

Circular Letter,

TO THOSE INTERESTED IN

SILK CULTURE
IN KANSAS.



VIEW OF SILKVILLE.

Silkville, Franklin County, Kansas, 1877.

The Ill-Fated Kansas Silk Industry



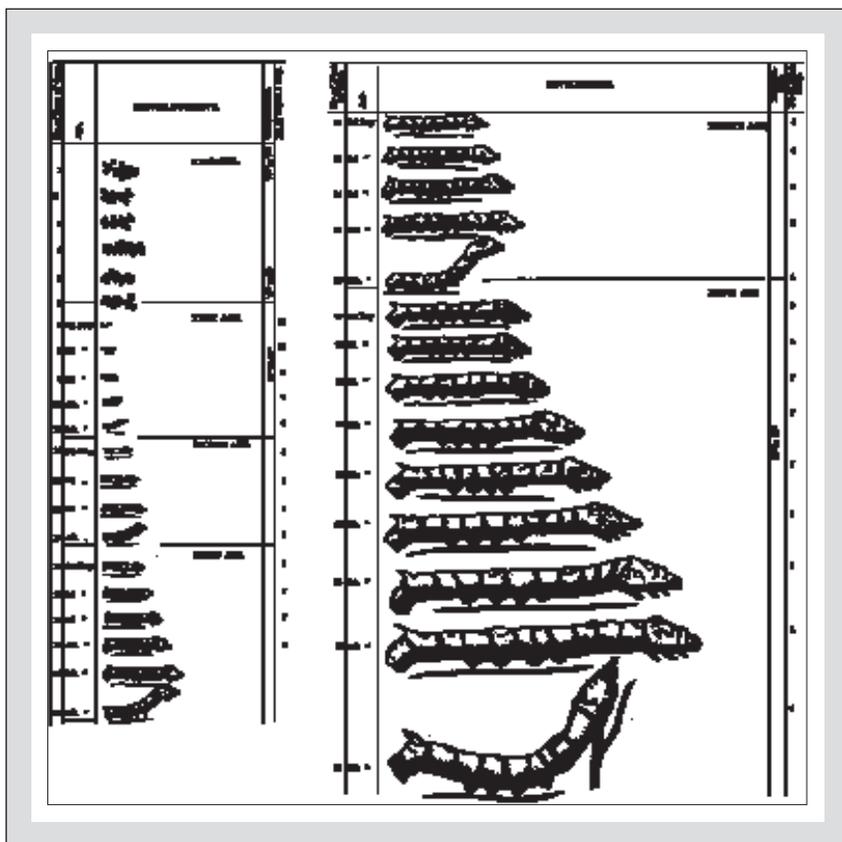
by R. Alton Lee

As Kansas was rapidly settled in the last half of the nineteenth century, farmers, agrarian food processors, agricultural experts, and politicians explored a number of new concepts for raising crops and livestock, processing farm products, and various panaceas that would promote the Sunflower State's economic prosperity. During the 1880s the legislature sought to encourage the production of sorghum cane sugar, for example, through bounties and other enticements. At the same time the state pursued a decade-long campaign to establish a viable silk industry. Promoters ultimately failed in this endeavor, but their effort is an interesting chapter in the history of an ancient industry.¹

Sericulture is unusual in that it is entirely dependent on a sensitive little insect with a voracious appetite for mulberry leaves. The silkworm is actually a caterpillar that eventually turns into a butterfly. It has ten legs and two jaws that move laterally. While humans have 520 muscles, the silkworm has 1,647 in its body plus 1,118 others in its head and feet. The egg hatches into a minuscule black worm with great growth potential. It eats day and night, and by the second day it is twice as large as at its birth. In four days it is one-fourth inch in length and is too large for its skin, resulting in a molt. Again it molts in eight days to shed a skin too small to contain it. After the fifth molt, it begins to spin its cocoon of the precious silk threads; the finished chrysalis is about the size and shape of a kidney bean. When it finishes eating, just before spinning, the worm has gained seventy-two thousand times its original weight. During its feeding period of approximately one month, the worm needs light, good ventilation, and dry leaves, and it cannot remain hungry very long. It is quite sensitive to cold or moisture and very susceptible to disease. It has been known to expire at the sound of loud thunder. There are no male or female caterpillars, but sex organs develop after the formation of the chrysalis. The moths emerge from the cocoon and mate, are separated, and the male dies. In captivity, the female lays her

R. Alton Lee is a professor emeritus of history at the University of South Dakota. His research interests include twentieth-century American political history and Kansas History. His most recent publications include *T-Town on the Plains* (Sunflower University Press, 1999) and "The 'Little White Slaver' in Kansas: A Century-Long Struggle Against Cigarettes," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 22 (Winter 1999–2000).

1. For information on the sugar industry, see Homer E. Socolofsky, "The Bittersweet Tale of Sorghum Sugar," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 16 (Winter 1993–1994): 276; Luce Boulnois, *The Silk Road* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1966); Mary Matilda Davidson, *Silk: Its History and Manufacture, From the Earliest Ages to the Present Time. Including Instructions For Silk Culture on Osage Orange or Mulberry* (Junction City, Kan.: J. B. Wadleigh, 1885).



The development of the silkworm (left) and its subsequent metamorphosis into the mature moth (facing page). Published in the American Silk and Fruit Culturist, July 1882.

eggs on a sheet of paper, then expires. Because this occurs in early summer, the eggs must be kept in a cool place until the following spring. When the mulberry tree leaves begin to bud, the egg sheets are placed in a warm spot, and the newly hatched worms are laid on racks to eat and then spin. The moths damage the valuable cocoons when they emerge, so except for those needed for mating, they are “stifled” or killed with heat or steam (not too hot to damage the cocoon). This is the first step in production. The second process is to manufacture the silk fabric.²

The vegetable product of cotton has to be spun, then woven. In the case of silk, the worm already has spun the cocoon from the outside inward and the thread is so fine it is about eleven miles long. The cocoon must then be unwound in a process called reeling. A reeler can spin one to one-and-a-half pounds of silk daily, but care must be taken to catch the ends and have a continuous thread. The higher the quality of cocoons, of course, the easier they are to

2. Armand de Quatrefages, “Silkworms and Sericulture,” *Popular Science Monthly* 3 (October 1873): 657–76.

reel. Twelve pounds of cocoons normally produce one pound of reeled silk. In the late nineteenth century silk was worth from four to eleven dollars per pound, depending on quality. The silk mill boils out most of the gum (some needs to be left to assist in weaving), the silk is woven, the remainder of the gum boiled out, and the fabric is then dyed and ready for fashioning.³

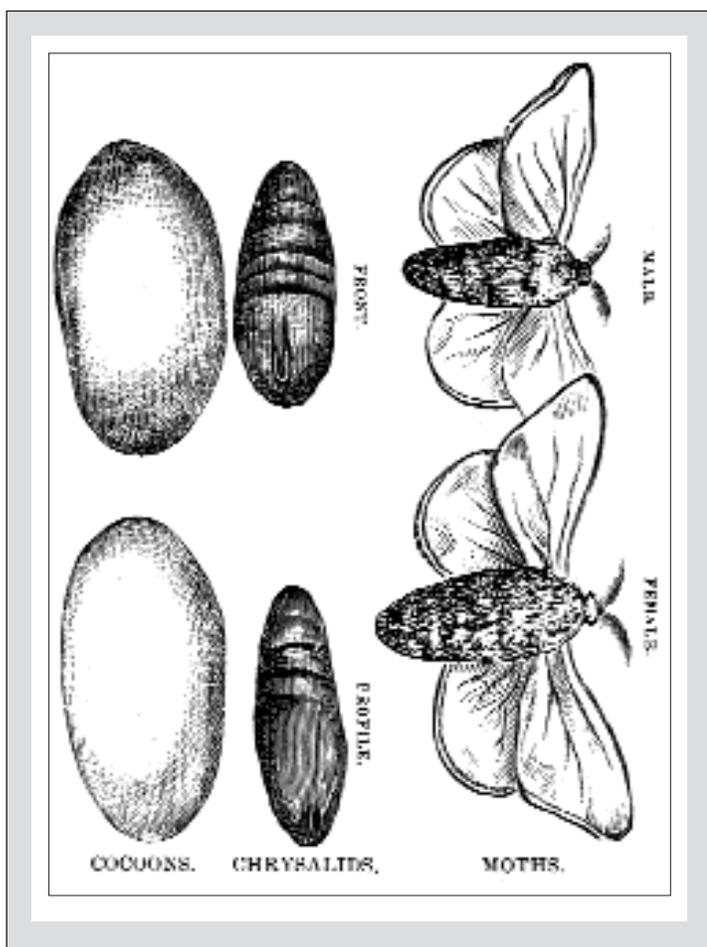
Following the Civil War, Ernest Valetton de Boissiere, a nobleman from Bordeaux, France, became the first to significantly promote the silk culture in Kansas. He was educated as a civil engineer, served in the French army, and upon his father’s death inherited the family estate, Chateau de Certes. Boissiere was

a fan of Voltaire and supported Victor Hugo against Louis Napoleon in 1848. When Louis Napoleon won the presidential election that year, the outspoken aristocrat escaped arrest and having his estate confiscated, but he was made to understand he must “go abroad for his health” because of his political views.⁴

Boissiere was a devotee of Fourierism and eventually sought to establish a similar utopian socialist colony in Kansas. The philosophy of this movement stressed the concept of dignifying manual labor and rendering it attractive. Members would practice communal living, and each was expected to live a Golden Rule of respecting the rights and interests of others “as he desired his own to be respected by them.” The Frenchman discovered the climate in Kansas to be quite similar to the area in France where silk culture was successful. Boissiere bought thirty-

3. Samuel J. Barrows, “The Silk Industry in America,” *Atlantic Monthly* 46 (November 1880): 616–20.

4. Garrett R. Carpenter, “Silkville: A Kansas Attempt in the History of Fourierist Utopias, 1869–1892” (master’s thesis, Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia, 1951), 7–8.



six hundred acres of land in Franklin County, and in 1869 he founded a colony there that he called Silkville. It was also variously known as the Kansas Cooperative Farm and Prairie Home, and the town was sometimes called Valeton. Boissiere planted several acres of mulberry trees and recruited French experts in silk culture to populate his colony. In a few short years some forty settlers migrated.⁵

Boissiere constructed a sixty-room building, called a philanthropy, that cost \$130,000 and could house some one hundred workers who ate in a communal dining hall with him. He also constructed a lodge hall, a blacksmith shop, a grade school, and barns capable of sheltering three hundred hogs, four hundred cattle, and fifty horses. He later built a cheese factory and produced wine from his vineyard. The laborers could choose their vocations, but the Frenchman emphasized his silk factory where they produced cocoons and wove the fabric into ribbons.

5. *Ibid.*, 39.

After learning that reeling machines were unavailable in the United States, Boissiere visited France and returned with a reeler in 1871. Others interested in sericulture, such as C. V. Riley, state entomologist for Missouri and later chairman of the U.S. Entomological Commission, sought to enhance the industry by improving the stock. He experimented with crossing Japanese and French silkworms, feeding them leaves from Osage orange trees. The worms grew “healthier and heartier,” and he took cocoons from the fifth generation to Boissiere, who pronounced as “excellent” a hank of silk that he wove from them.⁶

In 1872 Boissiere produced his first cocoons and subsequently experimented for several years with various worms and techniques to adapt sericulture to Kansas conditions. The State Department of Agriculture first mentioned his primitive operation in its 1872 report. Boissiere wrote the department that he had “planted a quantity of White Mulberry Seeds” in 1870 and had purchased three ounces of yellow silkworm eggs in France. Two ounces hatched on April 22. They thrived until June 2, then died. The third ounce hatched on May 15 and prospered. He had high expectations of that batch but rains came in early June, the weather turned hot, and they began dying. He expected better success the next year when he planned to try Japanese white eggs.⁷

Boissiere purchased some California eggs that proved more successful than the French or Japanese ones. He exhibited his ribbons at the Centennial Exposition of 1876 where they were a great success, receiving “hearty praise” and a blue ribbon.

Boissiere’s commune did not prosper, however. Few laborers were attracted by its philosophy, and Boissiere complained that those who came soon discovered they could receive a free homestead of one-quarter section of fertile Kansas land or make relatively good wages working elsewhere. In addition, the French girls, imported for the reeling, married local farmers and left the colony. In 1884 Boissiere returned to France a disillusioned reformer, and by 1886 his village had abandoned silk culture and weaving. He eventually donated his mansion for an Odd Fel-

6. William G. Cutler and A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas*, vol. 1 (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883): 615; *Kansas City Star*, October 23, 1938; George A. Huron, “Ernest Valetton Boissiere,” *Kansas Historical Collections, 1901–1902* 7 (1902): 557; C. V. Riley, “Silk Culture in Kansas,” *The Industrialist, Kansas State Agricultural College* 2 (November 16, 1876): 2, 4.

7. Kansas Department of Agriculture, *Transactions, 1872* (Topeka: Public Printers, 1873), 458; Riley, “Silk Culture in Kansas,” 420.

lows home and school for orphans. It burned in 1916, and Silkville eventually disappeared, but the mulberry trees survived. Boissiere's enterprise never was successful, except for its experimental or pioneering efforts.⁸

Meanwhile, other Kansans were engaging in the study of silk culture. Mary Davidson of Junction City, a self-taught expert in sericulture, estimated in a book-length treatise on the subject that 380 silk factories were operating in the United States in the 1870s, all of which used mostly imported cocoons. Therefore, sufficient markets were available if Americans could learn to produce the cocoons successfully. These mills produced 40 percent of the silk consumed domestically, but they had to import two-thirds of the silk they wove. Davidson experimented at some length with sericulture, and her influential book argued that "there is no reason why the entire demand of the mills should not be supplied by cocoons produced in this country." It was only necessary to create interest and expertise, which she sought to do. She noted that Philadelphia, New Orleans, Corinth, Mississippi, and locations in California advertised they had reeling establishments, and Kansans could readily find a market for their cocoons. She also urged the introduction of the culture into institutions for the aged and children, prisons, asylums, almshouses, and reformatories to give the tenants a productive occupation. Boissiere, Davidson, and other sericulture pioneers discovered that it required little capital but would have to be limited to females who wanted to supplement the family income, not as a full-time male vocation. Little manual labor was necessary and promoters successfully touted the idea that this was an ideal way for women and children to assist in supporting the family.⁹

Among Davidson's more interesting experiments was her success in feeding Osage orange hedge leaves to silkworms. The Sunflower State was short on mulberries but had a plentiful supply of the hedges, which Indian peoples had favored for making their bows and arrows. Because of a dearth of fencing materials, early settlers planted additional rows of Osage orange to mark the boundaries of their property and to lay off fields. Some experts, however, called attention to the difficulty of gathering hedge leaves

Residents of Silkville, Christmas 1889. Silkville founder Ernest Valetton de Boissiere is sixth from the left.

because of thorns and the "structure of the branches." Professor Riley reported the "whole secret" was to avoid feeding the more milky and succulent leaves and, instead, use older and firmer ones.¹⁰

The German Russian Mennonites, who came to central Kansas in the 1870s, are most commonly identified with the history of Kansas wheat, but they had long practiced silk culture as a home enterprise. They successfully raised silk cocoons in Ukraine and continued the tradition on the plains of Kansas. In July 1883 the *Home Journal* noted that they

find their new homes in America even more favorable for silk growing than their old homes on the plains of Southern Russia and declare there can be no better country for growing silk than this. And the same testimony is borne by the French colonists in Franklin County.

That same year a state department of agriculture report observed that "nearly all Mennonites raise some each year for pleasure and to teach their children." A traveler visited Jacob Schmidt's house in 1882 and found he was feeding silkworms "in his best room." The visitor reported seeing thousands of worms on tables and platforms eating leaves and "they finally eat mulberry brush by the wagonload." He continued to Johann Krause's home where he "witnessed the process of reeling silk" by Mrs. Krause on "a rude twister and reel of home construction." He reported the work of reeling as requiring "much patience, of which few Americans are possessed." A reporter for *InterOcean* visited some Mennonite farmers north of Newton and declared that the wife, in addition to her housework, could "with the aid of a child or two easily raise twenty-five or

8. Carpenter, "Silkville," 54–59; *Kansas City Star*, October 23, 1938.

9. Davidson, *Silk: Its History and Manufacture*, 117.

10. *Winfield Courier*, September 28, 1882, in Silk Culture clippings, vol. 1, 13–14, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.



fifty pounds of raw silk [an unquestionably optimistic estimate], which was worth from \$6 to \$8 a pound, and even higher prices if it is better in quality."¹¹

Topekans decided not to sponsor the state fair in 1885, so the members of the Marion County Agricultural Society brought it to their area. Some Mennonites displayed the results of their silk culture in Peabody that fall, which attracted the attention of those who sought to supplement their family income. The *Peabody Gazette* advertised the fair with a full front page story. "Don't fail to see the fine silk display in the main hall," the paper advised and described how "a few years ago" the Russian Mennonites brought their silkworm eggs and mulberry trees to Marion County. Silk culture in Kansas was in its infancy, noted the *Gazette*,

11. *Western Home Journal* (Lawrence), July 5, 1883, in *ibid.*, 26–33; N. L. Prentis, "An Objective Look at the Mennonite Settlements in the Spring of 1882," in *They Seek a New Country*, ed. David V. Wiebe (Hillsboro, Kans.: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1959), 96–97; E. L. Meyer, "Silk Culture in Kansas," in Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Quarterly Report, December 1883* 5 (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1884), 77–84. For Mennonite settlements in Kansas, see James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 101–4.

and (apparently unaware of Boissiere's machine) reported that the state held no machinery to manufacture silk. The Mennonites gathered cocoons "in large numbers," providing an excellent opportunity for someone to open a commercial filature or reeling station.¹²

For several years Isaiah Horner experimented and produced displays of the various phases of sericulture in the Emporia area. In the winter of 1887 he captured the imagination of many state legislators with his presentation of the topic before a joint session of the legislature. The solons immediately established a joint committee to investigate the subject and report back that session. John S. Coddling and Frank S. Jennings represented the senate while J. Hudson Morse, John W. Arnold, and William C. Edwards were named from the lower house. Coddling served as chairman and submitted a unanimous report: "the soil and climate of Kansas are peculiarly favorable to the successful development of this industry . . . and that its development will result in inestimable value to the State." The docu-

12. *Peabody Gazette*, September 3, 1885.



ment was absolutely euphoric about the possibilities the silk industry would provide, according to the committee:

remunerative employment to thousands of people; establishing the busy hum of factories in our cities and towns; aiding in the support of our penal institutions; affording pleasant and lucrative employment to the inmates of our charitable institutions [because anyone could perform the simple duties]; and supplying a practical as well as profitable solution of the forestry problem, as an adjunct to which its benefits will be of untold value.

The committee unanimously recommended that the present legislature appropriate thirteen thousand dollars to promote the silk industry.¹³

During their investigations, the joint committee discovered the following silk statistics for the United States for the previous year:

reeled silk imported	\$23,000,000
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13. *Kansas Senate Journal*, February 10, 1887, 360–61. All sources list Horner with the initial “I” with the exception of Carpenter’s “Silkville,” which uses “J.” Perhaps the author took this from Horner’s hometown paper, the *Emporia Daily Republican*, February 20, 1885, where he erroneously was reported as “J. Horner.”

waste silk	\$ 1,000,000
value when manufactured	\$65,000,000
imported manufactured silk	\$28,000,000
U.S. factories dependent on imports	425

These figures demonstrated that a ready market was available if the intricacies of silk culture could be mastered. While the committee did not overwhelm its colleagues with these figures, it was convincing, and Senate Bill No. 268, “an act for the encouragement of silk culture,” passed the upper chamber by a vote of twenty-two to fourteen on February 25, 1887. The lower house approved it on March 3 by vote of sixty-nine to twenty-six. Two days later Governor John A. Martin, who had been interested in promoting the industry for several years, signed the measure into law.¹⁴

The law appropriated thirteen thousand dollars to build, equip, and staff a station to promote silk culture, to be administered by a commission of three: one member chosen by the governor, one by the state State Board of Agriculture, and one by the Kansas State Horticultural Society. The State Board of Silk Commissioners was charged with locating and building the station, employing a super-

14. *Kansas Senate Journal*, February 10, 1887, 361; *ibid.*, February 25, 1887, 602; *ibid.*, March 3, 1887, 842; *ibid.*, March 5, 1887, 951; *Kansas House Journal*, March 3, 1887, 1090; *Peabody Gazette*, March 17, 1887.

Silkville, showing the "big house" (left), cheese house (center, background), and barn (right).

intendent and prescribing his duties, purchasing silkworm eggs and mulberry seeds and cuttings, and providing bounties for quality cocoons. Commissioners were to post a five-thousand-dollar bond and receive three dollars per day remuneration for the days they worked, plus travel expenses at five cents per mile. The bond, a common requirement when finances or property were involved, would assure obtaining solid, public-minded citizens to make the decisions that would be important to the chosen community and to the state. The commission was required to report to the governor at least once in two years. Expectations were high for success as the law specified the commission would expire on May 1, 1889. Not all observers were enthusiastic about the experiment. The *McPherson Daily Republic* reported in disgust that the legislature had appropriated thirteen thousand dollars "to find out what any Mennonite could tell them in fifteen minutes." The following year the newspaper referred to the station as "a fraud and humbug." Perhaps the editor's opinion might have been more positive if McPherson had won the struggle to host the station.¹⁵

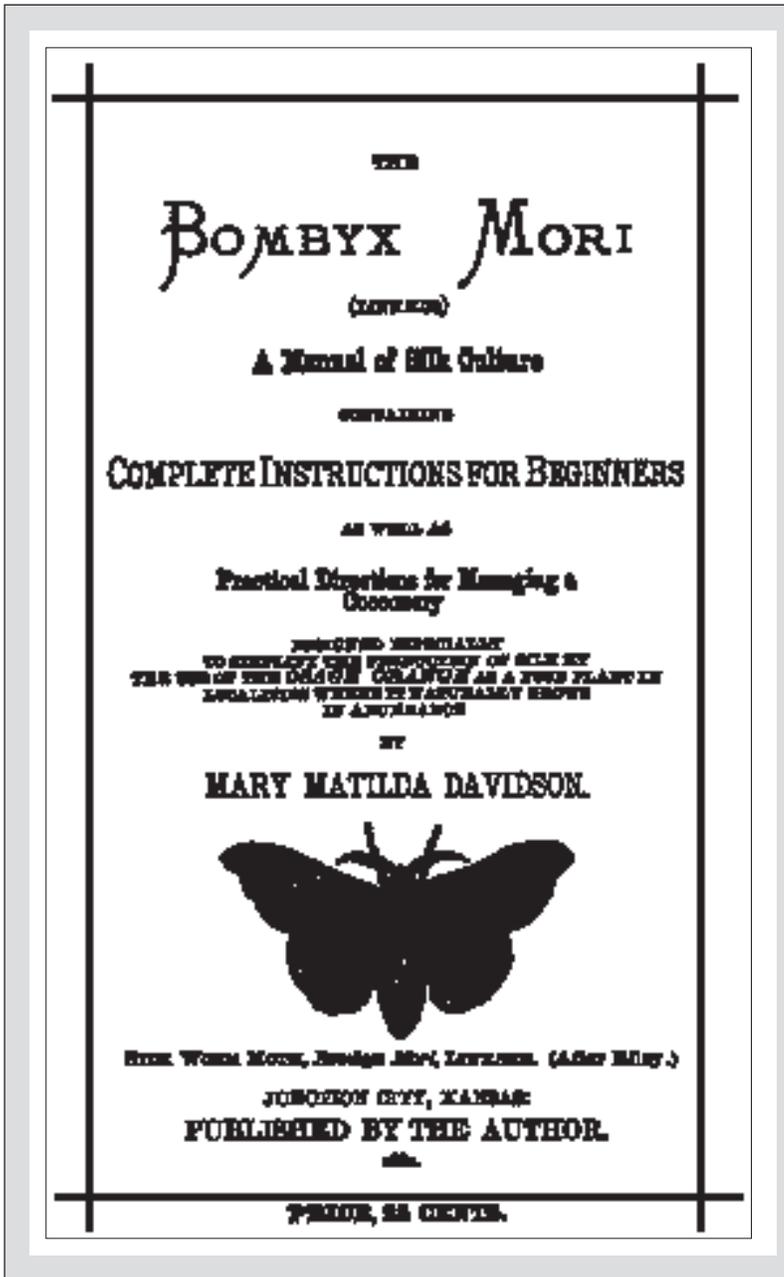
The Board of Silk Commissioners, composed of J. S. Codding of Louisville (Potawatomie County); J. H. Morse of Peabody (Marion County), who was a major force behind establishing the station; and Dr. Charles Williamson of Washington (Washington County), met on March 31, 1887, and chose Codding as chair. Hundreds of citizens of Marion County petitioned Governor Martin to appoint Morse, "including a large portion of those industrious foreign-born" Mennonites. The board named Isaiah Horner as superintendent of the experiment station with a salary of seventy-five dollars per month and immediately fell into a squabble over the station's location. The winning town had to agree to donate a ten-acre site. The commission investigated Hutchinson, McPherson,

15. *Kansas Laws* (1887), ch. 233; "History of Marion County Silk Industry Makes An Interesting Early-Day Story," *Marion Record-Review*, September 8, 1949, in *Silk Culture* clippings, 129–31; "Silk Station Failed After Short time Due to Finances," *Peabody Gazette-Herald*, Centennial Edition, June 29, 1961, in *ibid.*, 132–35; *McPherson Daily Republic*, January 19, 1889.

and Peabody, towns in the area of heavy Mennonite settlement, and Larned, a location farther west that desired economic development. In early April 1887 commissioners visited Larned, in Pawnee County, and the local editor claimed that "the gentlemen were greatly astonished at the beauty of our location . . . and said . . . we possessed every requisite for the successful raising of mulberry trees and silkworms, both as to soil and climate." At first Horner favored Larned with its higher elevation and drier climate. Codding, backed by Williamson, accordingly supported the expert and voted for Larned while Morse held out for his home town. The Larned editor noted that many of the towns involved in the selection process "became almost frantic to secure" the station. Garden City sent a delegation to meet with the commissioners "loaded with the Kansas persuader—a bonus," and Hutchinson "used all means available to secure it," but Larned "held the winning card." Horner then changed his mind and vehemently opposed Larned as the location, "citing scant foliage, cost of shipping and labor as factors" in that western county. As he put it, he "offered stout opposition so unrelentingly and . . . over-powered the board." With Horner remaining "inexorable" about this site question, Codding "proposed to bounce him summarily," according to the *Topeka Daily Capital*, "and agreed to pay his per diem and mileage out of his own purse." But the other members of the commission thought this procedure rather harsh. Horner "felt so strongly" about the matter that Dr. Williamson changed his vote and supported Commissioner Morse and the town of Peabody.¹⁶

Horner, the commission's first report observed, was "a visionary man," and "it was an impossibility for him to come down to the actual practical part of the work. . . . Machinery, reels, etc., were changed time and again." The man had worked so long and hard to promote the silk industry that "he was convinced in his own mind that he, and he alone, was to be Board and all, and could or would not brook restraint."¹⁷ The superintendent certainly labored mightily to make the station a success. Under his direction mulberry trees were planted, and at a cost of three thousand dollars a fifty- by thirty-foot building was constructed, with a basement for storing leaves and supplies, the ground floor devoted to reeling, and a second floor for

16. *Kansas State Board of Silk Commissioners, First Biennial Report, 1887–1888* (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1888), 3; "The Silk Station," *Topeka Daily Capital*, April 15, 1887, in *Silk Culture* clippings, 40–41; *Peabody Gazette*, March 17, 1887; *Larned Chronoscope*, April 1, 8, 1887; *Topeka State Journal*, November 2, 1887.



Mary Davidson of Junction City, a self-taught expert in sericulture, produced, among other studies, this Manual of Silk Culture in 1882.

many people came from some distance to visit the station and learn about silkworms that the staff was forced to limit the number of visitors. The silk commission offered a bounty that year of fifty cents per pound for the best quality cocoons produced by a Kansas family or individual, thirty-five cents for second, and twenty-five cents for third. The station sent free silkworm eggs and instructions for their culture to people in forty-six counties, and by July it was buying cocoons at an average of fifty-one to sixty dollars per crop.¹⁸

Horner's ambitions outpaced the silk commission's funds through his insistence on sending displays to various fairs across the nation. In addition, he was creating other mismanagement problems and exhibiting an independence that disturbed commissioners. They discharged him on September 29, 1887, after five months of employment. The reasons, Morse reported to the governor, were:

for general insubordination, impractical ability, and failing to comply with the orders and instructions of the board. From his entire lack of business principles, and application of them, we have had much to contend with, and when as a culmination, he acted in opposition to the express orders of the board, we thought it was time to call a halt.¹⁹

Morse failed to find the time to visit with the governor personally, as promised, but he wrote him about the details of the commission's tribulations with its superintendent and its ideas about a successor. He assured

the cocoonery. Horner purchased three thousand dollars worth of machinery and hired Helen Kroeker, a Mennonite from Hillsboro, to supervise reelers who taught the art to neophytes. He sent an exhibit of silk to the St. Louis Exposition in the summer of 1887 and traveled to the East Coast to investigate machinery and gather information from silk manufacturers about cocoon markets. In the first year so

17. Kansas State Board of Silk Commissioners, *First Biennial Report*, 4.

18. Mrs. S. H. Bennett, "Kansas Silk Culture" (Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, typescript), 8-11; "Silk Culture," *Weekly Capital and Farmers Journal* (Topeka), April 7, 1887, in Silk Culture clippings, 37-39; "Silk Station Failed After Short Time Due to Finances"; *Peabody Gazette*, April 21, 1887.

19. J. Hudson Morse to John A. Martin, October 1, 1887, Correspondence, John A. Martin Administration, Records of the Governor's Office, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, hereafter cited as Governor's Records. See also Kansas State Board of Silk Commissioners, *First Biennial Report*.

the governor that many problems contributed to Horner's discharge but that he (Morse) would "only refer to a few of the most important." Although the man was very capable in regard to raising cocoons, he was "constantly disregarding" the commission's instructions and had an "utter ignorance of the value of money." After the reelers arrived for work in Peabody, Horner insisted the commissioners build them housing. Morse had explicitly and repeatedly explained that such an expenditure was not in the budget and "the operatives should find places to board in town." "This," Horner insisted, "would not do," as one worker was "lame." Morse then suggested that the operatives could use the station's horse and wagon to travel to and from work. He secured a boarding house for them "less than one-eighth of a mile from the grounds" and assured Horner that arrangements were being made with "private parties" to erect an appropriate boarding house adjacent to the station. A week or so later Morse visited the station and found to his consternation that the operatives were gone and cocoons needed to be handled immediately. Horner "coolly informed" his boss that the operatives had been sent home "until such time as the Commissioners would erect a building for them." Left with seemingly no alternative, Morse obtained the commissioner's "most reluctant [*sic*] consent . . . to erect a building." When the structure was completed, Horner then insisted the commission "furnish the same," but Morse did not have "the hardyhood, or the cheek to ask consent of the Commissioners so to do."²⁰

Morse chronicled numerous instances of Horner violating the express orders of the commission, but the governor's wife's silk dress "was the last straw that broke the camels [*sic*] back." At first Morse and his colleagues individually favored the proposal of Belding Brothers of Northampton, Massachusetts, to promote the silk industry by presenting Mrs. John A. Martin with a dress woven by the company using Kansas silk. But the commissioners discussed the offer as a group and decided that, politically speaking, it was not a good idea because the silk actually belonged to the state, not to the board or the governor. Morse explained the implications fully to Horner and ordered him to do nothing more with the matter nor to talk to any reporters about it until he received further orders from the commissioners. Much to Morse's surprise, he soon read in the *Topeka Daily Capital* that "the dress was to be presented" to the governor's wife. When confronted

20. J. H. Morse to John A. Martin, October 10, 1887, Governor's Records.

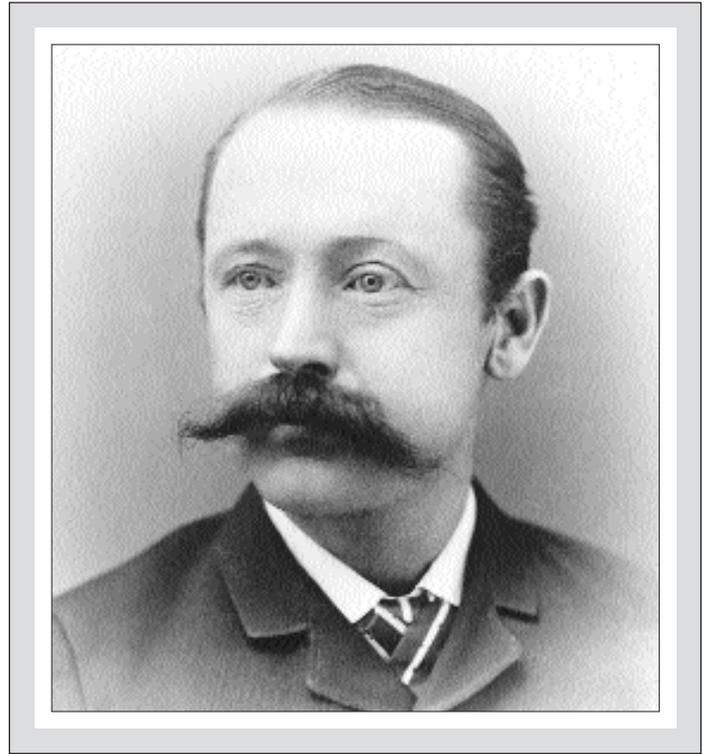
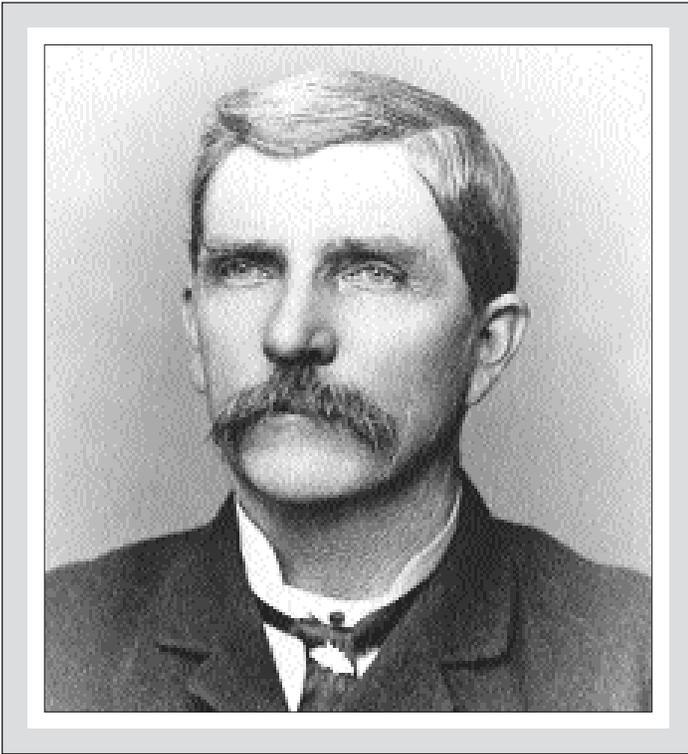
with the story, Horner responded that the newspaper must have gotten the information from the interview he gave to a *Topeka State Journal* reporter. Horner then demanded to know what would happen if he proceeded to give the dress to the first lady. Morse responded, "you may turn in your resignation." Horner subsequently sent the dress but refused to resign. The board then met and voted unanimously to discharge him.²¹

Horner had recommended and the commission selected Abraham Thiessen, a Nebraska Mennonite with considerable experience in silk culture, both in America and Russia, as Horner's successor. Upon assuming his duties at the Peabody station, Thiessen wrote a letter in German to the neighboring Mennonites explaining his plans for the future of the experiment. "This state has gotten what I have been trying to get in Nebraska for six years," he noted exultantly about the station, and he hoped in a year or two to win first prizes at international exhibitions for Kansas silk. He also wanted to replace the Japanese as the chief source for silkworm eggs sold in Europe. "Each year several carloads of Japanese eggs pass through Omaha in February," he explained, "enroute to Southern Europe where they are sold at enormous prices. . . . We have labored for the last eight years in our new home in this country" to expand the cottage industry, he reminded readers, and now the silk station could develop markets and good prices for the products.²²

Immediately after his discharge, Horner began a two-part campaign seeking revenge on the silk commissioners who had fired him and to establish a rival silk factory. The *Peabody Gazette* noted that his assignment as superintendent had placed him "on the high road to fame and fortune." Soon after his appointment, he married an Emporian, and they relocated in Peabody. His modest salary gradually allowed them to become "more situated," but following his dismissal Horner began a campaign "to enlist sympathy and aid" to establish a silk factory. According to the *Peabody Gazette* he had "skulked around the institution like a thief in the night trying to entice [*sic*] to girls employed there to quit work" following his discharge. He soon dissipated "his little savings," and the public failed to respond to his promotional scheme. Horner ended up on the streets of Kansas City, selling

21. Ibid; see also I. Horner to John A. Martin, September 24, 1887, ibid.; *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 20, 1887; Kansas State Board of Silk Commissioners, *First Biennial Report*, 4.

22. *Peabody Gazette*, October 20, 1887.



flowers made of silk until he fell ill, became the recipient of charity, and died in poverty on December 9, 1887.²³

Horner's second task, to discredit the silk commissioners, also resulted in disappointment to himself. Taking his case to the people, he complained about the interference of the commission with his work and insisted that the commissioners had exacted a thirty-five-hundred-dollar bribe to locate the station at Peabody. More than one newspaper believed his story. One noted that his charges were "grounded in fact, specific, pointed and notorious," and if the commissioners were not guilty, their accuser "would now be playing checkers with his nose in a prison cell as a result of a conviction for defamation of character. . . . If ever knavery and corruption in state officials needed scourging," the story concluded, "this silk commission presents the most inviting case we know of." When Horner reiterated his charges, the *Newton Evening Kansan* quoted him favorably as saying "my liberty is a living evidence of the truthfulness of the same."²⁴

Horner had the support of the *Topeka State Journal*, a

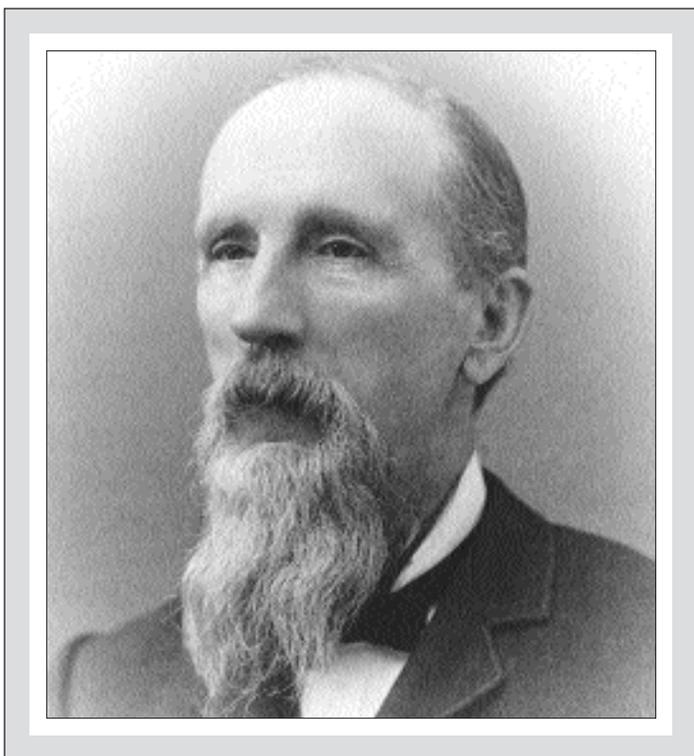
23. *Emporia Democrat*, December 14, 1887; *Newton Evening Kansan*, December 14, 1887; *Marion Record*, December 16, 1887; *Peabody Gazette*, November 17, 1887.

24. "The Silk Commission," unidentified newspaper article in Silk Culture clippings, 66, 81.

newspaper that found it difficult to believe anything positive about the silk commission. The *State Journal* concluded that trouble between Horner and the commission "culminated on account of the presentation" of the dress. One newspaper argued that "there was considerable money spent by Peabody and Larned people, which does not seem to be accounted for. It is stated that the commissioners have pocketed various sums contributed by parties interested in the establishment of a silk station."²⁵ Another newspaper claimed:

the board of commissioners are and have been from the first rotten to the core, and while we have been unable to get to the bottom of the facts, and can not [sic] positively state that such is the case, certain it is that such is the general belief of the public at large. . . . there is no doubt in our mind that Coddling and Williamson are nothing more or less than corrupt and bought up boodlers who take the silk dress muddle as an excuse to decapitate [sic] Mr. Horner, because he

25. *Topeka State Journal*, October 3, 1887; "Rotten Strands of Silk," unidentified newspaper article in Silk Culture clippings, 73. The *Topeka State Journal* early reported that "the action of the grand jury is awaited with great interest," but when the jury that investigated corruption charges took no action against the commissioners, the newspaper printed nothing about it; *Topeka State Journal*, November 7, 1887.



Members of the Kansas State Board of Silk Commissioners, formed in 1887: John S. Coddling (left), J. Hudson Morse (center), and Charles Williamson (right).

has from the first declined to stand in with them. . . .

We do know that Peabody not only donated grounds but raised large sums of money and paid it out somewhere; just where is rather shrouded in fog and mystery.²⁶

The editor of the *Western Kansas World*, Winfield S. Tilton, a colleague of Morse in the legislature of 1887, observed that "Mr. Morse was very friendly with Mr. Horner last winter (when the silk bill passed), which leads us to judge that the friendship has not been severed without at least severe provocation from Mr. Horner."²⁷ But the *Topeka State Journal* accepted Horner's accusations without question. Noting that he had generously recommended Thiessen as his successor, the editor was certain "this action on the part of Mr. Horner should be pretty conclusive proof that he is not a 'sore head.'" This type of support emboldened Horner to expand his charges. He told a *State Journal* reporter:

The commissioners are a band of boodlers and have been from the start. They located the silk station at Larned because they received money for it. I told

them the station could never be maintained at Larned and refused to have anything to do with it if it remained there. Partly because I demanded it and partly because they feared their bribe affair would be made public, they changed the location to Peabody, not, however, until the people of Peabody had put up the sum of \$3,500. This money . . . went into the pockets of the commissioners and two of the members openly boasted that the money was meant for them and would be kept by them.

Horner questioned Morse about the location decision and the latter explained that "the money paid by Peabody was for the purpose of reimbursing Larned men who had invested heavily in real estate on the promise that the institution was to be located there." Horner responded that he had previously respected Morse but now said, "you are a pretty sleek one" because the location at Larned was always tentative and the Larned investors were too smart to commit their money until the decision was finalized. Morse warned Horner that "I must dry up about that matter and threatened me and gave me to understand that I would be kicked out if I said anything more."²⁸

Horner had previously claimed, in a letter dated October 10 to the *State Journal*:

The commission were quite willing to have me restored on condition that nothing of past affairs should hereafter be referred to. But I having publicly in the presence of the secretary, charged the Board of bribery, could not accept a restoration of my official position without serious injury to my character.²⁹

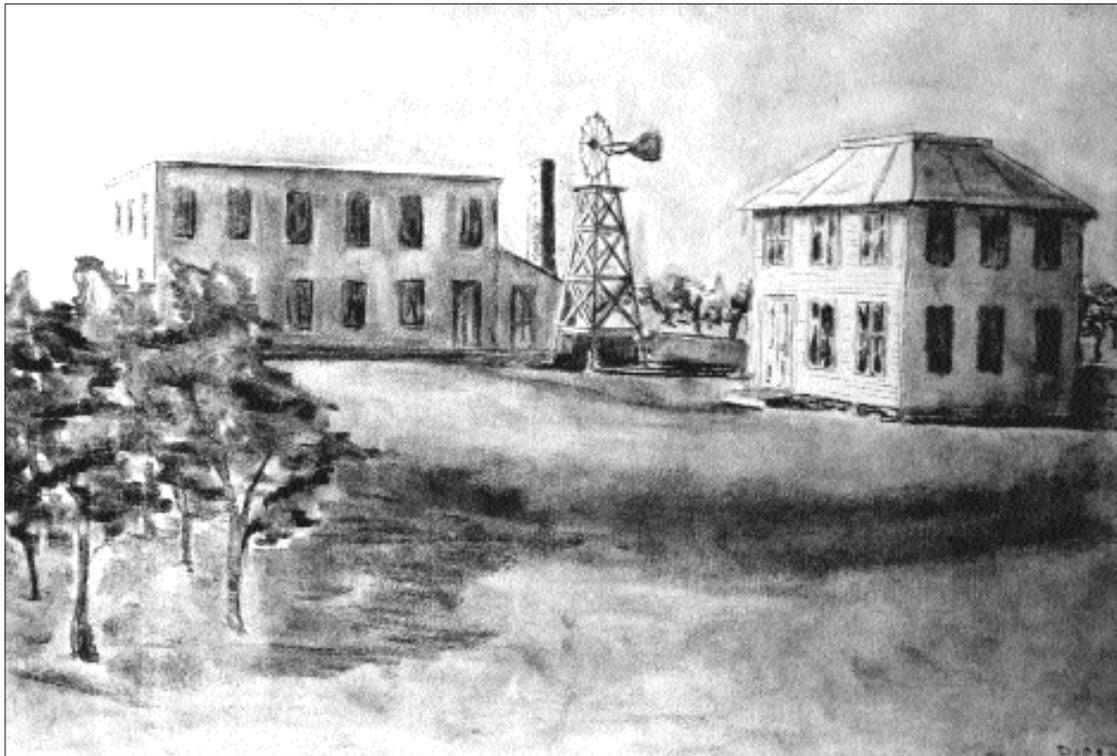
Horner's claims that Morse had used station property for his own purposes finally forced the commissioner to talk to a reporter. Morse admitted that he "and others" furnished the money to experiment with the production of

26. "Rotten Strands of Silk."

27. Quotation from *Peabody Gazette*, December 3, 1887.

28. *Ibid.*; "A Band of Boodlers," *Topeka State Journal*, October 22, 1887.

29. *Topeka State Journal*, October 12, 1887; *Peabody Gazette*, December 3, 1887.



An artist's rendition of the Kansas silk station in Peabody.

"dressed silk." Manufacturers used the "waste cocoons" to produce this material, and he believed the station must find ways to utilize this waste silk if the industry were to be placed on a profitable basis. When Horner began his campaign of vengeance, however, Morse returned the unused cocoons and paid for the remainder that had been consumed in the experiment. He said the commissioners "are ready to meet any accusations" of critics. Horner, however, demanded a grand jury to investigate the issue, and he "boldly reiterated" his charges before that body.³⁰

The *Peabody Gazette* noted, during the grand jury investigations, that "the people of Peabody are very tired of Mr. Horner. In fact, he tires anyone with whom he comes in contact." After several days of investigation and testimony on this and sundry matters, during which nothing surfaced that was indictable, the editor summarized the jury's findings and happily reported that "the Peabody Silk Station business was ignored," although indictments were handed down on arson and violation of the liquor

were handed down on arson and violation of the liquor laws. No charges of defamation of character were ever filed against Horner, because he died before the grand jury completed its work. The *State Journal* concluded that his "early death is the direct result of the action of the silk commissioners in removing him from his position just at the opening of winter. . . . he yielded up his life for the want of nourishing food." The *Marion Record* believed his charges against the commissioners, "while they may have been the exaggerations and distortions of a wounded heart and possibly a diseased mind, were nevertheless deserving of a full and fair investigation."³¹

Thiessen made several positive modifications in the Peabody station in addition to correcting Horner's mistakes. He found that mice were destroying cocoons, silkworms were being stored in damp places, and Horner had

30. "Mr. Morse Talks," *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 26, 1887; "The Silk Commission," in *Silk Culture* clippings, 81.

31. Bennett, "Kansas Silk Culture," 15; *Topeka State Journal*, December 13, 1887; *Marion Record*, December 16, 1887. The Clerk of District Court in Marion County was unable to locate the grand jury file but stated that, in any case, these proceedings are confidential and thus not open to research.

A sketch of a silk reel used by women in southern Russia and by silk culturalist Abraham Thiessen. Published in Thiessen's *The Mulberry Trees and Silk Culture*, 1884.



ill-advisedly spent money on impractical machinery that had to be replaced.³²

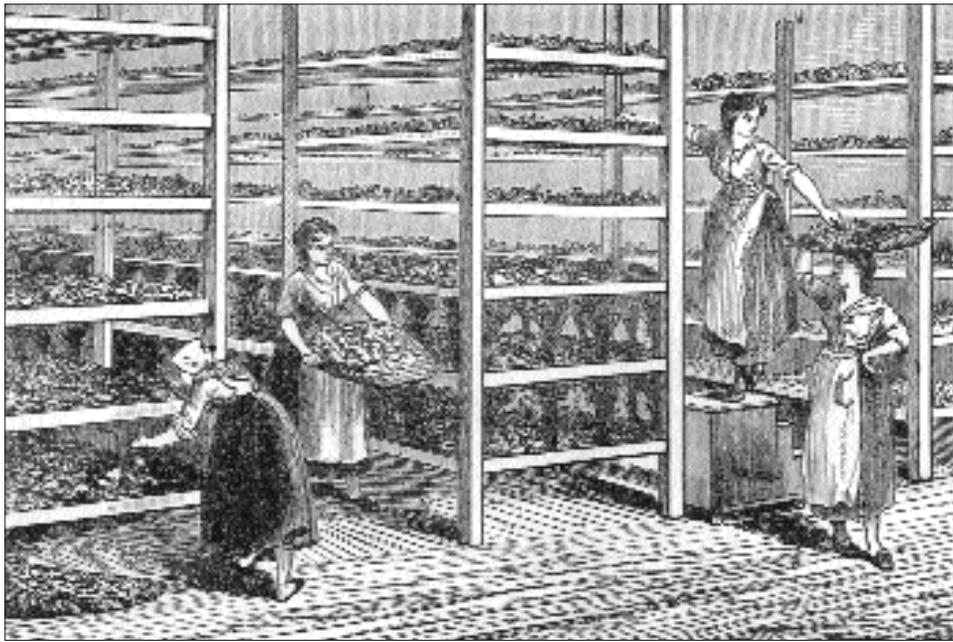
Morse resigned his position and moved to New York. Before his departure, however, he suggested to the governor that, based upon his experience of the previous year, he believed his successor should reside in Peabody. The station was dependent on workers “of foreign birth, and with peculiarities [*sic*] that only foreigners possess,” and the commissioner must “give daily attention to the matters that daily arise.” Morse recommended James H. C. Brewer, who received the appointment and commenced his service on the silk commission on March 12, 1888. Morse noted that since Thiessen was appointed superintendent work had changed at the station, and it would become “a potent factor in the development of our state.” Its operations already had “awakened a deep interest in this industry . . . all over the United States.”³³

In its first report to the governor, issued soon after Morse’s departure, the silk commission recommended that the industry be placed under the State Board of Agriculture, with a single “resident Commissioner” replacing the “useless” three-member board. The members also recommended, based on their experience, that the Board of Agriculture should try to purchase an automatic reeler (which would be a good idea except that one had not yet been per-

fect), and the state should place a bounty on silk production until the industry was firmly established. The legislature had offered a bounty on sorghum sugar production but was not ready to go that far with silk. Instead, legislation was introduced in February 1889 to appropriate five thousand dollars during each of the next two years to continue operating the silk station. “Opposition to the bill was strong as to date the station was not a paying proposition,” concluded Mrs. S. H. Bennett many years later. At the time, however, the *Wichita Eagle* believed this to be “a very reasonable request, both as to its merits and to the amount asked for It is as meritorious as the proposition to grant a bounty of two cents a pound to Kansas produced sugar, and this last proposition is universally approved.” Silk culture, the editor added, provided “light, pleasant, profitable employment” to women and children. Representatives from Abilene, Lindsborg, and Newton “talked in favor of continuing the experiment and without too much controversy the bill was passed.” The vote in the house was seventy-seven to four, and the senate approved

32. “Mr. Morse Talks.”

33. J. Hudson Morse to John A. Martin, March 12, 1888, Governor’s Records; “Silk-Culture Commission,” *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1923–1925 16 (1925): 702.



*Silk production was thought to provide "light, pleasant, profitable employment" for women and children. In this sketch women operate a facility equipped with shelves and trays for large-scale worm rearing. Published in C. V. Riley's *The Mulberry Silk-Worm, Being a Manual of Instructions in Silk-Culture*, 1886.*

it twenty-seven to six. In 1889 Kansas produced 20 percent of the nation's domestic cocoons.³⁴

That year the station needed a supply of silkworm eggs from the nearby Mennonites. With the death of Thiessen, the Board of Agriculture appointed J. H. C. Brewer to take charge of the station because he was well acquainted with the Mennonites and could use his influence to continue good relations. The board's second biennial report noted that fifty-four families in Kansas received \$1,254 for their cocoons that year for an average of \$23.22 per household. The work required six weeks and could be done by the young and the aged and was "especially adapted to girls."³⁵

Despite the favorable evaluations of the filatures in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington that Kansas silk was the best quality they bought, the industry just was not succeeding as the promoters had envisioned. Although Kansas-reeled silk brought seventy-

34. Kansas State Board of Silk Commissioners, *First Biennial Report*, 5; *Marion Recorder-Review*, September 8, 1949, in *Silk Culture Clippings*, 129; *Wichita Eagle*, February 22, 1889; *Kansas House Journal*, February 13, 1889, 710; *Kansas Senate Journal*, March 1, 1889, 942.

35. Bennett, "Kansas Silk Culture," 23–24; Kansas State Silk Commissioner, *Second Biennial Report, 1889–1890* (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1891), 3.

five cents per pound more than other American silk and one dollar more than imported, it was unable to compete with the foreign import produced by cheap labor. The 1892 silk report, however, remained optimistic. "There is but one thing lacking to make the station self-supporting and place the industry on a firm and paying basis in our State," Commissioner L. A. Buck proclaimed, "and that is a more rapid and cheaper process of reeling the silk from the cocoons." Philip Walker of the U.S. Department of Agriculture continued his work on an automatic reeler, but as the *Topeka Daily Capital* noted, reeling devices had not improved in the past two hundred years. The newspaper compared the pay of Peabody girls at \$3.50–\$4.00 per week with that of French female reelers at fifty cents weekly, concluding that Kansans just could not contend with this inequity. Some kind of help or protection was needed from the federal government.³⁶

As early as 1882 the U.S. Department of Agriculture distributed a few silkworm eggs to those who made inquiry. Two years later the department earmarked fifteen thousand dollars of its funds for encouraging silk culture and to promote markets for American cocoons. Noted science historian A. Hunter Dupree stated that this was par-

36. Kansas State Silk Commissioner, *Annual Report, June 30, 1892* (Topeka: State Printer, 1893), 3–4; "Home Grown Silk," *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 12, 1894, in *Silk Culture Clippings*, 52–53.

tially "an effort to develop the South, it definitely was pressed upon the department from outside." Beginning with the Forty-eighth Congress in May 1884, numerous senators and congressmen, including some Kansans, introduced legislation in every session to promote the industry. Finally, on June 14, 1894, the Senate approved a bill to instruct the secretary of agriculture to create five silk stations across the country to cooperate with state stations and to appropriate five thousand dollars for each unit's operating expenses. The House Committee on Agriculture subsequently recommended that the Senate measure "do pass" but the lower house declined. Probably this would have been of little assistance to Kansans anyway as the congressmen were relying on the advice of Professor Joseph Newmann, a silk expert from California. Newmann insisted sericulture was feasible only in the climate of the Southern Belt ranging from southern Virginia and Tennessee through North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, and up to Jackson County, Oregon. If the stations had been built, the secretary of agriculture would have located them within this region.³⁷

American sugar competed with foreign imports because the Louisiana senators were able to include their product in the tariff schedules. In 1890 Mary Davidson informed Kansas sericulturalists that, according to Philip Walker, chief of the silk bureau, a duty placed of one dollar per pound would be "sufficient protection and not materially increase the price of silk fabrics to the consumer. If we could produce all our silk it would add fifteen million dollars to the increase of our farmers." Kansas senator Preston B. Plumb unsuccessfully sought to amend the tariff bill of 1890 to include silk cocoons; this lost significantly by a vote of five to fifty-two. The state legislature continued to vote appropriations for the silk station until 1895 when it approved one hundred dollars to protect the property until they could dispose of it. In 1896 Congressman Charles Curtis introduced a bill to authorize ten thousand dollars for the secretary of agriculture to use in operating

37. Margaret W. Brooks, "An Experiment in Silk Culture," *Popular Science Monthly* 29 (1887): 317–22; A. Hunter Dupree, *Science in the Federal Government* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957): 162; *Congressional Record*, 53d Cong., 2d sess., 1894, 26, pt. 7: 6256; "Silk Culture in the United States," 53d Cong., 2d sess., 1894, H. Rept. 1396, serial 3272.

the station. This was defeated, so in 1897 the state legislature decided that cocoons did not thrive in Kansas and ordered the station disposed of "to the best advantage of the state." The solons were so disappointed with this unsuccessful experiment, explained the *El Dorado Times* some years later, they ordered to donate, if necessary, "the entire Peabody plant to the government." By that time even the national government had tired of the effort, and the silk station was sold eventually to private enterprise for other uses.³⁸

The figure of Isaiah Horner elicits sympathy. He had much to offer in the field of entomology and achieved some success in experimenting with silk culture, advertising its possibilities, and promoting it in the state. But obviously he was out of his realm in developing public relations and lacked the practical skills necessary to operate a public experiment as required by the silk station. The position offered him a good economic opportunity, and, when he failed and was terminated, he placed his shortcomings on the shoulders of the commissioners and sought vengeance against them. Alas for his peace of mind and financial situation, his story did not conform to the facts.

Kansans became greatly excited about the possibilities of silk culture in the formative years of the state and were on the cutting edge of adapting sericulture to Great Plains conditions. It was rightly touted as a crop the females of the family could cultivate to supplement farm income, and, with the assistance of the state, required little or no investment. But the climate proved to be more adverse and variable than promoters envisioned, and the sensitive little producer, the silkworm, did not thrive in the Sunflower State as expected. Most important, the lack of a mechanical reeler and especially the competition of low foreign wages militated against its success. The state sought to encourage silk production as it did the sorghum sugar industry, but it too "proved to be an elusive and eventually shattered dream."³⁹



38. "No Interest in Silk in Kansas," *El Dorado Times*, June 20, 1922, in Silk Culture clippings, 55; "Silk Culture," *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 22, 1890, April 16, 1923, in *ibid.*, 49; "Kansas' Early Experiment in the Silkworm Industry Similar to Modern Immigration Problems," *Topeka Daily Capital*, April 16, 1923, in *ibid.*, 56.

39. Quotation from Socolofsky, "The Bittersweet Tale of Sorghum Sugar," 289.