Rethinking the Past, Reimagining the Future

by Rita G. Napier

In recent years western history has been a battleground of contested knowledge. Kansas is one of the disputed areas. Why do the stakes seem so high? Because the battles are being fought over the control of knowledge, and knowledge is the yarn out of which we weave the fabric of the future. Identity from our past is the talent and skill we bring to the task of weaving.

Reinterpretation of history is not new. Historians always are looking for new or previously unused manuscripts and new kinds of data that will cast more light on our shared past. Errors in past writing, people or topics left out, and new perspectives or research techniques from scholars in other disciplines may cause historians to revise history. The impact of momentous events in a historian’s own time also can generate new research and writing. In recent years there has been significant reinterpretation of all fields in American history, none more so, perhaps, than the history of the American West.

Much change was generated by social and political events of the late 1950s and the 1960s. Historians began to recognize then that traditional western history left out many people, in particular women, African Americans, and ethnic groups of color. Civil rights issues, grass-roots political movements, women’s rights activities, and environmental questions, among others, provided new perspectives on the past. Historians discovered new source material and new ways of using familiar documents such as the census. As a result, historians introduced a host of new topics, people, and perspectives that produced a new western history.

At stake are some of our most cherished myths, values, and stories of the West. America’s sense of identity often is tied to the values found in western origin stories. For example, stories of cattle trails, army campaigns to conquer recalcitrant tribesmen, and pioneer farmers’ battles to dominate and transform an often arid, treeless landscape have been favorite topics among historians of the West. However, some argue that we must transform our vision of the past to include people and perspectives ordinarily omitted from these stories. In some

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visibility of such a series for several years and with the realization that historiography is not of interest to everyone, the editorial advisory board of Kansas History decided to move forward with the project, launched with this issue's provocative overview by University of Kansas professor Rita G. Napier, the series's co-editor. Over the course of the next several years, subsequent essays certainly should be of great value to students and teachers of Kansas history, but they also should be of interest to all lovers of Kansas history, who may discover new topics and perspectives. The editors are convinced that these contributions will serve a useful purpose, calling attention to the importance of recent writings and encouraging our readers to see Kansas history differently. Hopefully, the series also will inspire some to take research and writing in new directions.

All fields of American history have experienced change or reinterpretation in recent decades, none more so, perhaps, than the history of the American West. Like the so-called new social history of the 1960s, the new western history flourished in the late twentieth century, with historians such as Patricia Limerick and Donald Worster challenging many of our traditional concepts and assumptions about the region's past. Kansas scholarship too has moved in important new directions in the past thirty years or so, but many if not most people are unaware of how these differ-

A new approach, a new beginning, is the sentiment reflected in this painting by N. C. Wyeth.
ent historical strands are being woven into a new history. To give us all a better understanding of these profoundly important developments, we have asked numerous scholars to analyze the nature and evolution of Kansas history over the course of the last one hundred and fifty years or more. They will not plow through all the historiography but rather examine the best books, articles, or authors in their respective fields of study and discuss the major topics, themes, insights, and problems. Finally, each contributor has been asked to address the following questions: Where do you think the newest literature has taken us and where should we go from here? What direction should new scholarship take and/or what topics remain un-plumbed?

The series’s introductory essay, “Rethinking the Past, Reimagining the Future,” is a thought provoking essay that challenges the reader to examine the differences between the “old” western and Kansas history and the “new.” It seeks to explore answers historians have advanced and pose questions specific to our state that they need to pursue. The editors hope and expect the entire series to encourage debate and a fresh look at issues of importance to Kansas history. If it does, we will count it a success.

Virgil W. Dean
Editor, Kansas History

cases we are asked to question whether these traditional subjects had the significance given them by historians. To do so will lead to questions about the rightness of conquest, the importance of individuals over groups, the focus on elites rather than “ordinary” people, and triumphs rather than problems and failures.¹

The purpose of this essay is to shoot a different vector on the new history by examining in detail one western state, Kansas. Studies over the past thirty-five years have transformed our understanding of the history of Kansas. Material on topics such as environment, gender, race, class, ethnicity, community, capitalism, westward expansion, and Native Americans is rich and challenges old assumptions. The new story is complex if yet incomplete. For those who read history as literature, there are intriguing new characters, previously unknown episodes, and a chance to look at the complexities, successes, and failures in the experience of life. These new ideas about the past are stimulating a rethinking of our history.

New issues have been raised. For example, do stories about cowboys, fur traders and trappers, wagon trains on overland trails, pioneer farmers, prospectors and mining rushes, and Indian wars in the nineteenth century tell the whole story of the Kansas or western past? Or Kansas and western identity? Do we need to look more closely at farm families, their daily lives, family relationships, gender, and work roles? Should we not include the stories of women, African Americans, ethnic groups, and wage workers as well as wild and woolly trappers? Indeed, is it not at least as important to look at profit-seeking cattlemen as at cowboys? Or poor people and environmental destruction as well as prospectors and bonanza kings? And is not the twentieth century as crucial to our understanding as earlier centuries?²

The new history is not just the reverse of the old, however. Historians have begun to use a multitude of new sources that have created a very different picture of the West. Because it attempts to be inclusive, the new narrative incorporates greater diversity and is both different and more complex. Historians now include the full sweep of Kansas and western history, not just that before the turn of the last century. Some see the great stretch of prehistory as essential to the story as well. This longer view reveals some critical continuities obscured by the shorter span of much traditional history. For these reasons, the new adds both new topics and new perspectives. Its more analytical approach allows us to rethink the


past and, perhaps, to reimagine the future. This essay addresses the change from the old western and Kansas history to the new and seeks to explore explanations historians have advanced by focusing on the history of Kansas.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF NATIVE AMERICAN LIFE

Native American history has been at the nexus of controversy. Historians before the 1960s uniformly regarded Indians—if they discussed them at all—as warlike savages who were obstacles to superior Euro-American expansion and settlement. In the 1930s Walter Prescott Webb, for example, equated Plains Indians with animals who were perfectly adapted to the harsh, arid Plains environment. Their exquisite adaptation made them formidable foes before industrialization made conquest possible. As obstacles to Euro-American expansion, they were superb horsemen, expert buffalo hunters, cruel and barbarous foes, and excellent thieves, but eventually they would be conquered by six-gun toting Americans on horseback. More recently, historian Frederick Merk described Plains Indians as “wild” and “likely to rob or destroy small parties of Whites.” According to Merk, “Indians north of Mexico were a primitive people” with a “backward society” that did not use the land properly and did not deserve to keep it.3

Kenneth Davis, writing about native peoples in Kansas history, shared this orientation. He wrote as late as 1976, “This generally open prairie, this timeless land, was very sparsely inhabited in 1776 by a primitive and timeless people who, because they were few and possessed tools of limited environmental destructiveness, had left few marks upon it.” In this view historians echoed the beliefs of the Euro-American conquerors and ignored the perspective of native peoples.4

The new histories of Kansas and the West restore native peoples to a central role throughout. The stereotype of unchanging savages is disappearing. This inclusive approach describes more complicated, sophisticated native cultures and produces a more complex narrative with multiple perspectives embedded in it. It seems unlikely that historians ever again will resort to the old stereotypes when they describe native peoples.

In the new history Native Americans are central actors. Most historians now begin with the story of native origins and native life, at least ten thousand to twelve thousand years before Europeans entered this land. The story begins with explorers making their way over the land, creating mind maps of it, adjusting to great environmental changes, and generating their particular relationships with land, flora, fauna, and each other. Some evidence is available on their cosmologies as well. The native peoples of this place we would later call Kansas were a heterogeneous people who manipulated and altered the environment in significant ways. Both nomadic hunting and settled agriculture developed in Kansas. The agriculturalists transplanted tropical plants such as corn, beans, and squash and bred corn to adapt to the climate and environment of the Plains, which shows

they recognized environmental possibilities and limits and created a method of adaptation to them. They also replanted highly desirable wild plants to make them more accessible. This agriculture successfully produced a surplus, stored in large underground pits, and made greater cultural development possible in the leisure time thus gained. The hunters were attracted to the uplands of the Plains occupied by great buffalo herds and chose to focus their economic, social, and religious life on bison and grass. They traded surplus meat and hides to the agricultural villagers for vegetables. Thus, a complex trading network existed well before Europeans entered the scene. When the horse came to the Plains, the native peoples readily integrated it into their cultures as a tool for more efficient hunting and packing and as a new inspiration in their religious thinking.5

The experience of native peoples with the horse illustrates the way they both altered the environment and adapted to it before direct contact with Europeans. Historian Richard White’s essay on the Pawnee cultural landscape, for example, supplies us with some of our best evidence of native manipulation of the environment. The Pawnees, agriculturalists who hunted buffalo on the Central Plains, were eager to acquire horses, but they also wished to continue farming. Because of their adoption of the horse, the Pawnees had to find feed away from their villages in the dangerous winter season when the tall prairie grasses had lost their nutritional value. The Pawnees adapted by changing their seasonal routine. They went on winter hunts to places where they could find nutritious buffalo grass and cottonwood bark and twigs as they searched for buffalo. By firing dead grass in the spring, they also altered their environment for horse grazing by hastening green-up. The firing also killed trees and shrubs in an area where timber was already scarce. The land Euro-Americans found was hardly an unchanged “virgin” land.6

Just as the cultures and societies that developed in the thousands of years before Europeans arrived were not unchanging, they were not simple. The Pawnees of the Central Plains, as anthropologist Gene Weltfish has demonstrated, for example, understood and ordered their world through a complex cosmology and a thorough understanding of the natural world, both earth and the heavens. They used astronomy to calendar the year and to time their ceremonies and rituals. Based on their cultural understanding of life, they ordered their complex kinship system in terms of perceived relationships to constellations of stars. Well-thought-out household organization, divisions of labor, a system of matrilineal descent, and political order created the stability necessary to sustain a long-term agricultural society. Pawnee village life on the Central Plains existed at least seven hundred years. Their elaborate culture was made possible in part because of the


leisure time created by a successful economy. This was a long-term but hardly simple life on the Plains.7

Buffalo hunters on the Central Plains, too, had complex cultures that do not fit the stereotype. The Cheyennes in western Kansas used the stars to predict the solstice, calendar the year, and time the Sun Dance. Their sense of sovereignty was based on a covenant with the spirit keepers of the game and their right to hunt buffalo on a kinship relationship. The Cheyennes preserved social order through a combination of public law, leadership behavior based on a value consensus, appropriate kinship behavior, a tribal political system, and social ostracism. Although the Cheyennes were scattered in small groups a good part of the year, clear, shared rules guided their behavior. These hunters also produced a surplus and participated in an ancient trade network on the Plains.8

The evidence showing that native peoples were neither savage nor primitive should not cause us to create a new ideal type. Like other human societies, those of native peoples had imperfections. Their adaptation to horses, buffalo, and grass was not a perfect one, as some historians such as Dan Flores and James E. Sherow have demonstrated. Equestrian tribes struggled to prevent numerous horse deaths in winter, and once they began to hunt buffalo for the market, the nomadic peoples in western Kansas contributed to the weakening of the great herds. The Cheyennes created public laws against acts such as homicide and incest because they were real problems; most tribes created ideals of generosity, self-control, and wisdom because they knew such behavior was not innate and that some would achieve it and others would not. The new western history challenged us to avoid dehumanizing stereotypes and seek to fairly depict the complexities of Native American life.9

**EURO-AMERICAN EXPANSIONISM OR CONTEST FOR THE KANSAS PLAINS**

The traditional interpretation of Native Americans also was central to how historians depicted expansionism. Until recently historians saw taking native lands and replacing them with “civilization” as part of a great American triumph story. According to intellectual historian and literary scholar Kenneth S. Lynn, for example, resettling the West “constitutes one of the great achievements in the history of human freedom.” The “most spectacular achievement,” he wrote, was “the extension of its [United States’] principles of free democratic republicanism across the width of the entire continent.” Like the famous historian of frontier ex-

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expansion Frederick Merk, himself a student of Frederick Jackson Turner, Lynn saw expansion and resettlement as a great reform whereby an advanced civilization replaced backward people who seemed incapable of proper use of the land or of running effective governments. The earlier historians of Kansas generally shared this perspective.¹⁰

According to the new western historians, United States expansion into Kansas is no longer seen as a simple story of a triumphal march westward. Instead, they see it as a contested process in which Native Americans appear as legitimate sovereigns protecting their territory from unjust invasion. While military actions played a role in expansion, scholars now see a number of reasons why Native Americans did not resist successfully. The ability of tribes to resist was severely hampered by population losses from epidemic diseases such as smallpox and cholera and ongoing problems such as malnutrition. Historian William E. Unrau has documented the series of epidemics suffered by the Kansa Indians, for example, and the concurrent decline in their power. The operation of the market and the practices of traders created a credit dependency that also sapped native ability to resist political and cultural pressures. Further, tribal divisions meant that the expanding Euro-American population met divided resistance. Even so, expansionism and concomitant efforts to subsume native cultures was not uncontested, as native peoples resisted when they could and accommodated when they could not.¹¹

One of the ways historians have changed narratives of expansion, as evidenced in the work of Richard White and others, has been to include Native American resistance and adaptations. One aspect of expansion was removal of native peoples from the land. In Kansas the Munsees and Chippewas followed a strategy of both accommodation and resistance to keep their land. Over and over again, argued historian Joseph B. Herring, they refused to move to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) as vociferously demanded by both missionaries and Indian agents. At the same time, they tried to accommodate to other demands as an argument for retaining land and residence in Kansas. One set of strategies involved culture change. According to Herring, they accepted Euro-American-style clothing and agreed to send their children to missionary schools. Another strategy was economic. They took up the tools of their conquerors and began to cultivate farms. The two small bands finally succeeded in resisting further expansion and removal, but the loss of culture and autonomy was great.¹²


The way new western historians have rewritten the narrative of the fur trade adds another dimension to the understanding of expansion across Kansas. They now emphasize the long period of time when the fur trade anchored a new kind of economy and society. In Kansas French fur traders married Kansa and Osage women who became key to the organization of hunting and trapping by their native kin. According to recent scholarship, native peoples also influenced methods of trading and the value of goods transferred. Exchange of commodities typified trade, not cash payments, and often followed native rules and practices. The marriages resulted in distinctive communities like the one at Kawsmouth. These mixed-blood communities reflected adaptation by both the French and the native peoples and their offspring. Most lived by a combination of barter, based on trapping, and of growing small gardens. The majority was bilingual, although French was the main language. These novel mixed-blood communities were an excellent example of ethnic intermingling in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries that was a result of Euro-American expansion across Kansas.13

Other historians have rewritten the narrative of expansion in Kansas by emphasizing the mind set of resettlers to control the world around them. That is, expansion and conquest represented more than taking the land and incorporating it into United States sovereignty. German immigrants to Kansas easily accepted the ideal of manifest destiny, argued Julie Wilson in a 1996 Western Historical Quarterly article, and, like other resettlers, saw victory in changing the wilderness to a garden, creating land uses bounded by newly drawn lines, and even attempting to change the climate of the state. Farmers and railroad companies alike tried to grow forests on the flat arid grasslands. According to this historical argument, even the introduction of new varieties and species, which destroyed indigenous crops and animals, can be seen as evidence of part of this larger process of conquest and domination.14

The Resettlement Process and the Creation of a New Kansas Economy

When we turn to depictions of life after the United States took political control of Kansas and the West, the contrast between old and new history is equally stunning. In the traditional narrative, the economy was depicted as simple and isolated. Because of western isolation, economic decisions were made locally, influenced by local environmental conditions and local people who were primarily male. This perspective reflected an agrarian vision in which pioneer farmers were key figures. Work was simple and labor intensive. Farmers relied on muscle power and animal power to turn the prairies and harvest crops with simple

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tools. Although farmers might barter with neighbors for necessities or luxuries, held the influential western historian Ray Allen Billington, crop raising was primarily for subsistence not sale and profit. Because of the ready availability of land, most if not all of the men who went west could become farm owners, especially after passage of the Homestead Act.\(^\text{15}\)

As the traditional version of the story continues, other economic activities reflected the same simplicity, isolation, and opportunity. For example, cowboys cooperatively rounded up cattle and shared the labor of branding calves and driving herds to market. Even if people wished to market what they produced, they could do so only in local areas because there was no transportation infrastructure tying them to a larger economy. Most travel was on dirt wagon roads or trails cut by the hooves of thousands of cattle. Few rivers beyond the Missouri were navigable. In such a primitive economy there were no urban areas and few towns. Exchange was based on local needs, local products, and the skills of individual farmers, but there was little specialization. The primary goal of each farmer was to provide subsistence for his family by transforming the wilderness into a civilized place. There was widespread access to potentially wealth-creating resources, and as a result, there were no great distinctions of wealth. Gradually a more complex economy evolved.

It is apparent from this description of the traditional histories of Kansas and the West that narrative focused on the significant economic activities of single, white men. Although African Americans and Hispanics were a large portion of cowboys, their labor, for example, was ignored. Women had few economic roles in the story as well.

Traditional interpretations also were exclusive in another sense. People with specialized economic roles were ignored. When a few historians began to discover the ubiquitous land speculator, cattle town businessmen, bankers, and commercial farmers, the older paradigm seemingly had no place for them. Instead of rethinking the paradigm, however, historians just plugged brief references to the new figures into the old story.

In the traditional version of Kansas and western history, the pioneer conquest of wild and often arid lands eventually led to the successful modern economy of the twentieth century. The hallmark of the economy was the evolution from simple to complex. Those who drove this change were celebrated as agents of progress. Indeed, a development paradigm shaped the historical narrative of that evolution. Thus, historians presented development as progress rather than analyzing it in terms of costs and benefits. The darker side of economic history was not a part of the traditional story. Some historians bemoaned the dependence this economic isolation and simplicity represented. Because the western economy was extractive, as in farming, any surpluses generated left the region to be processed and sold, thus transferring most economic power outside the region.

In contrast to the isolated, simple, subsistence economy depicted by earlier historians, the new history envisioned a complex economy with ties to other sections of the United States and to the larger world from the beginning. In this view, well represented in William Cronon’s influential *Nature’s Metropolis* and Richard White’s “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own,” the old was not so different from the modern West. Its economy had complexity at its heart from the beginning. There were several significant types of economy, many types of historical actors, a network of economic connections to the larger world, a wide range of occupations and statuses, and a hierarchy of wealth-holding skewed to the top. The contrast between this portrait of a complex economy from the beginning and the older view of a simple agrarian West is striking.16

In Kansas, as in the rest of the West, there were commercial, industrial, and agrarian economic activities. These major types of economic activities were not the product of an evolutionary process but were carried intact from East to West, and they continued to be influenced by financial control from the East. The range and character of major activities reflected economic complexity.

Commercial centers, towns, appeared from the beginning of resettlement, for example, not at the end of a long development process. Town builders in eastern Kansas planted a cash-based market economy at a number of places where existing trade from overland traffic, outfitting of immigrants, cattle trails, or other activity made it profitable. In western Kansas where the railroad preceded settlement, the company established towns at regular intervals. In these towns specialists operated wholesale houses, ran retail establishments, acted as commission merchants, loaned money, processed local produce, opened boardinghouses and hotels, restaurants and saloons, and acted as skilled artisans. Land speculators, who often controlled town sites from the beginning, ensured that town lands were sold as commodities in a market exchange. These places of trade were inland economic nodes that tied the commerce of Kansas and the West to the urban financial and manufacturing centers of the East and established market-based transactions in the West.17

But in the new narrative these towns were not the only evidence of a commercial economy. Around them and along the railroad that often preceded resettlement, there was a surplus-oriented agriculture. Indeed towns stimulated the production of crops in their vicinity, and settlers who wished to farm commercially—and could afford higher land prices—sought land near them and along railroads. In addition some specialized forms of commercial agriculture appeared in certain areas such as bonanza farming and irrigated agriculture in western Kansas.

Commercialization encouraged specialization on family farms. Those farmers moved away from diversification to focus on a single marketable crop such as wheat. Cattle ranchers were commercial agriculturalists from the beginning in

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western Kansas. Their specialization made these entrepreneurs much more subject to the vicious boom and bust cycles of the market economy.18

Not all farms were thoroughly capitalist, however, nor were they completely hooked into the national or international economic network. Some were left out because they could not get their crops to market, but that dilemma was solved gradually with the extension of roads and railroads. Even so, in the late nineteenth century some “corporate” family farms chose a different path, according to historians such as Kathleen Conzen, “Peasant Pioneers,” and John Stitz, “A Study of Farm Family Culture in Ellis County, Kansas.” These families emphasized the connections between generations and followed the ideal of intergenerational cooperation and assistance. They aimed at perpetuating the family farm and farming as a way of life. Adults accepted responsibility for training children in the skills of farming. At the same time the essential labor of children contributed to the success and often the expansion of the farm. When the children were grown they would receive a piece of the farm or a dowry to assist them toward their own successful farm ownership. The adult child who received the main farmstead cared for elderly parents. These reciprocal relationships among three generations provided for the needs of all generations, including the social security of the aged. These were not subsistence farms, because some crops were sold; the primary goal was not profits solely, but the well-being of a family. Other examples of alternative attitudes and economic behavior suggest the economy was more complex than previously thought. Further research may reveal both added complexity and a better idea of how and why capitalism came to dominate.19

Major industrial activities also were carried to Kansas from the beginning. Initially far fewer people were engaged in industrial than in agrarian activities, but they pointed the direction the western economy would take. The railroad spearheaded industrialization in Kansas. From the 1860s through the 1880s railroad companies built shops every few hundred miles along the tracks and hired large numbers of wage workers to repair the rolling stock and keep tracks intact. Railroads often also operated underground coal mines along their routes to provide coal for fuel. In other areas, such as southeastern Kansas, industrial mining came hard on the heels of the removal of native peoples. Substantial capital was needed to operate underground and to process ore. In these cases large companies and corporations financed the heavily capitalized operations and made decisions, usually as absentee owners. This sector expanded at the turn of the century and

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19. The best general description of corporate family farms, although not in Kansas, is Kathleen Conzen, “Peasant Pioneers,” in The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America, ed. Stephen Hahn and Jonathan Prude (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985). John Stitz describes this kind of family farming in his dissertation “A Study of Farm Family Culture in Ellis County, Kansas, and the Relationship of the Culture to Trends in Farming” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1983). The author’s students at the University of Kansas have located contracts in county courthouses made by corporate families to cement the relationships between generations.
became central to the economy in the twentieth century. World War II capped the trend by making Kansas and the West an urban, industrial region.  

Industrialization has taken a somewhat different turn in recent years in Kansas. Meatpacking was a major industry from the 1870s characterized by corporate organization, wage workers, dangerous conditions, and labor strife. It was an urban operation and contributed to the state’s urbanization trend. Some of its key operations were in Kansas City, Kansas. Since the 1970s Kansas has been one of the pioneers in rural industrialization. Packing companies cut costs by bringing plants, feed lots, grain, and a supply of unskilled labor into closer proximity to each other. As Donald Stull and Michael Broadway pointed out, Kansas has “increased its share of the U.S. meatpacking employment since the 1970s and has had a gain of 3000 meatpacking jobs.” Large packing companies deliberately placed plants in right-to-work states such as Kansas.  

Many workers, particularly in smaller cities and towns such as Garden City, Dodge City, and Liberal, were part of new ethnic groups from southeast Asia. They have experienced the meaning of unrestricted corporate control and hazardous work first hand. According to Stull and Broadway, managers speed up the line to increase production, and safety often is sacrificed. Productivity has increased, and so have accidents. In Kansas between 1980 and 1988, seventeen thousand workers in meatpacking were injured, and eight died. Since workers are unorganized and the legislature maintains the state’s right-to-work status, they have little control over work conditions. The turnover rate is 72–96 percent annually, in meatpacking alone, conditions that seem to mirror those of nineteenth-century Kansas and the West. Obviously industrialization came early and determined a major trend in the character of the capitalist economy that continues today.  

This complex economy has had market capitalism at its center from the beginning. Why historians took so long to recognize its importance in Kansas remains something of a mystery, but recent studies, such as the one by Thomas Frank, “The Leviathan with Tenacles of Steel,” have shown how increasingly pervasive its effect has been. Because capitalism is both an economic and a social system, it produced a much different economy and society from the one depicted in traditional history. In Kansas the promise of opportunity was experienced by many fewer people than previously thought. Land speculation not only established a market in land, it also intervened between the government and settlers to drive up the price. A large amount of public land went to railroad corporations and was available to settlers only at higher prices. Corporate mining relegated

Initially far fewer people were engaged in agrarian activities, but they pointed the direction the western economy would take.


many men to low paying, dangerous wage labor rather than economic independence, and there was a much broader array of work and workers. Farmers, too, suffered from the vagaries of the market, as attested to by both the rise in tenancy in the 1880s and the Populist movement. With unequal access to the riches of the West came inequality in wealth and status, an effect that multiplied over time. This was especially true for people of color who regularly occupied the lowest paying jobs with little hope of mobility. In the face of great hopes of people for opportunity, this result seems tragic. The myth of opportunity has obscured the tragedy from us.

Environmental history has been a major force in the new history. Historians such as Donald Worster and Richard White have taken a more analytical approach toward the study of development, and as a result they often have questioned the idea of progress in economic change. Another way that historians have altered perspectives is in recognizing that the environment was a major actor in Kansas history, in that it set the limits and possibilities of life there. Historians have sought, therefore, to understand how people have dealt with environmental parameters for life.

Worster and others have shocked us into recognition that environmental control has been a central theme regardless of natural limits. They have documented the decimation or destruction of indigenous flora and fauna, the blocking of rivers, the pollution of air and water, the changing shape of the land itself. The Dust Bowl is an excellent case in point. After seventy-five years of farming experience in Kansas, with research available on the character of the arid Plains environment, some still chose to engage in the Great Plow Up in the 1920s. Using the new gasoline-powered tractor, farmers plowed up many acres of prairie never before turned over. When drought came, as it had in the past, and the winds blew, topsoil disappeared. Farmers had ignored environmental limits with devastating effects. This aggressive attitude toward the environment influenced water use as well. Jim Sherow pointed out that use of the Arkansas River for both irrigation and industrial use caused decrease in river flow, falling ground water levels, and narrowing of the river channel. People saw water, too, as an object to be exploited, through engineering, to secure economic growth. These studies of the human

Managing water and its uses has been one of the key factors in our attempts throughout history to control the environment. Above is the McLain pumping plant in Finney County.


relationship to the environment also are excellent examples of history that examines both the costs and benefits of development.25

For most of Kansas history, one primary cultural cause of all this destruction, according to some revisionist historians, has been the culture of capitalism. In this culture, plants, animals, water, even the land itself became objects whose value depended on profits they brought. Other studies suggest an even broader cultural orientation to power and control. Most settlers saw themselves as an army and resettlement as a victory. As Julie Wilson pointed out, “They harnessed water power, subdued the tall prairie grasses, and even developed ‘artificial forests.’” It was a common belief that, by plowing up the land and planting crops, they could increase rainfall and change the climate. They sought, in other words, to control even the climate. This attitude has persisted in the twentieth century. Kansans, often in cooperation with the federal government, have built dams to control flooding, diverted rivers to irrigate crops in arid areas, and reclaimed wetlands for suburban and industrial development. Currently, irreplaceable fossil water from the Ogallala aquifer is being pumped to irrigate corn crops and wash the carcasses of thousands of cattle in the packinghouses in western Kansas.26

The environment has not just been acted upon as depicted in traditional history, however. In the new history the environment is seen as an active force that sets limits and opens up possibilities for life. Studies of recurring droughts show environmental limits. In the drought years of 1859 to 1861, for example, many farmers failed, and about one-third of the population left Kansas, as revealed in the author’s own study, “Squatter City: The Social Construction of a New Community in the American West.” Instead of approaching the drought as evidence of a new kind of environment about which to learn and adjust, most business and political leaders blamed failed crops on the farmers themselves. Because leaders could see no limits to the possibilities of the environment, the cause had to be incompetence. Other examples of the powerful influence of the environment include the death of masses of cattle after overstocking the grasslands, the failure of poor African American exodusters forced to farm the thin soil of the Flint Hills uplands, or massive failures of farmers in the face of drought and grasshoppers in western Kansas in the 1870s and 1890s.27


“Pioneer settlers” pose a particularly interesting case for trying to balance costs and benefits because they hold such a powerful place in traditional history and popular imagination. The idea that there were great environmental costs in agricultural development can seem to be a harsh evaluation of settlers. The pioneers often are revered as people who persevered in the face of daunting hardship, to establish civilization in Kansas and the West on the one hand; and on the other, some environmental historians such as Worster and White point out that theirs also is the story of attempts to control and transform the environment by destroying indigenous grasses and animals and by exposing fragile topsoil to fierce Plains winds. We are the recipients of both traditions and must comprehend the cultural context of each.

A book such as Sod and Stubble, a classic story of pioneer life by economist and historian John Ise, allows us to appreciate the hardship in resettlement and the personal characteristics of the “pioneers” who persisted in spite of them. At the same time we can understand the ways settlers sought to control and change their environment. Sod and Stubble is an inspiring book about the daunting hardships, sacrifices, and courageous acts necessary to resettle north-central Kansas in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. Henry and Rosie Ise struggled to grow crops such as corn and wheat on the arid Plains. They fought off the incursions of grasshoppers, the devastation of prairie fires, the power of death-dealing blizzards, and the desolation of drought to become successful German American farmers.

To Rosie, the Plains were a wonderful new world but also a wilderness characterized by the “raw, savage loneliness of the uninhabited prairie.” She looked with approval on settlers’ attempts to bring order to wilderness, to civilize it. Henry and Rosie replaced the natural grass cover with crops foreign to that country, brought cattle, chickens, and hogs to replace the wild animals and even tried to change the climate by plowing the land and planting crops and trees they imported. Rather than seeing the natural order of the Plains or even interpreting the Plains as God’s creation, they understood their acts of transformation, culturally, as God’s will. 28

Yet the powerful environment set limits to the changes they could make. Aridity made it extremely difficult to raise corn, and periodic droughts brought near starvation to some and failure to others. Invading grasshoppers ate crops down into the ground and finished up on curtains and wooden tools. The environment was a formidable foe, and long before the great Dust Bowl, with most of the natural grass cover destroyed, wind storms blew away the earth they had plowed.

The historian’s challenge, of course, is to incorporate both these stories into a more inclusive and complex narrative—to seek a better balance of costs and benefits in our understanding of environmental change in both the past and the present. Environment as a topic helped shape the new approaches to the history of the economy, where efforts to dominate are no longer seen as progress. Historians weigh the costs and benefits of control of the environment as they look at industrial development and damage that may be irrevocable or at the culture of domination that has made adjustment difficult and insufficient. The new history of

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Kansas and the West, unlike most traditional history, reflects a profound respect for the power of the environment to shape human affairs.

THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Kansans, like other westerners, have welcomed federal assistance but have opposed federal direction in their lives. Nevertheless, the role of the federal government has been strong in the state. Subsidies have been willingly accepted for the most part, but federal regulation continues to be resented. The major exception to this pattern was the Populist call for public ownership of major public utilities, such as the railroads.

Kansas was, of course, a creation of the federal government. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 brought the land under federal ownership and jurisdiction. Congress carved the territory of Kansas out of that purchase in 1854, and in the territorial period federal involvement was necessarily heavy. The chief executive appointed territorial officials, and Congress funded the government. During the short territorial period, the federal government paid for and directed the army, land officers, and Indian agents.

Once Kansas became a state, federal involvement did not end. The role of the army in sweeping tribes from western Kansas is well known. Less well recognized is the ongoing presence of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) on the state’s four remaining reservations and the fact that army posts such as Forts Riley and Leavenworth pumped money into the economy and assisted local development. The federal government gave an enormous subsidy of free lands to get railroads built. By failing to stop free use of the public grasslands by cattleman who appropriated them, the government in essence subsidized cattle ranching.

Traditional history saw the role of the federal government phase out when public lands were in private hands and tribes were on reservations. In contrast, the new history points to a large and important role for the federal government in national parks and monuments, management of unsold public lands and national forests, reclamation, irrigation, damming rivers for flood control or hydroelectric power, and administration of Indian reservations. Unlike other western states, Kansas did not retain large amounts of public land administered by federal agencies. Nevertheless, the role of the federal government in the state at the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century was strong.

The BIA presence continued. The federal government subsidized highway development and began to regulate its character and quality after the invention of the automobile. Kansas resisted federal standards and control of highways, as Mary Scott Rowland showed in “Kansas and the Highways, 1917–1930,” but accepted monies to build a modern system. Federal funding also built dams, subsidized irrigation, and reclaimed land in Kansas. For example, the Army Corps of Engineers

One of the strongest roles of the federal government came in World War II. Through contracts, particularly those for aircraft production, the government pumped millions of dollars into the Kansas economy. In this 1940s photo, Brigadier General Ray Harris accepts the delivery of ten thousand Kaydet Primary trainer planes from Boeing Air Craft Company, Wichita.


Engineers built dikes to protect the bottoms of Kansas City, Kansas, so that the city could industrialize in that area.\(^{31}\)

The Great Depression and the New Deal dramatically increased federal involvement in the lives of Kansans. Indeed, during the depression many farmers and bankers would not have survived without federal programs such as the Farm Security Administration and the Production Credit Association. Farm subsidies were crucial to the agricultural sector of the economy for most of the rest of the twentieth century. Social Security, including unemployment insurance, has touched most Kansans since the 1930s.\(^{32}\)

One of the strongest influences of the federal government on Kansas came in World War II. While industry was important in Kansas before the war, federal subsidy of war industries stimulated great industrial development. Defense contracts bolstered the state’s economy beginning in 1940. Credit allowed existing industries such as Boeing Air Craft company and Beech Aircraft Corporation to expand rapidly. According to historian Robert W. Richmond, the federal government pumped fifty million dollars into the Kansas economy in 1940 alone.\(^{33}\) The federal imprint was heavy for the entire war. Forts were expanded, munitions plants built, and smaller defense plants went up in many towns. This boost to industrialization irrevocably shifted the Kansas economy toward industrialization and urbanization. Industries encouraged then received further support as a result of the Cold War. Thus the federal presence in Kansas has been profound and long lasting.\(^{34}\)

### A Complex Society

In traditional histories society was not an organizing concept. Historians tended to write in terms of atomistic individuals who represented a larger expansionist society, pioneers who laid the foundation for later development. Typically the individuals noted were white, male figures such as cowboys, pioneer farmers, prospectors, Pony Express riders, and desperados. Initially these men lived in isolation on farms and ranches except in special circumstances (or cases), such as mining camps or cattle towns. If women were present they were presented as a distinct minority, usually “harpies” and dance hall girls, but some histories noted the presence of pioneer women after the first phase of resettlement. All these individuals operated in a world of extraordinary opportunity and equality where free grass or gold might bring a handsome fortune. At the least they could acquire

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farms from free land and become secure yeoman farmers. Failures moved on to try again on the next frontier. When complex society finally evolved, unique western history ended, according to this interpretation, best expressed in Billington’s classic *Westward Expansion*.35

Groups, a more complex arrangement, did appear in the older narrative from time to time, but usually they were rudimentary and short-lived. The roundup, for example, was a brief, cooperative gathering where cowboys from different ranches separated cattle and branded them to establish ownership. Farmers who settled on isolated claims initially needed no social organization except rules that defined access to property such as claims. If these rules seemed to represent more complex social relationships, that was not explained. When there were sufficient numbers in an area, people did gather together to worship and begin to establish schools. Wagon train members might form an organization for protection, but it dispersed at the end of the trail. Ramshackle towns, outposts at the end of railroad lines, were “peripatetic Gomorrah’s” moving with the track crews and disappearing when they completed the railroad. As in the case of individual settlement, the narrative line moved from simple to complex.36

When people came together in groups in this older story, some sought order while others were lawless. The older histories typically described them as egalitarian organizations to protect life and property in a social and legal vacuum. The ensuing conflict generated a typical western form of ad hoc social organization. When some squatters faced lawless claim jumpers, fights over claims, and lack of institutions to cope with them, they formed claims clubs, wrote rules, and administered rough justice. Here many historians found the seeds of a later order and democracy. Ranchers, too, appropriated sections of the public domain to run cattle and then defined range rights to give orderly access to land and water. When “roaring reprobates” threatened that tenuous social order, vigilantism, again a local, improvised, and impermanent social creation to bring order, solved the problem with guns and ropes, then dispersed. In this older story, the individual was supreme, and group organization fleeting. Indeed, it is this local creation of rules and behavior that constituted much of the argument for western uniqueness. When population grew, and permanent, complex organization became necessary, the old West began to disappear.37

Society in the old story also was relatively egalitarian. The old West was characterized by the individual search for new wealth in a new land where most if not all migrants could easily acquire it. Although historians mentioned the role of the market in the cattle kingdom, for example, they did not include the complex society of professional cattle drovers, hotel managers, bankers, and railroad managers associated with it. If most farmers got cheap or free farms in the land rush west, the rough economic equality led to greater social equality in this version. Historians did not see success and failure in the race producing a society structured by inequality of wealth.38

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35. Billington’s *Westward Expansion* is a major but certainly not the only example of this approach.
The social situation in the traditional story was simple in another sense as well. African Americans appeared only as unique figures such as York, the slave of William Clark of Lewis and Clark fame, who amazed Indians, or as frontier trappers such as James Beckworth who joined the Crow tribe. Chinese “coolies” made brief appearances as picturesque, pigtailed workers building transcontinental railroads. Conquered people tended to disappear from the narrative after conquest. Mexican Americans seldom reappeared as farmers, ranchers, cowboys, or even railroad and agricultural workers, after the Mexican–American War. The traditional story became a touchstone for vanished values, not a key to unlock our past or imagine a new future.  

Traditional histories of Kansas also are characterized by the same narrow focus and exclusivity. The story of the pioneering experience in the state mirrored the western synthesis previously discussed. Once past the colonizing period, historians focused on gubernatorial administrations and important political movements such as Populism and Progressivism, effectively excluding women and minorities from the story. Significant political activity was assumed to be at the state rather than the local level. This assumption produced an almost exclusive focus on state political and social elites and a very narrow definition of what was political.

Since race was assumed not to play a key role in most state campaigns or in policymaking at the state level, it was seldom mentioned. Because of the unique connection of Kansas with the struggle over slavery, traditional historians did look at race in the 1850s but with a focus on white combatants, not enslaved people and free blacks. Likewise historians narrated the story of the Great Exodus to Kansas but ignored the contributions of African American people in the larger Kansas society. Although the question of women’s rights was debated almost constantly in Kansas, it received only peripheral attention from the traditional historians, and women’s roles in the larger society were excluded. Industrialization, wage workers, and strikers all cried out for coverage, but were seldom—or only briefly—addressed. This narrow definition of the proper topics of history decisively influenced Kansas history to be exclusionary and limited as well. As a result, supposedly well-educated people could exclaim that they had no idea there was segregation in Kansas when Brown v Topeka Board of Education brought national attention in 1954.

Because the new history strives to be inclusive, the population in this depiction is quite diverse. The new West is a place that is female as well as male, African American and Native American as well as Caucasian, and an ethnically diverse society as well. Society is a central part of the new story, and complexity is its hallmark. Instead of a simple, atomistic society of young, white males, early Kansas

39. Billington’s 1960 edition of Westward Expansion does not even have an index entry for women; there are no references to Mexicans after the war with Mexico; and, once Indians were forced onto reservations, references to them virtually disappear from this major textbook on western history.

40. For example, chapter 11 of Richmond, Kansas: A Land of Contrasts, covers political campaigns and the administrations of governors James M. Harvey, Thomas A. Osborn, George T. Anthony, John P. St. John, George W. Glick, John A. Martin, Lyman Humphrey, Cyrus Leland, Lorenzo D. Lewelling, and John W. Leedy.

41. This conclusion is based on a survey of textbooks in Kansas history. See, for example, Richmond, Kansas: A Land of Contrasts, 61–78, 170, 171, 192, 214, 227, 297–98; Davis, Kansas: A Bicentennial History, 76, 89, 97, 143, 117–118, 150, 152, 154, 181.
is a complex society structured by social characteristics of gender, race, class, and ethnicity. Rather than individuals waging a lonely war against the wilderness, we find groups of people, families, church groups, clubs and societies, even corporations, transplanting fundamental social forms that were useful both in resettling Kansas and in long-term structuring of Kansas society.

This diversity has been explored from a number of angles. One has been to determine where and how each of these groups fits into the larger picture of Kansas. Another has been to give voice to their perceptions and perspectives. Still another has been to look at the relationship among these different groups at important cultural crossroads.

Kansas society was not based on rough equality or open, equal access to prestige and power. Inequality in prestige and power has been apparent throughout Kansas history (including the “pioneer” period). Social status often was determined more by factors such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity than by individual ability, personality, or achievement. Access to participation was influenced in the same way. Because of conflicts between different social forms, the meeting of different ethnic and racial groups, and the unwillingness of individuals and groups to accept the place assigned to them, conflict often characterized this society.42

THE FAMILY AND GENDER AS DYNAMICS IN KANSAS HISTORY

Families, not individuals, were the essential and persistent unit of Kansas society. Elliot West pointed out that the family has been the center of society in central Kansas for the past eight hundred years. Members of families, acting in “mutual dependence,” resettled and transformed society and economy. The majority of the population was made up of farm families.43

These families were the center of production and reproduction. Children and women helped in major farming tasks, herded animals, hunted and gathered, made salable products such as butter, cared for chickens and gathered eggs, worked to bring home extra income, preserved food, and cared for the household. In this setting boys were trained by fathers and girls by mothers in gender specific roles. Children learned the cooperative behavior needed to make gender roles work together for the good of the household. They also learned the necessity of reciprocal relationships between the generations that perpetuated farm families. Even after the decline of family farms and the removal of much production from the household, the family remained the key unit for reproduction, early childhood development, and socialization. West’s depiction of the family contrasts sharply with that presented in the traditional story.44

42. No one source summarizes society in the new history in Kansas. This interpretation is based primarily on a survey of articles published during the past thirty-five years. Representative articles and relevant books are cited in notes 42–77.
44. Elliot West, Growing Up With the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 247.
This new work showed rather quickly that women were major players in a complex society from the beginning of United States’s territorial governance in Kansas. Indeed studying women and gender opened a new window on Kansas and the West. Initially historians focused on restoring women to history, and they found them populating farms, ranches, early towns, and mining camps from the beginning. More recently historians such as Glenda Riley and Nicole Etcheson have explored how gender structured society.

Women were indisputably a part of what the old history called the pioneer period after Congress formed Kansas Territory. Sometimes they were partners in the earliest resettlement efforts; at other times they arrived within the first year or two. As previously discussed, married couples with children, not single males, usually carved out farms, built towns, opened mining camps, and built ranches. Women, sometimes single or widowed, also came to Kansas as newspaper reporters, missionaries, schoolteachers, domestic, and even political campaigners.

From the beginning women transplanted a complex society with the family at its core, but they also started literary and debating societies and the like to transmit culture, organized library associations to channel the behavior of youth, and fought for different moral standards in places such as the cattle towns. Middle-class women were at the forefront of the temperance movement throughout the nineteenth century. In such groups as voluntary societies, those middle-class women also trained themselves for public roles and fought to secure the right to vote, campaign, and hold office in an unequal society.

These women were important carriers and transmitters of culture to Kansas. In the resettlement of western Kansas, women created “elegant dugouts,” as historian Angel Kwolek-Folland has pointed out. The home was a woman’s “autonomous cultural creation.” This behavior fit nicely with the concept that, although a woman’s place was in the private sphere of the home, she designed the cultural character of life there. Women believed that the physical home played a role in character development and change, and the home demonstrated that the family was “civilized.” In dugouts women worked to “reproduce the visible symbols of home” important to the idea of civilization. To that end they furnished the dugout with linen, silverware, and fine china. They also furnished it with other objects of cultural significance: organs, bird cages, matching tables and chairs, good books, and flowers. By organizing and furnishing the home with objects that

Except for unique cases, historians for many years limited women to the roles of wife and mother without recognizing the complexities of her contributions. This 1916 photo was taken in Murdock, Kingman County.


evidenced culture and refinement, Kansas women also transplanted the values and practices in the “essential ideal of the home.”

Another way that historians have expanded our knowledge of Kansas and western society is to use gender as a category of analysis. It is clear that gender provided one of the fundamental structures of Kansas society for most of its history. On farms women and men divided work by gender. Both believed that these specialized gender roles were necessary to run a family farm. Children were taught those roles from an early age as they were assigned chores. These gender divisions continued well into the twentieth century and some women resented them sorely. As Julene Bair writes about her 1950s experience in *One Degree West*, “I considered myself a tomboy and resented my brother’s comparative freedom. My family and our society placed more value on men’s work than on women’s work.”

Gender also divided public and private worlds. Men negotiated the public world of business while women were more restricted to the private world of home. As historians point out, men generally went to town to market crops and controlled that income, while women’s work was ordinarily unpaid labor. The same was true in towns and cities across Kansas. The main exception to this role was women in domestic service, often African American and ethnic women. Censuses and city directories indicate few jobs were available to women; the ones that did exist were usually low paying and low status.

The legal places defined for men and women in Kansas demonstrate another way that society was structured by gender. Initially the common law governed gender roles in territorial Kansas. It defined gender roles differently and unequally. When women married they became “dead in the law.” They could not own businesses, sign contracts, sue or be sued. Any property a woman brought into marriage came under the control of her husband. Typically, the man would receive custody of children in a divorce, and the terms of divorce were generally easier for men than women. Single women had to have a legal “friend” in business situations or when dealing with property. In addition, women in territorial Kansas could not vote or hold office. By these legal definitions men and women did not have the same legal or political rights or the same access to political and economic power. This political and legal position also defined their social position as decidedly inferior under the law.

Another way of seeing the importance of gender ideology in structuring society is to look at major ongoing efforts to change it. Many women and like-minded men recognized how ideas about gender led to unequal places in social structure. Clarina Nichols and allies such as Augustus Wattles and the Moneka Women’s Rights Association used the debates over the new state constitution in 1859 to secure greater legal equality for women. Nichols also risked arrest to prove the unfairness of child custody laws and decisions.

50. White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own,” 277–78; Riley, *The Female Frontier*.
equality in this area of law, activists succeeded in getting more property rights for women and the right for them to vote in school board elections written into the Wyandotte Constitution. Lyn Bennett’s study of divorce in Kansas suggests that the changes embodied in the constitution did not alter completely the unequal treatment of women in the courts.52

Four times in the nineteenth century and once in the twentieth, mostly middle-class women campaigned for greater political rights in Kansas society. The first campaigns in 1867 on two referenda to give the vote to women and African Americans failed after an arduous contest. In the 1880s women made the right to vote in municipal elections a moral reform by tying it to temperance, and they secured that suffrage in 1887. After an attempt, supported by the Populists in 1894, to attain complete suffrage failed, the Kansas Equal Suffrage Association spearheaded another attempt in 1911. The campaign succeeded in 1912. Not long after, the United States ratified the Nineteenth Amendment extending suffrage to women across the country. The fight for the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s reflected the continuing unequal structure of society in Kansas.53

Another more radical campaign to change gender ideology was conducted by the “sex radicals” in the 1880s, as explored by Hal Sears in The Sex Radicals. This was a group led by Moses Harman, Elmina Slenker, and Lois Waisbrooker who regarded marriage as a state-defined institution that harmed women. They published a newspaper, Lucifer the Light-bearer, that printed letters about the abuse of women in marriage. Because the letters to Lucifer contained sexually explicit descriptions, the government prosecuted and convicted Harman of sending “pornography” through the federal mail. Harman also urged women to follow the example of his own daughter and leave both church and state out of their marriages. The “sex radicals” opened up the question of the inequality of women under the marriage laws.54

Each of these movements strove to change the gendered structure of Kansas society. Proponents thought the structure made women’s social place inferior to that of men. More is needed, but in recent years stories of women’s participation, legal restrictions on their rights, and all the fights to change the nature of society have become fundamental to the new narrative.

**Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Kansas and the West**

Race, too, was a key ingredient in Kansas society in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This may seem surprising since the older view depicted
Kansas and the West as having few African Americans or other peoples of color. There also was the myth that, in Kansas, freedom for African Americans was won during the Bleeding Kansas period. This myth seems to have discouraged people from looking at community formation, discrimination, or the place of African Americans in the social structure. But the new history presented a very different “take” on race and society.

In this view, race was crucial in structuring Kansas society. Discrimination ensured that African Americans were at the bottom of the social ladder. Although antislavery warriors rid Kansas of slavery in the 1850s, the state constitution they wrote created second-class citizenship for African Americans. Under the Wyandotte Constitution, African Americans could not vote in the new state, join the militia, bear arms, or serve on juries. In an election in 1867 to change the constitution so that they could vote and hold office, Kansas voters said no. During the Reconstruction Era there was a brief respite from the exclusion, but the old pattern soon returned.

One sees this social structure quite clearly in the work of James C. Carper on school segregation. Although most Kansans believed that African Americans should receive free public education, they were divided over its form. With few exceptions, state legislatures over time established a legal basis for segregation in schools. Notably, even where the legislature did not allow it, communities segregated anyway. The recurring debates over school segregation show a deeply divided culture on the question of race and social relations. There was no fundamental change in this pattern of school segregation over time. If anything the divide deepened because African Americans gradually concentrated in cities where segregation in the elementary grades was permissible. This pattern was still firmly in place in 1954. Because education offered one of the best avenues for potential African American social mobility, school segregation was a key factor in structuring and maintaining inequality in Kansas based on race.

In spite of attempts to change this situation in some periods and places, segregation even deepened. At the University of Kansas, African Americans attended from 1870 on. They could not live in campus dormitories, were barred from dances, band, glee club and pep clubs, and often had to sit at the back of classrooms. At the University of Kansas, African Americans could not live in campus dormitories, were barred from dances, band, glee club and pep clubs, and often had to sit at the back of classrooms. 

55. This assessment is based on a survey of Zornow, Kansas: A History of the Jayhawk State; Richmond, Kansas: A Land of Contrasts; Davis, Kansas: A Bicentennial History.
56. Richmond, Kansas: A Land of Contrasts, 71, 164; Davis, Kansas: A Bicentennial History, 150, 152, 154; Dubois, Feminism and Suffrage.
to use the previously integrated swimming pool. In 1927 Chancellor Lindley segre- 
gated the student cafeteria.58

Opponents of segregation did not keep silent and inactive. Court cases in 1881 and 1903 challenged but failed to halt segregation. In 1881 the Kansas Supreme Court held that segregation in smaller cities had not been authorized by the legislature but left segregation of primary schools in first class cities intact. Many smaller cities, towns, and rural areas continued to segregate primary schools unless directly challenged. In 1903 segregation in Kansas schools was confirmed in Reynolds v Board of Education of the City of Topeka. Soldiers and veterans of World War II attempted unsuccessfully to institute in Kansas the values they fought for in Europe. Then black Topekans and the NAACP finally suc- 
cceeded in winning a case as part of the larger fight against segregation in 1954 in Brown v Topeka Board of Education.59

Forms of discrimination continue in Kansas today. Numerous newspaper ar-
ticles attest to ongoing defacto segregation in some schools and to the powerful role of race in structuring Kansas society. This new picture of race presents a very different Kansas and West. Clearly there has been a persistent structural inequality in Kansas society based in part on race, and we can only hope that the “new” historians of the twenty-first century will continue to enhance the narrative and deepen our understanding of this complex issue.

Ethnicity, too, has been central to Kansas society, but in ways different from gender, race, and class. Older histories saw ethnicity as a quickly passing phe-
nomenon because immigrants adapted both to American life and to frontier wilderness life. They were then assimilated into the larger society. Thus the 
wilderness forged a homogeneous although unique society in the old story. One of the hallmarks of the society was its openness, its fostering of social mobility. 
This picture of ethnic groups obviously focuses on white ethnics to the exclusion of others, ignores pre-existing societies, and anticipates the rather rapid exting-
guishing of ethnic differences. These traditional histories presented the ethnic experience primarily from the point of view of the larger society and glorified as-
similation of immigrants.60

The older story is based in part on the mistaken assumption that most immi-
grants came from western Europe. Between 1850 and 1890 most immigrants did indeed come from England, Ireland, Wales, Germany, and the Scandinavian coun-
tries. Germans from Russia represent an interesting exception to the pattern. Small communities as well as individuals also arrived from France, Holland, Bel-
gium and Canada. Beginning in the 1880s, however, new migrations came pri-
marily from eastern and southern Europe and Mexico.61

59. Dudziak, “The Limits of Good Faith,” 357–62; McCusker, “‘The Forgotten Years’ of Ameri-
ca’s Civil Rights Movement,” 31–37.
60. Billington, Westward Expansion, 745–58, emphasizes the Americanization of foreign immi-
grants in the nineteenth-century West; Richmond, Kansas: A Land of Contrasts, 153–61, is less theoretical but describes the same immigrants as being absorbed into Kansas economy and society and as contribut-
ing to their development. He also notes the partial assimilation of Mexican migrants.
61. Carroll D. Clark and Roy L. Roberts, People of Kansas: A Demographic and Sociological Study (Topeka: Kansas State Planning Board, 1936), 50–51.
These new groups settled in the mining areas of southeastern Kansas and the industrializing cities of the Northeast. Mexicans, whose numbers increased in the twentieth century, moved to areas of sugar beet farming and processing, meatpacking, or railroad shops. Imagine the complexity when such diverse populations had to negotiate relations with each other as well as with members of the larger society. This diversity and complexity were intensified in the twentieth century by the addition of greater numbers of ethnic people of color from Latin America and Asia.  

The new history includes these diverse groups and incorporates their experiences and perspectives. In this way ethnicity offers a different look at Kansas society. Because most immigrants chose to live with people from the same countries who spoke the same language, they formed many rural communities characterized by their own symbols, institutions, and cultures, creating a pattern of diverse communities across the state. These communities retained their distinctiveness well into the twentieth century and many, such as the Mennonites, remain distinct. At the same time, some groups such as the Mexicans chose to form distinct sub-communities in larger towns and cities. Thus the making of a diverse and complex society has been an ongoing process.

Newer studies gave us this perspective because they examined ethnicity in Kansas differently. Historians began with countries of origin to see how much of their culture and society emigrants were able to transport to Kansas. Linguists such as J. Neale Carman, who published his valuable research in the early 1960s, documented the persistence of languages. We began to pay more attention to the perspectives of immigrants themselves—to let them speak for themselves. Finally, historians began to see that ethnic groups could accommodate to the larger society in some ways yet retain distinctive cultures in others.

One unusual example of this process comes from the work of historian Joseph B. Herring. He studied a wide range of Native American communities that used selective accommodation and resistance to prevent removal from Kansas. One group was led by the Kickapoo prophet Kennekuk, who fashioned a religion that exhibited Christian characteristics yet was based on deeply held native beliefs. A study of Potawatomi resistance to allotment by an anonymous author supports Herring’s argument by showing how the Potawatomi used both old rituals and new practices such as petitions to resist. Distinctive Potawatomi and Kickapoo communities remain on reservations in Kansas today.

When one looks at ethnicity after the resettlement of Kansas by Euro-Americans, one can see that immigrants chose to cluster with people of the same culture whenever possible. They added a pattern of large numbers of distinct communities to the society in both rural and urban areas in every county in Kansas.

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63. Every county map in ibid. shows ethnic clustering. For southeastern Kansas, see 110–15; for northeastern industry and ethnic settlement, see 306.
and refute the idea of a single Kansas culture. Some of the better known of these were formed by Germans from Russia, Swedes at Lindsborg, or Czechs at Wilson, but Carman’s linguistic maps show that community clustering was pervasive and included a wide range of ethnic groups.  

In Osborne County, for example, Germans with quite disparate origins formed a rural community in the 1860s described in marvelous detail by John Ise in *Sod and Stubble*. Some members of this community were first-generation immigrants from Germany mingled with second-generation sons and daughters of others. The community also contained Pennsylvania Dutch. In a different migration altogether, Mennonite Germans from Russia purchased a large amount of railroad land in the 1870s so they could cluster together and reproduce a pattern of villages with outlying fields. They successfully perpetuated a distinctive culture based on religion. Swedes formed a company in Chicago and founded an exclusive utopian community based on ethnicity and religion, with a particular concept of salvation at the center. Throughout the state, French, Welsh, Swedes, Bohemians, English, Italians, and other nationalities fashioned communities of ethnic people with their distinct languages.

In cities, ethnic groups formed cohesive subcommunities. Instead of assimilating into the larger society, Germans in Atchison, according to Eleanor Turk, deliberately built a viable subcommunity within the larger society. The “unifying social center” of the Atchison German community was the Turnverein, a political and sport club. They established their own Catholic churches and schools, supported a German-language newspaper, and organized their own antislavery militia company. They even created a special holiday to celebrate the birthday of the German poet Schiller. These German people created a separate social structure with permanent institutions that were long-lived, according to Turk. After World War I their separateness and distinctiveness declined.

At the same time, the Germans were connected to the larger community. Some ran for office; others formed a community-wide choral society. As noted above, they fought in the political conflict over slavery. This participation was not without conflict or cost. Newspapers tended to depict them as comical stereotypes. The issue of Sunday drinking at beer gardens became quite controversial, but the Germans were able to effect a compromise. Indeed they were critical of some social aspects of that community, in particular its marriage and child rearing practices. Ethnic subcommunities like this appeared in many towns and cities and constituted a major aspect of a diverse nineteenth-century Kansas society.

In the last third of that century several new groups came to Kansas, particularly to the southeastern mining regions and the urbanizing area around Kansas City, Kansas. Some were from the British Isles, but the majority came from eastern and southern Europe. Italians, Slovenians, Belgians, and French were mixed

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69. Ibid.
in the camps, making it difficult to form separate institutions such as schools or churches. Social forms beyond the family were dominated by the mining companies. Kansas City, Kansas, was an intensely polyglot area. By the early twentieth century more than twenty-five different ethnic groups populated the regions, including people from Greece, Mexico, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Russia, living in their own neighborhoods near the major packing plants and other industries near the Kaw River. Specific churches such as St. Cyril and Methodius Catholic Church (Slovak) marked the neighborhoods.  

The importance of ethnicity did not cease with the nineteenth century, however. Several changes did occur in the patterns of ethnic origins. The new history recognizes the important role new groups such as Mexicans and Indochinese as well as the people from eastern and southern Europe played in Kansas history. As Robert Oppenheimer has pointed out, the largest Mexican barrios were in Kansas City, Topeka, Emporia, Wichita, and Garden City. Mexicans experienced discrimination because they were people of color as well as ethnic. “Until the 1950s, in virtually every Kansas town and city, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans remained segregated in movie theaters and were often restricted from some sections of city parks, churches, and other public facilities.” Mexicans were concentrated in low paying, unskilled work, such as railroad section gangs, sugar beet field labor, and meatpacking. Unlike other ethnic groups, Mexicans were fired from jobs and repatriated to Mexico during the Great Depression at the urging of Governor Clyde Reed. 

At the same time, Mexicans created their own communities with the Catholic church at the center. The sense of community was particularly apparent in the 1930s depression when Mexican workers split jobs among themselves. In Garden City one woman ran an open house, providing meals and shelter. Distinct Mexican communities remain today.

More recently diversity has been enhanced by the immigration of Indochinese, whom Kansans also regarded as people of color. They formed subcommunities in meatpacking towns such as Garden City and Dodge City since the 1970s. The work of Donald Stull and Michael Broadway has explained their experience particularly in the packing houses. In Garden City they work in unskilled jobs on the bloody cutting room floor where wages are low and the accident rates high. The character of their communities has yet to be explored thoroughly, but their cultures and their treatment by the larger society reflect long-term, persistent patterns in ethnicity in Kansas. Diversity and complexity continue to be major characteris-tics of Kansas society. 

Perhaps the most surprising part of the new story of society comes from the evidence on class. Not only did Kansas have a middle class, but a working class


The women saw themselves as marching to protect the family wage. In their eyes, the struggle to earn a living wage was linked to American ideals of justice and democracy.

also helped define Kansas society, and it was a part of that society from the beginning of resettlement and before natives were removed. For example, the transcontinental railroad passed through Kansas by 1870, before resettlers came in many areas. During the next twenty years feeder lines webbed the state. Railroad companies immediately established shops every few hundred miles and populated them with wage workers to repair the running stock. Much of the work was hazardous. Gangs of unskilled wage laborers also worked out of these towns and repaired tracks.74 This working class had parallels in other parts of the state.

In southeastern Kansas, mining began only a few years after the land was opened to resettlement. The miners lived in twenty polyglot mining camps. The 7,562 men employed there in the early twentieth century were idle about one-third of each year. The shared work culture fueled unionism and strikes. Here was a concentrated population of working-class people engaged in a high-risk occupation for low wages with little power to control their fortunes.75

Kansas suddenly became aware of the working class during strikes against the railroad in 1877 and 1883. At first, according to Joseph Tripp, the workers’ demand for better wages received general support, but conflict soon became a confrontation between labor and capital. Further strikes, particularly the one in 1920–1921, affirmed the existence of a working class, and the creation of the Industrial Court demonstrated the statewide opposition to strikes. The “Red Scare” after World War I further enhanced mistrust of the highly ethnic working class, but, as historian Ann Schofield and others have demonstrated, the strikes show the importance of the work culture and the strength of union organizing in Kansas.76

One notable feature of the coal miner’s strike was a women’s march. In solidarity with the strikers, women from several ethnic groups joined together to protest the use of “scabs” to work the mines. They saw themselves as marching to protect the family wage. In their eyes, the struggle to earn a living wage was linked to American ideals of justice and democracy, but theirs was a working-class definition of those ideals. Other Kansans depicted them as a frightening “army of amazons.”77

77. Schofield, “An ‘Army of Amazons.’”
The working-class component of society did not disappear as the state moved toward mid-century. Rather it grew proportionately with urbanization and industrialization. Areas of particular importance were oil field development, airplane production, and meatpacking. The great expansion of federally subsidized airplane construction during World War II drew many new wage workers to Kansas. The state’s economy became truly a mixed one as a result of these wartime developments, and industrial production became increasingly significant; nevertheless, the legislature affirmed its anti-union stance in 1956 by passing a right-to-work law. One can see its impact, as Stull and Broadway pointed out, in the accident-riddled meatpacking industry today.\textsuperscript{78}

**CONCLUSION**

Society in Kansas was far more complex than that depicted in the traditional histories where social simplicity gradually evolved into intricacy. The new story depicts complexity and diversity from the beginning. Instead of an open, egalitarian society where the opportunity for social mobility was unlimited, there was a society structured by gender, race, class, and ethnicity. The inequalities in the structure were hotly contested at times, sometimes with success as in the case of the fight against women’s legal and political disabilities. In the case of peoples of color, society has changed much less and even more slowly.

These differences between the older view of society and the newer one are emblematic of the larger differences discussed in this essay. The new history has brought us different stories, new actors, fresh images of Kansas. The new knowledge has yarn of many colors with which to weave our future.