

# THE WORK OF KANSAS FARM CHILDREN

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**Goal:** Introduce students to the work and play of farm children before the turn of the century.

**Objectives:** When the lesson is completed, students will know that:

Farm children were given simple chores at a very early age. These included caring for cattle and other farm animals, collecting fuel to heat their homes, and doing simple household tasks.

The chores of farm children were an important part of farm operations.

Farm children often mixed play and work.

<b>Vocabulary:</b>	Buffalo or Cow Chip	Graze
	Churn (noun & verb)	Herd (noun & verb)
	Corral	Milk (noun & verb)
	Cowherd	Oxen
	Dairy	Thresh
		Yoke

**From the Trunk:** Pictures #1-6  
*McGuffey's Reader* (book)  
Cattle Leader  
Butter Churn  
Butter Molds  
Butter Paddles  
Butter-making transparencies or power point CD

# Introduction

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**From the Trunk:** *McGuffey's Reader* (book), Pictures #1 - 4

## Picture #1



The students may have done simple chores at age three or four. Not long after they could walk, early Kansas farm children were expected to perform simple tasks as well. The chores of a Kansas farm child one hundred years ago, however, were probably very different from the chores children do today.

-How old do you think this girl is?

-What is she doing?

-Is she old enough to do this job?

## Pictures #2 & 3



The play of farm children often reflected the chores they were expected to do as they got older. In these photos the girls were learning about child care and household management, and the boys were learning about the care of cattle.

-What are the boys and girls in these pictures doing?

Letters written by Kansas farm children and their parents reveal quite a bit about their lives, including the kinds of work they did and what they did for fun.



Frank is nearly five years (old), makes little yokes to yoke up his (corn) cob oxen, generally has two yoke of oxen about, goes to Kansas City and back frequently for a load of provisions; has got a little wagon that he is all the time tinkering with, making new axel trees, or something, and on the whole is a very busy child -- has no idea of reading or books, but can fetch up the cows or go a mile on an errand, as a Kansas boy should...

--From a letter written by John Everett, Osawatomie, Kansas, May 20, 1858.

-Do you ever play with toy animals? So did Frank.

-Do you think that Frank's parents might have had any real oxen?

-Do Frank's work and play have anything in common?  
(He played with toy cattle and was responsible for rounding up his family's herd of real cattle.)

Harper's *Young People* was a popular children's magazine in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Subscribers were encouraged to submit letters telling about their lives. Those which follow were written by Kansas children and reveal quite a bit about life in this state during the 1880s.

Note that in the first letter the father has gone away for the winter, leaving the children to assist their mother in taking care of the farm. These parents depended on their children to take on a great deal of responsibility. The boy from Lawrence appears to have had no chores; his sole duty is to attend school. He has more leisure time for ponies and kites. The other children mixed work and play.

-What kinds of work do these children do? (List on blackboard)

-How does the work of the "city boy" from Lawrence differ from the work of Walter and his brother and sister?

-Which type of work is closer to what you do today?

-Were these children's chores important?

-Which of their chores do you think would be the hardest?  
Which would be the most fun?



My brother Wroy and I earned by herding the money that brings us the weekly visit of *Young People*.

Wroy and I have been practicing "spring and fall styles for boys" by springing from the millet stack and falling on the millet that is spread out to be threshed. It is fun, and threshes the millet, too. Papa has been away all winter, so we take care of Mamma and sister Zella, feed and herd forty head of cattle, yoke up old Ben and Sam (oxen), and haul wood and chips and do whatever Mamma tells us.

Zella and I have sixteen turkeys. We want to raise 200 this year. Wroy has ten Pekin ducks; they are pure white and look very handsome as they swim around over our home lake.

--from Walter William C., Lane County, Kansas 1882



I am a little Kansas boy. I am 11 years old and have been going to school for four years and am in the sixth grade. I live in Lawrence, and the University of Kansas is here. When I become old enough I will go there. I want to get a good education. Then, when I become a man, perhaps I may be an editor, or write story books. West of Lawrence a few hundred miles are the great plains. The Indians used to live there, and hunt buffaloes. The Indians are gone now, and so, I suppose, have the buffaloes.

Kansas is a good place for little boys. I used to live in Washington, D. C. But there the houses were too thick to fly a kite. Here on the prairies we boys often fly our kites to the height of two balls of twine. We have lots of room to run. Father has promised me a pony on my next birthday. He says thousands of people come to Kansas every year from the eastern states. I wish lots of little boys from the East would come to Lawrence to live.

--from Sidney C. P., Lawrence, Kansas, 1881.

**Picture #4**



Walter wrote of how he and his brother hauled chips. A "chip" was a dried piece of cow or buffalo manure. They and the woman in this photograph used chips as fuel because there was very little wood on the prairie to burn. Even collecting buffalo chips could be turned into fun as Mrs. Brumfield remembered:



Did we have fun in pioneer days? It depended on the ability of each individual to get joy out of the most trivial things and to sustain his spirit of great adventure in the midst of unglamorous surroundings....

But I remember many things in which we rejoiced and found much pleasure. The once-a-week mail added great zest on the day it came. And we had a week of anticipation before it arrived.

I found pleasure in helping gather fuel for the winter. We had tired bones, of course, and such sound sleep at night. Day after day we hauled in cow chips and stacked them in neat piles. In time we became experts in picking the right kind as to age and color so that we had the hottest flames with the least ashes. There was a feeling of satisfaction when we pronounced our stack the best and biggest in the neighborhood.

--Mrs. Louise Brumfield, Jetmore, Kansas, *My Folks Came in a Covered Wagon: A Treasury of Pioneer Stories Handed down in the Families of Capper's Weekly Readers*, Capper's Weekly, 1956.

Not only do we take time off from work for fun, but work can be fun as well. Some editions of the *McGuffey's Reader* contain stories such as "At Work" (pg. 28) and "At the Fireside" (pg. 70) (These two stories are found in the *McGuffey's Second Eclectic Reader*.)

-Do the students agree that work and play can be combined to make an unpleasant task more bearable?



## Activities

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### **Classroom Mural**

Create a mural which depicts the lives and work of early Kansas farm children. Be sure to include houses, barns, and animals as well as people working and playing. You may wish to limit how full the children make the mural so that more can be added as the week progresses.

**Supplies:**

Large sheet of butcher paper or newsprint  
Crayons or paints

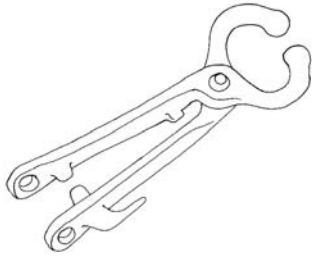
# Herding

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**From the Trunk:**

Cattle Leader

Herding was a responsibility given to young boys and girls on Kansas farms. A "cowherd's" job was to make sure that the cows for which he was responsible grazed in a certain area and did not stray into places they did not belong or become lost. This was important because cattle were valuable animals and farmers did not want their crops to be destroyed by wandering cows.



**CATTLE LEADER:** Attached to its nose, this tool could be used to lead a stubborn cow. A tug on the rope would cause the rounded ends of the leader to tighten on the cow's nose. Eventually the cow would learn to go where she was led. This would have been a useful tool for a cowherd.

Herding was an important responsibility, but it could also be rather boring. As you read the following article, have the students look for ways that Mr. Ellenbecker and his friends combined work and play to make herding cows more fun.



I herded more or less alone and seemed to have ample amusement. I often carried books along to the herd grounds (pastures) and enjoyed reading them. One book especially -- Willson's Fourth Reader -- which had many lessons in it on birds and plants, ...(was a great favorite of mine).

On Townsend Prairie north of our home farm was another herd ground ranged over by half a dozen herds from the Pleasant Ridge neighborhood. Here came together such lads as Peter and Nick Kerschen, Alfred Talbot, Hary and Gordon Warrington, George Tarvin, Seward Heister and a few others.

These boys had to take their cattle east of the Tarvin and Tillman homesteads to get to shade and water, because the herd ground lay west of those farms. So they had to drive their herds between cornfields several times a day, and through necessity, became veritable cowboys.

One year these herders were so enterprising that they made a race track on the high prairie and there ran races with their ponies. They also rigged up a circus and developed among their "cowboys" hurdle jumpers and fair bareback riders and rope walkers.

They certainly had a good time while herding, but in fall most of the grangers (farmers) around there missed corn that the bossies gathered while the circus performances on the hill were in progress....

From John G. Ellenbacker, "Summertime," *Marshal County News*, June 10, 1932



## Activities

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### **My Day of Herding**

Have your students write a letter to a friend describing a day of herding.

Add to your classroom mural.

Draw individual pictures of a day tending cattle.

# Milking

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From the Trunk:

Picture #5

Picture #5



Another responsibility of Kansas farm children was to help with milking the family's cows. As you can see from this picture, milking was done by hand, sometimes outdoors.

Milking 100 years ago was very different from milking today. Mr. A. C. Kurth remembered what it was like.



When I got to be eight years old, I had to join the milking crew.... I remember at one time we milked as many as forty-nine cows every morning and evening. And we had no milking parlor nor milking machine, but milked by hand in the open corral among the other cows, calves, bulls, and steers, in storm, rain, and all kinds of weather. When a rain shower would come at milking time we simply waited until the storm passed and then continued.

Sometimes we milked at midnight and later. Of course, I would get very little sleep, but at four or five in the morning it was again time to drive the herd to grass. At times I was so sleepy in the morning that I would fall asleep in the chair while putting on my shoes. But mothers and all the children had to share the burdens of the early settlers.

--A. C. Kurth, *The Life Journal of A. C. Kurth*, 1974,  
Edwards County Kansas

-Have you ever stayed up until midnight?  
How did you feel the next day?

-Have you ever had to work in rain or snow?  
How did you feel about it?



## Activities

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### **Dairy Visit**

Find photographs of cows being milked in a modern dairy and compare them with photograph #5.

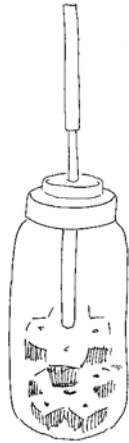
Visit a modern dairy farm or have a dairy farmer visit your class to show how milking has changed since Mr. Kurth's childhood.

# Churning

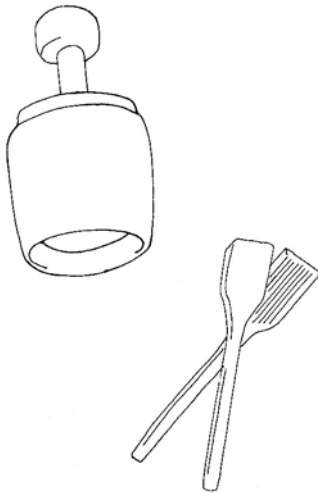
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**From the Trunk:** Butter Churn, Butter Molds, Butter Paddles, Transparencies or power point CD, Picture #6

**You Provide:** Overhead projector or power point projector, screen



**DASH CHURN:** After milking, the milk was set aside to allow the cream to rise to the top of the milk. It was then skimmed from the milk and churned. There are many types of butter churns. The one in this trunk is called a dash churn. The wooden dasher is moved up and down in the jar. This separates the fat from the cream, leaving butter and buttermilk. The butter is removed and then chilled.



**BUTTER PADDLES, BUTTER MOLDS:** Many families enjoyed having attractive butter. After it had chilled, some people pressed it into butter molds to make pretty butter pats. Others made it into small balls which they rolled between two butter paddles.

Show the students the butter making presentation. A power point presentation as well as transparencies of this presentation are located at the back of the manual. The power point presentation can also be accessed through the Kansas State Historical Society's web site, [www.kshs.org](http://www.kshs.org).



## Activities

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### **Butter Making**

Your class might enjoy making their own butter in the classroom. Preparation of butter requires only a few simple kitchen tools.

Provide some crackers so that the students can taste what they have created.

- Equipment:**
- Rotary egg beater in a fitted bowl or an electric mixer, or a jar with a tightly fitted lid.
  - wooden spoon or paddle
  - mixing bowl
  - measuring cup

- Ingredients:**
- 1/2 pint of heavy whipping cream
  - 1/8 - 1/4 teaspoon salt (if desired)

**NOTE:** WE DO NOT RECOMMEND THAT YOU USE THE BUTTER CHURN OR MOLD INCLUDED IN THE TRUNK FOR THIS PROJECT. IF YOU WISH TO USE THE BUTTER PADDLES, CLEAN THEM THOROUGHLY WITH SOAP AND WATER BEFORE AND AFTER YOU USE THEM. ALLOW ALL UTENSILS TO DRY COMPLETELY BEFORE RETURNING THEM TO THE TRUNK.

## Procedure

1. Remove the cream from the refrigerator and allow it to sit at room temperature for about ten minutes before it is used.
2. Pour the cream into the bowl, mixer, or jar and agitate it until small granules of butter form throughout the cream. With a rotary egg beater this will take 20-30 minutes. With an electric blender or mixer it will take only 3-5 minutes.
3. After the butter has formed, the buttermilk should be poured off and the butter placed in the mixing bowl. The remaining buttermilk can then be worked out of the butter with the wooden spoon or paddle.
4. Wash the ball of butter with cold water.
5. For sweet butter, no salt is added. For salted butter, work the salt in with the wooden spoon.
6. Spread on crackers and enjoy.

### **VARIATION:**

If you would like to give every student a chance to churn butter, you may wish to collect enough peanut butter or baby food jars and lids for every one or two students, and a half pint of cream per jar. To make the butter, students will shake the jars until the butter granules form. If you are working with very young children, have pairs of students sit across from each other and roll their jar between them. Then follow the directions above starting with step 3.