The Works Project Administration provided jobs to millions of Americans during the Depression years, operating from 1935 to 1943 as a centerpiece of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s expansive New Deal relief program. The WPA offered a multitude of employment opportunities for both men and women, always emphasizing the distinction between relief work and public assistance at a time when unemployment was high but accepting charity was considered shameful. In this unidentified photograph, a Kansas woman poses at a loom in a public exhibit that shows the training and occupations available to women in the WPA. A poster in the background underscores the message that the WPA was about work above all else. Exhibits like these served both to advertise the WPA as a work relief program and to normalize the employment of women by showing them engaged in domestic tasks.

The popularity and visibility of federal work relief programs encouraged states and local governments to adopt similar initiatives, like the County Cotton Mattress Program of 1940–1941. Devised as a means of surplus disposal—world events disrupted the global textile trade, leaving U.S. farmers, especially in the South, in dire straits—the cotton mattress program also provided instruction and an essential household item to the “deserving poor.” Kansans, however, preferred to believe it was “not a relief program in any way.” Indeed, as historians Virgil Dean and Ramon Powers explain, Leavenworth County was poised to reject the program due to the stigma attached to public assistance until the county’s persuasive home demonstration agent stepped in to prevent it. The county later reported that reluctant residents became “much happier when they understood it to be an educational and self-help project.” In all, more than twelve thousand families across Kansas participated in the Cotton Mattress Program, the subject of one of this issue’s feature articles.
Uniontown and Plowboy—Potawatomi Ghost Towns: Enigmas of the Oregon–California Trail
by Tom Ellis

“Out of the Ashes”: The Rebuilding of Lawrence and the Quest for Quantrill Raid Claims
by Katie H. Armitage

“In No Way a Relief Set Up”: The County Cotton Mattress Program in Kansas, 1940–1941
by Virgil W. Dean and Ramon Powers

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Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains is published quarterly through a partnership between the Kansas Historical Foundation and the Department of History at Kansas State University. The Kansas Historical Foundation serves as a fund-raising, fund management, membership, and retail organization to support and promote the Kansas Historical Society, a state agency that safeguards and shares the state’s history through the collection, preservation, and interpretation of its past. The Society’s collections and programs are diverse and are made available through its library and museum in Topeka, historic sites and classrooms across the state, and publications and web-based resources accessible everywhere. The Department of History at Kansas State University is especially well-suited to the study of Kansas, agricultural, and environmental history. As a Land Grant school whose culture and economy have historically been shaped by the economy in the state, the history of Kansas holds a venerable place in the academic offerings of the University. Environmental history, with a particular focus on agricultural, water, and grassland issues in Kansas, has become increasingly more important to university research and curricula worldwide.

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The journal publishes scholarly articles, edited documents, and other materials that contribute to an understanding of the history and cultural heritage of Kansas and the Central Plains. Political, social, intellectual, cultural, economic, and institutional histories are welcome, as are biographical and historiographical interpretations and studies of archaeology, the built environment, and material culture. Articles emphasizing visual documentation, exceptional reminiscences, and autobiographical writings are also considered for publication. Genealogical studies are generally not accepted.

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