Some Aspects of Economic Mobility in Barrett Township of Thomas County, 1885-1905

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THE FRONTIER in American history has been credited with providing opportunities for Americans. Frederick Jackson Turner stated in 1893 that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." 1 Ten years later he wrote: "In a word . . . free lands meant free opportunities." 2 The pioneer farmer meant to take advantage of what the frontier offered. He went west to find his fortune just as did the fur traders, gold seekers, and others who preceded him. These farmers have been studied as a group, and their success in settling the last American frontier—the Great Plains region—can be documented. 3 But what is known about the success or failure of the individual farmers in this area? Were they able to take advantage of the opportunities? This paper represents an effort to answer that question by comparing data on 64 farmers found on the 1895 manuscript census of agriculture. 4 These farmers all resided in Barrett township of Thomas county in northwestern Kansas.

Certainly Thomas county was successfully settled and developed as an agricultural area. In the 20th century it contains prosperous grain and livestock producing farms and ranches. Whatever wealth exists in the area today was built upon the frontier experience of those settlers who came into the area in the late 19th century. Success was not easily achieved in the county. The farmers had to adapt to the unfamiliar environment, learning new techniques of farming, shifting their emphasis from the traditional pioneer crops to crops which grew well in the region, and generally dividing their efforts between livestock and grain farming. While this

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2. Ibid., pp. 259, 260.


19—8910 (281)
LYON COUNTY LANDHOLDINGS ABOUT 1940

(Explanation of Numbered Landmarks)

2. "Lutheran" Cemetery (N 3-17-10).
3. Americus.
4. Emporia.
5. Welsh Cemetery and site of "log church" (Center 34-19-11).
6. Olpe.
7. Zion Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (SW 12-21-10).
8. Christensen farm (NE 4-17-11).
9. Reading.

process of adaptation took place, many of the arrivals failed to make a success of their farms. As a daughter of one homesteader who had arrived in 1885 put it: "some were not born for the hardships and left looking for a better place and that cut down the population." 5

Success on the individual basis is a matter of social and economic mobility. The definition of these terms so far as this paper is concerned is simple. A farmer who experienced vertical economic mobility in Barrett township is one who remained in the county and on the farm for at least 10 years. Obviously one might leave the farm and advance socially and economically, but this paper is concerned only with success on the farm. Some attempt will be made to differentiate between the farmer who had remained on his farm for the 10-year period and those who increased the size of their farms by over 1,000%. Although any farmer who remained for two census years is considered successful, the more prosperous farmers were those who increased their total acreage. Ten of the 25 repeaters had increased their total acreage at least 10 times between 1895 and 1905. 6

Although a successful farmer is defined as one who appears on the 1895 and 1905 censuses, caution must be exercised in terming those not found on the 1905 census as failures. M. L. Lacey, for example, settled in Thomas county in 1879 7 but was not on the census of 1885. He was elected probate judge of the county in 1885 and was probably not too involved in agricultural pursuits. 8 He was listed in 1895 but not in 1905; therefore he is a non-repeater. But an atlas of the county published in 1907 showed him to be a landowner in Barrett township of Thomas county. 9 Perhaps his success was found in politics and not on the farm. This example cautions the historian not to generalize too much on the individual basis with only the census reports as sources.

Historians of agriculture in the Great Plains area note the limited resources of the settlers, and most authorities agree that the newly arrived farmer needed several good crops to succeed. Also, several

6. The best source of information on the farmers (since many did not keep diaries and account books) is the manuscript census of agriculture taken every five years in Kansas. It gives detailed data on the farmer, his acreage, crops, and livestock. Unfortunately the census reports which are useful for Thomas county are those of 1890 and 1905 only. The census of 1885 was taken before county organization and only two of the farmers found on the 1895 census had been in the township early enough to be on the 1885 census. The 1890 census taken by the federal government was almost entirely destroyed by fire and the 1900 census has not been opened to researchers.
bad years in succession usually meant failure. Since the census was not taken annually, quite often the information is not available at the specific time a farmer arrived in the county. Thus, the manuscript census reports do not permit extensive analysis of the importance of good crops in the first years of settlement because a settler might have been in the county nearly 10 years before being included on the census and others might come and go without ever being noted on the census.

However, by using the Kansas tract books, which give the name and location of every person who acquired land from the federal government, the approximate date of arrival of the individual can be ascertained. Taking only one survey township in Thomas county, the tract books reflect the 244 separate entries were made on 156 quarter sections available.\textsuperscript{10} This indicates that there were at least 108 relinquishments or cancellations. Obviously some of these entries had been made by land speculators or other nonsettlers. E. P. Worcester, pioneer editor in the county, wrote in 1887: “Land can be purchased in the county at from $5.00 to $7.50 per acre. School land can be bought on long time from second hands. Relinquishments to homesteads and timber claims sell at from $100 to $1,000, according to location.”\textsuperscript{11} These “second hand” school lands and the relinquishments being offered for sale indicate the possibility of land speculation. But some of those who cancelled or relinquished their claims were undoubtedly farmers who had been conquered by the frontier.

Historians of the West have suggested that the time of settlement, initial size and location of the farm, fencing, capital, farm management, and adaptation were all determinants of success or failure on the frontier. Using the sources available, we can compare the repeating farmers with the nonrepeaters to test the validity of some of these theories.

The importance of time of settlement is related to climatic conditions because success or failure could be decided by the crops produced during the first two or three years. Climatic conditions were not typical in the years preceding the rush into Thomas county and precipitation remained sufficient for agriculture through 1888.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Kansas tract books of the General Land Office. The government survey township, which was in the northeast part of Barrett township, was T. 6 N., R. 35 W. The 244 entries and 108 relinquishments include individuals who filed under more than one land law. For example, in the entire area that became Barrett township, 27 entries were made in 1879 by a total of 19 men. Eight men acquired 320 acres each, while 11 acquired 160.

\textsuperscript{11} Eugene Worcester, A Brief Sketch of Thomas County, Kansas, and the City of Colby (Colby, Kans.: Thomas County Cen, 1887), p. 81.

\textsuperscript{12} An invaluable source for the consideration of agriculture pursuits and population movements in the region which includes Thomas county is found in Gerald S. Aitknap, “An Investigation of the Relationship Between Climate Conditions and Population Changes in Western Kansas, 1885-1900” (unpublished master’s thesis, Fort Hays Kansas State College, 1956).
These unusually wet years encouraged settlement, but they also gave a false picture of the region’s environment. When weather conditions returned to normal the farmer would be forced to adapt or to leave.

Thirty-eight of the 64 farmers listed on the 1895 census had been in the county for at least eight years, having arrived by 1887 according to the Kansas tract books. These farmers had arrived during the boom period. Eighteen of those who arrived prior to 1888 were found on the 1905 census compared to 20 who were not. The question may be asked, if time of settlement was important, why did these 20 not remain in the county, especially in view of the fact that they were successful enough to remain for from at least eight to ten years? These farmers had survived the disastrous crop year of 1894 when the value of field crop production in the county dropped 75%. Perhaps they had exhausted their resources after seven or eight years in the township. Obviously additional inquiry must be made to determine the reason or reasons for success in farming in Thomas county.

The initial size of the farm might also have affected the success of the pioneer farmer. The average size of the repeating farmers’ holdings was 265 acres compared to about 211 for those not on the 1905 census. The 10 most successful farmers had an average of 240 acres of land, yet 13 farmers who each had about a half section were not found in the county at the end of the decade. The size of the farm of the nonrepeaters and the 10 most successful farmers was not significantly different and therefore does not seem to be an important factor in the lack of success.

The location of the farm did not seem to influence success in Barrett township of Thomas county. For instance, four of the farmers found on the census of 1895 were located along the middle fork of Sappa creek. All four acquired their land in either 1886 or 1887, yet only two were listed in 1905. A survey of the locations of the successful farmers found in the Kansas tract books reflects that they were, in general, spread across the township along with those who did not repeat in 1905.

Since all the individuals considered in this paper settled on government lands, no consideration of differences between those acquiring land from railway companies or other sources can be made. Silas Swanson of the repeaters and six of the nonrepeaters were not listed on the Kansas tract books and therefore had apparently acquired their land from earlier settlers or possibly from land speculators.
Ray Allen Billington lists the problem of fencing as the most important of the various problems encountered by the pioneer on the Great Plains area. But how important was fencing to success? The need for fencing has been overstated in works like Webb's *The Great Plains*, for the pioneer farmer usually did not fence much of his land in the early years of settlement. Although the repeating farmers in Barrett township had nearly twice the percentage of fenced acreage as the nonrepeating farmers, only four of the 10 most successful had any fenced land in 1895—yet they had increased their individual holding by at least five times the 1895 figure. For instance, Richard T. Heming, who came in 1879 and had 5,780 acres (nine sections) by 1905, had not a single acre fenced in 1895. Here was a man who after 14 years had still not fenced his holdings even though he had over 125 acres of cropland.

Success probably came to the industrious farmer who adapted to the environment. A comparison of the farm activities of the repeaters and nonrepeaters indicates that those who enjoyed economic mobility tended to be more actively involved in farming. The entire family of the successful farmer seems to have assisted him, if data on sale of poultry and eggs is any indicator of efforts of the farm wife and children. In 1895 the successful farm families sold an average of $10.56 worth of poultry and eggs compared to an average of $6.85 for the nonrepeaters. Although the difference is only about four dollars, one must remember that “during the early years of settlement most farm families did not handle over $300, and more often as little as $100. Even after a decade on a western farm, families commonly spent only $500 or $600 annually for both living and operating expenses.”

One form of adaptation to the Plains environment was the use of machinery. The census reports do not give any detailed description of the nature of farm machinery, but the value of the farmer’s capital equipment is given. The amount of farm machinery was important to success. There is no way to determine how much capital the individual farmers had when they settled in the county, but a comparison can be made of the repeaters and nonrepeaters in 1895. Those farmers who were to remain through the following decade had an average of nearly $70.00 invested in farm machinery as opposed to the approximately $40.00 for the nonrepeaters. The 10 most successful farmers had about $5.00 more capital than the

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average successful farmer. Only A. H. Fink and H. A. Smith showed a cash value of farm machinery lower than the average for the nonrepeaters. These two men were apparently experiencing difficult times in 1895 as they were listed on the schedule of “Pauperism and Crime” as recipients of financial aid during the past year. Nine of the nonrepeaters had had more capital than the average successful farmer yet were not included in the 1905 census. Even with adequate capital prosperity was not assured in Thomas county.

Combining stock farming and grain operations was another means of adaptation in Thomas county. The successful farmers included those who engaged in both stock farming and the cultivation of grain crops. Those farmers who had experienced vertical economic mobility had an income of about $140 from the slaughter and sale of livestock compared to the $42.00 made by the nonrepeaters. The successful farmer had twice as many cows and about nine times as many “other cattle” as the nonrepeater farmer. These figures become even more striking considering that whereas over 70% of the repeaters owned cattle, only 30% of the nonrepeaters did.

In the area of field crops there is considerable difference between the repeaters and nonrepeaters. Those who appeared on the 1905 census were more involved in crop production. A higher percentage of the repeaters had sown corn and wheat than had the nonrepeaters. And only 16% of the repeaters had less than two types of field crops planted as opposed to 33% of the nonrepeaters.

Corn, the familiar pioneer crop, was planted by 80% of the repeaters and about 10% of the nonrepeaters. The average acreage in corn of the repeaters was about 32, compared to 27 for the nonrepeaters. The most successful farmers had an average of 41 acres of corn planted. These farmers, who enjoyed the most economic mobility by 1905, also had the most average acreage of both winter and spring wheat. This grain was to become the most important money crop for Thomas county farmers during the 1890’s. Therefore the early predominance given to wheat over corn by these farmers may have accounted for their success. Yet it is difficult to account for men such as G. W. Foust, Simon Miller, and William F. Starcher who had 160 acres, 90 acres, and 210 acres respectively planted in wheat in 1895, but were not found on the 1905 census.

What conclusions can be drawn from information contained in the manuscript census reports? Over all there seemed to be a pattern of adaptation and industry on the part of the successful farmers of Thomas county. The 10 farm families that had enjoyed the greatest amount of vertical economic and social mobility in the
period from their settlement prior to 1895 had the highest averages in the following categories: value of farm machinery, winter and spring wheat acreage, corn acreage, barley acreage, sale of poultry and eggs, and number of milk cows and "other cattle." Although their total acreage was not significantly higher, the repeating farmers led the nonrepeaters in 12 out of 17 items of comparison, which included farm acreage and value, value machinery, amount of fencing, acreage in certain field crops, butter, poultry and milk, and livestock holdings.

The successful farmer learned to adapt to the Great Plains environment rather than permitting it to conquer him. He had arrived in the area at about the same time as those who did not succeed—he made it and they did not. Time and location did not determine the success, but perhaps hard work, adaptation, and just plain luck did.