In 1974, during the last summer of his life, scholar and educator George Sylvester Counts made a final trip back to his native state of Kansas. It was the only time, recalled his daughter Martha, who drove her parents from southern Illinois to Baldwin City in eastern Kansas, that Counts expressed wistful longing for the place where he was born in 1889 and lived until he went to Chicago in 1913. “He used to say that Kansas is a very good place to come from,” Martha Counts remembered, noting that her father meant implicitly that Kansas was not a very good place to stay. Indeed, across the years Counts would return infrequently to Kansas for short restless visits. The state’s unofficial ethos that “God was a Republican and a Methodist” appeared to weigh heavily on him.

Throughout his life, Counts remained ambivalent about the things he associated most palpably with Kansas—overbearing religiosity, the relentless demands of farm work, and the natives’ wary suspicion of the world beyond its borders. Yet, Counts’s ambivalence about Kansas spurred him to think inventively about American life. By the mid-1920s, less than a decade after he left Kansas, Counts had emerged as a leading teacher and intellectual known for his inter-

by Claudia J. Keenan

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The author wishes to thank Baker University archivist Brenda Day and Baldwin City, Kansas, historian Katharine Kelley for their invaluable research assistance. She is also grateful for the comments of the three anonymous Kansas History reviewers.

George S. Counts, as a graduate of Baker University, 1911.
pretations of the relationship between culture and education. Boldly liberal—his detractors claimed he was a Communist—Counts believed that the process of schooling is contextual, reflecting the social issues of each era. Like John Dewey, Counts maintained that education should be a lever for social reform and that teachers must lead not follow. He dismissed the idea that teachers should be neutral and that education could ever be an objective process. A prolific writer, Counts is perhaps best known for Dare the School Build a New Social Order?, a collection of three speeches in which he urged teachers to “face squarely and courageously every social issue.”

Across the years several historians have linked the early part of Counts’s life with ideas that he would later develop. This article will evaluate the significance of Counts’s years in Kansas in terms of interpersonal connections and shared experience, the private ironies embedded in religion and family, and how that social sensibility may reflect an emotional affinity with a specific time and place. George S. Counts spent the first twenty-four years of his life in Kansas. How did those years affect him?

George Sylvester Counts was born during the year of the greatest corn harvest in Kansas history. However, the price dropped quickly and the same farmers who grew the corn would burn it for fuel. In 1895 at the age of six, Counts received a dollar from his grandfather for learning the names of the books in the Bible. That same year William Allen White bought the Emporia Gazette and began a forty-nine-year career as its editor. George Counts turned seven after he started school in 1896, and William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic presidential candidate who also received the People’s Party nomination, campaigned vigorously throughout Kansas and captured the state’s ten electoral votes. In 1901 at age twelve, Counts with two of his brothers began to hunt and trap in the woods and creeks that lay around Baldwin City. That same year Kansas temperance crusader Carry A. Nation moved from Medicine Lodge to Topeka and made plans to visit Baldwin. Counts was twenty-two, newly graduated from Baker University, when President William Howard Taft visited Baldwin and spoke in honor of Baker’s new president in 1911. One year later Counts crowded toward the Bull Moose candidate Theodore Roosevelt during his Baldwin whistle-stop, where William Allen White joined the former president on the train platform. For the rest of his life, Counts would greatly admire Roosevelt.

Even though Baldwin City was a small town in the Great Plains, Counts grew up at a point of convergence between local and national action. He came of age during a time of vibrant political and social change that energized the state between 1890 and 1910. After Bleeding Kansas, these decades framed the most famous turmoil of Kansas history, drawing their intensity from such movements as temperance, woman suffrage, the agrarian revolt, Methodism, Populism, and Progressivism. Extraordinarily immediate and accessible to most residents of Kansas, these movements involved daring language, defiant women, the marginalization and expression of dissent, and the chance to be live and up close. Thus they acquired a spectacular quality, offering brilliant spectacles for local spectators. As a spectator, Counts began to gain perspective on his own life and times while he was quite young.

Later in life Counts referred to the insularity and repetitiveness of farm life, small-town life, and late Victorian gentility. Yet he enjoyed the opportunity to observe conflicts, or the legacy of conflict, over ideas and issues that beset Baldwin and other farming communities during the Progressive Era. The best evidence that Counts watched everything closely would be his abiding scholarly interest in the transition from agrarianism to industrialization. He perceived that his own formative years in rural Kansas straddled pre-industrial culture and the onset of the modern, technological age.


5. [George S. Counts] “Biography of George Sylvester Counts,” 1940 (Baker University, Baldwin City, Kans., typescript), 2; “President Visits Baldwin City,” Baldwin Ledger, September 24, 1911; Kansas City Times, April 20, 1967, clipping in Presidents file, Baldwin City Public Library, Baldwin City, Kans.; Counts interview, March 19, 2002.
Counts’s lifelong desire to reconcile the virtues of change with its sad implications for family life reflected his sentimental outlook as well as his intellectual view. In other words, this desire grew out of Counts’s own deeply felt local sensibility, his feelings for Kansas, where he joyously explored the Wakarusa River valley and sang Methodist hymns at the top of his lungs, even as he saw his family and community transformed by agricultural depression, political failure, and the bitter struggle between debtors and creditors during the heyday of Populism. From a distance, he watched these wounds reopen during the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. In 1930, for example, Counts’s emotions lay just below the surface of his thoughts about industrialism:

Industrialism, having swept away the material foundations of the ancestral order, is now fast destroying the entire system of morals and beliefs which that order nourished and supported. The American people are consequently between two civilizations and are the inevitable victims of doubt and uncertainty.  

Through much of his work, Counts wove together the strands of the past, present, and future. In so doing, he perpetually balanced recollection and detachment. Despite his ambivalence about Kansas, George Counts stayed close to the past, which suggests the strength of his affinity with the place from which he came.

The boyhood of George S. Counts occurred on a 160-acre farm just outside Baldwin City, Kansas, where his parents moved in 1890 to be near the public school. Previously, James Wilson Counts and Mertie Gamble Counts lived just to the north in Vinland, where four of their six children were born: Florella in 1886, George in 1889, Wilson in 1891, and Mary in 1895. Hugh was born in 1888 when the family spent one year in James’s native Minnesota, hoping to find a less hardscrabble life. Milton, born in Baldwin City, followed unexpectedly in 1899. The move from Vinland to Baldwin City entailed a major commitment for James and Mertie Counts: the purchase of 160 acres of land and building a house and barn.  

The Counts family was familiar with the territory because Vinland and Baldwin City were only four miles from each other within the geographical region known as the Osage Questas, a hill-plain configuration that distinguishes much of eastern Kansas, including Douglas County, of which Lawrence was the seat of government. In the stone, two-room Coal Creek schoolhouse, the Counts children learned that a proslavery guerrilla named William Quantrill had raided Lawrence in 1863, massacring more than 150 men and burning the city to the ground before heading south toward Baldwin, then east to Missouri. The students also learned that the Santa Fe Trail passed near Vinland and Baldwin City, favorite stopping points for pioneers because of a deep well and the availability of trees to repair wagons. Eventually Vinland languished and Baldwin City became a thriving town.  

Throughout his life, George Counts admired Theodore Roosevelt and likely witnessed the presidential candidate’s whistle-stop in Baldwin in 1912.

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7. J. Wilson Counts and George S. Counts file, Baldwin City Public Library; Michele Counts Karmeier, interview by author, March 5, 2002; Warranty deed, January 11, 1899, Counts file.
By the mid-1890s the Baldwin population approached fifteen hundred, plus one thousand students enrolled at Baker University, established in 1858 by the Methodist Church. Baldwin businesses included bookstores, a drugstore, hotels, a real estate office, a bank, and a restaurant, as well as a harness maker, milliner, jeweler, blacksmith, grocer, baker, hardware dealer, dentist, and tailor. The commercial district centered on the intersection of Eighth and High Streets. Baldwin residents supported two Methodist churches, a Baptist and a Presbyterian church, and “those for the colored populace.” One of the bookstores maintained a lending library that advertised itself: “Do you read?” Obviously many did because the town sustained two newspapers, the Baldwin Ledger and the Baldwin Bee, for several decades.

Local news featured the comings and goings of Mary Elizabeth Lease of Wichita, a pro-labor Populist and suffragist who lectured to enthusiastic audiences throughout Kansas and the United States between 1885 and 1895. Lease came often to Baldwin because she liked to speak at Baker University. A charismatic orator, Lease railed against Wall Street, the Santa Fe Railroad, millionaires, and monopolies. Kansas boasted several other reformers with fine speaking reputations who occasionally visited Baldwin. “Little” Annie Diggs, considered more charming and politically shrewd than Lease, built her influence around a lifelong association with the Unitarian Church. She wrote a newspaper column on behalf of the Farmers’ Alliance, championed socialist principles, and campaigned for Populist candidates.10

In their time Lease, Diggs, and others ignited Kansas politics and stirred the emotions of the populace. Dynamic and ambitious, they helped transform Kansas into a place of political ideas and action. Further, while these orators became nationally known, they remained close to home. Quite simply, they stayed around for their Kansas audience. Among farm families, the experience of listening to the fiery stump speeches of the Populists fostered the development of a “movement culture,” as historian Scott G. McNall observed, one based on social and political solidarity that used patriotic fanfare to build enthusiasm.11 Interestingly, the Populist movement culture was similar to the “Klan-nish culture” that Kathleen Blee noted among the women of the Ku Klux Klan.12 Both evolved as the means through which politics became socialized, insinuating itself into the daily lives of local residents. Picnics, weekend encampments, and other activities often bore some connection to the Farmer’s Alliance and Populist movements.

Because the railroad ran through Baldwin City and Baker University lent prestige to this small town, politicians, evangelists, and social activists gravitated toward it. Therefore local families found themselves in the thick of

early for chores before they walked to school or were pulled in a wagon by the old family horse, “Pet,” and returned to chores after school until dinner. They worked every day except Sunday. The boys cleared and plowed the land, and planted, cultivated, and harvested the crops. The cows, George Counts once explained to his daughters, were demanding and annoyed him greatly. Later he developed his “Cow Theory of History,” which held that there would be fewer wars if every person in the world owned a cow, for the relentless badgering of humans by cows that cannot wait to be milked, fed, or groomed would leave little time for anything else. Counts still had his mind on cows in 1966, when he wrote that “we have not ever found a substitute for the milk cow, one of the most important educational institutions of pre-industrial America.” Strict accountability for assigned farm chores taught children skills and promoted discipline and responsibility, with each family member contributing to the group’s welfare, Counts believed. He characterized farm chores as a ladder that each child climbed upward to maturity.}

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ile Baldwin City drew and generated spirit and activity, like other farming communities it remained culturally distant from the great centers of commerce and industry. Some, like George Counts, longed for that other world. Ultimately, most farmers’ children felt the tug between the unfamiliar cities that beckoned and the small places they knew well. For the Counts children, home was a plain two-story square white wooden farmhouse with a high, hipped roof and an open attic where the boys slept, a screened porch, and brick chimney. The barn had a gable roof and sheds where James Counts kept his dairy cows, hogs, and Percheron horses. The land rolled gently. Counts, who loved fruits and nuts, planted a grove of black walnut trees to complement his apple orchard. The Counts farm was a subsistence farm, recalled several Counts cousins, dependent on family labor and a few hired hands. Only during World War I when James Counts expanded his wheat and corn plantings, he once confided to a grandson, did the farm turn a profit.14

On the farm, George Counts recalled, he and his “three brothers and two sisters played, quarreled, and worked during childhood and adolescence.”15 The children arose early for chores before they walked to school or were pulled in a wagon by the old family horse, “Pet,” and returned to chores after school until dinner. They worked every day except Sunday. The boys cleared and plowed the land, and planted, cultivated, and harvested the crops. The cows, George Counts once explained to his daughters, were demanding and annoyed him greatly. Later he developed his “Cow Theory of History,” which held that there would be fewer wars if every person in the world owned a cow, for the relentless badgering of humans by cows that cannot wait to be milked, fed, or groomed would leave little time for anything else. Counts still had his mind on cows in 1966, when he wrote that “we have not ever found a substitute for the milk cow, one of the most important educational institutions of pre-industrial America.” Strict accountability for assigned farm chores taught children skills and promoted discipline and responsibility, with each family member contributing to the group’s welfare, Counts believed. He characterized farm chores as a ladder that each child climbed upward to maturity.16 The lessons of the farm

stayed with Counts although his memories of the work involved tedium and exhaustion.

America’s nineteenth-century farms produced thousands of children who grew up and left the plains forever, most of them in the years before World War I. These young men and women did not want to become farmers. Their departure changed how farms functioned, and families mourned the loss. Yet Kansans were proud of the proliferation of state colleges and universities that encouraged the trend. Baker University, for example, developed an excellent reputation and, as historian Ellen Condliffe Lagemann has noted, strong connections with academics outside of Kansas, including sociologist Albion W. Small at the University of Chicago. Baker aggressively courted the children of farm families with newspaper advertisements:

One hundred students should enter from within a dozen miles
Of Baker University during the next sixty days.
COME: Farmer’s Sons and Daughters, ENTER.

George Counts’s boyhood occurred on this 160-acre farm just outside of Baldwin City.

The exodus of American farmers’ children, a phenomenon that escalated through the 1890s, concerned President Theodore Roosevelt, who appointed the Cornell University horticulturalist Liberty Hyde Bailey to direct a presidential Country Life Commission that sought to preserve rural life and farming culture. Bailey determined that public schools could help reverse the trend. He encouraged superintendents to add agricultural content to high school classes and edited a series of agricultural textbooks. Bailey also urged universities to expand their agricultural programs. In the case of the Counts family, the Country Life Commission proved successful, for the family farm would be passed to the next generation.

All six Counts children except Wilson graduated from Baker University. Wilson graduated from Kansas State Agricultural College (later Kansas State University) in Manhattan. Family lore holds that James and Mertie Counts insisted that every one of their children graduate from college. Yet when James’s four sons turned to college activities and studying, he complained about the lack of help.

Although Wilson Counts held a college degree, he never quite left the farm. After college, Wilson was the first of several family members to attend the Palmer School of Chiropractic in Davenport, Iowa. However, he interrupted his own studies in 1916 to help out on his father-in-law’s farm


20. McKittrick interview.
in Colorado where he and his wife, Wilma, started a family of three daughters. In 1919 James Counts called Wilson back to Baldwin City to help with the family farm. There was no one else to call, for Hugh had moved to Washington State, Milton was a chiropractor in St. Louis, and George had long since earned his doctorate and held a teaching position at the University of Washington. In 1920 George would join the Yale faculty. Logically, the farm fell to Wilson.

Between 1920 and 1960 Wilson and Wilma Counts hosted family reunions during the highest heat of the Kansas summer. Although large, the farmhouse could not hold everyone and some family members slept outside in old covered wagons scattered around the property. The reunions stretched over several weeks. After 1927, when George joined the Teachers College, Columbia University faculty, he and his wife, Lois, and daughters, Esther and Martha, came to Baldwin during intercession, when Counts took his break from teaching. George came and went quickly although his family stayed much longer; he made it clear that Kansas bored him, an attitude that grated on some of his siblings. The younger generation of Counts children would recall a sharp contrast between George rocking and lecturing longwindedly on the porch, and the more engaging Wilson, who showed off his gem collection and the farm animals to the children.

Wilson and George had been close until their teens, joined by a shared passion for nature, especially collecting birds’ eggs. But the closeness slipped during college, due in part to George’s eagerness to leave Kansas behind. Further, George’s contact with his parents and siblings diminished after he left Kansas. While he wrote thousands of letters to colleagues and friends, he rarely wrote to his family, a notable exception being a letter that he sent to his mother from Russia in 1927. Counts’s detachment from his family, his very own “farm family,” is a curious sidelight to his scholarly interest in the deterioration of the family with the advent of industrialization. In 1934 he wrote:

The democratic individualism of the frontier served to emancipate both women and children from tradition; and the forces of industrialism shattered the self-sufficient domestic economy, reduced the prestige of

A fine farmer, Wilson was extremely civic-minded. In the 1930s he served as president of the Douglas County Farm Bureau, where he established a production credit system that worked like a land bank, assisting farmers with the manufacture of food and fiber. A longtime public school trustee and Sunday school superintendent, he donated land for the Douglas County Lake, which became an important recreational park. By the time Wilson retired in 1955, he had expanded his family’s original 160-acre farm to 900 acres and had risen as high as he could in Baldwin as a philanthropist, professional, and community leader. Obviously Wilson could not surpass his brother George on the national stage, but he made a profound contribution to his hometown.

24. Counts interview, March 7, 2002; Karmeier interview.
husband and father, widened the gap between parent and child, and even threatened to disrupt the home.\textsuperscript{25}

While this passage affirms Counts’s reverence for the lost world of the farm family, it also mourns his own childhood and youth.

As Counts grew older, he became more accessible to some family members. Rocking away on the porch at Baldwin, Counts became “far less of a lecturer and more of a storyteller. In fact, he became a pausing storyteller!” recalled one nephew.\textsuperscript{26} While Counts continued to recount his experiences in Russia, Japan, and Germany, he finally found it in himself to tell stories about Kansas, too.

Complicated feelings about his own family may explain why Counts developed especially close friendships with the progressive educator and administrator Jesse Newlon and the economic historian Charles A. Beard. Like Counts, Beard and Newlon were the sons of farmers (both, by coincidence, from south-central Indiana). Counts may have been drawn to these two men whose backgrounds were similar and would come to fondly recollect the world of their youth. While Counts developed strong intellectual partnerships with many colleagues, his affinity with Newlon and Beard was strongest.\textsuperscript{27} It is an interesting possibility that Counts unconsciously sought to replace the childhood closeness with his brothers, particularly Wilson.

Even before George Counts left Kansas, he developed distance from his family. Although he lived at home during his four years at Baker University, Counts reveled in his newfound social independence. Baker was coeducational and offered a dazzling array of extracurricular activities that Counts adored. Further, the campus shaded by ancient oaks, its limestone buildings set squarely along High Street, conferred upon students a strong sense of intellectual purpose. When George Counts entered Baker in 1907, the university comprised just five buildings: Case Hall, where he took most of his classes; “Old Science” (now Parmenter Hall), which dates to the Civil War; Taylor Hall (now Mabee Memorial Hall), where William Howard Taft delivered a speech about world peace; Centenary Hall; and the Conservatory of Music. Since Baker’s founding, a Methodist church, which the Counts family always attended, had rested at the west edge of campus.\textsuperscript{28}

Passionate about college basketball and football, Counts later described himself (in the third person): “In his junior year he aroused the displeasure of the college authorities by taking a leading part in an unauthorized and


\textsuperscript{26} Counts interview, March 7, 2002; McKittrick interview; Karmeier interview.

\textsuperscript{27} Counts interview, March 19, 2002; see also Dennis, George S. Counts, and Charles A. Beard: Collaborators for Change, 16.

\textsuperscript{28} Brenda Day to author, March 13, 2002, private collection of Claudia J. Keenan.
unchaperoned excursion of the college basketball team, of which he was captain, to St. Louis, Chicago, and other far-away places during the Christmas vacation.”

President of his class, his fraternity, and the athletic association, Counts was ready for the world. The inscription next to his yearbook photographenthused:

Oh! You hero!
Keen in books;
Good in looks;
And as a “fusser” he’s quite complete.
In athletics he can’t be beat!

Graduating from Baker in 1911, Counts remained in Kansas two more years, becoming a science instructor at Sumner County High School in Wellington (1911–1912), and then high school principal at Peabody (1912–1913). While Counts always stated that his formal education resumed at the University of Chicago in 1913, in fact he spent a long summer session at the University of Kansas in 1912. From there Counts took two and a half months worth of credits beyond his Baker degree to Chicago. More significantly, his ideas may have been influenced by the professors who taught in the Kansas summer session. These included the Chicago classicist Frank Justus Miller, who lectured on Virgil although the bulk of his work probably lay in his capacity as an examiner for secondary schools. Another summer instructor, Victor Emanuel Helleberg, assistant professor of sociology at Kansas, taught “Elements of Sociology,” “Psychological Sociology,” and “Contemporary Society in the United States.” Much has been made of the fact that Counts chose to combine the disciplines of education and sociology in his doctoral studies. It is likely that working with Helleberg piqued his interest in sociology although the professor himself contributed nominally to the field, publishing just one work very late in his career.

Victor Emanuel Helleberg was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, and attended Yale University. Subsequently he received an LL.B. from the University of Cincinnati, practiced law for ten years, and spent another decade as a photo-engraver. In the autumn of 1906 Helleberg became a fellow in the fledgling sociology department of the

University of Chicago. Although he would pass his French and German exams and obviously intended to earn a doctorate, Helleberg never finished but instead accepted an assistant professorship in sociology at Kansas. Such an occurrence was not unusual around 1910, notes historian Rainer N. Egloff. What Helleberg did earn was the magnificent opportunity to be present at the blossoming of sociology and social psychology at Chicago, with Ernest

32. Although the University of Kansas did not keep transcripts of its summer session students, it is possible to deduce Counts’s courses because he took several that were “supplementary” and therefore of specific length. See University of Kansas, Forty-Sixth Annual Catalogue 1911–12 (Lawrence, Kans.: April 1912); Victor Emanuel Helleberg, The Social Self: The Star in the Human Comedy; An Evolutionary Social Psychology Sketch (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1941).
33. “Helleberg Biography—Breaky,” Victor Helleberg morgue file, University of Kansas Archives, University of Kansas, Lawrence; “Student Gift Honors Helleberg,” University Daily Kansan, August 3, 1937, Faculty Scrapbooks 41, ibid.
Both men’s interests and ambitions regarding graduate studies. Yet, Counts family lore held that George’s older sister, Florella, went first to Chicago and encouraged her brother to come and study with Charles H. Judd, dean of the School of Education. Ironically, Counts and Judd were a famously bad fit, for Judd’s intent was to professionalize the study of education through a “scientific point of view,” whereas philosophy and social analysis would form the core of Counts’s scholarship. In any event, Florella did not go first. Together she and George attended Chicago’s 1913 summer quarter, with George formally enrolled in the doctoral program in education and sociology, and Florella a summer student. Then, Florella went back to Baldwin and had little connection with education other than campaigning for kindergartens in the city’s public schools in 1920.

In his later years Counts referred to the influence of his brother-in-law, who urged him to pursue a doctorate in education as well as sociology. Who was this brother-in-law? Earl Shepard Johnson came on the scene when he married Esther Bailey, Counts’s favorite among his wife’s sisters and for whom he named one of his daughters. The marriage occurred sometime between 1914 and 1920. Interestingly, Johnson himself would develop strong ties to the University of Chicago, except they began long after Counts had graduated in 1916. The two men shared political views and academic interests. It was Johnson, rather than Charles H. Judd, who persuaded Counts to combine education and sociology in his graduate studies.

Born in Iowa in 1894, Earl Johnson received a B.A. from Baker University in 1918 and worked as a teacher and administrator in the Kansas public schools between 1919 and 1924. In 1932 and 1941, respectively, he received an M.A. and a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Chicago, and would teach there from 1932 to 1959. Johnson never became a full professor but was an instructor and assistant professor and department head.

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34. Victor Emanuel Helleberg, official transcript, Office of the Registrar, University of Chicago (1906–1910); Rainer Eglolf to author, July 8, 2002, Keenan collection.
39. 1913 Summer Quarter: George Sylvester Counts, Chicago transcript; Florella Tucker Counts, official transcript, Office of the Registrar, University of Chicago (Summer 1913); McKitrick interview.
40. Lagemann, An Elusive Science, 139; Counts interview, May 11, 2002. Miss Counts believes that Earl Johnson and George S. Counts did not meet until Counts was at least partially through graduate school at Chicago. The precise date of the Johnson–Bailey marriage has eluded the author.
professor of sociology and founder of the divisional master’s program in the social sciences. An enormously popular teacher, Johnson was passionate about humanism, social studies, and education.41 The strikingly parallel paths of Johnson and Counts—time spent in Kansas, undergraduate work at Baker, marriage to a Bailey sister, graduate studies at Chicago, and interests that interwove history and culture—may be a coincidence. But they reiterate the importance of place in shaping personal and professional character.

Emerging from high school when he did, Counts became part of a great wave of undergraduates that swept into colleges and universities during the first two decades of the twentieth century. This period would become fraught with debate about the aims of higher education. Progressives were especially concerned with the direction of universities. Training for jobs? Socialization? Development of expertise?42 At a time when undergraduates often became apathetic and graduate studies lacked rigor if the student and his professors were not aligned effectively, Counts determinedly made his way. Although we have been conditioned to think that Counts found his purpose when he reached Chicago, his exposure in Kansas to emerging disciplines and compelling personalities was equally a factor in his development.

Upon leaving Kansas, Counts broke further from his family when he stopped attending church regularly. Counts had been “reared in the strict discipline of the Methodist Church,” he once recalled. His parents and grandparents were Methodists and the proximity of Baker University made Baldwin City “the mecca of Kansas Methodists.” Methodism had been well established in Kansas since before the Civil War, due in large part to the church’s “itinerant system” of circuit-riding preachers. These men worked extremely long hours, riding circuits up to three hundred miles through the Great Plains, preaching as many as three times daily. They conducted Sunday School, distributed literature and collection cards, performed baptisms, and led revivals and camp meetings. Among the small towns and villages, particularly those inhabited by ranchers and farmers, the greatest contribution of the circuit riders was meeting the need for both salvation and recreation. Social life and the church became synonymous, as historian F. Morton Szasz has argued. Indeed, until the advent of the automobile, the church served as the focal point of local society.43 Religiosity permeated nineteenth-century Kansas, even the newspapers. In nearby Brooklyn, Kansas, for example, the Reverend DeWitt Talmage lived and preached between 1869 and 1894. When Talmage moved on to Texas, he sent every sermon that he delivered to his new congregation back to the Baldwin Ledger. The published sermons often spilled over a full page and drew eager commentary from Baldwin residents.44

Once, expressing skepticism about the Soviet education system, Counts noted sarcastically: “I recall that the

44. Reverend DeWitt Talmage’s sermons appeared in the Baldwin Ledger from 1895 to 1900.
The social gospel has often been described as the religious expression of the progressive movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historian Robert H. Wiebe once characterized the clergy who presided over the social gospel as “the honorary chairmen of progressivism.” If progressives were concerned with political and social reform, the Protestant ministers who purveyed the social gospel provided the religious and moral underpinnings for those reforms. Each and every Christian would be expected to make a commitment to society; the individual’s desire for salvation would be wound up with an obligation to improve the welfare of the disadvantaged. To remain detached from the world would be immoral. Social problems related to poverty, bad labor practices, industrialization, racial and ethnic prejudice, and access to schooling were among those addressed by Washington Gladden, Walter Rauschenbusch, and other Protestant ministers as well as progressive activists such as Jane Addams, John Dewey, and Florence Kelley.

While the social gospel famously inspired altruism among the middle and upper classes of America’s big cities, its influence also extended to the cities and towns of the Plains and near West. One such city was Topeka, where the Reverend Charles M. Sheldon popularized social ethics and devoted himself to community welfare between 1888 and 1946. Prejudice toward immigrants and racial inequities were Reverend Sheldon’s particular concerns. He and his followers established a public library, settlement house, day nursery, and kindergarten training school. Sheldon’s emphasis on moral responsibility for others resonated with Kansas Methodists. Among the many ministers Sheldon influenced, Charles Wilson Bailey, who would become the longest serving Methodist minister in Kansas history, was the father of Lois Bailey, one of George Counts’s classmates and the woman he would marry in 1913.

49. Szasz, The Protestant Clergy in the Great Plains and Mountain West, 194, 199.

Born in a log cabin in Wisconsin in 1849, Charles Wilson Bailey grew up in the wilderness among trappers, traders, and the Winnebago Indians. During the Civil War he was wounded at Vicksburg and later settled in Kansas, where he became a cattle driver. Married in 1877, Bailey decided to study for the ministry and was ordained in 1887. At the time of his death in 1951, Reverend Bailey was 102 years old, the last Civil War veteran in Kansas and the oldest alumnus of Baker University. He had retired from the ministry in 1937 after fifty-one years. Like Sheldon, Bailey was a liberal thinker who reviled racial prejudice and anti-Semitism and upheld the theory of evolution.

Reverend Bailey was Counts’s father-in-law for thirty-eight years, so Counts could not completely close the door on religion. The strong familial presence of the Methodist minister would have spurred Counts to continually reevaluate the church, especially its response to problems faced by farmers. Notably, these included dwindling spiritualism due to disillusionment with government and business, anxiety about modern values, and loss of control over one’s livelihood and children. Further, Counts indicated that he recognized the Methodist Church had tried to mediate the very changes that tugged at him—the transition from agrarianism to industrialization, and family struggles with cultural change. That mediation was part of the social gospel fits with Counts’s conception of the social gospel as a practical, democratic force. In describing Counts’s framework for “a culture that would be a self-renewing civilization,” Gerald Gutek noted: “Only as people were influenced and nurtured by a particular tradition did their lives become integrated and effective.” The social gospel, which grew out of concern about industrial development and capitalism, was woven into the tradition Counts envisioned. In this way, the teachings of the Methodist Church remained part of Counts’s life and thought, even though he had disavowed religion as a very young man.

In the seemingly quiet world of turn-of-the-century Baldwin City, George S. Counts experienced the fast flow of ideas and intensive exposure to people of conviction and spirit. Growing up in Kansas between 1889 and 1913, he observed sweeping changes, some of which he considered so profound that he believed America came to em-

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