Cattlemen, Railroads, and the Origin of the Kansas Livestock Association—the 1890’s

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“Grass is the forgiveness of nature . . . her constant benediction,” wrote John J. Ingalls, long-time U.S. senator from Kansas and one of many to eulogize the lush grass of the state. This grass, native to the region, was the foundation of the cattle industry and the basic reason that the industry remained permanent in the West and not transient as it had been in the East. Many changes have occurred in the grassland beef industry since its origin in the 19th century, but even today the industry is still heavily dependent on the nutritive powers of the native grasses. The cow, along with the grass, was also basic. Not particularly intelligent or prolific, as animals go, the cow is a hardy critter with a unique, four-compartment stomach that can convert the relatively low-grade natural vegetation into a highly desirable protein food. “She is a mobile, self-powered processing plant,” one observer has noted, “that needs no other raw material except water” to produce meat, one of man’s most popular foods. Largely as a result of these two resources, beef cattle bred or fed on the prairie grasses of Kansas during the late 19th century supplied the steaks and roasts that graced the tables of millions of American homes.

Grass, cows, and the whole production phase of the industry, however, were only the initial requirements confronting cattlemen. Once the cattle had matured sufficiently that another producer became involved with the remaining growth and development, or when they had been fattened enough for slaughter, cattlemen entered into the marketing phase of the industry. This was the intermediary stage between range or feedlot and the ultimate consumption of the meat. During the 19th century and much of the 20th, marketing usually involved railroad transport

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to one of the large marketing centers where the stock was either sold to a feedlot operator or to one of the large packers. Cattle raised in Kansas were most often sold at the central stockyards that developed in Kansas City, St. Joseph, and Wichita during the two decades following the Civil War. The availability of railway transport from the producing areas to the marketing centers was closely related to the development of these terminal stockyards.

Located in or around the large stockyards were packing plants, whose representatives bought the cattle ready for slaughter, processed the meat, and distributed it to retail outlets. Most of the large packing interests—Swift, Cudahy, and Armour, for example—as well as a number of smaller concerns, began operations in Kansas City, St. Joseph, or Wichita simultaneously with or slightly before initiation of the stockyards. Railroads were essential for the growth of the packing industry, too, both in the transporting of cattle to market and in facilitating the development of a national system of distributing the meat.

Marketing, then, forced cattlemen into association with a number of other industries, big businesses that producers often felt were unfriendly to their interests. Dissatisfaction grew as consolidation of marketing industries increased. As a result, cattlemen often formed new associations or redirected the activities of those that already existed in attempts to promote their industry, or to protect themselves from the power of these big business consolidations. The response in Kansas to the real or supposed injustices resulted in the formation of the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA) in 1897, and, of the three separate industries that cattlemen in the state dealt with in the marketing process, the railroads were most responsible in influencing them to respond with a new organization. Although KLA was probably weak and somewhat ineffective for several years after its initiation except in dealings with railways, its creation did provide the state’s cattlemen with a means of responding collectively and a basis upon which they would build a strong association at a future date.

Of all the complaints that agrarians voiced against big business during the 1890’s, few if any exceeded in frequency or intensity those that were raised against the railroads. At times shippers complained of poor service or some other unpopular practice of the lines, but the most frequent and concentrated attack was upon freight-rate policies. To complicate matters, railroad rate schedules and the process of arriving at them were exceedingly com-

2. KLA was sometimes referred to as the Kansas State Live Stock Association.
plex and difficult for the average shipper to comprehend. Most rural shippers understood only the cost of transporting their goods to market and not the complicated procedures for determining the various schedules. To them, the rates were simply too high. These shippers had no desire to see the railroads operate without earning a “fair” profit. But, in view of their own diminished purchasing power during the early 1890’s, shippers believed that the increased efficiency and the expanded carrying trade of the lines, the seemingly high freight charges for the goods they purchased, and what they believed to be corruption, mismanagement, and overcapitalization in railway circles, all emphasized the fact that rates were higher than necessary.

When all rates are considered collectively, levels had actually started to decline several decades before the 1890’s, and continued to do so into the 20th century. This fact has been attested to by almost every historian who has dealt with railroads in the post-Civil War period. It was estimated, for example, that the average charge for transporting one ton of freight for one mile was around two cents in the latter part of the 1860’s but only .73 cents by 1900, a level it retained until after 1910. This represented a reduction of over 63 percent. The Santa Fe system, one of the most patronized roads in Kansas and the Southwest, had reduced its rates from about 2.3 cents per ton-mile in 1881 to less than 1.1 cents in 1895. These declines might seem to indicate that rate increases were definitely justified by the 1890’s in order to ensure the roads a reasonable profit, but the level of rates may not have been a good criterion of the lines’ profitability. William Z. Ripley, in one of the most detailed analyses of the subject, concluded that the level of rates did not always indicate profit or the lack of it. Other kinds of information, much of which the railway companies were reluctant to divulge, were necessary for an accurate evaluation of profits. Not even the fact that a number of railroads failed and went into receiverships during the 1890’s was convincing evidence that freight rates were too low to ensure a successful business operation, as mismanagement or a number of other factors may have caused the failures. In the end, Ripley failed to reach a definite conclusion on the justice of rates during the 1890’s.

John F. Stover, however, another student of railroads, sug-


4. Lawrence L. Waters, Steel Trails to Santa Fe (Lawrence, 1950), p. 172.
gested a possible answer when he concluded that before 1900 rates did generally fall more rapidly than did the general price structure, and that they continued to lag behind for the first decade or so of the 20th century. But the relationship of tariffs to the general price structure that Stover noted was not of prime importance to shippers of farm products. This concept included all freight rates, some of which were relatively low, as well as all prices throughout the economy, some of which were relatively high. Those engaged in agriculture, for example, were only interested in the cost of transporting manufactured goods from east to west or the expense of getting livestock to a central market. In addition, rates probably did not decline as rapidly as did rural income. Thus the justice of the railroads' position on interstate rates during the 1890's remains somewhat clouded, except in the view of most rural shippers.

The evidence is more conclusive on those tariffs that have been variously referred to as local, short-haul, or intrastate rates. As competition and the inability of railroads to establish effective pools tended to push long-haul rates down, local or short-haul charges usually were whatever the traffic would bear. Some declined, others remained constant, and some actually increased during the last part of the 19th century, according to reports made to the Kansas Board of Railroad Commissioners. A report in 1892, for instance, showed that the cost of shipping a carload of cattle or hogs 50 miles in Kansas had declined from $22 per car in 1883 to $18 in 1892, a reduction of 18 percent. For the longer haul of 250 miles, rates were reported to have decreased from $72 to $43.50, or 39 percent. If the report was accurate—and there is some doubt that it was—there had been a significant reduction in local rates, but even so, reductions did not occur with the same speed that interstate rates had apparently declined. The commissioners noted in 1891, however, that the statistical information included in their report was as full and accurate as was possible, but also that the complicated nature of the task made it possible for the railroads to make almost any desirable showing. The lack of accurate information on the rates that were charged, as well as the nature of other railroad practices, accounts in part for the contradictions that often permeated the rival claims of shippers and railway companies. Cattlemen, for example, were not cog-

nizant of any decline in local rates during the 1890’s, and in fact claimed that tariffs were going up.

There was no effective federal agency that cattle shippers could apply to during the 1890’s for redress of local rate grievances. Appeal to the Interstate Commerce Commission was usually considered too cumbersome, time-consuming, and expensive. The practice of figuring on an extended basis whether the lines charged more for a short than a long haul also made it difficult to establish that local rates were excessive. This practice allowed lines to charge relatively high rates for short hauls in areas without competition as long as cheaper rates in areas with competition reduced the total charges for the several short hauls to equal that of the long haul.8

On the state level, shippers could appeal to the Kansas Board of Railroad Commissioners—composed of three members appointed by the governor—which had been established in 1883. According to the legislation establishing the institution, the board had the power to supervise most activities of common carriers, require statistical reports, conduct official hearings, and, according to some shippers, the power to issue binding orders on rates to specific cities. As the century drew to a close, however, it became evident that the board did not have the power to determine freight tariffs, and indeed, had little power at all if a road stubbornly refused to abide by its decisions or had them set aside through appeals to the courts. These weaknesses were largely responsible for the Populist campaign to strengthen the board during the 1890’s. Yet others felt that the board already had too much influence. William Allen White, for instance, in an attempt to forestall the Populists’ drive to increase the board’s powers once noted that the men who formed the commission were “ignorant and mercenary, with the morals of bandits and the crude intelligence of arrant demagogues. These men,” he continued, “too often regard the railroads as their prey and the people as their dupes.” State railroad boards in general and the Kansas board in particular, White held, stood between the shipper and justice. The debate continued throughout the 1890’s and beyond, yet by 1896 the board had heard over 1,000 cases, 354 of which had been decided in favor of the rail lines, and 483 in the shippers’ favor. The railroads had disobeyed 22 rulings of the board.9


The specific contest in Kansas between stockmen and railroads that eventually led to KLA centered on the recurring question of increased freight rates. This was not the first confrontation between Kansas cattlemen, or most Western cattlemen for that matter, and the railroads, but by the 1890’s the effects of the depression, the growing power of railway consolidations, and the other complexities of an increasingly industrialized economy put the dispute into a different perspective and added urgency to the search for a solution. The question of rates also involved the contestants in issues related to the mode of charging for freight and in the quality of the railroads’ services.

Almost a decade before the formation of KLA, shippers and railroads disagreed on the mode of charging for services. The lines had traditionally charged stock shippers on a carload basis with a specific charge per carload of stock—dependent upon the size of the car and the distance to market—without regard to the number or the weight of the livestock in the car. Then in 1888 the railroads initiated a system that called for tariffs based on the weight shipped rather than the old carload rate. The new system stimulated numerous complaints to the Board of Railroad Commissioners, as the stockmen considered it only a ploy to raise rates. This three-man commission conducted a hearing and subsequently directed that the new system be abandoned.10 The railroads unsuccessfullly attempted to change the mode of rate charges again in 1890; then, apparently, they made no serious attempts to modify the established system until 1896. Most of the complaints to the board during the first half of the 1890’s involved discriminations in the form of rebates, drawbacks, false classifications of freight, free personal transportation, and the practice of billing at underweight. The secretive nature of these arrangements between railroads and their favorite shippers made regulation by the commissioners difficult.11

In 1896, the old dispute surfaced again, producing as much material for the researcher as any confrontation between shippers and rail lines during the period of this study. Possibly the availability of source material leads one to describe the 1896 struggle as “typical” of all the others, but the information related to the other confrontations also suggests that the disputes both before and after differed little from that in 1896. On January 1, 1896, the new system of charging shippers by weight rather than

11. Ibid.; Thirteenth Rept Bd RR Com., 1895, p. 16.
carload was announced by the roads. Stockmen immediately protested and pressured the railroad commissioners into summoning representatives of the lines to a formal hearing. Several hundred stockmen, according to the Kansas Farmer, arrived in Topeka on the appointed day in order to register their complaints, but most of these were mere spectators as only 49 witnesses testified in behalf of the shippers, and even some of these men were bankers, commission men, and freight agents.

The railroads, “represented by a splendid array of their best legal talent,” according to the Kansas Farmer, argued that the new rates were not higher, or if higher, that the increase was minimal. A $3.60 per car reduction in the charges from Norton to Kansas City was cited to show an actual decrease in a part of the new schedule. They also argued that the new system of charging was more equitable to small shippers who were not always able to fill a car to the same capacity as large shippers, yet still had to pay the full carload rate. In addition, they claimed that the carload rate had encouraged overcrowding of cars, which resulted in the added expense to both shipper and carrier of injured or unmarketable stock. Decreased brutality and fairness to small shippers were the cornerstones supporting the railroads’ argument for a new system of rate charges.

Shipping representatives, among whom the cattlemen exerted a major influence, argued convincingly that the new mode of charging had resulted in a 15 to 50 percent increase in rates. W. G. Tod of Maple Hill, for example, testified that the new rates increased the charges he paid for the 68-mile haul to Kansas City by $6.00 to $7.50 per car, while J. P. Campbell attested to a $8.22 increase per car for the several-hundred-mile trip from Ashland in Clark county. James W. Robison, Towanda, Butler county, stated that his rates had increased by $8.00 a car, and that he had driven some of his stock to the Wichita market rather than pay the increased rates to Kansas City.

Robison also emphasized other major complaints of the stockmen. The necessity of weighing the stock cars in Kansas City, and the practice of weighing the cars while they were still coupled and in motion, left stockmen with no foreknowledge of shipping charges and in considerable doubt as to the accuracy of the

12. The information that follows was taken, for the most part, from three sources: Kansas Farmer, Topeka, April 16, 1896, p. 249; Fourteenth Rept Bd RR Com., 1896, pp. 22-31; “Transcript of Hearing Before the Board of Railroad Commissioners,” box 13, 1896, 355pp., in Kansas State Historical Society archives.
14. Ibid., pp. 36-40, 131-133.
railroads' scales. Robison argued that weighing cars while they were in motion—considering the uneven coupling devices commonly in use at the time—resulted in some cars recording excessive weight. This meant that a shipper might pay for more freight than was actually carried as he might be charged for weight in the car either ahead of or behind his. But J. C. Lincoln, one of the three attorneys representing the Missouri Pacific, countered Robison's argument by suggesting that "experts" had determined that weighing moving cars actually resulted in short weights for the shipper. This conclusion, according to the testimony, was based on much the same principle as that which accounted for a moving skater being able to cross thin ice. The subtlety of this argument was lost on the shippers, they remained unconvinced. Finally, the stockmen maintained that the new system had increased the suffering of stock through delays in weighing, and by encouraging shippers to load fewer cattle in the cars than was advisable for safe travel.

In response to the skillful prompting of their Topeka attorney, Joseph G. Waters, cattlemen emphasized their desire to lower rates and to eliminate the other abuses by returning to the old carload system of charging. The value of their testimony, however, was weakened somewhat by two inconsistencies. First, the stockmen found it difficult to justify adequately the inequities of the carload system for the small shipper, except by saying that all shippers, sooner or later, ship "light" and "heavy cars," or that the small shippers could always cooperate with neighbors in order to obtain a full load. This may have been true, but the lines' contention that the large shippers favored the old carload system so that the small shippers would continue to subsidize their freight charges, in part, also had merit. A second problem revolved around the question of why the stockmen demanded more cars to ship the same number of stock under the new system if, as they contended, they had not been overloading under the old system. This question was partially answered when some shippers admitted that the increased demand for cars had been a deliberate attempt to frustrate the lines' new system.

The Board of Railroad Commissioners recognized that the testimony had suggested at least two major issues: the mode of charging for freight, and the question of whether the new system had raised rates. They agreed with the lines that the new mode of charging was the more "just and equitable manner," but they were much opposed to the apparent rate increase. They did,
however, postpone a final decision on the questions until time permitted them to digest the several hundred pages of conflicting testimony and the numerous documents that had been introduced. In the meantime, the board ordered the lines to return to the old system.\textsuperscript{16}

The fact that the railroads again attempted to establish rates according to weight in 1897 indicated that the board eventually required the continuance of the old system. The change in 1897 prompted another hearing before the Board of Railroad Commissioners, but neither the arguments, the witnesses, nor the results were much different from those of the hearing in 1896. The lines did, however, change their argument from the “no increase” position of 1896 to that of a reasonable and justifiable increase. Stockmen eventually won this 1897 round too, but probably most important for the cattlemen of the state was the relationship the hearings in 1896 and 1897 had to the origin of KLA. Organization of cattlemen into a united front against the freight increase in 1897, as well as the lack of organization that had plagued previous disputes, was the major stimulus that led cattlemen to meet in Emporia and form the new association.\textsuperscript{17}

Although KLA most likely derived from the rate battle that occurred in the state during the late 1890’s, there is some evidence that the association was organized a few years earlier. Not least responsible for confusing the issue are two typescript accounts of the association’s early years that are presently located in KLA files, and a short history that introduced the only annual report ever published by the association in book form. There are also numerous historical accounts in the \textit{Kansas Stockman} to compound the confusion, but all of the latter apparently derived from the two typescript accounts noted above. The typescript histories of the early years seem to have been written during the second decade of the 20th century by men who had either participated in the founding or who had talked to those who had. The memory of George Plumb, KLA’s first secretary, seemed to have played a large part in creating these early accounts.

Contrary to most indications, the earliest accounts note that in May, 1894, over a hundred stockmen gathered in Emporia to initiate KLA. Its primary purpose was to combat the railroads’ attempt to raise rates by switching from the carload system. This date, however, cannot be corroborated by any other evidence.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 12-13, 16-18, 22, 36-37, 54, 251-252, 351-353.

\textsuperscript{17} “Transcript of Hearing Before the Board of Railroad Commissioners,” 1897, pp. 3-12, 46, in KSHS archives; \textit{Fifteenth Repi Bd Rfr Com.}, 1897, pp. 15-17.
Neither the Emporia newspapers for the spring of 1894 nor the papers published in the hometowns of the founders made any reference to this meeting. Nor was there evidence of the particular freight rate dispute referred to. The railroad commissioners did have a lengthy hearing related to reducing rates during May, 1894, but livestock tariffs were a minor consideration and few if any stockmen testified. It seems unlikely that over a hundred cattlemen from across the state could descend upon the small town of Emporia, establish an association, then depart without some notice appearing in one of the local papers, or that this particular freight rate dispute would pass unrecorded in the files or published reports of the board.  

The more likely time for the establishment of KLA was over three years after the date suggested above. Most people of KLA’s vintage would probably welcome becoming three years younger, but an organization may not be so gracious, especially when its golden and silver anniversaries have already been celebrated. But, be that as it may, 1897 is the most probable date for the birth of the first state-wide livestock association in Kansas, although it was probably preceded by a local or county organization that might have originated several years before.

William Allen White’s Emporia Daily Gazette announced the new organization in its August 30, 1897, issue. Crowded between the news that Arthur Brobe, “a boy tramp from Dodge City,” had stolen a pair of shoes, and an advertisement that two-quart hot water bottles could be purchased for 75 cents, was a report that “Stockmen from all parts of the state met at the court house this afternoon and formed a state organization. The principle [sic] object of the organization is to get freight [sic] rates which will be just and equitable. . . .” In its issue the following day the paper listed other objectives of the new association when it reported that

the organization is to protect in every manner possible the interest of dealers and shippers of livestock. It will fight for just and equitable freight rates, use every effort to detect live stock thieves, and prevent the shipping, into the state, of live stock with contagious [sic] diseases.

Some of the impetus for organizing this state organization and the advertisement of the meeting place were provided by a Lyon county cattlemen’s association whose president was George Plumb. This organization, which had recently changed its name

to the Lyon County Live Stock Association, had been in existence for at least a year and may even have had its origin in another group known as the Central Kansas Cattlemen's Association. The latter had been organized in February, 1894, by cattlemen from six Flint Hills counties including Lyon. But the Central Kansas Cattlemen's Association was not the same organization that was mysteriously referred to by the first historians of KLA even though its origin was in 1894. It was initiated to press for stricter quarantine regulations rather than to fight rising freight rates, and it had a completely different set of officers from those who were reported to be the first officers of KLA. 19

George Plumb, however, may have been active in this early association, and then blurred the original dates of the two when he was asked to recount the beginning of KLA over a decade later. Forming local stockmen's groups seemed to be a common practice in Kansas and throughout the West during the last quarter of the 19th century. Many of the associations, though, were crisis-oriented and lapsed into inactivity as soon as the particular difficulty that had encouraged their creation had passed. The Central Kansas Cattlemen's Association may well have met this fate, or it might have become the Lyon county group as was suggested earlier. At any rate, it seems fairly certain that today's KLA was created in 1897 at the instigation of a county association located in the very heart of the Flint Hills. Even if Plumb did begin to work with an organization in 1894, it was not a statewide association—nor did it claim to be—at that time.

Although the exact origin of KLA is debatable, the names of several prominent Kansas stockmen can definitely be associated with the organization's earliest years. James W. Robison of Towanda, sometimes hailed as the proprietor of the "biggest farm in Kansas," was the association's president from the time of its initiation until his death in 1909. This Butler and Sedgwick county stockman was born in Scotland in 1831, and raised in Tazwell county, Illinois. Before migrating to Kansas in 1882, Robison had farmed in Illinois, beginning, as he said later, with a "stumpy forty acres" rented from his father. By the late 1890's, Robison controlled over 10,000 acres of Kansas land, which included 3,000 acres of corn; 700 acres of wheat, oats and sorghum; and 300 acres of alfalfa. Most of the remaining land was used for grazing his 1,800 head of cattle and horses. Much of this land may have been leased rather than owned. His cattle included

19. Emporia Daily Gazette, March 23, 1896, August 20, 26, 1897; Weekly Gazette, February 1, 1894, August 12, 19, 1897.
James W. Robison, Towanda

George Plumb, Emporia

Hiram B. Miller, Osage City

Thomas M. Potter, Peabody

W. J. Tod, Maple Hill

Frank M. Arnold, Ashland

Some early officers and members of the Kansas Livestock Association. Robison was the first president; Miller, vice-president; and Plumb, secretary.
many feeder steers that were marketed after grass and corn fattening. He also marketed about 2,000 head of hogs each year, illustrating the close relationship that often existed between hog and cattle fattening during the 19th century. A labor force of 60 to 75 men was required by Robison’s extensive operation, it was reported, even though a Topeka Daily Capital reporter noted that “Everything on the Robison farm is as handy as a pocket in a shirt.” By 1901, Robison’s holdings were reported to have increased to over 16,000 acres.

Robison was also active in several other promotional organizations in addition to KLA. At various times he was president of the Kansas Improved Stock Breeders’ Association, vice-president of the State Horticultural Society, president of the State Bank of El Dorado, and served a two-year term on the Kansas Board of Railroad Commissioners. Robison’s fame also reached far beyond the borders of the state. His obituary in the El Dorado Republican, July 21, 1909, noted that he had acquired international fame as a “breeder, importer and handler of the big black handsome Percheron horses.” The registered horse business was continued on Robison’s famous Whitewater Falls Stock Farm by one of his sons long after his death. Purebred Shorthorn breeding stock was also added in later years, but the death of the son, the efficiency of the gasoline engine, and possibly the depression forced liquidation of the Percherons in 1937.20

George Plumb, brother of U. S. Sen. Preston Plumb, was probably the most important early member of KLA, serving as its secretary during the first 16 years of its existence. He and his parents had migrated from Ohio during the spring of 1857 to a Kansas prairie site that was destined to become Emporia. The Plumb family were reported to have built the first wooden shanty on the townsite. Plumb served with several Kansas cavalry units during the Civil War, spending much of his service time in the West, before he began extensive sheep and cattle raising in the Emporia area. Plumb was also a member of the Kansas legislature from 1905 to 1907, and chairman of the 1911 Board of Railroad Commissioners that organized the Kansas Public Utilities Commission.21

Robison and Plumb appear to have been the most active members of KLA during the early period, and often seemed to

comprise the whole organization, but they were not the only prominent stockmen involved with the new association. H. B. Miller of Osage City, was the first vice-president and W. P. Martin of Cottonwood Falls, the first treasurer. Thomas M. Potter, large rancher and cattle feeder from the Peabody area, was also a charter member. Potter accumulated a long list of accomplishments in addition to his participation in KLA before his death in 1929, including membership in the state legislature, a gubernatorial candidacy, the presidency of the State Board of Agriculture, and membership on the University of Kansas Board of Regents. A small reward for the latter obligation was his becoming the eponym of Potter’s lake on the campus of the university. Jacob Heath, M. M. Sherman, Frank Arnold, George Donaldson, W. J. Tod, the prominent Hereford breeder from Maple Hill, and Melville C. Campbell, were also among those noted for their early efforts.

Campbell was especially well-known for his long service in KLA and more generally as a Kansas rancher and businessman. He had begun his cattle interests by trailing herds north from Texas during the 1880’s before settling more permanently on a ranch in southwestern Kansas in 1891. Later he became an active businessman in Wichita, first as a commission man during the early years of the stockyards company, then as a banker. Campbell had a good deal of experience with livestock associations before KLA was ever conceived. During the 1880’s he had been a member of the Cherokee Strip Live Stock Association, the Western Kansas Cattle Growers’ Association, and the group that eventually became the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association. He served on the board of directors of the latter organization for many years. The KLA executive board also benefited from Campbell’s wide experience from its beginning until a few years before his death in 1932. During the 1890’s when KLA was organized, Campbell was busy buying, or “blocking-up” as it was called, some of the public and private land in Clark county that he and other stockmen in the area had been using. The ranch—which was operated for several years in partnership with his son-in-law, Jesse Harper, former coach and athletic director at Notre Dame during the Rockne era—included over 20,000 acres by the 1950’s.22

KLA, then, was organized during the 1890’s with a few promi-

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nent stockmen providing the impetus. But it was not the first significant stock association in the state. Besides the organizations in the Flint Hills area previously mentioned, probably dozens of livestock organizations preceded it, but most of these earlier groups were of local significance or were devoted to a single type or breed of stock. The Clark County Cattlemen’s Protective Association would exemplify one of the local organizations, while the Kansas Shorthorn Breeders’ Association was typical of the groups concerned with specific breeds. If one is concerned with the oldest association in the state with continuous existence, the local association of Greenwood county should rank high in consideration. This Flint Hills group was organized well before KLA and still exists today.

At least two of these earlier organizations, however, gained more than local significance. During a three-day meeting in Dodge City during April, 1883, ranchers in the area initiated the Western Kansas Cattle Growers’ Association. The *Ford County Globe* published a full-page supplement to its April 17, 1883, issue devoted exclusively to a day-by-day account of the meeting. Concern for their mutual protection against thieves, prairie fires, diseases, and the use of the range land by “outsiders” prompted the organization. Cattlemen were also interested in a more “systemized” use of the “crowded range.” The reasons for establishing this organization were typical of those that led to the formation of many stock associations throughout the West. One resolution, however, may have been not only unique but also contradictory to the modern myth surrounding the cowboy. Apparently without notable dissent the association adopted a resolution that banned the carrying of firearms during roundups.

Another influential organization that preceded KLA was the Kansas Improved Stock Breeders’ Association. More promotional than protective in nature, this association was formed in 1891 by consolidating older organizations that had been established at various times during the 1880’s: the Kansas Sheep Breeders’ and Wool Growers’ Association (1881), the Shorthorn Breeders’ Association (1881), the Kansas Trotting Horse Breeders’ Association (1885), the Kansas State Dairy Association (1888), and the Kansas Swine Breeders’ Association (1889). Accounts of the Improved Breeders’ Association’s annual meetings in Topeka indicated that the organization was most interested in educating its membership to the more advanced techniques of livestock production. The

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meetings were, according to the *Kansas Farmer*, January 2, 1895, "The birth places of thousands of useful ideas and the grave yards of many fallacies."

As the name of the organization suggests, breeding-up—or the elimination of the "scrub," "plug," and "runt"—was also of prime importance. The necessity of improving breeds was stressed in several papers at each meeting, and on one occasion even the stockmen’s personal character was cited as a factor in stock improvement. "It takes a thoroughbred man," the paper noted, "to make a good breeder. He needs to improve himself in order to succeed." Many a breeder must have been able to "improve himself," as T. A. Hubbard waxed eloquently about the contributions of upbred stock at one annual meeting. He claimed that improved stock was the "cornerstone" of Kansas wealth, and that "you, noble men, Improved Stock Breeders, have done more to build up Kansas and her wonderful resources than any other equal number of men that walk up and down the face of the earth. You are noble missionaries in a grand cause." This group of stockmen was interested in all types of livestock, but the emphasis seemed to be on hogs. This, in turn, made the association’s appeal and membership more in line with the activities of eastern Kansas than any other section of the state.

All these stock organizations predated KLA, but, with the possible exception of the local group in Lyon county mentioned above, there seems to be no connection between the older groups and the new KLA. The interest of the new organization was almost exclusively directed toward organizing resistance to higher freight charges by the railroads. Newspaper coverage of the first KLA meeting noted that the group would be concerned with reducing stock theft and the spread of disease, as well as any other issue that might affect the stock industry, but most of its activities for over a decade after its creation failed to move much beyond the freight-rate dispute.

The state’s cattlemen stopped or reduced several increases in transportation charges during the 1890’s, both before and after KLA became their intermediary. George Plumb, in fact, claimed later that success in preventing rate increases saved livestock shippers $300,000 to $400,000 a year for many years. But it was a continuous struggle. A short notice in the Emporia *Gazette*, May 16, 1898, relating to the second meeting of the young KLA.

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implied that the organization was in dire need of enhanced financial resources for its continuing battle with the lines. A report that KLA officers “were instructed to look after the injunction cases now pending” suggests that the railroads were not always following the dictates of the Board of Railroad Commissioners and that the conflict had moved into the courts. The railroads’ use of federal and state courts to protect their rate schedules eventually encouraged the 1899 state legislature to create a court of visitation to replace the old Board of Railroad Commissioners. While no record was discovered to indicate the stockmen’s view of the new court, the implication that the court was a stronger regulatory agency than the board should have put the stockmen squarely on the court’s side. But the new court of visitation, unfortunately, proved to be no more effective in regulating the railroads than the Board of Commissioners had been. Eventually it was declared unconstitutional.

The 1899 meeting of KLA, the first in more than a year, was likewise devoted almost exclusively to plans for raising money for the continuing fight on rates. The railroads had again initiated new schedules, which were, according to the cattlemen, “from 40 to 50 per cent higher than the old rates” in many localities. KLA officers appointed a committee to encourage the formation of associations in every county of the state with the expressed purpose of raising money for the renewed fight, but little came of these efforts by KLA, nor did the lines succeed in raising livestock tariffs as much as they wanted.26

Thus began a struggle between Kansas cattlemen and railroads that continued for a decade after the second World War. Stockmen were unable to preserve the carload method of charging for livestock freight beyond the early 1900’s, but they were able to keep the few rate increases at a reasonable level. This was true, however, only until the government took over the lines during World War I. Then livestock rates rose sharply, and continued to do so during the 1920’s. Motor trucks were destined to figure prominently in, if not actually to eliminate, most of the strife between stockmen and railway companies.

In the few years of its existence during the 19th century KLA made a notable beginning in its journey toward becoming the most effective stockmen’s lobby in the state, although it was relatively weak for the first decade and a half of its existence. Meetings were infrequent, membership small, and united action difficult. Then, just before the outbreak of the first World War,
KLA was reorganized and, as a result, became much stronger. Its activities were broadened and membership was increased, but most significant in enhancing KLA’s influence was the designation of Joseph H. Mercer as permanent, full-time executive secretary. Mercer served in this capacity for over two decades and was probably the major reason that KLA became one of the most influential stock associations in the nation during and after the first World War.

The early years when KLA was struggling for existence, however, had apparently taught cattlemen at least one valuable lesson. Individualistic, self-help methods of redressing grievances—in view of the increasingly complex economic situation—were largely impotent. Only through organization, cooperation, and collective efforts were the numbers of relatively small unit producers able to make their voice heard. Yet many of the early members of the association were reluctant to give up their concept of the cattlemen as a “rugged individualist,” a person wholly capable of caring for himself.

A popular story recorded by the author of one of the typescript histories mentioned above, typified the view that many had of the cattlemen in general, and the founders of KLA in particular. “In the fall of ’93,” the author wrote,

in one of the little crossroad towns of Western Kansas many of the hardest were invoicing to see what help they would have to get through the winter. Aid was necessary and they were getting ready to send out the S.O.S. call. One of their number, one of the poorest, refused to join, saying that he would get along somehow. The town mayor, knowing his condition, tried to argue with him telling him that he would starve unless he received some help. The old man replied that he would get along, he had a cow. “But you have no feed for your cow, so that will not help you, Jim,” protested the mayor. “Oh, she’ll get along,” said Jim, “she sucks herself.” 27

The writer went on to say that “Jim was a stockman. He was resourceful, all he wished was to be let alone. His reply typifies the spirit always present among stockmen.” In reality, this incident hardly characterized KLA. It, as well as the other associations in the country, were rather the antithesis of individualistic self-help, except in the broad sense that a group of people who had a community of interests cooperated to promote a single industry. A number of Kansas stockmen were only too willing to cooperate, and to turn to state and federal agencies for help in protecting and promoting the interests of their own industry. Unfortunately, the advancement of the wishes of some stockmen may have been harmful to the interests of their neighbors, at least

in the case of KLA’s attempt to preserve the carload system of freight charges. Small cattlemen may have suffered most, as the evidence for the first decade of KLA’s existence seems to indicate that it was not representative of all stockmen in the state, but rather the organ of a few relatively large operators. It was also apparent that the driving force of the early KLA was more specifically the well-established stockmen from the Flint Hills. The practice in the Flint Hills of grass-fattening transient cattle, and thus a greater dependence upon the railroads for in and out shipments, probably accounts for this relationship in large part.

Thus developments during the 19th century laid the foundation for the Kansas beef industry of the future. Production had stabilized, and, to some extent, specialized into calf production, partial or full maturing of stock, or the raising of purebred breeding animals. The necessary links between grasslands in Kansas and urban tables had been provided by the development and movement westward of railroads, stockyards, and packers. Sometimes these big business middlemen seemed omnipotent to the individual producers, but through organizations like KLA stockmen acquired the power to force compliance with some of their demands. By the late 1890’s Kansas beef producers, as well as those throughout most of the West, were fairly well prepared for the 20th century, and into this new era they carried few regrets, much optimism, and a little better understanding of an increasingly complex economic system.