3-28; Walter M. Kollmorgen and Davis S. Simonett, "Grazing Operations in the Flint Hills-Bluestem Pastures of Chase County, Kansas," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 55 (June 1965): 263-78; and

Thomas D. Isern, "Farmers, Ranchers, and Stockmen of the Flint Hills," *Western Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (July 1985): 253-64. We have adopted the boundaries for the Flint Hills established by Isern, although we are aware that these boundaries, particularly those in the eastern part of the region, are complex and that geographers are by no means in agreement on this issue.

2. James Kindall, "The Idylls of the Range," *Kansas City Star* magazine, 24 July 1983: 10-13, 24-25.

3. Wayne Rogler in taped interview with Anita Faddis, December 1982. Kansas Oral History Project, Emporia State University, pp. 1-19.

4. Malin, "Introduction," pp. 9, 11.

5. Kollmorgen and Simonett, "Grazing Operations," pp. 266-67. See also Robert Kenton Wibking's doctoral dissertation (University of Nebraska, 1963) entitled "Geography of the Cattle Industry in the Flint Hills of Kansas." Wibking identified six topographic features in the uplands: the summit uplands, intermediate slopes, benches, limestone breaks, knobs, and mesas.

6. Data from Thurman are derived from Joseph V. Hickey's book in progress on the social organization of a Flint Hills neighborhood, *Thurman 1874-1944: A Farming Neighborhood in Cattle Country*. The Elk material is from David A. Henderson's 1984 Master's thesis at Emporia State University, "Elk: Community Development and Collapse in the Flint Hills of Kansas."

7. Isern, "Farmers, Ranchers, and Stockmen," p. 262.

8. Joseph E. Van Riper, "Details of a Simplified Koeppen-Geiger System of Climatic Classification," *Man's Physical World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2nd ed., 1971), pp. 627-30. The dividing line between Humid Continental climate (Dfa) and Humid Subtropical (Cfa) is drawn near Council Grove, north of the study area.

9. U.S. Department of Commerce. Weather Bureau, Climatological Data, Kansas Annual Summaries: 1896-1984.

10. Ibid. (Data from both Cottonwood Falls and Matfield Green are utilized to provide a more complete record).

11. Mark Baldwin, Charles E. Kellogg, and James Thorp, "Soil Classification," *Soils and Men, Year Book of Agriculture*, 1938, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1938, pp. 993-95.

12. U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Soil Survey of Chase County, Kansas*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.

Government Printing Office, 1974, p. 11.

13. Ibid.

14. Kollmorgen and Simonett, "Grazing Operations," p. 267.

15. Charles L. Wood, *The Kansas Beef Industry* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), p. 4.

16. Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1945), p. 6.

17. Cited in Mary J. Read, "A Population Study of the Driftless Hill Land during the Pioneer Period," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1941), p. 156.

18. *Emporia News*, 17 July 1860.

19. Martyn J. Bowden, "Desert Wheat Belt, Plains Corn Belt: Environmental Cognition and Behavior of Settlers in the Plains Margins, 1850-99." In *Images of the Plains*, ed. Brian W. Blouet and Merlin P. Lawson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), pp. 193-94.

20. Population schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, National Archives Microfilm Publications, Microcopy 593, Roll 430. 1870 Federal Census for Chase County, Kansas. Kansas State Agricultural Census, Bazaar Township, Chase County, 1875.

21. Kansas State Agricultural Census, Chase and Marion Counties, 1875.

22. *Chase County Leader*, 29 September 1871.

23. *Chase County Leader*, 29 March 1872.

24. *Chase County Leader*, 26 April 1872.

25. These preliminary statistics were gathered by analyzing the Tract Records in both Chase and Marion counties, Kansas.

26. These data were gathered by analyzing Tract Records in Chase, Butler, and Greenwood counties, Kansas.

27. Malin, "An Introduction," p. 10.

28. Yasuo Okada, *Public Lands and Pioneer Farmers* (Tokyo: Kokusai Printing Company: 1971), p. 41.

29. Keith Bryant, *The History of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1974), p. 36.

30. Kollmorgen and Simonett, "Grazing Operations," p. 290.

31. Kansas Articles of Incorporation, Eastern Kansas Land and Loan Company, 15 March 1883. Kansas State Historical Society.

32. *Chase County Leader*, 24 July 1890.

33. Isern, "Farmers, Ranchers, and Stockmen of the Flint Hills," p. 259.

34. Henderson, "Elk," p. 59.