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# A PLACE OF BOOM AND BUST: Hard Times Come to Kansas

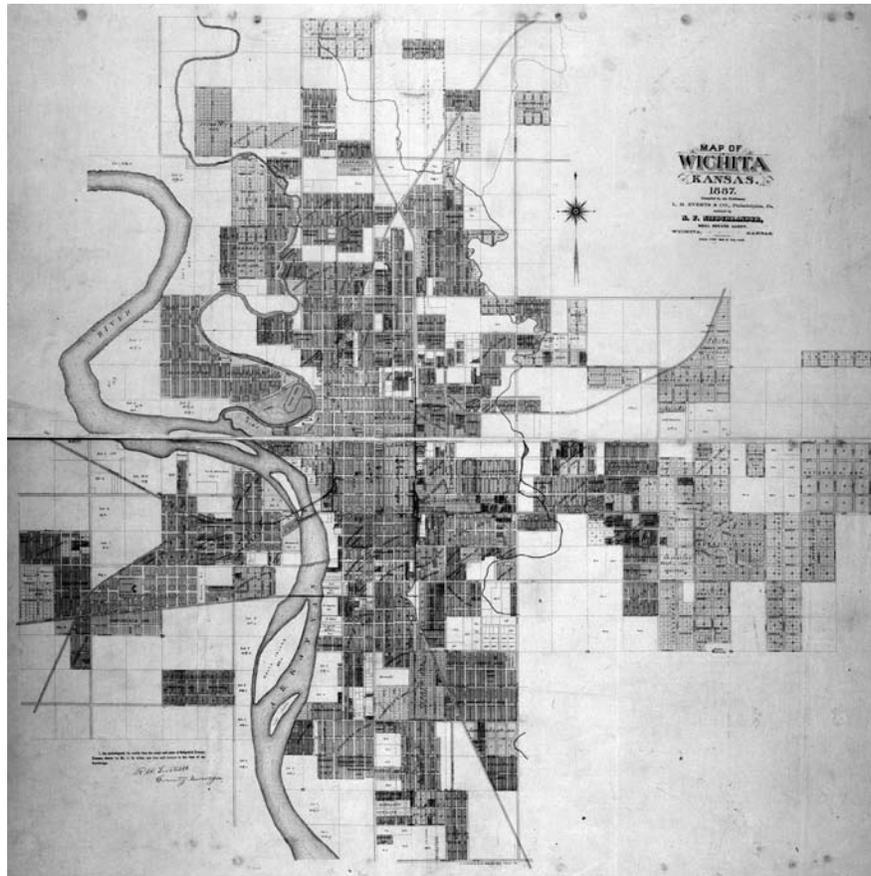
*by Craig Miner*

**K**ansas is a land of cycles, or what historian Robert W. Richmond called “a land of contrasts,” and adjusting to these is part of being a Kansan.<sup>1</sup> Among the most prominent of Kansas cycles have been the economic ones, usually driven by a combination of weather and speculation. The up times reflected the ebullient optimism of Kansans about the future of their state, while the down times tested patience and persistence. Some called overinvestment in the future greed or gullibility, but it seemed bred in the bone with those who stuck with the prairie and survived to prosper. One needed a long-term perspective, as the short-term turns could be extreme.

Kansas economic cycles include the great drought that came at about the time of statehood, the difficulties surrounding the national Panic of 1873, and the famous Dust Bowl cycle of the 1930s, following too closely the agricultural prosperity of the World War I era. Imagine the planning difficulties involved in wheat’s selling for nearly \$3 a bushel in the late teens and then declining to twenty-five cents a bushel in the early 1930s; or that for years a bushel of wheat and a barrel of oil sold for the same price. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, while production of wheat remained more steady due to scientific farming, wheat prices ranged from \$3.50 a bushel (hardly more than it was in 1918) to more than \$12 a bushel, showing that cycles remained. But no doubt the champion roller coaster ride for the Kansas economy took place with the boom and bust of the late 1880s and early 1890s. Kansas in that period became nationally known, first in a positive and then in a negative way. An entire national third party movement, the People’s Party, arose largely out of the Kansas troubles of this time. A look at how Kansans adjusted to that period, therefore, provides an especially telling case study of how Kansas culture has been affected by cycles.

*The late Craig Miner, who died in September 2010, was the Willard W. Garvey Distinguished Professor of Business History at Wichita State University and the author of numerous books and articles, including West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865–1890 (University Press of Kansas, 1986), and its sequel, Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890–1940 (University Press of Kansas, 2006); Harvesting the High Plains: John Kriss and the Business of Wheat Farming, 1920–1950 (University Press of Kansas, 1998); Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000 (University Press of Kansas, 2002); Seeding Civil War: Kansas in the National News, 1854–1858 (University Press of Kansas, 2008); and posthumously A Most Magnificent Machine: America Adopts the Railroad, 1825–1862 (University Press of Kansas, 2010). Raised and educated in Wichita, Kansas, except for his PhD, which was taken at the University of Colorado, Craig truly was the “dean of Kansas history,” and a faithful friend and supporter of this journal and the Kansas Historical Society. He finished work on the present article, his last, just weeks before his death.*

1. Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts*, 4th ed. (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1999; Saint Charles, Mo.: Forum Press, 1974).



*This 1887 map of Wichita was produced by a Philadelphia company with the assistance of N. F. Niederlander, a Wichita real estate agent, right at the beginning of the boom that turned to bust within three short but eventful years. In the spring of 1887, a Topeka journalist wished Wichita well, but called the boom there "misguided," insisting that there must be an end to the "fungus growth" that had given Wichita 280 additions to the original townsite. And a Missouri man reported that the Wichita boom was a huge fraud. The seven hundred real estate agents in the town had learned "by necessity, to lie unmercifully."*

In the winter of 1890 an eastern editor commented: "With a frightfully corrupt Legislature, and no market for her corn, the State of Kansas is not beginning an excessively happy New Year." If proof were needed that "pride goeth before the fall," it could have been found in the economic boom and bust that characterized Kansas from 1887, when the volume of real estate transfers in Kansas City, Wichita, and Topeka were among the top ten in the nation, to a painful nadir in the 1890s, when the state's population declined in most areas, and some imagined that western Kansas had returned to desert. Under the headline "Kansas Burning Up," the *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican* in August 1890 documented that "that which the Kansas farmers have feared has come to pass." Prairie fires broke out spontaneously through western Kansas and burned what the sun had not already destroyed. Standing corn and grass had "been swept as clean as a floor, and the blackened earth presents a most dismal sight. Vast stretches of country where only a few weeks ago all was clothed in living green are now covered with ashes." A correspondent to a Pittsburgh newspaper thought Kansas, "the once bright star of the West," was in eclipse. The state was a drowning man clutching at a straw. New Haven agreed. There was, a reporter there said of the exodus from western Kansas, "absolutely nothing in this country to keep the people alive."<sup>2</sup> Hard times had come to Kansas.

2. *Atchison Champion*, August 12, 1890; *Dispatch* (Pittsburg[h], Penn.) quoted in the *Kansas City Star*, September 24, 1890; *New Haven* (Conn.) *Register*, October 1, 1890; the eastern editor quoted in the *Atchison Champion*, January 9, 1890.



*According to one writer in Wheeling, West Virginia, in some Kansas towns "every other building is said to be a real estate office." One such enterprise, pictured here in 1889 as part of a substantial business block on North Main Street in Wichita, advertised money to loan to farm and city folk alike. In Wichita, like in "nearly every one of the new growing western towns . . . publishing abroad the wonderful statement that it will soon be the rival of Chicago, . . . land prices are boomed way up beyond intrinsic value and beyond the prices in substantial Eastern cities."*

became bitter in the mouth of residents of the Sunflower State.

The word boom once applied to a loud sound, a part of a sailing ship, a jam of logs, or to the progress of a ship before the wind. In 1878 it received a new coinage, describing first enthusiasm for a political candidate and then rapid urban development. One North Carolina editor called the word "boom," the "grossest form of modern slang." But the growth of certain western cities required a new word to describe it.

The 1880s real estate boom was national, breaking out prominently in Birmingham, Duluth, Tacoma, and Los Angeles. Certain Kansas towns also received much attention. A man from Ogden, Utah, who spent the winter of 1886–1887 in Kansas, reported on returning that "portions of Kansas are fairly wild, and are booming to such a high pitch that scarcely anyone there can keep their head. Little towns are fairly alive with people, and real estate agents and real estate investors are omnipresent and almost omnivorous." Wichita became famous, not only as the fastest growing city in the United States in 1887, but as the city that had most overreached. "The tales from Wichita, Kan.," wrote a reporter in Texas, "read like those of the Arabian Nights."<sup>4</sup>

The contrasts were painful. Wichita had thrived on slaughtering hogs, and was hoping for the success of a rail car manufacturing plant. By the middle 1890s it lost one-third of its claimed population and 50 percent

The building of a city, wrote an Omaha editor, and the promotion of a real estate bubble by speculators were two different things. Omaha had survived the cycle well, growing steadily from 33,709 in 1880 to 134,742 in 1890, and finally outdistancing even Kansas City. Topeka could claim that Lincoln, Nebraska, was unsophisticated, "a small country town, half built," but had to admit that Lincoln had grown 200 percent in the decade and was larger than Topeka and Wichita too. High lot prices had left Kansas City and Wichita, and the Omaha journalist was contemptuous of them: "The same story can be told of every city where the winds of the Great American Desert have gathered in a gas-bag boom."<sup>3</sup> The very word "boom," so recently and so eagerly applied to miraculous growth, now

3. *Omaha Daily World-Herald*, July 7, 1890; *Topeka Weekly Capital*, July 10, 1890; H. F. McIntosh in *Morning World-Herald* (Omaha), August 22, 1890.

4. *Salt Lake* (Salt Lake City, Utah) *Herald*, March 31, 1887; *Milwaukee* (Wisc.) *Sentinel*, July 4, 1887; *Fort Worth* (Ft. Worth, Tex.) *Daily Gazette*, March 18, 1887; North Carolina editor, quoted in *Raleigh* (N.C.) *Register*, September 2, 1885. See also *The Century Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Century Co., 1889–1891), 3:626; *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 2:399–400; *St. Louis* (Mo.) *Globe-Democrat*, May 9, 1887.

of its assessed valuation. Kansas City thought that its annual Exposition would draw tourists. But in 1889 the Expo company was bankrupt, and the annual exhibition of industrial wares cancelled. Already in 1882 Topeka was on the boom, “decidedly brilliant and metropolitan like,” one observer said. The only concern was that “a good many branches of business are overdone.” One wag warned in the spring of 1887 that Topeka with its suburbs and additions was becoming too large. “A certain portion of Kansas should be reserved for agricultural purposes.”<sup>5</sup> There was no such worry a year or so later.

Agriculture experienced the same wrenching ride. Medicine Lodge and Ness City constructed plants for rendering sorghum sugar from area crops. In 1889 counties had to sue to recover their bond aid when investigators discovered that the sugar companies had mixed cane sugar in their promotional samples, and that the process did not work. The Ness City Sugar Mill burned to the ground in 1890, probably the result of arson and insurance fraud. Garden City thought ditch irrigation from the Arkansas River, and the tapping of the underflow by wells, would result in a truck gardening bonanza. But by the time the ambitious 300-mile Amazon irrigation canal system opened in 1889, Colorado had already diverted the river flow upstream and crop prices had bottomed. Rainfall fell, as did wheat yields and prices, all by more than half. The population figures for many western Kansas counties never again reached the levels they had touched in 1886 and 1887.<sup>6</sup>

Kansas, which had added 523 miles of track to its 9,000-mile railroad system in 1888, saw only 50 miles of new construction in 1890. An Atchison editor commented: “The State would not greatly suffer if not a mile of new railway should be built in the next five years.” An atlas of Kansas, published in 1887 by a Philadelphia company and weighing more than twenty pounds, found few buyers.<sup>7</sup> Seldom had a region suffered such a reverse so quickly.

There was recrimination. Newspaper columns were a litany of woe from a people whose only sin seemed to have been too much hope. Prophets of doom had emerged at the height of things. They were dismissed as “kickers” or as “old fogies.” But their comments were often prescient. There was reminding of the great “panics” of U.S. history, particularly those of 1837, 1857, and 1873, and their roots in irresponsible speculation and the misuse of credit. A Chicago paper warned that prosperity brought

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5. *Kansas City Star*, May 14, July 19, 1889; *Atchison Globe*, December 2, 1882; *Atchison Daily Globe*, April 25, 1887. For the Wichita boom and bust generally, see Craig Miner, *Wichita the Magic City: An Illustrated History* (Wichita, Kans.: Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum Association, 1988), 45–92.

6. *Atchison Champion*, December 11, 1889; Craig Miner, *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865–1890* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 179, 181, 228–29; *Atchison Daily Champion*, January 4, 1889; Craig Miner, *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890–1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 11; Anne M. Marvin, “A Grave-Yard of Hopes’: Irrigation and Boosterism in Southwest Kansas, 1880–1890,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 18 (Spring 1996): 36–51. The source for crop and weather statistics is the *Biennial Reports of the State Board of Agriculture, Kansas*. A complete statistical accounting from 1862 forward is found in George Ham and Robin Higham, eds., *The Rise of the Wheat State: A History of Kansas Agriculture, 1861–1986* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 1987), 51.

7. *Atchison Daily Champion*, January 18, October 18, 1889; June 21, 1887; *Official State Atlas of Kansas* (Philadelphia, Penn.: L. H. Leverts & Co., 1887).

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“restlessness . . . with sure methods,” and the *Rocky Mountain News* characterized real estate booming as an “infection.”

Prices were too high, and subdivisions extended too far out into the country. “This is dealing in futures,” wrote a Kansas City man in the fall of 1885, “to an extent which makes the prospect for profit on the part of the purchase of to-day very poor.” Many railroads and subdivisions existed only on paper. It was a “golden vision,” but without proper precautions it might turn out to be a dream that put “a premium on trickery and invites . . . disaster.” An Atchison man wrote: “I have come to the conclusion that the town is in confusion, and our booming is an ulcer that conceals our hungry bones.”<sup>8</sup>

Money seemed the sole determinant of status. Culture and “quality of life” took a second seat. Kansas City, wrote one boomer, was “too busy to be handsome.” The Kansas City resident’s “heart fills with joy as he picks himself out of a newly excavated sewer trench, or falls over a pile of building material. These are the emblems of the city’s great prosperity.” At Topeka a visitor in 1886 saw streets 130 feet wide that ran “into endless prairies where only the imagination can follow.” Here often was “simply indescribable” mud, so deep that crossing the street was “like wading in a marsh of glue.” Humorist Bill Nye, describing boomtown Wichita, noted that capitalists could venture out into the woods on the street car and return with a brace of pheasants and a couple of corner lots.

Not everyone agreed these were signs of sustainable progress. The Kansas City superintendent of buildings decried in 1886 the paucity of municipal structures. The city hall was a “shambles,” and the jail “would be most scornfully rejected as a make-shift for hogs or dogs.” The public library was an embarrassment.<sup>9</sup> So what if public debt and taxes were low?

There was concern early about the practice of selling options on lots. This allowed people to control the property for a short time with a small down payment, hoping to sell it quickly at a profit. When prices declined, these buyers would panic, trying to unload their investments before a second payment became due. Marshall Murdock, editor of the *Wichita Eagle*, wrote an editorial in February 1887 titled “Call a Halt.” “When men abandon legitimate trade to embark in a craze of any character,” he opined, “the end is not far off.”

The West was a land of hyperbole. “It is a notorious fact,” said a writer in Wheeling, West Virginia, “that nearly every one of the new growing western towns is publishing abroad the wonderful statement that it will soon be the rival of Chicago. . . . In some of the Kansas towns every other building is said to be a real estate office. Land prices are boomed away up beyond intrinsic value and beyond the prices in sub-

8. *Atchison Daily Globe*, February 16, 1886; letter from suburban property owner in the *Kansas City Star*, January 19, 22, 1886; *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago), January 4, 1882; *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, Colo.), March 22, 1885. A typical financial history lesson is in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (New York), October 11, 1884.

9. *Kansas City Star*, March 17, 1886; September 21, 1887; and March 4, 1886; letter from Topeka, quoted in (Madison) *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 19, 1886; Nye quoted in Craig Miner, ed., *The Wichita Reader: A Collection of Writings About a Prairie City* (Wichita, Kans.: Wichita Eagle and Beacon Publishing Co., 1992), 17–18.

stantial Eastern cities." A collection of boom slang published in the *Los Angeles Times* defined a "chump" as a man who bought land for a home.<sup>10</sup>

There were pointed jokes. It seems that a stranger asked an Eskimo in the Arctic how far it was to the North Pole. A half-mile, he was told. Could he not go any further north? No. "Well," said the visitor, "I am laying off a new addition to Kansas City, and that'll cut it off rather short." Wichitans were said to

refuse to wash themselves because they could not afford to waste the valuable dirt they had accumulated on their bodies. One joke had it that a Kansas man bought a New York City brownstone rather than a boom city Kansas dugout because it was cheaper. There were poems:

There is a town as dead as a tomb;  
It died from the cause of too much boom!  
It was boomed by the papers and boomed by the people,  
till prices were hoisted as high as a steeple.  
They plastered the land with mortgages deep,  
and burdened the town with taxes so steep.  
They paid a big bonus to build a new road,  
and laid for the suckers on whom to unload.  
But the cash they snaked in from their victims so rank,  
was all gobbled up by the "3 percent" bank.  
Its officers skipped while the boom was still high,  
and left the poor victims to suffer and sigh.

The farm that a year ago grew potatoes was now a "mount," or a "park," or a "place," or a "height."<sup>11</sup> It seemed ludicrous.

Then there was the famous Kansas weather, newsworthy for its violence. In May 1886 there was a serious tornado in Kansas City, which left more than thirty dead, including a number of schoolchildren. Drought and hot winds made the news regularly from the western end of the state, as did frequent flooding in the east. Added to this was news of western Kansas county seat wars and frequent lynchings in the state, neither providing evidence of the high civilization the boom publications advertised.<sup>12</sup>

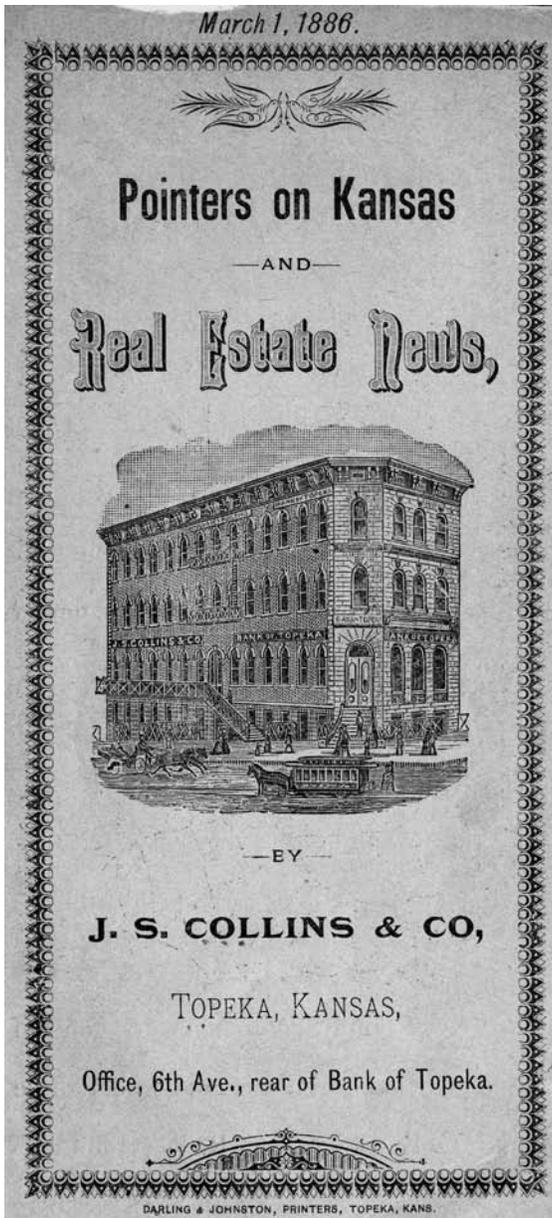


*Boom time Kansas, like other western locales that built themselves up on the risky foundations of hyperbole, became the butt of pointed jokes, including one in which an investor bought a New York City brownstone rather than a dugout in the Sunflower State because it was cheaper. The harsh life offered by Kansas's "soddies," along with the state's famously harsh weather and its bloody county seat wars, did not provide evidence of the high civilization boom publications advertised. Nonetheless, there were those who stuck to the land, such as those settlers pictured here outside their dugout in Finney County.*

10. *Wheeling (W.Va.) Register*, March 27, 1887; *Los Angeles (Calif.) Times*, August 28, 1887; *Kansas City Star*, May 1, 1886; *Atchison Daily Globe*, July 9, 1886; Murdock quoted in Miner, *The Magic City*, 69.

11. Poem quoted in *Galveston (Tex.) Daily News*, July 10, 1887; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, October 7, 1886; *Lincoln (Nebr.) Journal*, quoted in the *Atchison Daily Globe*, December 10, 1887; *Kingman Courier*, quoted in *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, February 21, 1887; *Omaha (Nebr.) World*, quoted in *Bismarck (D.T.) Daily Tribune*, June 15, 1887.

12. *Duluth (Minn.) Tribune*, May 14, 1886; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 16, 1886; *Daily Inter Ocean (Chicago, Ill.)*, July 18, 1887; *Atchison Daily Champion*, October 24, 1886; June 9, 1889; *Daily News (San Jose, Calif.)*, November 10, 1886; *Sun (Baltimore, Md.)*, March 7, 1887.



At the height of the boom this promotional booklet, which listed improved farms and city property for sale, described Topeka as “the finest, and destined to be the greatest city in the West.” And, it noted, Kansas had grown in just a few short years “from a wild and bleak desert to its present proud and lofty position.” By May 1890, however, a Chicago journalist observed that there had been nothing in the general commercial or financial situation in Kansas to justify the “ephemeral flurry” that was the Kansas boom. There remained fine buildings, but those “very buildings in their splendour,” one easterner wrote in October 1890, “seem built by men who forget that they are mortal.”

Municipal debt piled up in anticipation of growth. “The average Kansan,” wrote an editor there, “seems to regard bond-voting as a recreation, and is ready to engage in the play whenever it is proposed.” The bust, which arrived in 1888, led to more serious thinking. There were reports of starvation in western Kansas, and trains were sent there with relief items to help people through the winter. Farm mortgages, which had been characterized as instruments of optimism, now seemed burdens of desperation and despair. Kansas mortgage and foreclosure statistics provided regular fare for the national press in the late 1880s and early 1890s.<sup>13</sup>

Kansas newspapers tried to correct misimpressions, arguing that farmers were just ordinary capitalists making responsible use of credit. Editors elsewhere were less charitable. A headline in Denver’s *Rocky Mountain News* read: “A Grand Hegira from the Land of Grasshoppers, Drouth and Mortgages.” Often the slogan was quoted: “In God We Trusted; in Kansas we Busted.” A San Francisco writer on “the curious condition of Western Kansas” thought that the banks sold improvements and farms to an endless succession of tenderfeet who did not understand the odds of succeeding on a Kansas farm. Western Kansans recognized the beginning of a new cycle. People there turned to subsistence farming, to stock raising, and to rainmakers.<sup>14</sup>

Blaming bankers and mortgage companies for the crash was paralleled by blaming Prohibition and woman suffrage. Kansas instituted constitutional prohibition of liquor in 1881. It passed a Municipal Suffrage Act in 1887. Both initiatives, products of the unique brand of liberal Republicanism practiced in Kansas, were cutting-edge and controversial. It was natural to look for reasons to attack the two Kansas reforms. Hard times provided one.

Prohibition was pilloried on the grounds that it was hypocritical. There was also loss of revenue. A Wichita writer, who favored “resubmission” of the Kansas amendment, claimed there were only two hundred real estate agents left in Kansas City out of the eighteen hundred that had operated a year before. Yet the five thousand saloons in a city with no Prohibition kept revenue flowing. There were claims, too, that people did not want to move to a state where drinks were not readily available. The *Morning Oregonian* in

Portland called Prohibition “The Farce in Kansas.”<sup>15</sup>

Editor Murdock in Wichita was famous for his hatred of ambitious and political women. “The thirsting of women after political privileges,” he

13. See, for example, *Galveston Daily News*, September 1, 1890; on starvation and relief, see Miner, *Next Year Country*, 13; and Chicago’s *Daily Inter Ocean*, October 10, 1889; and for the editor’s comment on municipal debt, see *Atchison Daily Champion*, March 2, 1889.

14. *Rocky Mountain News*, March 3, 1889; *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco, Calif.), April 19, 1889; Miner, *Next Year Country*, 25–28; for efforts to correct misimpressions, see *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 5, 1888; *Boston (Mass.) Daily Advertiser*, September 10, 1888; *Atchison Daily Champion*, January 10, September 21, 1888.

15. *Los Angeles Times*, December 24, 1887; resubmission discussed in the *Atchison Daily Champion*, July 4, 1889; for a Wichita counter-argument see speech of H. W. Lewis, quoted in the *Topeka Weekly Capital*, December 12, 1890; *Morning (Portland) Oregonian*, July 14, 1889; on Kansas reforms, see *Galveston Daily News*, July 27, 1887.

wrote, "is simply an uncontrollable desire for notoriety." Many trivialized women's new role. "Now that Oskaloosa, Kas., has elected a woman mayor and a city council composed of women," speculated a Chicago newspaper, there would be ordinances "regulating the amount of sugar used in making quince preserves," and "a special committee to be appointed by the mayor to discover the best method of darning socks." A writer in Milwaukee said that one of the problems causing Kansas to lose its prosperity was a "restless race of reformers," who never gave up no matter how often they failed.<sup>16</sup>

Another alleged cause of the crash was the opening of Oklahoma. The rush to Oklahoma in 1889 was, one man wrote, a form of "emotional insanity." It hurt Kansas. Wichita thought it lost seven thousand people to the Oklahoma rush. "When a man says that the opening of Oklahoma would benefit Kansas," a man in Atchison wrote, "it is reasonably certain that his intelligence could be improved by a trepanning operation which would remove his alleged brain and insert, in its place, a cove oyster."<sup>17</sup>

Of course the root cause of the bust seemed to be overextension, and too much confidence in a confidence game. To drive that lesson home there was no better case study than that of the rise and fall of Wichita. Reflecting on the city's decline, a Wichitan wrote that if people there had known in 1887 what awaited them in 1888 the drugstores would have sold out of poisons. For a time it was wonderful at the "Athletic Ajax of the Aboundful Arkansas." There were forty architects in town "drawing, devising, planning and estimating, and everybody is talking real estate and shouting for Wichita." The streets were filled with people, the hotels and boarding houses were overrun with them, and "every train brings additional scores to swell the boom. Great blocks of buildings are going up, five, six, and seven stories high, not on the principal thoroughfares alone, but on all sides, and there is no end to the demand for mechanics." The town was so heavy with subdivisions that it was nine miles long and six wide with eighteen miles of street railway. A lot with fifty feet of frontage in the business part of the city went for \$50,000. "Prices can't go much higher," the observer said.<sup>18</sup>

There were always doubts about it lasting. A story circulated in the spring of 1887 that an old settler at Wichita sold some of his land for \$30,000, half cash and the rest well secured. When it came time to execute the papers, he asked what the security was on the unpaid balance. Why, the buyer said, the property itself. Oh, no, the seller said. I don't take such security as that. You must give me something I know is worth the amount of the note. A Topeka journalist wished Wichita well, but called the boom

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16. Murdock quoted in the *Atchison Daily Globe*, October 5, 1889; *Kansas City Star*, April 5, 1888; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 6, 1887. See also Rebecca Edwards, "Marsh Murdock and the Wily Women of Wichita: Domesticity Disputed in the Gilded Age," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 25 (Spring 2002): 2-13.

17. *Atchison Daily Champion*, March 6, 1889; on the impact of the land rush, *Evening News* (San Jose, Calif.), February 7, 1889; *Weekly Capital-Commonwealth* (Topeka), February 14, 1889; *Atchison Daily Champion*, March 13, 1889; *Rocky Mountain News*, April 13, 1889; *Cherokee Advocate* (Tahlequah, I.T.), September 25, 1889.

18. *Atchison Daily Champion*, February 23, 1887; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, February 28, 1887; Miner, *The Magic City*, 71.

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But the statistics held. It was said a man sold his dog in Wichita for \$10, invested it in real estate and cleared \$2,300 in two weeks. Real estate transfers in Wichita ran two million dollars a week for four weeks running in the spring of 1887. The crowds came “convinced that there is but one Wichita.” In July Dun & Bradstreet rated Wichita third in the nation in real estate transfers after only New York and Kansas City.<sup>20</sup>

The crash at Wichita came fast and hard. “A boom is a hollow sound or roar,” an Atchison paper noticed in April 1887, “as of waves or cannon, and it ceases as soon as the wind goes down or the powder gives out. . . . In Wichita there was a flash, a great noise, and then came a calm in which one could hear a pin drop.” The census of 1890 gave Wichita a population of 23,735. At the height of the boom in 1887 it had claimed 42,000. The town, jealous Atchison noted in May 1887, “was built largely by the audacity, or if you please, the faith of its founders.” Its two great colleges, Garfield and Fairmount, with their enormous administration buildings and surrounding subdivisions, soon enough stood vacant with birds in their soaring towers. The city had reached too far and spent too much. It had subsidized moving the Burton Car Works to Wichita, mostly to beat Kansas City as a second bidder, and it paid too much. It needed paving and sewers, but they were expensive and involved debt and taxes.<sup>21</sup>

Many had a grudging admiration for the people who had made such a phenomenon out of a “malarious swamp in Kansas.” But in the end Wichita was a laughingstock. George Rogers of New York saw Wichita property advancing at 10 percent a week and bought unimproved land on a streetcar line. The fact that the streetcar company had only one car drawn by a single mule and ran through cornfields where not a single house was seen made no impression on him at the time. He rejected several fair offers for his land and went off to Europe to await the maturing of his fortune. On his return, the cornfield was still a cornfield and the streetcar rails had rusted. The best offer per acre he got for his land towards the end of 1887 was what he had originally paid per foot.<sup>22</sup>

By the time the 1890 census confirmed the dire statistics of decline, Kansas as a whole was comparatively still. Everything had been on the

19. *Atchison Daily Globe*, March 25, 1887; *Topeka Journal*, quoted in *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, March 10, 1887; *Weekly Graphic* (Kirksville, Mo.), April 22, 1887.

20. “The Land of Booms,” in *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, April 18, 1887; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, April 2, 1887; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 4, 1887.

21. For the full story of the colleges, see Craig Miner, *Uncloistered Halls: The Centennial History of Wichita State University* (Wichita: Wichita State University Endowment Association, 1995); *Kansas City Star*, June 30, July 20, 22, 1887; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 23, 1887; Miner, *The Magic City*, 71, 79, 112; *Atchison Daily Champion*, January 22, 1889; *Rocky Mountain News*, May 11, 1889. On the collapse, see *Atchison Daily Champion*, May 28, 1889; *Atchison Daily Globe*, April 6, 1887; August 28, 1890; *Atchison Daily Champion*, May 10, 1887.

22. *Columbus (Ga.) Enquirer-Sun*, December 26, 1887; *Salt Lake (Salt Lake City, Utah) Weekly Tribune*, September 22, 1887; *Duluth Daily News*, October 3, 1887.

“high pressure plan,” but no more. The liveliest activity was that of the Farmer’s Alliance and the People’s Party excoriating banks and railroad corporations. “Politics,” one man said, “rages as it ever did in Kansas,” but little else moved.

There had been nothing in the general commercial or financial situation in Kansas, a Chicago journalist observed, to justify the “ephemeral flurry” that was the Kansas boom. Perhaps, however, Kansas had learned something—the importance of economy, for instance, and the necessity to temper the “rage for borrowing.” The results were not all bad. Kansas had gotten considerable attention. It had, wrote a Topeka man, “shown a wonderful degree of courage and perseverance in a few years of its splendid history, and the world knows it.” There remained fine buildings, but those “very buildings in their splendour,” one easterner wrote in October 1890, “seem built by men who forget that they are mortal.” That seven million cigarettes a month sold in Kansas City was hardly compensation for the loss of more attractive business.

It was obvious to many that “our boom could not have come at a more inopportune time.” In place of having money in the bank and low debt, Kansas faced hard times, bad weather, and crop failure with investments at high prices and loans at high interest. “Looking back over this period,” a Topeka reporter wrote, “it is not altogether surprising that the people have raised Cain in Kansas.”<sup>23</sup> Surely for a good long time, no one there wanted to hear the word “boom” again.

Had Kansans learned anything? Perhaps. Wichita banks in 2008 did not overextend in subprime lending, nor did Wichita housing prices undergo the rise and fall typical of many parts of the nation in that great real estate and credit cycle. Perhaps there was some local institutional memory of former boom/bust cycles that kept Kansas in a duller, but safer mode than in some of its earlier years. One thing is certain, although some called them greedy or green for investing too much in the promise of the wide-open prairie, many of those who stuck to the land and survived its travails prospered. Life in Kansas demanded, and perhaps still demands, the long view, given how extreme its relatively short cycles could be. Kansans took pride in being “stickers” rather than “kickers” in the face of these cycles, and the true Kansan was the survivor who was strengthened by adversity, as our state motto suggests. We seem to have an inferiority complex, but self-deprecation and speaking softly, while developing a quiet strength, balance, and common sense, is something Kansans appreciate about themselves and about their response to the rapid and threatening changes they have faced. [KH]

23. *Topeka Weekly Capital*, November 20, 1890; *Daily Inter Ocean*, May 11, 1890; *Topeka Weekly Capital*, May 15, 1890; *Sun*, October 27, 1890; *Kansas City Star*, November 22, 1890; *Daily Inter Ocean*, August 6, 1890.



*Haskell County in southwestern Kansas, where land agent James S. Patrick set up shop after the turn of the century, experienced the same boom and bust cycle that afflicted other Kansas communities in the late 1880s and early 1890s. In a few short years the county saw its population rise to a peak of 2,666 residents and then plummet to 1,000. Its land valuations continued to rise steadily despite the bust, however, from just under \$500,000 to over \$2.5 million in the mid-1910s, when the potential investors pictured here came looking. Though they surely had memories of the recent bust, these land buyers, some from as far as Wichita, seemed willing to entertain bets on the return of boom times to Kansas.*