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FLOOD CONTROL AND THE DISPLACED RURAL
COMMUNITIES OF IRVING AND BROUGHTON, KANSAS

ROBIN A. HANSON

We should not be surprised if sinners sometimes sin and floodplains sometimes flood.
—Walter M. Kollmorgen

In this case study, I examine how the residents of two displaced rural Kansas towns, and their descendants, exhibit a sense of identity common to small farm communities throughout the Great Plains, and how tenacious these ties are even after the physical reminder of their communal bonds no longer exists. By examining the struggles to survive faced by these two towns, Irving and Broughton, the resiliency of the people who called them home, and the continuing expression of community solidarity by the individuals associated with them, I propose that the individuals living within these communities created a transcendental identity similar to that of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities. This communal identity remains a unifying bond without the need for an enduring physical signifier.

Benedict Anderson identifies the nation as "imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Although Anderson is discussing the concept of nation, this sense of imagining is also employed in these small rural communities because they share a common bond, a sense of belonging that transcends personal interaction. This camaraderie, built on shared experience, provides the foundation for a reciprocal existence fading quickly in the face of rapid growth and market expansion.

Experience throughout time has shown that shared tragedy and adversity build strong ties between people who might otherwise have
little in common. The environmental tragedies shared by the people living in these small communities create a certain sense of community that connects the people to the land and to their ancestors who persevered through similar misfortune. The remarkable bonding between seemingly unrelated farmers scattered through the country who band together and help each other in the face of adversity is so well documented that it is often referred to as the "Kansas spirit."2

This sense of belonging that emerged during the expansion phase of American westward migration remains today and is unique to these farm communities. The numerous small towns that rose up around railroad stops and mines had a sense of impermanence because they were often settled to fulfill a business need without the accompanying expectation of creating a permanent settlement. On the other hand, people who settled in farm communities expected to remain on the land, but the difficulties of living in the Great Plains required an interdependency between people who would normally remain strangers. Even though the towns finally succumbed to federally mandated flood-control projects, the camaraderie shared by the townfolk refused to concede defeat.3

Rural communities are a distinctive reminder of the earlier growth and settlement of the United States. At the formation of our country only 3 percent of the population lived in cities; that number is now 80 percent.4 With this urban shift, understanding of and respect for rural communities has shifted as well. Food products in the local stores, packaged in appealing containers, maintain a distance from the farms and ranches and the people responsible for supplying them. With the close of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier and the push of modern technology, the physical distance between the coasts shrank to a mere five hours by plane, but the sociological distance between urban and rural communities continues to grow to the detriment of the rural lifestyle.

Irving, Kansas, located on the banks of the Big Blue River in Marshall County, and Broughton, Kansas, just north of the Republican River in Clay County, serve as poignant representatives of the numerous farm communities lost to the pressure of commercial enterprise. Unfortunately, these towns did not die a natural death through neglect or disinterest. Instead, these towns were dismantled, displaced, or more aptly put, destroyed to make way for what some people called progress.

Living in Kansas, a part of what was once defined as the Great American Desert, requires a particular type of person. Farmers who are making a living from land considered marginal by many still manage to bring in bountiful crops year after year. Human tenacity, coupled with the unpredictability of nature, resulted in the development of a special bond between these intrepid individuals. Persevering through the staggering array of nature's fury, including drought, flood, tornado, blizzard, grasshopper, and fire, these pioneers and their descendants created homes and businesses that endured through the generations. But nature was not their greatest threat—the interests of big business and imprudent urban planning resulted in legislation ensuring the end to their bucolic way of life. Farmers living in the Flint Hills recognized the power of nature and lived in conjunction with the ebb and flow of the rivers, yet economic concerns downstream proved more devastating than the fury of nature itself.

**Flood History in Kansas**

The volatile force of nature is nothing new to the residents of northern Kansas. The winters are often harsh, filled with blinding snowstorms that bury the Great Plains under several feet of snow and with wind-chill temperatures far below zero. In the spring, the threat of flash floods, damaging hail, and killer tornadoes mingle with the promise of growth and prosperity. Summer brings temperatures over one hundred degrees, the threat of drought, and the continuation of dangerous storms producing wind, hail, and torrential downpours. The fall serves as a brief respite as the people prepare for next cycle of seasons. Even though situated at
the edge of the Great Plains, the river valleys provided a ready and constant source of water and, because of the natural flooding patterns, nutrient-rich soil.

References to massive flooding in this area go back as far as 1542 when Hernando de Soto’s expedition documented flooding in Kansas in his expedition notes. The rivers in the northern portion of Kansas are part of the Missouri River basin (see Fig. 1).

With continued European colonization, references and detailed accounts identify major floods within this basin during the years of 1827, 1844, 1903, 1908, 1935, 1951, and 1993. The social and economic impact of these floods increases dramatically with the growth of settlement and industry in the affected area, especially the floodplains.

Farmers living throughout the Missouri River basin recognized that the floods provided a continuous supply of rich topsoil, and they viewed the flooding as a dangerous but necessary part of the natural cycle. One season of loss due to flooding often resulted in a reward of high-yield bumper crops the following years. However, with a growing population along the rivers farther east, the flooding gained greater significance. Starting with the devastating 1903 flood, public outrage and demands for government assistance shifted the popular view of nature as provider to nature as a destructive force that must be controlled (see Fig. 2).

The population growth in the Kansas City and Topeka metropolitan areas led to ill-advised construction in the floodplains, thus resulting in greater loss of property and
economic hardship as a result of the massive flooding. Immediately following the 1903 and subsequent 1908 floods, local businessmen began talk of trying to limit the impact of future flooding, but interest in flood-control measures waned when several decades passed without any major flooding in the area.

This relative period of calm coincided with a market-driven push for more product and more profit, causing farmers to abandon the accepted routine of crop rotation in order to take advantage of high prices for their products. This dangerous practice, coupled with a severe drought that lasted several years, turned the surface soil of the Great Plains into dust. The prevailing western winds blew this dust as far east as the Atlantic Ocean. Although farmers in western Kansas suffered the loss of their topsoil and their ability to grow crops, the farms in the Republican and Big Blue River...
Valleys suffered little effect from the dust bowl. Not surprising, once the drought broke and the normal heavy spring rains fell on the Great Plains, the hard, sun-baked soil that remained provided for greater than normal runoff, leading to major flooding throughout the Missouri River basin in 1935 (see Fig. 3).

The 1941 flood and subsequent minor floods over the next couple of years renewed local calls for government attention to flood control, but World War II proved an impediment to any vigorous action. The return of catastrophic flooding throughout the Missouri River basin in 1951 compelled the federal government to finally implement an ambitious flood-control program. The resulting dams and reservoirs proved the final blow for many rural communities that had survived the fury of nature only to succumb to the combination of business and politics.

**Settlements of Irving and Broughton**

Driven by a belief in the notion of manifest destiny and the familiarity afforded by the Oregon Trail, people from the settled East answered the call to tame the wilderness. To early emigrants the Great Plains, then known as the Great American Desert, existed simply as a desolate and dangerous region through which they attempted to pass through as quickly as possible on their way westward to the rich farmlands of the Pacific Northwest. Endless rolling hills with grass growing as high as “a man on a horse;” scorching prairie fires, blistering droughts, choking dust storms, monstrous thunderstorms, deadly tornadoes, torrential downfalls, and devastating floods are all common and associated with Kansas.

In his book *Astoria*, Washington Irving wrote about his experience in the Great Plains, agreeing that the region which resembles one of the ancient steppes of Asia has not inaptly been termed “The Great American Desert.” It spreads forth into undulating and treeless plains and desolate sandy wastes, wearisome to the eye from their extent and monotony. It is a land where no man permanently abides, for at certain seasons of the year there is no food for the hunter or his steed.
What irony that in 1859 a handful of intrepid pioneers from Iowa journeyed into this seemingly inhospitable environment in search of land and a place to call home and named Irving, Kansas, in his honor.  

Irving, Kansas

Irving, Kansas, located on the banks of the Big Blue River in Marshall County, and Broughton, Kansas, just north of the Republican River in Clay County, serve as poignant representatives of the numerous farm communities lost to the pressure of commercial enterprise. Even though located at the edge of the American Desert, the community of Irving appeared well conceived and ideally located for cultivation. In his 1883 History of the State of Kansas, William G. Cutler acknowledged the insightful planning of the early settlers who founded Irving:

[S]ituated in the wide spread valley of that winding stream, with its pure clear waters and timber-covered banks, the Blue, it unquestionably has a pleasant location. Irving has, and always will have, a good trade, arising from the fact of its being located in one of the best settled and best cultivated portions of Marshall County.

What the settlers could not control or even expect were the severe environmental conditions that challenged the early settlement of Irving and the other farm communities in the Big Blue River Valley.

From the first days of their settlement, the pioneers of Irving experienced the ferocity of Kansas’s tempestuous weather. The year 1860 started out with a severe drought, followed by strong thunderstorms accompanied by winds that wreaked havoc throughout the fledgling town. The community survived and began to prosper until the grasshopper invasions of 1866 and 1875 blackened the sky and destroyed the crops. Once again, the pioneers persevered and replanted, and season after season the crops became more and more bountiful. The next trial occurred four years later. On May 30, 1879, two tornadoes from two different storms struck Irving, destroying most of the town, injuring nearly a hundred people, and killing at least eleven. Again, the community mourned its losses, gathered together as one, and rebuilt their homes and the town, refusing to succumb to the proclivities of nature.

Perhaps respectful of their fortitude and tenacity, nature afforded the Irving community a period of peace for nearly twenty-five years. The town grew in size until nearly 500 people called Irving home. The community served as a focal point for the local residents, providing banking facilities, a weekly newspaper, post office, public library, churches, and schools. Irving grew in both population and business as the country continued to prosper.

In 1903 a catastrophic flood swept down the tributaries and into the Kansas River valley, causing widespread damage and killing twenty-three people. Situated on the west side of the Big Blue River, just north of the Marshall County line, Irving suffered major damage. As before when faced with environmental misfortune, the residents of Irving regrouped, learned from experience, and put in place policies for dealing with the next flood. The settlers, mostly farmers or business owners dependent on the farm economy for their livelihood, understood their precarious position. Dependent upon the land for their livelihood, they recognized that nature wielded a double-edged sword. Rain and sunshine served to increase the productivity of their land, yet soil-depositing floods and prolonged droughts destroyed existing crops. It was a precarious balance between the good years and the lean years, but they learned to live with nature, rather than attempting to control nature. Although small farmers still recognized their dependence on nature, the growing sentiment in the cities and among the business elite turned toward controlling nature.

Broughton, Kansas

About thirty miles to the southwest of Irving, a settlement later known as Broughton grew up
along the clear waters and timber-covered banks of the Republican River. Although smaller than the Big Blue River, the Republican River provides water for irrigation throughout a large portion of the upper Smoky Hills, flows along the western edge of the Flint Hills, and serves as a major tributary for the Kansas River. The early years of this settlement remain a historic blur. The primary documents from the first couple of decades were lost over time. Peripheral sources, including many maps, identify several named communities in the area, including Rosevale, Morena, and Springfield, yet it was not until August 17, 1888, that Broughton as an identified community came into existence. Although never quite as large as Clay Center, the county seat, Broughton boasted a population near 200 and was known as the “busiest little town between Clay Center and Manhattan.” Figure 3 shows the main street of Broughton during the late 1800s. Stores, churches, grain elevators, and railroad offices supported both the town as well as dozens of farms in the immediate area.

Broughton grew in responsibility and influence as a junction between the Rock Island rail line from the east and the Union Pacific from the southeast. Businesses prospered and adapted over the years to changes in technology, the blacksmith’s shop giving way to gas stations and auto repair shops, the telegraph office becoming the telephone exchange, while the steadfast churches and schools provided the foundation and moral fortitude for the families that called these towns home.

Broughton and its surrounding community mirrored Irving in a number of ways. Both towns originated at a time when the major tributaries of the Kansas River provided a primary source of transportation, they served as railroad hubs, and they provided a physical location for people to share the burdens of frontier life—to know they were not alone. Although subject to raging floodwaters on a fairly regular basis, the residents of these small towns and the surrounding farms also recognized the benefits offered by the river and resisted the call for government flood-control programs.

FLOOD CONTROL AND ITS IMPACT ON RURAL KANSAS

By the 1903 flood, a large enough population lived in Kansas that the widespread damage and loss of life generated state and federal interest and concern. Although many of the farmers and farm communities dealt with the flooding and made modifications to lessen the damage, business farther down the river, especially in the Kansas River valley, continued to build and even expand into the floodplain. The population in eastern Kansas grew as businesses increased in the larger metropolitan regions. With this growing development, President Franklin Roosevelt’s strategic design for river development gained more and more support amongst business owners along the Kansas River, specifically those in Topeka, Lawrence, and Kansas City. These individuals believed that incorporating a series of dams along rivers to the west would help revive both the national economy as well as prove a supportive measure for their own endeavors.

A reservoir for flood control, conservation, and other purposes near the mouth of the Big Blue River was first mentioned in official documents in 1928, but a larger, single dam directly on the Kansas River near Topeka gained greater support from local business owners who viewed the resulting reservoir as potential income. In 1933 the Roosevelt administration proposed a flood-control project, the Kiro Dam and Reservoir, but local residents, as far west as Wamego, vehemently opposed the dam and the destruction of so much farmland in the Kaw River valley and consequently defeated the proposal.

Between May 31 and June 17, 1935, a flood swept through the Republican and Kansas River valleys. Although opposition had successfully defeated the Kiro Dam proposal, the devastating nature of this flood confirmed the ongoing danger of flooding in the area and resulted in another demand by businesses for the federal government to remedy the problem. In response, Congress passed the Flood Control Act on June 22, 1936 (Public Law 738, 74th
Congress), which was followed by the Flood Control Act of 1938 authorizing construction of dams along several of the rivers that posed the greatest threat of major downstream flooding. Citing the successful damming of the Tennessee River and its economic impact, the 1938 Flood Control Committee Report of the 75th Congress called for the construction of seven reservoirs in the greater Missouri River basin, including Tuttle Creek Dam and Reservoir.  

To businessmen, a wave of flooding in 1941, although not as devastating as in 1935, confirmed the need for immediate government intervention. In response to demands from local residents and business interests and the devastation wrought by massive flooding in the Elkhorn River basin during 1944, Congress passed the Flood Control Act of 1944, known as the Pick-Sloan Plan. The legislation coordinated plans by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation for the entire Missouri River basin.  

Even though the Corps of Engineers serves as a military entity, their engineering expertise contributes significantly to civil projects, and the growing environmental concerns leading to federal flood-control projects provided the perfect avenue for this expansion. Eager to proceed with the project, the Corps of Engineers drilled the first exploratory core hole near the proposed spillway on June 6, 1944. This drilling occurred the same day as the landing of troops at Normandy in World War II—an ironic twist in which the beginning of the end of the war in Europe was also the beginning of the eventual demise of the communities of Irving and Broughton.  

Although passed in 1944, the Flood Control Act resulted in little actual work on the projects, especially in areas with large farm contingencies. It was not until the late 1940s that the business owners readdressed the issue and lobbied the state and federal government to pursue the construction. Recognizing the influence of the Farm Bureau and utilizing the knowledge and experienced gained through the defeat of the earlier Kiro Dam proposal, the Kansas River valley businesses turned their focus to tributaries farther upstream where lower population density provided a better opportunity to secure government action.  

Resistance from the farm communities remained formidable, and the projects stalled until a series of floods in 1951. These floods impacted 10,000 farms and 116 towns, resulting in the destruction of 2,500 residences and total losses of more than $725 million. With the increasing population and the impact on business and transportation, the federal government quickly reinstituted the dam projects and moved forward with the construction of a number of dams that resulted in the demise of many small farm communities throughout the Midwest. The 1951 flood and the Flood Control Act approved September 3, 1954 (Public Law 780, 83rd Congress) further expanded government action toward the implementation of widespread flood-control measures.  

**Tuttle Creek Dam and the Beginning of the End**  

The 1951 flood, the “most extensive, prolonged and calamitous flood in the history of Kansas,” resulted in a major push for actual construction. Local newspapers carried numerous articles requesting the federal government to intercede and build dams along the Republican, Smokey Hill, and Big Blue Rivers. The dams and reservoirs, proposed as early as the 1930s, finally received the funding and governmental support required for realization. Construction on Tuttle Creek Dam, nine miles upstream from the confluence of the Big Blue and Kansas Rivers and five miles north of Manhattan, Kansas, began in October 1952.  

In the Big Blue River Valley, residents responded immediately and over the next thirteen years struggled valiantly to save their homesteads in a fight that “became a symbol of opposition to oppressive bureaucracy, a battle pictured as a fight between democracy and totalitarianism.” The dam opponents argued that the dam would result in loss of rich farmland, destruction of stable communities, and
growth of government at the expense of local autonomy. Instead of supporting one major dam along the Big Blue River, they proposed and supported projects focusing on a watershed program providing for soil conservation and smaller dams in the headwaters.  

The Big Blue River Valley opposition, labeling the Tuttle Creek Dam project as simply “Big Dam Foolishness,” were able to delay construction from December 1953 until December 1955 through vigorous campaigning, letter writing, and public debate. However, between 1952 and 1965 the Corps of Engineers acquired title to 33,847 acres in fee simple from 1,713 different landowners through purchase, and condemnation and flowage easements completed the purchases with an additional 27,376 acres. After thirteen years, the Big Blue River Valley communities resistance conceded defeat to the power of the federal government and the interests of big business. On July 4, 1959, Tuttle Creek Dam construction began and was completed on July 1, 1962 (see Fig. 4).

Besides Irving, nine other towns in the Big Blue River Valley suffered some form of displacement due to the dam. These included Stockdale, Randolph, Winkler, Cleburne, Blue Rapids, Shroyer, Garrison, Barrett, and Bigelow. Only Randolph and Blue Rapids, after tenuous negotiations, survived in some physical form.

In 1950, just prior to the initial dam construction, 350 people called Irving home. Located forty-five miles north of the proposed site for Tuttle Creek Dam, Irving was the last town along the Big Blue River scheduled for complete displacement. A 1959 newspaper article referenced the doomed community: “Laughter doesn’t come easily, nor often, in the town this summer. Townsfolk talk...
quietly—almost in hushed voices, as though in respect and sympathy for the town in its death throes.”30 And even though the town’s displacement loomed as inevitable, several residents remained in their homes until the government finally forced them out on June 1, 1960.

**Milford Dam and Acquiescing to Policy**

During the “Big Dam Foolishness” fight waging in the neighboring Big Blue River Valley, residents along the Republican River discovered their own livelihood under attack. Milford Dam was originally included in the 1933 flood prevention proposal along with other reservoirs on the tributaries of the Kansas River, but as the flooding subsided, interest in the dams waned. When the 1951 flood brought the issue back to the forefront, the Flood Control Act of 1954 Congress authorized the construction of Milford Dam on the Republican River as a “multipurpose” project that included flood control, water supply, water quality, navigation, and recreation/wildlife.

The townsfolk of Broughton watched with despair as the residents of the Big Blue River Valley failed in their valiant attempt to save the valley and their homes. They realized that a long, drawn-out battle with the government was hopeless and emotionally destructive. As Irving and the rest of the Big Blue River valley conceded defeat, most of the residents of Broughton and the farmers along the lower Republican River acquiesced quietly and spent their energy securing as many memories of their lost townsites as possible.

Dismantling the town proved a long and painful process. Many of the town residents
moved to Clay Center, a larger community five miles northwest that was also located on the Republican River. Area residents moved the local Methodist Church four miles east of town. The local cemetery, high on a bluff overlooking the river valley, remained unaffected by the threat of rising waters. A weekly column in the area newspaper, the Clay Center Dispatch, served as a community forum for announcements and local news, and next to it during 1963-64 ran a separate column called the “Milford Dam Land Record,” documenting each farm and homestead bought by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Even more agonizing was the inclusion of an itemized list of the property the seller retained and the final date to vacate the land.

Whereas the Tuttle Creek Dam project resulted in the destruction or removal of ten towns, the Milford Dam affected four towns. Wakefield and Milford relocated along the edge of the reservoir, but Broughton and Alida were dissolved. Construction of the dam began July 13, 1962, and with final impoundment, Milford Reservoir became Kansas’s largest manmade lake in Kansas, with 163 miles of shoreline and over 16,000 surface acres of water (see Fig. 7). As with the end of Irving, local newspapers documented the loss of the community as a personal, emotional loss rather than merely the removal of a collection of roads and buildings. For the residents of the Republican River valley, Broughton served as an important hub to the local farming community. And yet, “When the last letter is delivered through the post office and the last plug is removed from the telephone switchboard, the once proud town will quietly await the lapping sound of waters.”

MAINTAINING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Living on the Great Plains requires great fortitude, for nature reigns in magnificent glory through wind, rain, fire, hail, and heat. Individuals who remain stoically separate seldom survive, let alone prosper. Survival requires a willingness to work together for the security of the community as a whole. For a rural farm community such as Irving or Broughton, the surrounding farms are as much a part of the community as the town itself, since both groups' livelihoods are interdependent. Within this framework, the personal interaction and the perpetuation of their shared identity allow the former residents and their descendants to hold on to a cultural identity established over several generations.

Most of these established, long-lasting communities ultimately yielded to a transitory gesellschaft existence, where community and family ties suffer from high urban mobility, the creation of momentary friendships, increasing divorce rates, and limited job security. This transitory lifestyle destroyed personal bonds to the land, weakened family ties, and resulted in a life devoid of physical stability. This physicality is fundamental to an understanding of resiliency in the "imagined" community identity of rural Americans is paramount.

As Janet Fitchen states in her book Endangered Spaces, Enduring Places: Change, Identity, and Survival in Rural America, "Farm families in upstate New York not only live on their dairy farms, they live their farms." Life in a rural town, whether in New York or Kansas,
provides a different worldview for those who consider themselves part of the community. In these rural societies homes pass down through families over the generations, ancestors born on the homestead are often buried in family or community cemeteries either on the land they worked or close by, and the stories of their struggles, their triumphs, and their defeats become entwined in both family lore and community history. Add to this scenario the volatile Great Plains weather and the view becomes even more focused on the ties between individuals subject to the same challenges. This lifestyle builds a unity between individuals as well as with the land itself. The loss of the towns and the accompanying farms was a harsh blow for these communities. They lost not only their homes but often a sense of their heritage. There was also a sense of guilt that they did not fight hard enough or that they let down the generations that struggled and persevered before them.

The simple task of defining the term “community” is at times vexing, especially in a rural setting, yet even without a physical tie binding these people together, they still identify themselves as a clearly distinct community. According to the Rural Policy Research Institute, “There is no standard definition of rural areas used in policy, research, and planning, and there is no uniformity in how rural areas are defined for purposes of federal program administration or distribution of funds.” However, to people living in these outlying areas, there is little doubt about who they are and the structure of their communities. Existing federal policy appears to dismiss the small population figures associated with rural living, not realizing that the township’s population surrounding the small farm community is a much more accurate accounting of the town’s impact and influence on the surrounding area. Although robust transportation infrastructure and modern technology shrank the physical distance between the West Coast and the East Coast, the cultural distance between urban and rural communities continued to grow. The earlier gemeinschaft lifestyle of the bucolic rural communities, where survival and prosperity rested on the reciprocal interaction between the various families, provided the template for the development of many small towns during westward migration.

Life in a Rural Community

The ability to physically interact with one’s neighbors helps to continue a shared sense of identity, even if expressed in nothing more than sitting around gossiping or simple “catching up,” as these men appear to be doing when asked to pose for the photo in Figure 8. These men might not share a lot of time together, as farm life is labor-intensive, but a few minutes of interaction serve as a lifeline, a reminder that others share your dreams, your worries, your world. They also provided a sense of comfort—if disaster struck, help was nearby.

In these small rural communities the town and its people become family—everyone knows everyone else, and people become attached to one another through good times and bad. This social structure remains in place over the generations, passed on through each family, providing a sense of security and longevity. Annual neighborhood and church picnics served as vivid reminders that in a rural farm community a sense of family extends beyond blood. Groups such as Neighborhood Clubs provided a tangible link
between individuals who were often physically separated by miles but who faced very similar difficulties (see Fig. 9).

In rural communities the town serves as the focal point of social interaction, and it is through the town that the people interact and bond with others who share common experiences, heredity, and expectations. Much like family reunions, neighborhood clubs, and church picnics, the act of working together on farms or within the town created a sense of unity, of brotherhood, that resulted in a community identity that survived from generation to generation and even the physical demise of their town and farms.

An Enduring Communal Identity

A sense of a communal identity is still strong among the former residents of Irving and Broughton, even though the physical towns no longer survive. That bond, like that of family, could not be broken even by death. In both communities, residents gather annually to commemorate the town, attesting to the continuation of their community identity.

Although the construction of the dams altered the physical landscape of these rural Kansas communities, the sites still bear meaning and significance to the people who consider them home. A sense of community remains firmly embedded in the psyches of past and would-be current residents through their returning to the town and various family homesteads. Maintenance of a community identity is tenuous because of the ambiguity and flexibility of the concept of “community.” Just as Benedict Anderson views the concept of “nation” as an imagined community, so too is a rural community “imagined.” Through the shared experiences, love for the land, and a strong sense of heritage, these people imagine ties with one another. The accompanying ceremonies of remembrance serve as a set of actions, performed mainly for their symbolic value, that add to both the public and personal continuation of the community.

The federally mandated dams and reservoirs effectively severed the physical ties holding together these farm communities, but not the emotional and spiritual bonds forged by shared experiences and identity. Even though the towns no longer exist, their communities are held together by a sense of belonging and of loss. Many of the surviving Broughton residents still drive out from Wakefield and Clay Center to attend church in the Broughton church, a physical tie to their lost town. Each year the displaced residents of Irving and Broughton meet at the abandoned townsites to restore and solidify old ties. The annual picnic and reunions are the focus of family and school remembrances, and are simply a renewal of the physical presence of the community bonds that reach back over a hundred years.

The number of people attending the annual gatherings is slowly dwindling, as the former residents grow too old to make the journey or pass away. Yet the memory of Irving and Broughton lives on, not just in the history books but also in the later generations—people who never actually experienced Irving or Broughton as a tangible entity. It was at one of the Irving reunions that I witnessed an act of community and inclusion that impacted my view of the town and its people.

My grandmother was the oldest child in her family and had to leave school after the eighth grade to help her mother care for her eight younger siblings. The Irving reunion in 1977
also commemorated the fiftieth class reunion of 1927, which would have been her graduating class. During the reunion the class members in attendance were asked up on stage. As people gathered, several of them looked around and said they were missing a classmate. One of the men motioned for my grandmother to join them. They told her and the crowd that even though she was not allowed to graduate with them, they considered her part of the class. I will never forget the look of pride on her face while she stood with them that day. She had not graduated with them nor had she lived in Irving for fifty years, but she was still part of the Irving family. Having lived in several different urban areas for the past twenty years, I cannot imagine witnessing this same act of unity.

These rituals of remembrance provide an active role for the perpetuation of this imagined community by providing symbols, rites, and ceremonies that seek to give sacred meaning to the life of the community. Yet Jules David Prown stresses that even though the physical landscape and remaining artifacts may materialize beliefs, they do not create them. Ideas or beliefs may be associated with an artifact, but purely existing as a physical location does not create the belief. It is inanimate; human thought is required to create the meaning behind the symbol, behind the belief. Besides adding the structure for these valuable locations, rituals provide the means of conveyance for public memory and for a uniquely American heritage:

Memories perceived as continuous with the past provide a sense of history and connection, a sense of personal and group identities. Whether such memories are truth, reconstructions, or inventions seem to matter less than whether people accept them as truth or, at least, as useful and meaningful.

Mircea Eliade supports the view that rituals, reenacting what becomes viewed as sacred prototypes, recalls past events and transmits them to future generations.

**Physical Reminders of Community**

When weather permits, the annual picnics take place at the former townsites, which are both only under water, ironically, during periods of extreme flooding, near the only remaining sign of their earlier existence—a town marker, or more accurately, a gravestone. The Irving marker, a carved stone originally located between the front steps of the Irving city hall (later the Irving post office), gained a new position of prominence when revealed as a memorial marker at a public Memorial Day celebration in 1975 (see Fig. 10). The Broughton marker sits along the Broughton road, an enduring visual reminder of the former town (see Fig. 11).

A mailbox set next to the Irving marker, provides an ongoing means of communication between the past and the present. Within the mailbox is a notebook and pen. Past residents, their descendants, and curious visitors record their impressions, memories, and reminiscences of days gone by and days yet to come. One of the most poignant messages left in the Irving notebook was from a young woman who chose the site for her wedding because the town had been such an important location in her family history, and she wanted her marriage to be a part of that continuing story.

Irving lives on in her actions, her memories, and in the memories she continues to create for her family. Her testimonial as well as all others’ bear witness to the memory of the martyred communities—not just of Irving and Broughton, but of Alida and Bigelow and many more. As I stand at the townsites, where small trees grow in a section of land separate from the farmland that surrounds it, I experience a melancholy that I should not feel since I never walked these towns’ busy streets nor sat on a park bench listening to tales of days gone by, but I still feel the loss. Unless a person has lived in these rural communities, it is almost impossible to find the words to convey what the land and the history tied to that land mean to these people. I know because I grew up close to these two townsites, and their history is a part of my
history. I feel the pain, I feel the loss, I grieve with each and every person—both living and dead—that called these rural communities home. Standing there, on what often feels like sacred soil, it is as if the land itself weeps for its lost souls.

The continuation of a communal identity is difficult to maintain where the physical landscape is only as concrete as the memories of those who lived in the original, physical setting. In the minds of rural Americans the memories remain vivid, the stories obviously cherished—just waiting for someone to listen—to pass on the memories of the struggles that created a bond between the citizens of these towns and the surrounding farms. Even though the townsites sit forlorn and abandoned by the government, the memory remains of that particular cultural landscape, thus perpetuating a temporal landscape, documenting the transition, and remembering “that which has been.”

CONCLUSION

The fight against the construction of Tuttle Creek Dam ended more than forty-five years ago, and against Milford Dam nearly forty years ago, yet the memory and the impact of the events still linger. In the 1960s, following the long public debate over the destruction of these communities, came a change in policy with movement away from flood control and more toward environmental and community concerns. Later dam construction or major flood events resulted in the federally assisted movement of entire towns to locations safe from flooding.

Current concerns center on three issues: the danger of a major fault line running just to the east of Tuttle Creek Dam, the possible conversion of the dam to an ugly, generally unproductive “dry” dam, and a continuing distrust for people considered “outsiders”. The reality is that if the Tuttle Creek Dam fails, Manhattan, a town of over 50,000 people, will be completely swept away, resulting in deaths far greater than all the past Missouri River basin floods combined.

The demise of this once productive area of Kansas still elicits newspaper and magazine articles that revisit the struggle between these rural communities and the federal government, serving as policy makers for business interests. Scholars doing research debate the outcome of the flood-control measures and later watershed and soil conservation directives. Dale Nimz, in the abstract to his doctoral dissertation, wrote that “despite billions invested in flood-control engineering, flood damage losses increased. Flood control encouraged development in the nation’s floodplains, but it could not guarantee protection. In the
late twentieth century, the policy changed to emphasize damage prevention and floodplain management, but dams, reservoirs, and levees remained, which were a tangible legacy of the program to control nature. In the twenty-first century, the problem is to manage, not just rivers, but the human relationship with rivers.45 Much as Glen Stockwell and the Blue Valley Study Association attempted to redirect the federal government away from constructing major dams and toward soil conservation and conscientious business and residential planning in the early 1950s, policy makers are recognizing and supporting a different focus for the future of flood management. It appears the recognition of conservation instead of control is too little and too late as the damage to the region is already done.

Topeka, Kansas, whose business owners rallied for the dams as a means to protect their city from flooding, recorded five of its ten greatest floods after completion of the dams on the three main tributaries to the Kansas River.46 The townsites of Irving and Broughton sit abandoned, the sites now overgrown with small trees and rapidly expanding underbrush. The rising water expected to inundate the townsites rarely occurs except when torrential rains flood the Big Blue and the Republican Rivers much as it did before the dams. The number of people attending the annual picnics and reunion dwindles as the older townsfolk pass away or become too fragile to travel. The younger, displaced residents of Irving and Broughton continue to carry and disperse the memories of their youth, but will the sense of community survive into future generations? With time and distance, the tenuous connection once forged between the people and the land will likely wither away for these small farm communities.

While the early settlers of the Flint Hills struggled against both natural and human obstacles to build their homes and their communities, their descendants simply try to hold on to the memories and the special ties that bind their families together. Once-prosperous farmers struggle vainly to maintain the family farm until, like the fight to save the Big Blue River Valley, the inevitable occurs and the people reluctantly admit defeat. With each family that succumbs, it is not just the towns and the physical community that suffers, but the will of the people and the sense of who they are and where they belong. It is no coincidence that the Great Plains are suffering a major depopulation. The loss of large segments of valuable farmland and the realization that the dreams of their forefathers meant little when confronted with the menace of capitalist endeavors ultimately destroyed the determined fighting spirit of these resilient farm communities. A third of the population has left since 1920. To people whose roots are both figuratively and literally in the ground, losing that hallowed ground is like losing a family member.

Even though Manhattan, Kansas, located at the base of Tuttle Creek Dam, is home to Kansas State University and numerous industries, and its population has tripled, the poverty level is 21 percent—more than twice the Kansas average.47 The dams may have brought prosperity to larger cities farther down the river, but it destroyed the economy, the homes, and the sense of belonging for those living in the Big Blue River Valley and along the lower Republican River.

Although the physical presence of these small communities succumbed to the bulldozer and the crane, the sense of community that tied the people together withstood the onslaught. The essence of a shared identity lives on in the hearts and minds of those who lost their homes and their way of life. The abrupt and unwanted ending to these towns is a heartrending episode in Kansas’s political, environmental, and social history not soon forgotten. It is not the first tragedy experienced by these towns and their townsfolk, and as long as the memory of the shared experiences and the love of the land remain, the displaced residents and their offspring continue to bear witness to the ignominious deed and to that which was lost. The displacement of these communities is “not a tragedy in the physical sense of broken bones, but a tragedy of broken hearts.”48
NOTES


3. I have personal insight into their struggles as I grew up a few miles from Broughton and my paternal grandmother was raised in Irving; her parents were some of the residents forced to relocate. My grandfather (my grandmother’s second husband – I was adopted by them in 1963) had lived in Broughton and had many friends who lived there at the end. I actually remember riding in the back of a truck along the Republican River road that now lies under the lake below bluffs where the relocated town of Wakefield now sits.

4. Population Division of the United Nations Secretariat, World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revision, Data Tables and Highlights (NY: United Nations, 2004). Estimates and projections of urban and rural populations are made by the Population Division of the United Nations Secretariat and published every two years. According to Campbell Gibson in his 1998 paper “Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990,” it was not until 1874 that a systematic attempt to define the urban population of the United States since 1790 appeared in a census publication, the Statistical Atlas of the United States. The definition of urban adopted in that report applied to places (generally cities and towns) with a population of 8,000 or more. The urban threshold was dropped to 4,000 in the 1880 census and to 2,500 in the 1910 census.


10. The Big Blue River, originating near Grand Island, Nebraska, is one of the largest tributaries of the Kansas River, and drains one-sixth of the Kansas River valley.


12. The Republican and the Smoky rivers are the other two tributaries that, with the Big Blue River, combine to form the Kansas River.


14. Dale E. Nimz, “Damming the Kaw: The Kiro Controversy and Flood Control in the Great Depression,” Kansas History 26, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 14-31. The Kiro Dam was to span the Kansas River just west of Topeka. The dammed water would have created a huge lake, flooding farmland as far west as Wamego and impacting more than 10,000 local residents.


17. Ibid.


19. Corps of Engineers, “Tuttle Creek Lake History.”


flood waters, primarily on July 13 and 14. The flood affected more than 150 communities, killing twenty-eight people and causing $1 billion in damages.

22. Corps of Engineers, "Tuttle Creek Lake History." Tuttle Creek Dam was first surveyed and reported to Congress on August 21, 1931.


24. Letter, Glen Stockwell to Mr. Arthur Hawthorne Garhart, October 9, 1951. Located at Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, KS.

25. Corps of Engineers, "Tuttle Creek Lake History."

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Randolph relocated to the bluffs overlooking the reservoir and at the edge of the Randolph Bridge, the longest bridge in Kansas. Many of the streets of the new town are named for the communities lost to the reservoir.


32. Corps of Engineers, "Milford Lake, Flood History."


37. The Irving reunion is held on Memorial Day weekend and the Broughton annual picnic is the first Sunday in August. Former Broughton residents also held a Broughton reunion in 1976 and again in September 2006.


40. Jacob Climo and Maria G. Cattell, Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 27.


43. U.S. Corps of Engineers, Kansas City District, “Tuttle Creek Dam Safety Assurance Program: Community Comments—Lowered Pool/Dry Dam Alternative, May 2001,” 2004, http://www.nwku.usace.army.mil/projects/tcdam/community-comments5-01/community-comments&lowered-pool.htm (accessed February 2006). The sentiment expressed in the comments runs from support for a dry dam or limited levels to leaving it alone. There are also several comments in reference to the construction of the dam that emphasize the fact that area residents still maintain hard feelings toward the Corps of Engineers and the federal government for constructing the dam in the first place. Also, for information on Kansas residents’ responses to a 1998 flash flood in south-central and southeast Kansas, see Bimal Kanti Paul's article, “Floodings in Kansas: Respondents' Satisfaction with Emergency Response Measures and Disaster Aid,” Great Plains Research 12 (Fall 2002): 295-322.


47. The area below the dam, just north of Manhattan, is now known as the Grand Canyon of Manhattan. The water released from Tuttle Creek Dam during the 1993 flood carved twenty-foot canyons out of solid rock.