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# WHOLESOME, HOME-BAKED GOODNESS: Kansas, the Wheat State

*by Pamela Riney-Kehrberg*

Colorado may have its mountains, Minnesota its lakes, and California its seashore, but none can match Kansas on the beauty of its towering and stately elevators and its golden fields of wheat.<sup>1</sup>

—June Inskeep, 1967 Kansas Wheat Queen

**W**hile Wheat Queen June Inskeep's claims for the comparative beauty of Kansas elevators and wheat fields are open for debate, her observations make clear the linkage of the state of Kansas to its role as a farm state. Kansas, not unlike a number of other states, associates itself with the products of its land. Across the country, many a state can be identified by its primary agricultural product. In Idaho, it is potatoes; in Wisconsin, milk and cheese. Florida is heavily associated with the orange. Iowa has its corn and hogs. But Kansas is the Wheat State. The nation associates amber waves of grain with the agricultural fortunes of Kansas. Wheat, the staff of life for so much of the nation's population, holds out the possibility of wealth for the successful farmer, but it also holds the possibility of failure. The national imagination of a better life to be had in the Garden of Eden fueled westward movement into Kansas, while less imaginary environmental threats tempered that image. Natural disasters such as drought, dust storms, and locusts had enormous power to disturb the agricultural order upon which Kansas based so much of its economy. The nation has recognized the state's agricultural identity as much in failure as in success. Nevertheless, the title of the Wheat State has persisted, perhaps because of the positive, homey associations between wheat, agriculture, and the state of Kansas.

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1. Kansas Wheat Commission, *Kansas Gold: Historical Notes and Heritage Recipes from the First Fifty Years of the Kansas Wheat Commission* (Manhattan: Kansas Wheat Commission, 2007), 1.

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*Wheat field, Haskell County, Kansas.*

It was the promise of abundance that lured settlers west to Kansas. Initially, farmers planted corn as they had on farms farther to the east. Soon, however, farmers began to transform the prairie and plains into fields of wheat. In the 1870s Mennonite immigrants imported Turkey Red wheat to Kansas, and with it came the possibility of even greater development of that particularly lucrative cash crop. Over time, scientists would develop other hard winter wheats, even better suited to Kansas conditions. The land that once had been a sea of grass became a sea of wheat, beckoning settlers from near and far. It was a transformation that made sense; hard winter wheat varieties were well adapted to the Kansas climate. Kansas farmers learned the lessons of wheat culture quickly, harvesting their first one million bushel crop in 1866, and their first ten million bushel crop in 1875. By 1914 they would harvest one hundred million bushels.<sup>2</sup>

The state and its boosters clearly saw agriculture as a primary selling point. In order to encourage further settlement, those with a stake in the state's success trumpeted its agricultural potential in posters distributed near and far. "Drouthy Kansas" put happy settlers in the foreground, wallowing in a feast of giant-sized watermelons, grapes and corn, against a background of wheat fields, the very picture of abundance. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad promised to find homesteaders good land for wheat, "the best thing in the West." Yet another AT & SF poster, subtitled "'Out of

2. Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 32.

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the Woods' into Kansas" illustrated the enormous differences between the tough times to be had clearing eastern stumps and the presumably easier road to wealth on Kansas's flat, stump-free plains. In level, treeless wheat country lay the promise of wealth, stability, and a happy western home.<sup>3</sup>

And so the settlers came, riding a roller coaster of success and failure. Although the number of bushels of wheat harvested by Kansas farmers rose steadily, those farmers endured many a setback along the way. Farming has never been an easy way to make a living, and heavy reliance on a cash crop such as wheat tends to make farmers particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in the national economy as well as environmental perils. As Craig Miner has so deftly described in his work, the ups and downs of the Wheat State were substantial. In 1862 a dust bowl threatened, but in 1865 there was enough moisture and bountiful crops. The 1870s brought new varieties of wheat and the mid-1870s, success; 1879 and 1880, however, saw failure. And nothing could prepare Kansas farmers for the massive crop losses, drought, and locusts of the first half of the 1890s.<sup>4</sup> The path to success was neither straight nor level.

**T**he bumpiness of the road to success is evident in the stories of those who came to test their fortunes in the Wheat State. One of these early settlers was Howard Ruede, a young man who came to Osborne County, Kansas, from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1877. The county was in the middle of a wheat boom, and acreage devoted to the crop rose from 2,716 in 1876 to 5,659 a year later. Participation in that boom meant that Ruede had to be willing to accept hardship and uncertainty, conditions that were visible in his letters home to his family. The rigors of the frontier shaped every facet of his life. Even though he would have preferred a stone house, he lived in a dugout, which was inexpensive and relatively easy to construct. His diet suffered, and, lacking other options, he dined on monotonous and spoiled foodstuffs. About his daily rations, he commented, "Bill of fare—mush and broiled ham. The meat flies have got at it, and it must be used up soon." He wore his clothing to shreds, and discarded items as they fell apart. In an aside he wrote, "Underclothes I don't wear. I quit that about the middle of April; and socks are none to wash, as they have also been discarded." His shoes, too, were of doubtful utility to his work, and he went into the wheat fields barefoot, suffering from cuts and chafing from stubble. To his family he complained, "what 'gets me' the worst is the short wheat stubble on my bare feet and ankles. I have sore places on one foot now, so I guess I'll have to wear shoes this week and get them healed up." Because he, like so many others, came without adequate resources, debt was a way of life. Even breaking the land required debt because Ruede did not own adequate animal power

3. "Drouthy Kansas," which appeared in the *Kansas Farmer* in the 1860s, reproduced in George E. Ham and Robin Higham, eds., *The Rise of the Wheat State* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 1987), 24; Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, "Lands in Southwest Kansas," 1870s, promotional poster (also available at [www.kansasmemory.org/item/11829](http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/11829)), and "'Out of the Woods' into Kansas," circular advertising, Records of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Company, Library and Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.

4. Craig Miner, *Harvesting the High Plains: John Kriss and the Business of Wheat Farming, 1920–1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 6–7.

to do the job. He planned to work off his obligations, lacking cash or any immediate prospects to obtain it.

His letters provide an excellent description of the wheat harvest in the days before internal combustion engines.

It was steady work for 2 1/2 days to cut the 20 acres. The wheat was very heavy, and had got rusty, which made our eyes sore, and our clothes were covered with the rust, which is of a red-brown color. We made four or five rounds with each team and changes, so as not to bring too much work on either. . . . The harvester cuts a swath about four feet wide, and the wheat was so heavy that we could not take more than two or three feet at once, and then the grain was delivered on the table in front of the binders so fast that we had to stop two or three times on a side to enable them to get the table clear.<sup>5</sup>

Ruede and his compatriots cut wheat with a mechanical harvester, but bound the crop by hand, making for tedious work. He shared his labor with neighbors, working his way from farm to farm. Ruede's life as a nineteenth-century wheat farmer involved long hours of strenuous work in the hot sun for an uncertain return. Settlers like Ruede walked a very thin line between success and disappointment.

Ruede was not alone in his travails. Thousands upon thousands of individuals and families struggled to make a success of their ventures. What often captured the nation's attention, however, was the plethora of stories that ended in disaster. A good harvest was nice, but bad harvests made headlines, and Kansas's reputation as the Wheat State has been shaped as much by years of bust as by those of boom. Geographically, Kansas is situated in a challenging location. The hundredth meridian, the line that separates the prairies from the plains, runs north to south through the state, basically through Dodge City. To the east of that line, rainfall is more reliable and more abundant. To the west of that line, rainfall levels drop off, and the precipitation becomes less reliable, often amounting to less than twenty inches of moisture per year. This unreliability has plagued Kansas farmers on many occasions, and minor droughts have occurred on a regular basis. Major droughts, however, have made their appearance and headlines on several occasions. In the 1890s, drought and locusts plagued the state, leading to a significant exodus of farmers from the western



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5. Howard Ruede, *Sod House Days: Letters from a Kansas Homesteader, 1877-1878*, ed. John Ise (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1983), 110, and ix, 41-42, 49, 76, 112.



On Kansas Day, January 29, 1925, Vada Watson, the Kansas “Wheat Girl,” presented President Calvin Coolidge with a tiny bag of wheat that proclaimed “Kansas Grows the Best Wheat in the World.” The state’s congressional delegation led a large contingent of Kansans and ex-Kansans that accompanied Miss Watson to the White House on the state’s sixty-fourth anniversary. But the promotional tour did not end there. Escorted by Mr. and Mrs. F. Woody Hockaday of Wichita, among others, the Turon, Kansas, farm girl made stops in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and, here, the Atlantic City boardwalk. For decades thereafter, Kansas used its young women—later called “Kansas wheat queens”—to promote the wholesome goodness of the Wheat State and its number one crop.

reaches. The wheat crop, which had been climbing in volume, declined significantly. The volume of the wheat crop fell by two-thirds between 1892 and the depths of the depression in 1895. More than 25 percent of the total population of western Kansas picked up and left. Families fled eastward, signs on their wagons proclaiming, “In God We Trusted, In Kansas We Busted.” An examination of Census Bureau maps shows that the frontier, which the bureau had declared closed in 1890, had reappeared by census time in 1900, the result of hard times on the western plains.<sup>6</sup>

A new century brought even greater expansion into wheat, with the crop pushing its way into far western counties that had traditionally been home to cattle ranching. By the early 1930s, even holdouts such as Hamilton County, which long maintained an open range, could be classified as part of the Wheat State. Dire conditions, however, visited again in the 1930s, plunging the Wheat State into a decade of distress. Farmers harvested a bumper crop in 1931, totaling in excess of two hundred million bushels. But yields would sag throughout the rest of the decade, and farmers, on average, would abandon approximately 30 percent of their acreage due to drought and insect damage.<sup>7</sup> In Kansas, the failure of the wheat crop became nearly synonymous with the decade’s troubles.

In every state, a particular indicator of economic disaster became emblematic of the perils of the Great Depression. Farmers in Iowa defined the troubles of the 1930s with worthless hogs, and the thousands of bushels of corn burned because it could not be sold profitably. Chicago’s urbanites saw the Depression in the long lines waiting outside of soup kitchens. In Kansas, the trials of the decade could be traced in the ups and downs of the wheat crop. In 1931 some farmers, disgusted with a bumper crop made worthless by rock-bottom prices, destroyed their wheat, or held it off the

6. Warren A. Beck and Ynez D. Haage, *Historical Atlas of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), maps 3 and 63; E. G. Heyne, “The Development of Wheat in Kansas,” in *The Rise of the Wheat State*, 51–52; Craig Miner, *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890–1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 11; Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 8. The Census Bureau maps for 1890 show a population of at least two people to the square mile in all but Morton and Stevens counties. The 1900 Census Bureau maps show that much of western Kansas had less than two people to the square mile, as a result of depopulation caused by drought and depression.

7. Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, 90; Heyne, “The Development of Wheat in Kansas,” 51–52.

market, hoping for a reprieve. The market price for wheat did not meet the farmer's cost of production, a situation that would continue throughout much of the decade. Frantic concern issued from around the state, with individuals lobbying for solutions ranging from greater consumption of wheat in breakfast cereals to a farmer's strike designed to drive up prices. As one Kansas farmer wrote, "We who live out here in the wheat belt and see the actual conditions every day, can I am sure be pardoned for getting somewhat hysterical about the situation." Unfortunately, the situation would only go from bad to worse. In 1932 farmers watched their hopes for recovery blow and burn away, in dust storms and drought. Kansas's farmers were facing a decade of trials; recovery would not come until 1940. The problems of the Depression caught the Wheat State coming and going; low prices made crops nearly worthless, while environmental conditions made the act of growing crops problematic, if not impossible at times.<sup>8</sup>

**D**ismal conditions led to the outward migration of many farming families, and some questioned the wisdom of farming in Kansas at all. Lawrence Svobida, a Meade County farmer, told his tale of woe in his book, *Farming the Dust Bowl*. Svobida began farming in Meade County at an inopportune time, on the eve of the Depression and drought. At the beginning of his tenure, Svobida could not have been more positive about his prospects. He wrote, "I believe any man must see beauty in mile upon mile of level and where the wheat, waist high, sways to the slightest breeze and is turning yellow under a flaming July sun. To me it was breath-taking, the most beautiful scene in all the world; and hundreds of acres of that wheat was mine, representing the reward of labor, ambition, and enterprise."<sup>9</sup> The coming decade, however, would offer the farmer few opportunities to watch the wheat rippling in the breeze.

Failure after failure followed, and years of drought and dust consumed Svobida's hopes, leaving him both unwilling and unable to continue farming in Meade County. Deeply disillusioned, he wrote in exasperation: "My own humble opinion is that, with the exception of a few favored localities, the whole Great Plains region is already a desert that cannot be reclaimed through the plans and labors of men."<sup>10</sup> He left behind droughty Kansas to pursue his dreams elsewhere. It is no small wonder that in 1939, when Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer released *The Wizard of Oz*, the movie emphasized with black and white footage the bleak western landscape of Dust-Bowl Kansas, the place most associated with the decade's agricultural failures.

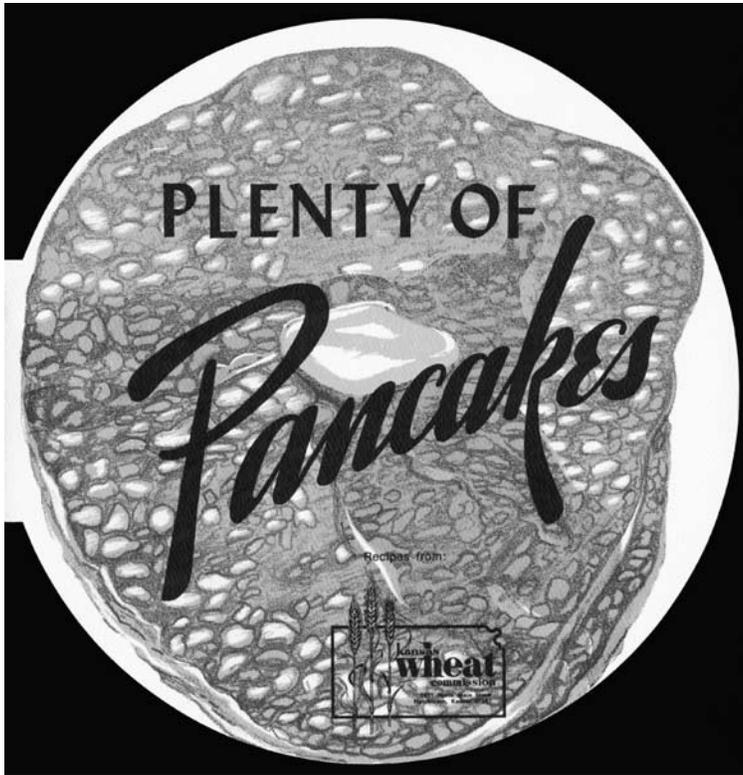
But the Wheat State's image as a land of plenty was not beyond rehabilitation. Almost as abruptly as the troubles of the decade had begun, the drought and Depression subsided, with the return of both the rains and good prices for grain in 1940. A recovery was soon underway. The *Syracuse Journal* ran an article in May 1941 titled "What to Do with the Bumper Wheat

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8. Quotation in Miner, *Kansas*, 286; see also Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, 21–43.

9. Lawrence Svobida, *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 45–46.

10. *Ibid.*, 255.



*The persistence of the idea of the Wheat State is most understandable when viewed in the light of the positive images that the grain conjures up in American imaginations. In spite of wheat's declining role in the state's fortunes, for just over fifty years the Kansas Wheat Commission has done all it can to promote the commercial and cultural prospects of the grain. At the center of this effort is the yearly production of a cookbook, one of which is pictured here, designed to encourage the home baking of tasty wheat-based treats. What better way to promote the crop than by encouraging Americans to bring the wholesome goodness of Kansas wheat into their homes in the form of handcrafted breads, rolls, cookies, pancakes, and other especially toothsome treats?*

Crop a Major Problem," the author opining, "But back to the wheat fields. They are beautiful now." World War II and Mother Nature had intervened, making farming in Kansas profitable once again. As historian R. Douglas Hurt has commented, "most Great Plains farmers saw the war as an opportunity to recoup their economic losses of the past decade." While farming had meant impoverishment and frustration during the 1930s, it could bring significant rewards during World War II. Not only was raising wheat profitable, it was also patriotic. Once the United States entered the war, the federal government encouraged farmers to produce all that they could, and to set aside the production limits of the New Deal, in order to feed the nation, its troops, and its overseas allies. Farmers would be as integral to winning the war as soldiers in the field.<sup>11</sup>

The years of the Second World War saw other developments as well. Kansas was less and less an agricultural state, and more and more industrial. In part, this was a statewide reaction to the troubles of the 1930s. Agricultural collapse encouraged the state's residents to think of other economic

opportunities less likely to be destroyed by drought and dust. The transition to wartime offered enterprising Kansans a chance to build on those dreams. One of the best examples was the aircraft industry. During the war, factory workers in Kansas produced 44 percent of the B-29s and 67 percent of the B-25s the Army Air Corps demanded. This was not an anomaly, but part of a larger pattern of industrial development. In terms of its contribution to the state's economy, Kansas would be less of a wheat state, and more like other urban industrial states, relying on sectors outside of agriculture for its wealth. Although the nation still thinks of Kansas as its agricultural Heartland, and often forgets that Kansans do anything other than farm, the reality is somewhat different. By the year 2000, more Kansans were employed in the government and service sectors than any other, leaving agriculture far behind. As Craig Miner commented in his history of the state, "The trend has been upward in yield of high protein wheat . . . upward in farm size and mechanization, and, since the 1930s, downward in total acreage planted. Farmers, consequently, have had a diminishing political influence, even in the Wheat State, and precisely because of their success in wheat culture." The first decade of the new millennium brought drought and increasing overseas competition for wheat farmers in Kansas, further impairing their competitive position.<sup>12</sup>

11. "What to Do with the Bumper Wheat Crop a Major Problem," *Syracuse Journal*, May 30, 1941; R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 150, and 145–88, for the larger story of Great Plains agriculture during World War II.

12. Miner, *Kansas*, 32, and 286–87, 310–11, 406; Kansas Wheat Commission, *Kansas Gold*, 119.

A sesquicentennial of change has meant diversification for the Kansas economy. Given that situation, is Kansas still the Wheat State? Kansans in the Wichita area might just as well call themselves residents of the “Airplane State.” Those residents a little further west might perceive themselves as citizens of the “Natural Gas State.” What about being the “Coleman Cooler State,” or the “Feed Lot and Meat Packing State”? Somehow, none of these alternatives sing quite the way that the Wheat State does. None of them bring to mind the beauty or the bounty represented by fields of ripening grain. None of them conjure up the wholesome goodness of being the Wheat State. These are not options that can be promoted easily in an annual cookbook, redolent with the odors of baking.

Yes, baking. The persistence of the idea of the Wheat State is most understandable when viewed in the light of the positive images that the grain conjures up in American imaginations. In spite of wheat’s declining role in the state’s fortunes, for just over fifty years the Kansas Wheat Commission has done all it can to promote the commercial and cultural prospects of the grain. At the center of this effort is the yearly production of a cookbook, designed to encourage the home baking of tasty wheat-based treats. What better way to promote the crop than by encouraging Americans to bring the wholesome goodness of Kansas wheat into their homes in the form of handcrafted breads, rolls, cookies, and other especially toothsome treats? Like the Wheat State, the cookbook has changed decade by decade, emphasizing the way in which American appetites for this grain have evolved over the years. In the 1950s, when the Wheat Commission produced its first cookbook, Mexican food was only beginning to enter the American mainstream. By the 1990s tortillas had become the fastest growing segment of the American bread market; in 1997 Americans consumed forty-five billion flour tortillas. Consequently, cookbooks featured “Layered Enchilada Casseroles” and “Tortillas in a Bag,” in addition to the usual breads, rolls, and cookies.<sup>13</sup> In spite of changing trends in diet and health, Kansans promoted their signature grain to the world.

Interestingly enough, the Kansas Wheat Commission is attempting to improve upon a very small segment of the market for wheat flour: home cooks and bakers. One hundred years ago, homemakers did a large proportion of their own baking, and only rarely purchased commercially produced bread. With rising numbers of women in the workplace, easily available and inexpensive commercial products, and falling numbers of Americans with experience baking their own bread and desserts, flour purchases have fallen significantly. Only 10 percent of all flour purchased in the United States is used by home cooks and bakers, while the other 90 percent is used by large-scale food processors.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of the gastronomic dominance of commercial bakers, it is the image of home-baked treats that captures the meaning of wheat agriculture for many Americans.

While farming  
had meant  
impoverishment  
and frustration  
during the 1930s,  
it could bring  
significant rewards  
during World War II.  
Not only was  
raising wheat  
profitable, it was  
also patriotic.

13. Kansas Wheat Commission, *Kansas Gold*, 96, 114, 131.

14. United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, “USDA/ERS Briefing Room: Wheat,” at <http://transcoder.usablenet.com/tt/www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/wheat/consumption.htm>.

Kansas, the Wheat State, persists in the popular imagination, in spite of all the developments that have changed its shape in the last 150 years.

This wholesome image of Kansas as the Wheat State also derives from the agrarianism so revered by the state's residents and by Americans in general. Throughout most of the nation's history, Americans have believed in the innate superiority of agriculture as a way of life. Farmers live closer to the land, both literally and figuratively, improving their characters in the process. They prosper through the application of a little sun, a little rain, lots of hard work, and a measure of good fortune. If Thomas Jefferson was to be believed, farmers were the chosen people of God, uniquely virtuous and uniquely equipped to lead a democratic nation.<sup>15</sup> Little wonder, then, that there is something innately appealing about the idea of Kansas as a wheat state. Unlike an oil and gas or manufacturing state, a wheat state is tied forever to the virtues of the land.

Perceptions of the Wheat State are also tied to assumptions about family and work. Although Kansas wheat farms have long been large, highly mechanized enterprises, and many have been incorporated, the predominant image of the wheat farm is one of a family farm, operated by individuals bound together in pursuit of a common goal. When people think abstractly about wheat farms, they probably are not thinking of the numerous western Kansas acres that businessman Ray Garvey owned and John Kriss managed, as Craig Miner so carefully described in *Harvesting the High Plains*. In 1946 Garvey's operation encompassed sixteen thousand acres in Kansas and another twelve thousand in Colorado, and saw a profit of well over a million dollars.<sup>16</sup> This, however, is beyond most people's comprehension. It is an image of the Wheat State that fails to fit our preconceived notions about the way in which our daily bread should be produced.

Instead, when people imagine wheat farms, they are thinking of much smaller operations, owned and operated by families. They are imagining something much more akin to that of the Ise family (movingly described by John Ise in *Sod and Stubble*): a mother, father, and their eleven surviving children, working day after day, year after year, to feed themselves and develop their land from the sweat of their brows. The Ise family struggled in pursuit of their goal, facing blizzards, tornadoes, prairie fires, and locusts. They faced death, disease, and injury. They blistered their hands and strained their muscles in pursuit of their daily bread. In spite of these stresses, the family worked, cooperated and prevailed, establishing a successful farm, the proceeds of which sent all of the Ise children to secondary school and most on to colleges and universities. Their story and their struggles conjure up a comforting vision of what it means to be a part of the Wheat State. It means not only hard work for uncertain rewards, but also the striving of a family toward a common goal.

And so Kansas, the Wheat State, persists in the popular imagination, in spite of all the developments that have changed its shape in the last 150 years. In most of our minds, it is an image much more than a reality.

15. Excerpts from Thomas Jefferson in Everett E. Edwards, *Jefferson and Agriculture*, Agricultural History Series 7 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1943), 23–25.

16. Miner, *Harvesting the High Plains*, 167.

It is the kind of place where Howard Ruede and the Ise family sweated and strained to make a living. It is the place where Lawrence Svobida's dreams crumbled in the face of the ravages of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. It is the source of our daily bread and the warm, oven-fresh treats baked in homes across the nation. We do not usually think of it as a place that is home to farms of more than ten thousand acres, and that provides us, too, with the ingredients for tortillas. The comforting fact about history is that through its lens, Kansas, the Wheat State, can be all of these images at once, considerably more complex than this simple slogan would suggest. [KH]



*The Great War in Europe was a boon to Kansas wheat farms in the mid-1910s, and growing conditions were favorable during much of the decade. The 1916 crop was not a record, but per bushel prices were relatively good and the harvest was plentiful, as implied by this photograph of the "wheat market" at Offerle, Edwards County. During both of the twentieth century's "great" and tragic world wars, Kansas wheat farmers were encouraged to produce as much as possible and assured that "Wheat Will Win the War." Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.*