CHANGING CLIMATE IN KANSAS:  
A LATE 19TH-CENTURY MYTH  

PAUL D. TRAVIS

The fictionalized hope held by Kansas agriculturists in the 1890's of creating rain artificially in the semiarid belt, was neither new nor unique. Rainmaking continued as an extension of agricultural myths based, in part, on the premise that Providence held the yeoman in special esteem. Indeed, the basis for such a concept assumed that man had been granted dominion over the elements and therefore he had the capacity to alter the climate as agricultural needs in the semiarid region dictated. Such a romanticized conception of the agriculturalist, therefore, served as a stimulant for westward migration into the trans-Mississippi Plains.

The optimism of late 19th-century Kansas immigrants, relative to the agricultural potential in the former "desert," reinforced itself through widely accepted beliefs. Some agriculturists universally placed their faith in rain following the plow. Still others believed the Kansas climate would become more moderate and conducive to farming through settlement. Cultivation of the soil, some suggested, would substantially alter the semiarid environment. Editors offered the opinion that Kansas would ultimately become a garden because of the unalterable laws of nature. Finally, many scientists and agriculturists agreed that rainfall would increase through the cultivation of forests, widespread adaptation of crops, and the utilization of dry farming techniques.

As land became available in Kansas following the passage of the homestead act in 1862, scores of Eastern settlers gravitated to the semiarid belt, drawn there by optimistic—yet unfounded—hopes that their presence coupled with their relationship to what Jefferson referred to as nature's God would insure agricultural success. Kansas newspapers, state agricultural societies, popular periodicals, and promotional literature, as well as the reports of federal agencies, all strongly suggested the widespread circulation and public acceptance of various theories that the Kansas climate had moderated substantially in the late 19th century and that agricultural bonanza for farmers lay in the near future.

The diaries of Elam Bartholomew, a native Pennsylvanian, who as a child moved with his family to the Ohio and Illinois frontiers before migrating to Kansas as a youthful school teacher in 1874, picture the 19th century agriculturist in Kansas typically in at least two respects. They reflect the migration of farmers from Eastern frontiers to Kansas, as well as the dependence of homesteaders upon rainfall for their very survival. Bartholomew notes in his entry for March 16, 1874, "Having made up my mind to go to Stockton, Rooks Co., Kansas as a place of future residence I spent the a.m. in packing my personal effects." After a rigorous journey to Kansas by rail Bartholomew recorded, on different occasions, his awe of the semiarid summer: "Exceedingly hot weather," "it still being exceedingly hot," "It being intensely hot these four days." Although mildly traumatized by weather patterns more erratic than those of Illinois, Bartholomew, nevertheless, remained in Kansas, his optimism largely sustained by his religious faith. He wrote of his frequent church attendance for services, singings, meetings, and social gatherings. From time to time he noted a "good" or "excellent" sermon by the pastor, the Reverend Mr. Bracken.

Somewhat more revealing are the diaries of Thomas Andrew Bone for they bristle with references to weather, crops, hopes for agricultural success in the future, and the notations of his family's involvement in church. Concern with the weather and its relationship to his crops also occupied Bone's mind: "weather

The author wishes to acknowledge a grant from the university grants committee, Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, which generously supported his research efforts relating to this article.

2. July 3, 7, 21, 1874, ibid.
warmer,” and “first rain of the spring,” exemplify the farmer’s entries. Likewise, Bone’s diaries attest to his involvement in the local church.

Even more succinctly, Charles A. Thresher’s diaries described the plight of the 19th century Kansas farmer, his concern with the environment, his avid optimism for the region, and his faith in Providence. Few diary entries between 1871 and 1879 failed to mention the weather. On May 8, 1871, Thresher noted, “Toils . . . will do good,” and in late summer of the same year, he entered the notation, “Heavy rain every night.” Displaying a consciousness of the erratic weather, Thresher also revealed the insight of his total dependence upon “good weather” i.e., rainfall for his agricultural survival: “RAIN awful big rain—7 inches fell last night.”

Frequently, “RAIN, RAIN,” in large letters dominate the page as Thresher expressed his exultation for the downpour. Confident of the improvement in the climate of Kansas, Thresher wrote on July 23, 1889, “RAIN RAIN never a July in Ks like this in 30 years past.” Most revealing is Thresher’s final entry for a given year, labeled “Retrospect.” At the close of 1881, the settler reviewed his labor and observed: “Corn about 7 or 8 bu. to the acre—had to sacrifice my stock of hogs—in fact fell in rears borrowed 150. on the house.” For Thresher, 1885 improved agriculturally, “A good year crops fair health ordinarily good—Good revival meetings our children joined Church.”

Two years later Thresher expressed his thanks for the family’s health and added, “. . . very poor crops and raised little or no corn—and cattle almost no sale at all. Yet homes are fair or better than might be expected.” The Thresher family enjoyed both good health and crops in 1889, but the crucial year 1890 contained no mention of harvests. The drought of 1890 and 1891 took its toll on Thresher as he reviewed the year, “Crops—half crop of corn—oats a failure. Wet spring dry season afterward health variable . . . close times.”

Although the diaries revealed the daily hardships of 19th century Kansas farmers as well as their concern for rainfall and weather, diaries were for individual consumption and reflection. In contrast, letters of Kansans mailed to Eastern relatives and friends were available to those contemplating a move to the Jayhawk state. In this sense the letters of Dr. Louis Watson, writing from Ellis county to his mother in Illinois, are most revealing. In July, 1871, Watson wrote, “Nothing suffers from the want of rain . . . .” Commenting upon the number of settlers coming to the state in 1873 Watson claimed, “Ellis [county] has been growing considerably and there are a number of decent people here.” The following year the frontier doctor noted the effect Kansas had upon the health of settlers: “The plains are very healthy and with the little population 4 or 500 of our town it would be supposed that there would not be sufficient business to support me.” He added, as if to emphasize his enthralment with the semiarid belt, “I like it as well as I should anywhere in Eastern Kansas and probably are more contented than I should now be at Quincy.”

Watson emphasized his faith in the future agricultural potential of western Kansas. In the summer of 1875 he penned a note to Illinois in which he emphasized that “There has been sufficient rain this spring to make all sorts of crops thrive and every thing looks well.” In the fall of 1875 Watson elaborated upon his assessment recorded in earlier letters:

Crops this year have been very good. The soil is rich . . . this country would beat Illinois in many farm products. The plains or prairies (for they are as much prairies as the . . . country of Illinois) are changing as respects their vegetation. The ‘Buffalo grass’ is passing away and other grasses replacing it . . . . I firmly believe that within a few years here, 300 miles west of the

4. Ibid., January 13, 1877, April 6, 1879. A purusal of Bone’s notations reveal an avid concern with rainfall, see entries, for example, March 14, 16, and 21, 1879.

5. Ibid. For example, see entries for March 2, 9, 23, 1879. A typically revealing comment is “. . . went to [Sunday] 8[bread] quite a good number in attendance—March 23, 1879.


7. Ibid., August 10, 1880.

8. Ibid. See entries for 9, 14-16 of July, 1889. Also the word “RAIN” printed to itself was included in the notation for January 15, 1889. Many entries by Thresher are exclusively weather assessments, see February 27, and March 31, 1889 as typical examples of his weather concerns. Often when the word “RAIN” is imprinted upon the page for emphasis, it is obvious that Thresher pressed his pencil more firmly upon the page. See the entry for May 12, 1889.


10. Ibid., “Retrospect” for 1881, 1885, 1887, 1889, 1890, and 1891.

11. Letters of Dr. Louis Watson to his mother, in the "P. J. Jennings Papers," manuscript dept., Kansas State Historical Society.

12. Ibid., July 17, 1871, and December 22, 1873.

13. Ibid., December 12, 1874.

14. Ibid.
Charles A. Thresher (1836-1922) homesteaded at Berryton in 1857. His diary had many references to weather and reflected his optimism about the region and his faith in Providence.

Missouri River, many agricultural products will be bountifully produced.18

Beyond such personal letters, promotional literature published in the form of immigrant guides by individuals, state agencies, and railroads fostered greater hopes among potential settlers for agricultural success than newspapers, periodicals, or books. The guide, Kansas as She Is, an example of such literature, emblazoned upon its frontispiece “Free Homesteads in the Garden of the World.” If such a phrase failed to capture the imagination of the potential Kansan, the rhetoric found inside its pages would surely lure them:

The homestead act throws open to settlers thousands of acres of unoccupied land in Kansas—a gift from the government to the poor. NO OTHER COUNTRY UNDER THE SUN OFFERS SUCH INDUCEMENTS TO THE TOILLING MASSES and enables all her citizens “without money and without price,” to become independent lords of the soil.19

According to Kansas as She Is, “The harvest is great, and the yield is bountiful. Prices are liberal, and every inhabitant . . . ought to be, happy and contented.” 17 Such forecasts, fostering extremely optimistic and mythologica
cal conceptions of agricultural potential, paralleled glowing assessments of the state’s semiarid environment:

The climate of Kansas is, without exception, the most desirable in the United States—it is better than that even of the same latitude, east of the Mississippi River.

Since the year 1860, the State has been blessed with an abundance of rain . . . The oldest inhabitants universally agree that the drouth of 1860 was the only of any consequence that ever visited Kansas.18

The promotional work closed with the admonition that “God might have made prettier country than Kansas, but never did.” 19

Other guides, ostensibly published to aid Eastern farmers contemplating a move to Kansas, reinforced the glowing statements found in Kansas as She Is, The Kansas Guide, published in 1871, alluded to fictionalized concepts of “get-rich-quick” agricultural panaceas and excerpted descriptions of the state from other sources: “We warm toward Kansas whenever we hear the name spoken,” suggested the Massachusetts Ploughman. The New England Farmer relegated its remarks to succinct descriptions of wise immigrants seeking land beyond the Missouri river. “Not less than a thousand immigrants a day,” continued the Farmer, “have been finding homes in Kansas during the fall of 1870, and this flowing tide still continues even into the winter.” 20

18. Ibid., p. 8. The publishers mythically suggested that Kansas was the “Mecca of the young man’s hopes, the place of all others where the poor man can achieve a competence and independence, and rise to usefulness and honored citizenship.” 27


20. Geo. W. Hamblin, The Kansas Guide. Facts and Practical Suggestions to Those Who Intend Seeking New Homes in the “Far West” (Ottawa, Geo. W. Hamblin, 1871), pp. 4-5. See, also, F. C. Adams, The Homestead Guide, Describing the Great Homestead Region in Kansas and Nebraska and Containing the Homestead, Pre-emption and Timber Bounty Laws, and a Map of the Country Described (Waverly, F. C. Adams, 1872). Adams's Homestead Guide included frequent references to settlers who came to the state and subsequently, through hard work and application of industry, improved themselves monetarily. "The facts, so far as I can gather, have been insisted, p. 30, "that a man with proper notions of life, and with a disposition to be industrious and frugal, can better himself by going west."
Free Homesteads in the Garden of the World.

SOME GENERAL PRACTICAL INFORMATION

IN REGARD TO THE

"Great State of Kansas."

The Greatest Fruit, Stock and Grain Country in the World.

SECOND EDITION. • ENLARGED AND REVISED.

PUBLISHED BY THE KANSAS PUBLISHING COMPANY.

LAWRENCE, KANSAS.

1870.

A LATE MAP OF KANSAS ACCOMPANIES EACH BOOK, SHOWING COUNTIES, CITIES, TOWNS, RIVERS, RAILROADS COMPLETED, RAILROADS IN PROGRESS, &c., &c. ALSO, A BEAUTIFUL ENGRAVING OF KANSAS FRUITS, AS THEY APPEARED IN PHILADELPHIA, SEPTEMBER 15, 1869; 20 STATES COMPETING, AND KANSAS AWARDED THE GREAT GOLD MEDAL.

Price 50 Cents.

Address, THE KANSAS PUBLISHING COMPANY,
LAWRENCE, KANSAS.

Kansas as She Is: The Greatest Fruit, Stock and Grain Country in the World (Lawrence, Kansas Publishing Company, 1870), was typical of the books promoting immigration to Kansas in the late 19th century. Shown here is the first inside page. Such literature published by individuals, state agencies, and railroads served as guidebooks and fostered hopes among potential settlers for agricultural success.
In Kansas as It Is, L. D. Burch eloquently compared the semiarid region to “the plains of Lombardy” adding that Kansas soon would become “as lovely as the fabled Eden.” In his words, settlers moving into Kansas could expect a land where “the sunlight falls upon its matchless landscapes as softly as upon the limpid waves of Naples Bay. It is.” Burch continued, “something to live in a land where Apollo may tend flocks on the hills and Sappho turn dairy-maid, singing her sweet songs in the shadows of the blue mounds.” 21 Burch urged his readers to join those settlers who had decided to seek their agricultural fortunes in Kansas. “How instinctively everything drifts westward,” admonished Burch, “... out of the West comes Life.” 22

In assessments of the state compatible with those of Burch, Frederick Collins in Kansas!, published in the mid-1880’s, referred in his preface to the state as “the garden of the world.” He reminded Eastern readers of what fortune lay in the future for them should they decide to homestead beyond the Missouri river. In Collins’s opinion, “God never favoured man with a fairer land, richer plains, more fertile valleys, clearer skies, a more genial climate, greater promise of such unparalleled advantages.” 23

Promotional literature published by the Union Pacific railroad, designed to capture the migrating fancy of potential emigrants in the East, contained glowing accounts of an agricultural paradise included in immigrant guides, but it stressed that the Kansas climate offered greater farming opportunities. “The climate in these parts,” in the testimonial of a saline county settler, “has been materially modified in the past few years by some causes. ...” Another Kansan stressed that tornadic and cyclonic storms had diminished in regularity and that “We now have rain without thunder and lightning.” 24 Jeff Jenkins, in The Northern Tier, agreed with settlers, promoters, newspaper editors, state agricultural publications, and college professors relative to a substantial and lasting alteration of the Kansas climate. “The hot winds,” wrote Jenkins, “and occasional drouths that were observed before the country was settled are things of the past.” 25 In The Homestead Guide, Adams agreed with his contemporaries and elaborated that “The fall of moisture on the plains is steadily on the increase ... as cultivation and tree-growing advance; and as the Indian, the buffalo and the prairie-fires cease to prevail.” 26

Literature extolling Kansas as an Eden with abundant rainfall made an impact upon those Easterners willing to believe the rhetoric. The journalist Horace Greeley noted in the New York Tribune the degree of acceptance in the popular mind of the emerging agricultural mythology. “Settlers are pouring into Kansas by car-loads, wagon-loads, horse-loads, daily,” he reasoned, “because of the fertility of her soil, the geniality of her climate, her admirable diversity of prairie and timber, the abundance of her living streams, and the marvelous facility wherewith homesteads may be created.” 27

Moreover, the publicity afforded Kansas’ fruit for “the largest and best display ... unequalled in size, beauty, and excellence” 28 by the American Pomological Society at Richmond, Va., in 1871 added to the state’s agricultural mystique. Indeed, such notoriety for horticultural accomplishments led one publication in 1879 to exclaim: “The whole of the East, and North and Northwest was on the alert. It was wild to go [to Kansas].” 29 Former Pres. Ulysses S. Grant joined those praising Kansas, by appearing for a July 5 speech at Emporia in 1880. Typical of such speakers, the Civil War hero pointed out that “in our whole beautiful country we have none

---

22. Ibid.
23. Frederick Collins, Kansas! Information Relative to Its Location, Extent, General Surface Features, Population, Farm, Crop and Livestock Statistics, Mineral Resources, Vacant Public Lands, Schools, Churches, Manufactures, Assessed Valuation, Etc., Etc., Etc. (from Report of the State Board of Agriculture, Belleville, n.p., 1885-1886), pp. 5-6. A contemporary writer observed that such “guides” were “published and broadcast through the country, painting Kansas as the Paradise of farmers.”
28. Ibid., p. 551. The St. Louis Fair, 1871, awarded the State “a diploma for the best exhibition of apples,” the New England fair, also in 1871, recognized Kansas “for its best display of fruit,” and the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society awarded Kansas “a silver medal for its fruit.” —Annals, p. 652. Some five years later, at the centennial in Philadelphia, Kansas fruit was “awarded the first premium.” —Ibid., p. 754.
that looks to be more productive than the very land I see around me here." 30 An optimistic assessment of Kansas by the eminent journalist Greeley and the endorsement of the agricultural potential of Kansas by the man who had done much to preserve the Union led Jenkins to assert in his *Northern Tier* that it was natural for those in the thickly-settled New England and Middle States, surrounded with facilities for comfort and luxury, to imagine that a homestead-settler, by procuring a quarter-section of land for a mere nominal sum, in the midst of an extensive prairie, surrounded with nature's embellishments, was a fortunate being, who with a few days' labor could convert his new possession into a garden of beauty and fields of plenty.

This temptation, in Jenkins's view, induced "the landless in [the East] . . . to make the trial by the gratuitous advice of friends, and elaborate articles in newspapers, culminating in the memorable words of an eminent journalist, 'Go West!'" 31 Some years earlier journalist Frederick Lockley wrote from a similar perspective about the migration to Kansas: "There is no doubt that a large share of the many thousands who are flocking into Kansas have their minds filled with exaggerated ideas of the profitable chances that await them." 32

Still, the most eloquent description of Kansas, its people, and their success "in the garden," emerges in Jeff Jenkins's *Northern Tier*. For example, Jenkins carefully paraphrased the words of a sermon delivered by Rev. Romulus Pintus Westlake:

> The honest laborer and Christian who "hews to the line," and makes society better and happier, and causes the light of civilization to penetrate the wilderness, thus dispelling the gloom of ignorance and barbarism, and causes Christianity to speak its genial rays wide over the world, may truly be classed as one of Nature's noblemen whose energy and enterprise have caused the rose to blossom upon the desert waste, beautified the forest wilds, and gathered the splendors of the valley into the storehouse of usefulness. 33

Jenkins referred to the invincible spirit among newly settled homesteaders and their burning desire, sometimes amid temporary privation, to extend "a desirable civilization into the wilderness." Moreover, the writer had himself observed the conversion of "waste places" in northern Kansas into "fields of plenty." In words similar to those used by other writers, Jenkins utilized symbolic language, pregnant with meaning to Eastern minds, as he, too, suggested Kansans daily created an agricultural utopia in which the landscape blossomed "like gardens of beauty." 34 Indeed, a garden was attainable because, to Jenkins, the terrain revealed an extremely rich soil "checkered with meandering streams of pure water," while uncultivated sod anticipating the settler's plow, "was covered with nutritious grasses." 35 Jenkins's agricultural hero, performing heroic deeds as he transformed the desert into a garden, symbolized "the sunburned settler, clad in his home-made raiment," who daily laid "the foundations of a high civilization." 36

Letters sent to Gov. George Anthony by Easterners considering homesteading in Kansas revealed that optimistic assessments of Kansas had penetrated the minds of the Eastern populace. A letter from Pennsylvania typified Eastern inquiries and suggested that "20-25 families" would, in the near future, homestead in Kansas. Similarly, A. W. Tourgee of New York informed Anthony that he desired land in Kansas because he wished "to go where [I] can find free schools and be free men." 37 From Belleville, Ill., a prospective settler wrote that he should expect "thirty or

30. Wilbur, *Anata*, p. 884. Grant joined the chorus of praise for Kansas agricultural virtues. "Western Kansas," wrote a 19th century author, has one of the most genial and pleasant climates, all the year round, of any section of the United States. Owing to this salubrious climate the health of the people is most excellent. Epidemics seldom occur. The disease becomes robust and strong. The native consumptive is unknown. Cattle is irritable. The hope produced by health stimulates and exalts all the people."—See Dr. W. A. Yingling, *Westward or Central: Western Kansas* (Ness City, Star Printing Co., 1890). p. 11. Jeff Jenkins in *The Northern Tier*, p. 32, described the Kansas climate as possessing "vernal beauty, enlivened with refreshing showers and sunshine; it is said that the state's environment, as a result was "invigorating, healthy and inviting."


32. *Lakeside Monthly*, Chicago (March, 1871), p. 199. Lockley, as others, stimulated the desire among Easterners to homestead in Kansas when he offered the opinion that "A hardy and industrious settler can here [Kansas] find an ample farm within his means of purchase; and what future enhancement of values results from increased population, serves to reward him for the privations and exposure of his early years."—p. 201.


34. Ibid., p. 151. Jenkins's words as others' had to have popular appeal to a landless easterner, or to a debt-ridden farmer looking eagerly to the West. "The prospect of a home unburdened with rent," Jenkins emphasized, "and unnumbered with debt and mortgage; the future prospects of schools and churches, and the noble impulse to establish the nucleus of a civilization in which the healthful breeze would fan the brows of a free people."

35. Ibid., p. 32.

36. Ibid., p. 21.


38. A. W. Tourgee to Anthony, Raleigh, N.C., June 8, 1877, "Anthony Papers."
forty familys’ to homestead in the state in the near future.  

Additional prospective settlers participated in forming colonies to enter the state. A. Copley, representative of such colonizers, wrote Anthony seeking the governor’s aid in selecting the site for a colony when he arrived.  

Materials published by the state board of agriculture impressed one prospect contemplating a Kansas homestead: “I am thinking,” wrote the Easterner, “about emigrating to Kansas with a half dozen other people and in looking at the matter I have seen ‘The Report of the State Board of Agriculture for 1875.’ That contains a great deal of information which I [could] use.”  

“We have,” wrote V. C. Taylor from Cleveland, Ohio, “a great many people in our city who are talking of emigrating to your state and there is not a day passes but what I am inquired of if I know what kind of land there is in such and such a county in Kansas.”  

From New York City, Chas. R. Parmele informed Anthony that he had wished for years to migrate to Kansas. The Jayhawk state, Parmele confessed, loomed even more attractive for him because of the “fine display . . . made at the Centennial.” Edgar Eddy wrote a relative in Kansas, George Leslie Eddy, November 25, 1877: “Hod talks about coming to Kansas.” Earlier, in April, 1877, Edgar again wrote to George Leslie Eddy from Broken Straw, N.Y., asking if his cousin was “bound to stay out there [in Kansas] and get rich? There is quite a number gone from Panama [New York] to Kansas this Spring. Dr. J. C. Lewis went last Monday and Eugene Butler, Luly Rundall’s man and some others up on the town line road.” Beyond such letters, didactic poetry fostered the mythical imageries of peaceful pastoral scenes. Poetry reinforced the prevailing assessments of other writers for it appealed to the heroic conception of farmers conjured in the popular mind. W. A. Yingling, in his guide for immigrants entitled Westward or Central-Western Kansas, included a poem filled with vivid imagery:

Verdant wheatfields stretching southward  
Fruitful orchards east and west;  
Not a spot in all the prairies  
That the spring-time has not blessed;  
Every field a smiling promise,  
Every home an Eden fair;  
And the angels-Peace and Plenty—  
Strewing blessings everywhere.”

Similarly, E. P. Ford, in Kansas, beckoned the Easterner to the state in the final stanza of the poem, “Kansas”: “We invite the honest toiler to this garden spot of earth.” He urged the intrepid victim in the East to abandon his:

40. A. Copley to Anthony, Paola, November 28, 1877, ibid.
41. F. H. Fuller to Anthony, Boston, Mass., November 5, 1877, ibid.
Sterile hillsides, pulling roots and picking stones;  
See this land of milk and honey, leave the hillsides to the drones.

We have room for brawn, and brain, and for energy galore;  
And tho' thousands now are coming, there is room for thousands more.47

Joel Moody in "The Song of Kansas," praised the state's climate and its citizenry. In one stanza he described what the future immigrants could expect to attain should they choose a Kansas homestead:

Hashboards and wives, and little ones,  
Are kings and queens on Kansas soil,—  
Their empire rests secure from broil,  
And here in peaceful life they toil,  
And raise for Liberty her sons.48

Few poems, perhaps, possessed the capacity to stir the imagination of potential homesteaders in the 19th century more than Eugene Ware's "Ironquill." Ware alluded to a mythical prehistoric age in the initial stanza, drawing the reader's imagination toward the dawn of creation. Cadmus roamed the earth, the author suggested, in "days unknown." In an age in which the dormant plains remained un molested from human enroachement, Cadmus planted the seeds of a future civilization. The Indians and the Spanish conquistadores failed to unlock the mysteries of the semiarid region, but then "Came the blue-eyed Saxon race/And it bade the desert awaken." In Ware's words:

And it [Saxon race] bade the climate vary;  
And waiting no reply  
From the elements on high,  
It with ploughs besieged the sky—  
Vexed the heavens with the prairie.

Then the vitreous sky relented,  
And the unacquainted rain  
Fell upon the thirsty plain,  
Whence had gone the knights of Spain,  
Disappointed, discontented.

We have made the State of Kansas  
And today she stands complete.

Ware emphasized that the transformation of the desert had been dependent upon the Anglo-Saxons, who with their plows had attacked the sky, demanding of nature that it provide rainfall for the civilization to come. Such an epic spoke directly to a popular mind in the 19th century which accepted this literary form and blended it with what they considered to be the actual experience of semiarid settlers. Within this blurred vision of reality, mystical though it appeared, homesteaders and Easterners as well accepted the rhetoric and romanticism as fact. Moreover, the slogan, "We have made the State of Kansas," was no longer an idle boast; but rather it projected a particular perception of reality—an acceptable mode of belief—to the 19th century mind. Similarly, a pioneer guidebook suggested, "You look around and whisper, 'I vanquished this wilderness and made the chaos pregnant with order and civilization.'" 49

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in Nature, emphasized that "Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve...It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful." 50 On another occasion, Emerson, in an essay entitled, "Farming," observed, "The farmer was the first man, and all historic nobility rests on his possession and use of the land." Emerson further inquired: "Who are the farmer's servants? Geol-

46. Moody, however, recognized the difficult life in store for settlers. He wrote in an additional stanza:  
"What though their earthly lot is hard!  
What though their humble house be sod!  
They bend no knee to tyrant's rod,  
There they may live and worship God,  
And love shall never be deburred."—  
47. Eugene Ware, "Ironquill," in D. W. Wilber, Annual's, p. 1170.  
Lydia A. White had suggested a similarly symbolic and mythological process in her poem, "The Plowmen," Wichita Eagle, April 23, 1874. The impact of the didactic poem is, perhaps, best expressed by a Kansas journalist: "During the year 1878, closing with August, not less than sixteen million acres of government lands were taken up by homestead entries alone, and fully fourteen million acres of new lands were sold to settlers. It is estimated that half a million people settled upon the new lands in 1878, and the number for the present year promises to be greater."—Dodge City Times, April 10, 1879. For the determination of the stock-holders and railroad executives to past the land into the hands of actual settlers, see Section Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the Kansas Pacific Railroad Company to the Stockholders for the Year Ending December 31, 1888 (St. Louis, Levison & Blythe, Printers, 1889), p. 1. The promotional literature published by various rail lines within the state contained, again, glowing estimates of agricultural bonanza and evidence that the climate of Kansas was improving and becoming more hospitable for farming.
49. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature (1869), in Leo Marx, Machine in the Garden (New York, Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 231. The world, Emerson suggested, "becomes at last only a realized will, the double of the man," William Best Hesseelink's "Four America Traditions," Journal of Southern History, Houston, Tex., v. 27, no. 1 (February, 1961), p. 21, is compatible with Emerson's views; see, also, the poem which begins "Oh, there is good in labor," in ibid., p. 19. In addition, see American Journal of Science, New Haven, Conn., v. 38 (1840), pp. 279-287, in Leo Marx, Machine in the Garden, p. 96. To the scientific community, writer and poet, and the popular mind as well in the 19th century, man is indeed, "lord of creation; and all nature, as though daily more sensitive of the conquest, is progressively making less and less resistance to his dominion."—Ibid.
ogy and chemistry, the quarry of the air, the water of the brook, the lightning of the cloud, the castings of the worm, the plough of the frost."  

And he continued by noting that "the profession has in all eyes its ancient charm, as standing nearest to God, the first cause."

Decades thereafter, L. H. Bailey, in *The Outlook to Nature*, essentially agreed with Emerson’s wisdom recorded in “Farming.” Bailey suggested that the farmer struggled in a state of nature against what must have been seemingly insurmountable odds. “But day in and day out, year in and year out; sun and rain,” Bailey wrote, “he [the farmer] stands by his plow and works out his own salvation. It is not mere dull work to follow the plow . . . if one is conscious of all the myriad forces that are set at work by the breaking of the furrow; . . . the free fields, the clean soil, the rain, the promise of crops.”

The imagery of mystically unlocking the supernatural forces, previously untapped in the universe by the plow or furrow, conjured to Bailey and conveyed to the popular mind as well, the fabled process of rain dutifully following the plow. Such a premise had become to the Kansan and the potential Jayhawker in the East an unimpeachable dictum in the 1870’s and 1880’s. Indeed, as rainfall appeared in the semiarid belt seemingly beckoned by the settler’s plow, one Dodge City newspaper predicted in 1879 that in two years “we will be standing in fields bearing luxuriant growth—the tree, the vine, the flower, to give shade and rest from a hard day’s toil.”

Similarly, the glowing rhetoric of Joel Moody, expressed in his poem, “Song of Kansas,” conveyed and sustained allegorical truths while also dispelling “False signs to scare” occasionally cropping up among discerning critics of the state’s agricultural potential. Admitting that the immigrant might be subjected at “crossings of old Indian trails” to scandalous untruths about crop failures, droughts, and storms, Moody nevertheless urged future homesteaders to follow the lead of the agrarian hero depicted in his poem. When faced with falsehoods, Moody’s farmer became a militant farmer-activist:

At these the sturdy pioneer
Leveled his axe, and with a stroke
Cut down the lies, and then he broke
The sod with plow and steers, and woke
The earth to grow his harvests here.

More importantly, as Eugene Ware suggested in “Ironquill,” and as Lydia A. White expressed in “God Will Bless the Labors of the Plow,” Moody, too, recognized the omnipotence or “the power of the plow” in the mystical but unfolding process of climate modification in the steady march of the pioneer toward the utopia of agricultural plenty. To accomplish the goal of productivity, Ware’s farmer-heroes, “the blue-eyed Anglo Saxon race,” had resorted to the weaponry of their plows in voicing their demand for rain from the heavens.

Lydia A. White’s agriculturist, however, refused to resort to such militancy; the possession of the plow by the farmer, and the thrusting of that instrument into the earth would by the force of that magical moment insure the blessings of nature’s God. Moody’s hero-farmer, however, had to “set things straight” before he implemented the cosmic forces of climate alteration with his plow. The imagery of didactic poems in the 19th century, from Emerson to Moody, had a great impact upon the popular mind. The reception of such mythology through the written word, of the Plains was that groves of trees would help modify and moderate the exigencies of the scant rainfall belt. Also, see *ibid.*, September 6, 1879, in which the *Times* welcomed “the immigrant [to] a warm and cordial reception . . . and rich fields; where health and prosperity await the prudent and industrious. A few years will transform the bleak and cheerless waste into teeming fields and verdant groves.”


51. L. H. Bailey, *The Outlook to Nature* (New York, the Macmillan Company, 1905), pp. 83, 159. Nineteenth-century writers concerned with agricultural themes often refer to farming as a “conversion” or “salvation” experience. Leo Marx, in *Machine in the Garden*, p. 323, observing such a trend in literature, has written: “The idea of the countryside as the appropriate site of the conversion experience is common to the Christian tradition and the romantic poets. It is the accepted convention of New England Calvinism. [Jonathan Edwards] describes the state of grace as making the soul ‘like a field or garden of God, with all manner of pleasant flowers, all pleasant, delightful, and undisturbed; enjoying a sweet calm and the gently vivifying beams of the sun.’”

52. *Dodge City Times*, September 29, 1875. “Morris C. Collor,” according to the *Times*, has cottonwood trees fully sixteen and twenty feet high and four and six inches in diameter. The growth of all trees has been wonderfull this year.” *Ibid.*, September 27, 1870. Many individuals of the 19th century assumed there was a relationship between soil fertility and the growth of trees. In addition to this concept the prevailing myth in the semiarid sector of the Plains was that groves of trees would help modify and moderate the exigencies of the scant rainfall belt. Also, see *ibid.*, September 6, 1879, in which the *Times* welcomed “the immigrant [to] a warm and cordial reception . . . and rich fields; where health and prosperity await the prudent and industrious. A few years will transform the bleak and cheerless waste into teeming fields and verdant groves.”


54. Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, p. 40. . . . the association of America with idyllic places,” according to Marx, “was destined to outlive Elizabethan fashions by at least two and one half centuries. It was not until late in the nineteenth century that this way of thinking about the New World lost its grip upon the imagination of Europe and America.”
pended upon the willingness of thousands of potential immigrants to test the fictionalized conceptions of western Kansas—the mythical region responsible for spawning and sustaining the romantic concepts. The influx of immigrants the state received in the latter portion of the 19th century attested to the faith in romantic ideologies and became the primary indicator of the level of acceptance of fictionalized beliefs among the people. Stimulated by weather myths, the masses journeyed to Kansas. Once on the "semiarid soil," they put the existing concepts to the test.55

Nineteenth-century rainmaking efforts in Kansas thus emerge as the result of a complex pattern of agricultural myths. The basis for the faith of the settlers in rainmaking experiments began in the 18th century amid the philosophical concepts of Thomas Jefferson, who stressed the virtue of farming and that those who chose it as a vocation were, in turn, the "chosen people of God." Agriculturists were viewed as unique in their relationship to Providence and because of this linkage were granted dominion over the elements with the mystical power to alter the climate regardless of semiarid obstacles that might lay in their path to agricultural success. Fictionalized conceptions of the West and of agricultural potential were spread by journalists, speculators, early Plains travelers, agriculturists, members of the scientific community, railroads, state and national agricultural and horticultural agencies, and a host of 19th-century authors and poets.

As it became apparent to Kansas homesteaders that the climate in the sparse rainfall belt had not immediately moderated, homilies and simplicities relative to the state appeared regularly. Some clung to the idea that the climate changed, however imperceptibly, with settlement, and in spite of evidence suggesting otherwise, droughts became exceptions and past phenomena. Fluctuating and erratic weather patterns prevailed and new methods of cultivation arose as panaceas in exceptionally dry portions of the state. New homilies emerged as farmers toiled attuned to the slogans: "Try harder," "wait 'til next year," "Tough it through!" Other agriculturists held to the concept that God blessed "the Labors of the Plow." Many felt that inadequate rainfall could be effectively solved by planting trees in verdant groves throughout the state. Still others believed that with greater migration to Kansas rainfall would substantially increase.

Crop adaptation and new plowing methods were attempted to insure agricultural success in the 1880's by farmers whose crops dried and

Eugene Ware (1841-1911), Kansas newspaperman and poet, most famous for his "Rhymes of Ironquill," stirred the imagination of potential homesteaders in the 19th century.
withered in parched fields." The advent of the "drouth of 1890" called for more effective measures to guarantee adequate rainfall for crops. Many Kansas farmers, therefore, accepted the mythical rainmaker who promised to beckon precipitation from the clouds and who became a charismatic and cosmic miracle worker. With his mystical machinations and drawing from a tradition which stressed that man could control the elements as agricultural needs so dictated, the rainmaker worked his magic—but to no avail. The agricultural mind of the 19th century had been prepared for his arrival.

56. T. S. Eliot, in "The Waste Land," published in 1922, captured in another setting the pathos of hopelessness approaching that experienced by Kansas settlers decades before:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with Spring rain.
What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water...
If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And the dry grass singing
But sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
But there is no water."—

---

**Annual Report**

For many years the Historical Society's annual reports were published at this point in the spring issues of the *Kansas Historical Quarterly*. *Kansas History* will not include the annual reports. However, John E. Wickman's presidential address at the October 18, 1977, annual meeting appears on the following pages. Copies of the annual report for 1977 are available at the Society free of charge.