

# KANSAS HISTORY

A Journal  
of the  
Central Plains

Volume 16, Number 4  
Winter 1993-1994



## Centennial Highlights

### The Panic of 1893



During the 1890s many western Kansas families, like the Owens of Greeley County (pictured above), were forced to abandon their Kansas farms for friendlier environs back east. Written on their wagon cover is, "Left Kansas Nov. 20, 1894. Arrived Illinois Dec. 26, 1894."

The stock market crash of June 1893 signaled the beginning of a national "panic" or depression, the worst in the nation's history to that date. In Kansas, however, hard times began in the late 1880s and the "Panic of 1893" received slight notice. Farmers, especially in western Kansas, struggled through yet another year of drought and almost total crop failure. Thousands had abandoned the region by year's end, making the "run" into Oklahoma Territory or returning "to see their wife's folks" in Illinois, Iowa, or some other eastern state with "greener pastures." The population of Kansas west of the one hundredth meridian, which had boomed in the mid-1880s, fell from over 81,000 in 1889 to nearly 50,000 in 1895.

Many of those who persevered in Kansas needed assistance, and Governor Lewelling was deluged with letters and petitions from the western counties. Lane County's Dighton Herald called the "sensational reports" of suffering in western Kansas, "so far as we know, false." But many, including the Lane County Commission, appealed to Topeka and elsewhere for help. On September 25, 1893, a Scott County official asked that "an extra session of the legislature [be convened] to devise a means for supplying seed wheat to the destitute districts in the western part of the state." The farmers were ready to plant, but without assistance they could not; they were "not asking for charity but desire a loan until they can raise a crop." Others asked for coal or "worried over" the state's "poor people" who were dependant on an ever dwindling supply of cow chips "to keep them warm."

If anything, the situation grew worse during the winter and spring of 1894; and in late June the governor received the following desperate plea from a Trego County woman: "I take my pen in hand to let you know that we are Starving to death. It is Pretty hard to do without any thing to Eat hear in this God for saken country. We would of had Plenty to Eat if the hail hadent cut our rye down and ruined our corn and Potatoes. I had the Prettiest Garden that you Ever seen and the hail ruined It. . . . My husband went a way to find work and came home last night and told me that we would have to Starve he has bin in ten countys and did not Get no work. . . . If I was in Iowa I would be all right. I was born there and raised there. I havent had nothing to Eat to day and It is three o clock." Another asked the governor if, in light of all the crop failures, there was not "some way to stop this foreclosure of notes" which was driving "people from their homes."

While Governor Lewelling could do little at the time—except to work through private organizations such as the Farmers Alliance—the movement he led was concerned about the needs of the downtrodden. The People's party program for social and political reform was not generally adopted at the time, however, and real relief did not come until the drought broke and favorable weather returned to the High Plains near the end of the century. With the rebirth of "good times" and the dawn of agriculture's "golden age," many came back to western Kansas and contributed mightily to the ascension of the wheat state early in the twentieth century.



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Cover: *Painting of the Battle of Wilson's Creek, depicted in Battles of the Civil War, 1861-1865. The conclusion of "The Wilson's Creek Campaign" appears in this issue. Back Cover: Early wheat harvest. Reminiscences of a 1930s wheat harvest is the subject of this issue's "In the Land of My Dreams."*

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*Kansas History* (USPS 290 620) is published quarterly by the Kansas State Historical Society, Inc., 120 West Tenth Street, Topeka, Kansas 66612-1291. Second-class postage paid at Topeka, Kansas. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Kansas History*, 120 West Tenth Street, Topeka, Kansas 66612-1291.

Printed by Mennonite Press, Inc., Newton, Kansas.

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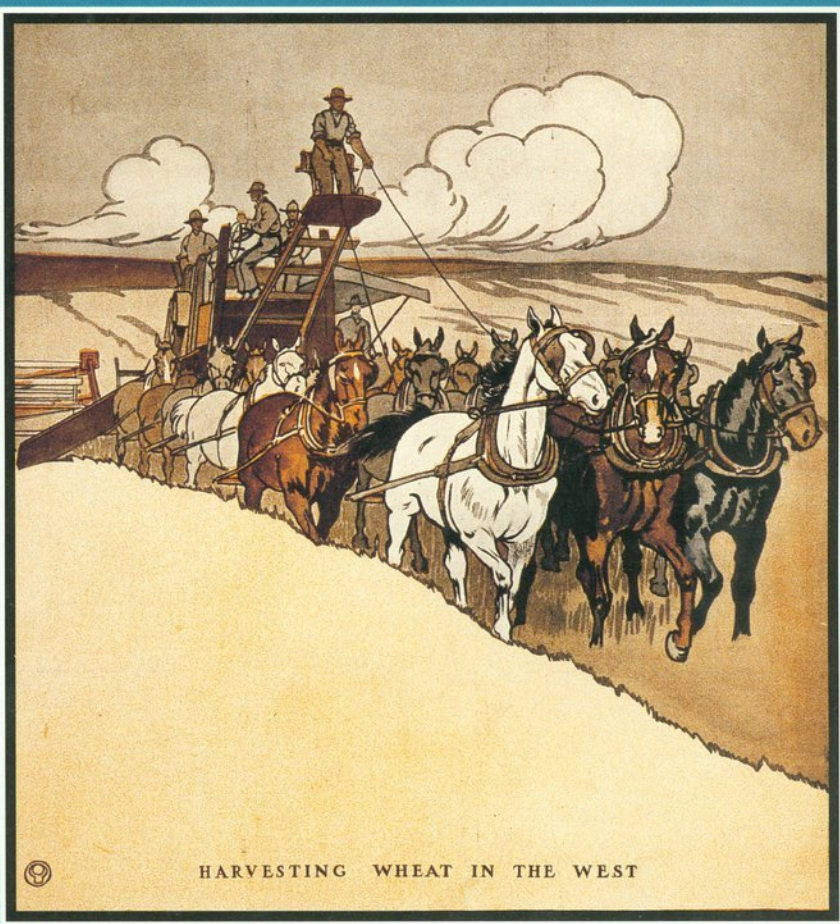
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