Wheat in Kansas
SPECIAL ISSUE

The Culture of Wheat in Kansas

INTRODUCTION

by Homer E. Socolofsky

Wheat—Kansas! Kansas—Wheat! That is the twentieth-century image of agriculture in Kansas, even though beef cattle have produced more income for the state's farmers almost every year. For beef cattle, several other states have greater production; during most twentieth-century years, however, Kansas was the nation's leading wheat producer.

Kansas environment is not ideal for wheat, as compared with other crops, but it is close enough. Land suitable for cropping is available in Kansas in greater quantity than all other states except Texas. Corn, the Kansas farmer's biggest nineteenth-century crop, was replaced by wheat, which became the primary crop raised in the twentieth century. An adjustment in kinds of wheat produced had to be made. Wheat varieties were developed to mature earlier so they could be harvested prior to the dry days of July and August with burning hot sun.

In the first half of the twentieth century, harvest usually was under way by the Fourth of July. Later the spectacle of the annual harvest was almost complete by that national holiday. Masses of men and women and the muscle power of horses and mules were needed to work the harvest in the first half of the century. Itinerant labor in large numbers, from nearby states, bummed rides on incoming freight trains to work in Kansas wheat fields. Temporary state labor offices were staffed to organize this army of laborers and meet the needs of local farmers. The legislature even required the state penitentiary to produce binder

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Harvesting on an early-day Kansas farm.

twine to lower the price that farmers had to pay for this much needed harvest item. Numerous elevators were built along every Kansas railroad to provide a local market in an era when grain was hauled in horse-drawn wagons. Flour mills in Kansas had far greater capacity than needed to meet the demands of local consumers. Mechanization between the World Wars greatly reduced dependence on human or animal muscle—a wheat harvest of shorter duration was carried out by far fewer people. Later, with a self-propelled combine and a larger truck, a farm family could complete the harvest without any outside labor, or it could rely on custom combine crews who followed the harvest from Texas into Canada.

Kansas wheat statistics for the nineteenth century reveal only two years with yields greater than twenty bushels per acre—1862, when only nine thousand acres were harvested, and 1882 for 1.6 million acres. This was an era when varieties for seeding were unsettled. Farmers were still undecided on whether spring habit wheat or winter wheat was best for them. In 1898, at the Manhattan experiment station, Turkey Red winter wheat and a variety of spring wheat were considered best for Kansas. But the former soon took over, and by 1919 Turkey Red accounted for 82.3 percent of the state's crop. In subsequent years most varieties in use in Kansas could trace an inheritance back to various Turkey types, but prior to 1950 per acre yield stayed at or under twenty bushels—indeed, the twenty bushel mark was exceeded only in 1914 when Kansas farmers harvested 172,750,000 bushels on 8,650,000 acres.

Despite drought, dust, and depression, Kansas wheat production increased steadily during the century. The total crop exceeded two hundred million bushels for the first time in 1931 but did not surpass that mark again until 1942 and 1945–1948. The first wheat crop of more than three hundred million bushels came in 1952, averaging twenty-one bushels per acre statewide. By 1958 the Kansas wheat harvest was exceeding two hundred million bushels in most years, and by 1969 it usually topped three hundred million. The four hundred million bushel mark was reached in 1979, and two Kansas wheat harvests in the 1990s produced more than five hundred million bushels. By the late twentieth century Kansas per acre wheat yield generally was above thirty bushels, and in some years the statewide average was above forty bushels per acre.[1] Unfortunately, in most years prices to Kansas farmers have been a disappointment.

About half of the increased yield since mid-century, according to Kansas agronomists, is due to new varieties of wheat introduced to the Kansas farmer. Other advances have come through the use of better machinery for timely soil preparation, sowing, and harvesting; greater use of fertilizer, particularly nitrogen; use of chemical controls, herbicides, fungicides, and insecticides; and in some areas through irrigation. An improved combination of these factors in the future is likely to more than double the wheat that can be produced on an average Kansas acre. The Malthusian fear of running out of food for a growing population of the earth does not appear to be imminent.

Turkey Red hard winter wheat with its high protein content made good bread flour. However, the traditional stone burr mills of the 1870s could not do the job. The more expensive steel roller mills in combination with various other milling techniques were needed to handle this harder wheat. Bakers found that the red color of the grain, even though it was removed from the flour, imparted a slightly bitter flavor to bread made from Turkey wheat. They masked this bitterness with a slight amount of honey or other sweeteners in their finished product.

By the end of the twentieth century about half of all wheat raised in Kansas was sold abroad. The introduction of a high quality hard white winter wheat to Kansas farmers in the late 1990s is expected to rapidly alter the balance between a small production of white and a large production of red wheat that so long has been expected from the Kansas wheat farmer. Kansas will remain the leading wheat producing state, with a type of white wheat that is more eagerly sought on the international market. Moreover, white wheat has all the favorable qualities of red wheat and a miller can produce more flour from a bushel. It should be an interesting feature to watch through the years.

This special issue of *Kansas History* brings together an illustrious group of knowledgeable writers, beginning with Elma L. Bamberg who wrote a memoir many years ago that never was published. "Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread," a chapter from her work, provides a delightful account of wheat harvest time at the turn of the last century and the role played by men and women. Farming wheat, both technologically and culturally, changed greatly in the 1900s and Bamberg shows that from the perspective of southwest Ellis County.

Mark A. Carleton came with his family to Cloud County, Kansas, at the age of ten years. He graduated from Kansas State Agricultural College (KSAC) in 1887 and taught briefly at colleges in Wichita before returning to KSAC and later to the United States Department of Agriculture. Thomas D. Isern, a native of Ellinwood and now a professor of history at North Dakota State University, writes about the distinguished career of Carleton, an early agricultural explorer and a hands-on researcher. "Wheat Explorer the World Over: Mark Carleton of Kansas" outlines Carleton's achievements as an outstanding cereal scientist and his contributions, as much as any farmer or scientist in history, to the adaptation of wheat culture to the Great Plains. His achievements sprang from scientific expertise, personal determination, and visionary thinking. Isern states that Carleton was decades ahead of his contemporaries in his remarkable grasp of regionalism and environmentalism.

Norman Saul, professor of Russian history at the University of Kansas, has long been interested in the history of Russian-born, German-speaking immigrants to Kansas. He also has examined the varied stories about importing Turkey Red hard winter wheat. In "Mill Town Kansas in the Age of Turkey Red," Saul goes one step farther with a focus on the critical forty-year period of changes in the Kansas milling industry, 1880s–1920s. This significant industry has had relatively little study. Using agricultural census records and selected local newspapers, Saul illustrates that Kansas was first a flour milling state and later became the wheat state.

Many travelers when crossing Kansas became aware of the prominence of country elevators. In "The Legacy of Country Grain Elevators: A Photo Essay," Barbara and Bruce Selyem offer a beautiful glimpse at one of the Plains' most striking visual images. Black and white photographs are complimented by brief remarks reflecting on the importance of the elevator to its rural community. "On a grand scale, it was the community's domestic and international connection," writes Barbara Selyem. "But to the local farmers, who gathered there for morning coffee, it was a place to interact with friends, tell stories and spin yarns, share laughter, and understand tears."

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[1] *See* E. G. Heyne, "The Development of Wheat in Kansas," in *The Rise of the Wheat State: A History of Kansas Agriculture, 1861–1986*, ed. George Ham and Robin Higham (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 1987), 41–56.

Agricultural historians Pamela Riney-Kehrberg and R. Douglas Hurt, both of Iowa State University, offer articles that concentrate on southwestern Kansas. Riney-Kehrberg's "Women in Wheat Country" makes use of census data, governmental studies, and letters and diaries to explore the lives of rural Kansas women. In southwestern wheat country, women lived very differently from their peers in the well-watered, agriculturally diversified middle west. They had fewer children, produced almost no eggs and butter for market, and lived at far greater distance from neighbors, family, and friends. It is clear, according to Riney-Kehrberg, that factors such as geography and crop mix significantly influenced women's lives.

R. Douglas Hurt, a native of Ellis and currently president of the Agricultural History Society, discusses the effects of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) on southwestern Kansas wheat farmers of the 1930s. The AAA provided payments to enable farmers to reduce wheat acreage and help eliminate the surplus, which it hoped would lead to commodity price increases. Since farmers could not afford to do otherwise, nearly all Kansas farmers participated and depended on AAA payments. Farmers could thus remain on the land. But the program had its handicaps, which encouraged retention of crop production on land not suited for wheat. Thus, demand for wheat lands was high due to payments based on size of the wheat enterprise. Large-scale producers were favored over "family farmers."

In "The Wheat Empire of R. H. Garvey, 1930–1959," Craig Miner, Garvey distinguished professor of history at Wichita State University, explores the corporate culture of wheat. Garvey had a large entrepreneurial empire, and wheat was one significant facet. The Garvey story is a path for analyzing a twentieth-century trend in farming and many other businesses toward diversified yet integrated enterprises, applying many economies of scale, cross-business lessons, and deep national and international information and analysis to what had been an isolated, tradition-bound, family-based farming activity. Using business records and numerous letters, Miner shows how the entrepreneur operated and how he changed the regional wheat business for better or worse.

Bonnie Lynn-Sherow, an agricultural and environmental historian at Kansas State University, is a native of Canada. In "Beyond *Winter Wheat*: The USDA Extension Service and Kansas Wheat Production in the Twentieth Century," she examines one of the influences on the wheat culture of the Plains. In using James Malin's *Winter Wheat* and the advice given to farmers by the extension service since 1914, Lynn-Sherow concludes that the extension service has promoted a particular view of agriculture that has contributed to many modern agricultural practices. These have enabled some to survive as farmers but created many dire consequences for other rural Kansans.

Thomas Fox Averill, professor of English and literature at Washburn University, brings his skills as a writer of Kansas literature and observer of Kansas culture to harvesting in "Kansas Wheat Harvest." Observations are based on a fly-over one June across central and western Kansas during a particularly big harvest year, and of living during one harvest in the middle of a wheat field in Douglas County. Averill also reflects on the meaning of the annual harvest and how wheat "is storied in Kansas literature, as well as in Kansas soil." The writings of Edna Walker Chandler, Mela Meisner Lindsay, John Ise, William Stafford, Truman Capote, and others are discussed as they impact the wheat culture.

When asked to write for this special issue, the contributers readily agreed, and they came through with excellent material. In addition, the Kansas State Historical Society has used several other programs in an attempt to make the year 2000 one of emphasis on WHEAT IN KANSAS! The Kansas Museum of History mounted an outstanding special exhibit entitled "Wheat People: Celebrating Kansas Harvest," and outside the museum's main entrance, just across the sidewalk, are short rows of many wheat varieties, sown in the fall of 1999 to be ready for harvesting this summer. In order, these twenty-six plots show Turkey Red winter wheat from the 1870s and many newer varieties all the way to a new white winter variety released to farmers in 1998. Together, these and other programs and publications equal a substantial contribution that enhances our understanding of this most important twentieth-century Kansas product.