



*Harvest, Busse farm, Cheyenne County, 1998.*



# Kansas Wheat Harvest

by Thomas Fox Averill

In a good year  
one's whole field of vision  
gone bushel-green and sprouting.

Sunflowers and futurities.  
Snow in the milo and heads on the stalks.

Juggernaut gleaners and overloaded trucks.  
Threat of hail and harvest rush.

Breathe it in: Kansas!

—from "Breathing Kansas," by Artful Goodtimes

**A**s I was growing up in Kansas, our license plates bore the slogan, "Midway U.S.A." Later, we were the "Wheat State." Both are still true. Most years, no other state grows, stores, or grinds more wheat into flour than Kansas. My *Fun Facts About Kansas* tells me that with one year's wheat harvest, you could line up grain cars on a railroad track that ran from Atwood, Kansas, to the Atlantic Ocean, fill every car to the brim, and still have a few kernels of wheat to spill into your shoes. In mid to late June, from the southern border of Kansas, the wheat harvest begins its steady sweep through the state. Most years, harvest is finished by the Fourth of July. One year, in late June, I flew a loop over western Kansas, from Salina (central Kansas) to Oakley (northwest Kansas) and back. The Kansas wheat harvest

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*An "over" view of Kansas:  
wheat fields as far as the  
eye can see.*



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was 60 percent complete, ahead of its usual schedule. In the four or five days punctuated by my flyover of the harvest, Oakley area grain elevators took in 3.5 million bushels of wheat. This was out of a total harvest of 433.2 million bushels, the wheat some of the best in years—low moisture, high protein, and 37 bushels per acre on 11.4 million harvested acres. That’s as many acres as there are in all of Vermont and New Hampshire: imagine those two states as one big wheat field. Or imagine that if the harvested acres of wheat in Kansas made up the land area of a state, that state would be bigger than any one of these nine states: Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Vermont. So wheat is important in Kansas; the state deserves its common nickname: Breadbasket.

For the individual farmer, wheat harvest represents the end of a long process. Winter wheat, the myth says, was brought to Kansas by the Russian Germans, those Germans who sought religious freedom in the Volga area of Russia on the invitation of Catherine the Great. Being

German herself, she knew these hard-working people could survive, even thrive, on the Steppes of Russia, where up until her time cossacks had roamed, wild and nomadic. She offered them free land, religious tolerance, and freedom from conscription into military service. The Steppes, these Russian Great Plains, were difficult—what plains are not?—but with wheat that could be planted in the fall, and could winter the terrible blizzards, and could be harvested before the season of drought, these people thrived as Catherine expected they would. At least until conditions in Russia began to change: taxes increased, and Russian German young men were being forced into military service. By the 1870s, however, the Santa Fe and other railroads were looking for hard-working farmers to settle the Great Plains of Kansas. Since the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe was the owner, by land grant, of alternate sections along each mile of laid track, and since business would not thrive unless people traveled out by rail, and goods traveled back to the great centers of commerce, the railroad sent recruiters to the Volga region of Russia. The state of Kansas

offered these peace-loving people freedom from service in the Kansas militia (later National Guard), and the United States allowed for conscientious objection. The Russian Germans (Catholic, Lutheran, Mennonite) came to Kansas. (Today Kansas has more conscientious objectors per capita than any other state.) And, although winter wheat had been planted in Kansas before their arrival, the story persists that Russian Germans brought with them the hard red winter wheat, sometimes called Turkey Red, that made Kansas the wheat state it is. Perhaps the myth underlines the facts of their hard work, their past adaptation to the conditions of the Plains, and the Kansas need to make wheat farmers seem heroic, fabled, storied.

Wheat has its story. And, it is storied in Kansas literature as well as in Kansas soil. In some ways, it is the story of risk. As one of the characters in Edna Walker Chandler's *Chaff in the Wind* thinks to herself: "Wheat farmers are a bunch of gamblers. Just gamblers. They're used to taking long chances. Maybe if I had the soul of a gambler I'd like it, too." The risk starts when a Kansas field is broken and sown with winter wheat in the fall. I'll borrow some lines from Elmer Suderman, a Mennonite poet, from his collection of poems *What Can We Do Here?*:

What can we do but walk,  
walk, walk on and on  
breaking sod no man  
has ever broken before?;

and,

The wide country was nothing  
...  
and nothing became something,  
became land, our land,  
ours to break the sod, and harrow  
and plant and harvest  
Turkey Red hard winter wheat.

All through the winter a thick green scurf of new growth sits in the field. If a farmer is lucky, the wheat has grown enough to lie dormant without harm through the punishing cold, but has not grown so much that it has begun to joint (send out the stems that will hold the head of wheat, the seed, the grain). This hardy winter wheat can even be grazed by cattle; after all, wheat is nothing more than cultivated grass. Ideally, it is covered from time to time with insulating snow, and the young roots thrive on this best

moisture, the slow melt, drop by drop, into the soil, with little runoff. The green of wheat in the spring is almost a kind of buoyancy. In Mela Meisner Lindsay's *The White Lamb*, the vision of wheat is coupled with the birth of a first son. The mother says,

Here, from my bed, I watch the morning gild the sky. I gaze out over the tender wheat field and see the green rills run straight to the horizon. The year has a good beginning! In its freshness the dust and ashes of other years are forgotten, blown away by the odorous breezes of a new spring.

If the wheat does well through the rest of a spring, it joints, stems, heads, and seeds all on schedule, changing color from a very bright green, to greenish gold, to pure gold: America's "amber waves of grain."

Herbicides, pesticides, and prayer have kept it from plagues like rust, from pests like green bugs, from the arbitrary and inevitable hailstorms that can strip a field or lay the wheat down to the ground, making it impossible to harvest. And all of this happens before the usually punishing heat and drought of a Kansas August, which would wreak havoc on any spring-planted strain of wheat.

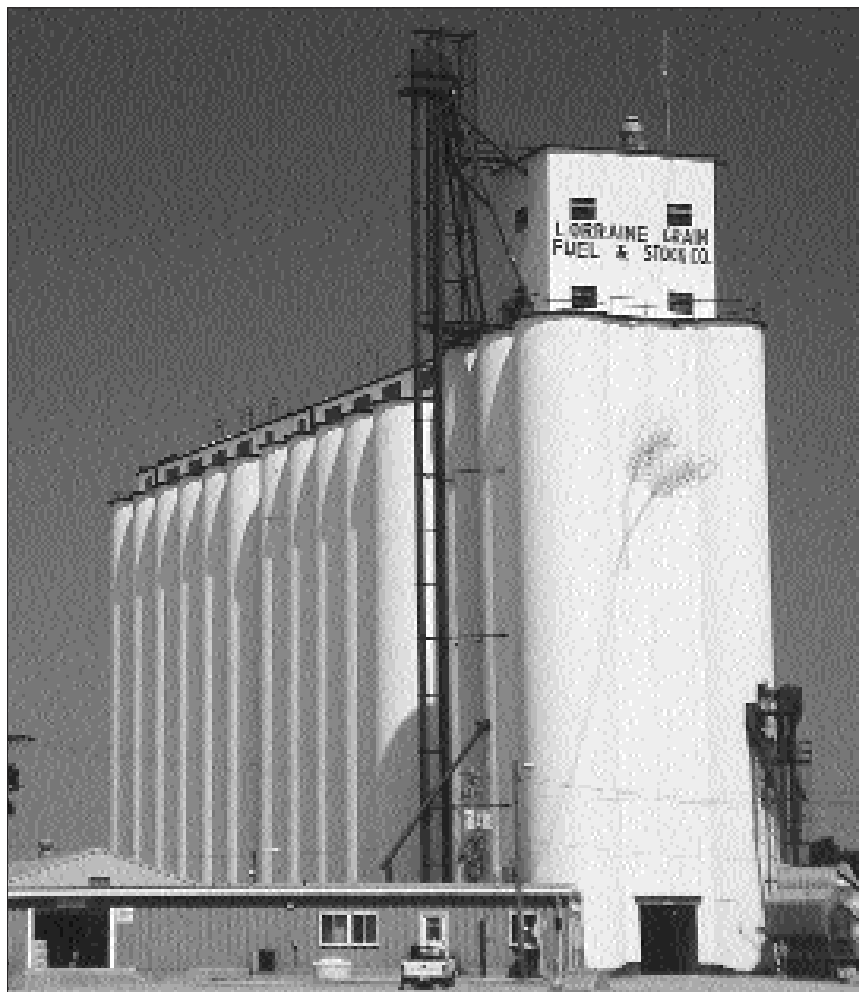
Of course, sometimes even prayer won't help. In John Ise's *Sod and Stubble*, passage after passage reads like this one, describing 1888:

Dry weather set in early. The wheat clung tenaciously to life through April and May; but early in June, the chinch bugs invaded the fields, and in a few days the beleaguered stalks crumpled to the ground. Henry had hoped to mow it for cattle feed, if it did not make a crop worth harvesting, but it was completely ruined before he realized what was happening.

Ironically, it is this same hot, dry weather (minus the chinch bugs) that is important to the last ripening of wheat. Kansans like to tell the joke about three lifelong friends, close to death, who decide to be cremated together. Although they spent their childhoods in Kansas, two have gone away to live, one in Colorado, one in California; only one stayed, and he became a wheat farmer. Well, they put the three of them in the crematorium, and after half a day the Coloradan is burnt to the bone. The Californian lasts a full day. But after three days, when they open up the oven again, the Kansan sits up and says, "Another day of this good heat and we'll be ready to harvest the wheat!"

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*From their vantage point, gleaming white elevators follow the progress of harvest, welcoming the bounty. Lorraine, Ellsworth County, 1990s.*



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**I**f heat is the necessary final touch, then rain storms, particularly with hail, are the enemy. In *Chaff in the Wind*, John Halgren works furiously against the weather:

He had to run a double crew that summer, for the wheat was so heavy, and it went down fast. Every day the clouds rolled up thick and greenish blue, threatening rains that would lay the grain to the ground, or shatter it out of the heads, or worse yet, split the stalks and beat them to the ground, their heads empty and fruitless. He worked his men and his horses to the limit, but none of them worked harder than he himself.

The harvest itself, although hard work, provides an exhilarating satisfaction. Emanuel and Marcet Haldeman-Julius, in their novel *Dust*, show Rose Wade remembering both the hard work and its reward as she experiences her last harvest before selling her farm:

Later there had been the stroll down to the field in the shade of the wandering afternoon, to find out what time the men would be in for supper; and the sheer delight of breathing in the pungent smell of the straw as it came flying from the funnel, looking, with the sinking sun shining through it, like a million bees swarming from a hive, while the red-brown grain gushed, a lush stream, into the waiting wagon.

And *Sod and Stubble's* Henry Ise, sick with cancer, finds particular satisfaction in his last wheat harvest, circa 1900:

Perched upon the high seat, he drove the binder bravely around the field, contentedly watching the yellow grain fall thick upon the canvas, studying the bundles that fell into the carrier, to see if the knots were properly tied, listening, in the steady hum of the machine, for any hint of loose bearings or need of oil. . . . Scarcely a breeze stirred. The sun beat down hot from above, and glared back from the white stub-

ble, while the line of the horizon across the valley flowed and danced with the waves of heat.

It was very hot the day I flew over harvest. Not a cloud in the sky, not a high wind, but enough heat when the plane took off, around three o'clock, that the small craft bucked and tilted, rode hard through pockets of heat, dropped and shook and wavered enough to shudder the plane, and my stomach. At times, I'm sure, my face was as green as the alfalfa fields below. Only when the air cooled and the plane steadied did my face return to its more natural color, a color more like wheat, ready to harvest.

From the air, the intensity of wheat harvest multiplies well beyond the individual farmer. Farmer after farmer, on farm after farm, was bringing in the harvest. Field after field, mile after mile, county after county was contributing to the 433.2 million bushels. In late June and early July Kansas is populated with a world of combines. Custom crews start in Texas early in the summer and end up on the Great Plains of Canada by season's end. They are always in a hurry, working from mid-morning (as soon as the night's moisture and morning dew has lifted from the wheat) through afternoon and evening, through dusk, even into the night, by headlight, until moisture makes wheat too wet, too tough to cut, and the combiners and truck drivers head to a motel and the mechanics take over, preparing the machinery for another long day. We often saw as many as three and four combines per field, moving as deliberately as steam-powered riverboats, but with the paddle wheels in front, welcoming the grain.

The extra help at harvest time has always meant extra work for everyone, but particularly for women. Rose Wade, in *Dust*, remembers:

how often she had toiled and sweated over those three days of dinners and suppers for twenty-two men. Now she recalled, with an aching tightness about her heart, how delicious had been her relaxation, when, the dinner dishes washed, the table reset and the kitchen in scrupulous order with the last fly vanquished, she and Nellie had luxuriated in that exquisite sense of leisure that only women know who have passed triumphantly through a heavy morning's work and have everything ready for the evening.

In *Chaff in the Wind*, John Halgren makes the mistake of teasing his wife about the extra work:

"And what, my fróken, do I pay you? For cooking, and all that?" he joked.

"Stacker wages," she said promptly, as if the answer had been on the end of her tongue for a long time.

He ends up paying her for women's work, learning a lesson in the differences between Old Country and American harvest. If the story of wheat has been successful, of course, everyone gets paid in one way or another.

The contemporary Kansas harvest I flew over taught me a wheat aesthetic, too. The combines seem to follow the same erratic pattern as the sowing created the fall before. The combines cut swaths, like kids drawing, retracing lines remembered from the year before, or the year before that. The field turns amber where the wheat is cut, remains a shimmering gold where it is not yet cut. The patterns are intricate: sometimes, when the combines miss small stands of wheat, they leave the field with parentheses in the corners of the section. Sometimes, the freshly cut wheat stalks stand at uneven heights—as when a painter uses very thick paint and a broad brush. Color, pattern, and texture turn every field into an impressionistic canvas: an art of production.

Once full, combines head to the trucks. Kernels of wheat gush from the strong arm of the combine's auger into the empty bed of a two- or three-ton truck. These grain trucks, like combines, are everywhere, filled, or being filled with grain at the edge of a field, or kicking up dust on the road heading back to a field. Those roads, in the most level parts of northwestern Kansas, are absolutely straight lines on the land. In north-central Kansas, they waver, undulating with the rises and drops of hills, humps, run-offs, drainages.

From above, the excitement, the race along those roads to and from—the complete urgency of harvest—is wonderful to watch. Trucks wait at the side of a field. Combines wait for a truck to return. Trucks idle in line at the grain elevator. The elevators fill with wheat that has been weighed and graded. And railroad box cars wait on the other side of the elevator, for whenever it might be time to ship grain out.

The grain elevator is a mighty icon. Note the beginning of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*:

The land is flat, and the views are awesomely extensive; horses, herds of cattle, a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples are visible long before a traveller reaches them.

When Joshua Logan, the great film director, came to Kansas to film William Inge's *Picnic* in 1955, he did not come to the southeast Kansas of Inge's childhood. He chose, instead, to show the open country around Hutchinson and to change



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*Massive combines fill waiting trucks with golden cargo. Leebrick farm, Rawlins County, 1998.*

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the livelihood of the richest family in town from oil to grain. Logan shot several scenes in and around Hutchinson elevators, grain gushing everywhere. And the camera takes the climb to the top, the cabin of the elevator, for a panoramic view of the rich central Kansas landscape. Logan knew exactly what he wanted to project as the heart of Kansas in what was only the second film ever to be made in the state. And after being in the cabin of a plane, looking out over harvest, I understand his impulse.

Mingo, north of Oakley, is almost nothing *but* grain elevators. Railroad tracks trace crooked lines between elevators. At the Zurich elevator, three huge trucks, and one smaller, wait their turns. The grain elevator issues each trucker a ticket with the bushels, weights, and moisture content of the harvest. The elevator is go-between from truck to rail car. It acts as storage while farmers wait through another long gamble: wheat futures, and deciding when to sell.

Once, I watched harvest from the ground, in the fields next to the farmhouse I rented ten miles southwest of Lawrence. The Florys were Dunkards by faith: Protestant, Anabaptist, black hats, beards without moustaches—like Amish without the prohibition against technology. Their combine made the slow circles around my house, scattering the chaff behind, dust everywhere, swirling into the sky on the little tornadoes we in the Midwest call “dust devils.”

After they had gathered the golden-brown wheat and emptied it from combine into truck, I went over to ask about the crop. One of them climbed up on the three-ton truck, reached into the bed for a handful, and brought it to me. He let it run through blunt fingers into his other hand, smelled it, chewed it. He said it was a good year. When he gave me the handful, I felt it, smelled it, chewed it: still, I couldn't tell how he knew it was a good year—weight? dryness? sweet smell? sharp-tasting skin?

I asked if he would take it all to the elevator, or just how much they saved for personal use. "We buy flour," he told me.

"I buy wheat berries," I said. I had a small mill, and liked to bake with freshly ground flour.

His eyes widened, as though not quite sympathetic with someone who went to extra, and unnecessary, work. But then he smiled. "Go get a sack," he said. "You've got an empty fifty-pound feed sack in that chicken house, I'll bet."

When I returned to the truck Mr. Flory was already knee-deep in wheat. I handed up the sack and he scooped it to the brim with enough wheat to last me a year. He would not accept money.

And what had been a good year for wheat became a good year for food. I baked breads and rolls and biscuits. I rolled out pie crusts and egg noodles. I mixed thin batters for pancakes and crepes and thick batters for tortillas and crackers. I barely cracked the wheat for hot cereal and for tabouli. I thickened sauces and gravies. For a year I lived in a place and was nurtured, quite literally, by what had surrounded me, green to gold, from September to July. Which is, after all, one of the pleasures of living in the Midwest, so close to harvest.

A wheat field, of course, does not stop being a wheat field in July. After the gathering of grain, the earth is not abandoned until the next planting. When I flew over harvest I saw that farmers often work the stubble back into the ground, for mulch and moisture retention. Some bale the straw, and small bales lie scattered in the field like bricks. Or, if they've been gathered into those great rounds that always remind me of jelly rolls, then the huge rolled bales simply squat, looking like they want to become permanent features of the landscape. Other farmers burn the stubble. I saw huge flames near Beverly, just northeast of Salina, racing across a field toward a line of black, back-burned stubble that would keep the fire from spreading. Smoke rose from other fields all during my aerial view of the harvest. Rex Buchanan, of the University of Kansas, let me know that farmers burned more fields than usual the year I saw it from the air: a wet year had made them worry about weeds and grass.

And where there wasn't wheat, other crops, still green, lay below: soybeans, alfalfa, milo. Soybeans were thicken-

ing in the fields. Alfalfa was ready for a second cut into hay. Milo—distinguishable from the air from soybeans because of the more distinct rows—had not started to turn color, in that process where the head goes from green, to lime, to gold, to rust. West of Oakley, where irrigation circles dominate the landscape, I saw some circles that were half wheat, still being harvested, while the other half was bright green with new crop.

At the end of the flying day, heading back toward Salina, I saw the wheat harvest, still intense, at dusk. Just south of Plainville, in Rooks County, the plane made two passes over shadow-laden fields. The combines threw elongated images of themselves on the stubbled field. Each swath of cut wheat contained the shadow of what was still to be cut. As the sun went down, everything—combine, wheat, truck, elevator—lengthened, doubled up, became both what it was *and* what it could project onto the earth beside it.

I felt the same way, projecting something onto harvest—projecting a calm, a satisfaction, a feeling that, at least for these people, these fields, this time, everything was as it should be: harvested, stored, valuable. And storied with the double lens of literature, as well. I thought, too, of the temporary calm created in me by the words of Kansas poet William Stafford in his poem celebrating the wheat harvest, from *Stories That Could Be True*:

#### Universe Is One Place

Crisis they call it?—when  
when the gentle wheat leans at the combine and  
and the farm girl brings cool jugs wrapped in burlap  
slapping at her legs?

We think—drinking cold water  
water looking at the sky—  
*Sky is home, universe is one place.*  
Crisis? City folks make

Make such a stir.  
Farm girl away through the wheat.

Sky may not be permanent home, but it's a fine place to be if you want to view the universe of wheat in Kansas, Midway U.S.A., the Wheat State: Breadbasket. 