WHO CAN PREDICT THE FUTURE?: CENTRAL KANSAS AND THE BOOM OF 1887

A Thesis by

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The following faculty have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommended that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in History.

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ABSTRACT

Kansas experienced a period of rapid construction in the late 1880’s that marked both the urban and rural environments. The growth was the result of an unparalleled atmosphere of opportunity brought about by a collusion of easy credit, liberal land policy, and a shared vision of progress. While many of these 19th century claims seem ludicrous today, they seemed very real at the time. This paper studies the boom in the central part of Kansas and its lasting effects on the politics, built environment, and culture of the state. The end of the boom brought about a changed political and economic landscape that reflected lessons learned in the boom years.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. “NEVER WERE MEN MORE IN EARNEST”</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. “THE TRAIN OF PROGRESS”</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE WORKSHOP AND THE GRANARY</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. “THE GLITTERING FABRIC OF CREDIT”</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. BUY A CORNER LOT TODAY</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. “ONE BY ONE THE ROBINS SING”</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I.
INTRODUCTION

In early 1887 came the college craze. Every town in central Kansas, it seemed, needed a college if it were to survive. Wichita’s 40,000 people had eight august institutions to serve their progeny, and if a town were to keep up, they had to stay as “up-to-date” as Wichita.¹

McPherson, Newton, Lindsborg, Salina and Sterling, among others, all made their plays for their own colleges. The plans were all relatively simple: acquire a plot of land on the outskirts of town, preferably 160 acres, paying as little as possible – usually $100 an acre – for the land; deed 10 of those acres to the college; subdivide the other 150 lots, and sell them for $250 a piece; use the profits to build the college; get a denomination – any church – to pay for half the expense of building the college; and reap anything else as clear gain. So were founded McPherson College, Bethel College, Bethany College, 

¹ Many of Wichita’s supposed eight colleges never came to fruition, but at one point there were that many on paper. The booster publication of the time, the Wichita Journal of Commerce, listed Garfield College, Wichita University, Fairmount College, Judson University, John Bright College, All Hallows College, Diocesan University, and an unnamed Catholic college. See the Wichita Journal of Commerce, (Wichita: Wichita Board of Trade, Eagle Publishing House, 1887), 93.
Kansas Wesleyan, and Cooper Memorial College (later Sterling College). Each college, representing a separate denomination - Church of the Brethren, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian, respectively - was built for the same reason: to cash in on a part of central Kansas' economic wild upswing, the "boom."²

Carl Becker, in an oft-quoted 1910 essay on Kansas, characterized the state's history as "a succession of reverses and disasters," which created a unique regional character that marked the Kansan as someone ideologically distinct.³ Becker argued that Kansans have, in a turn on the popular phrase, built their state by a process of moving five steps forward and three back. The state's nineteenth century boom and bust economic history resulted from exuberance over two disparate elements: the prospects

² For a description of McPherson College's founding, see E.L. Craik, History of the Church of the Brethren in Kansas, (McPherson, KS: by the author, 1922), 65-83. For the story of Bethel College, see David Haury, Prairie People: A History of the Western District Conference, (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1981), 32-33. For the history of Bethany, see Frank Blackmar, ed., Kansas: a Cyclopedia of state history, embracing events, institutions, industries, counties, cities, towns, prominent persons, etc., (Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912), 176-177. For Kansas Wesleyan, see ibid., 62. For Cooper Memorial College, see ibid., 443-444.

of agricultural bounty and the possibility of filling the prairie sky with towering urban buildings and factory smokestacks. Driven particularly by irregular patterns of rainfall and weather, the economic fortunes of the state swung in a seemingly bipolar manner from one extreme to the other over several times in the nineteenth century. Three major boom and bust cycles are easily identified. The first boom, in the late 1860’s, was based largely in the eastern part of the state because of the large amount of inexpensive, well-watered land, largely on the Missouri and Kansas rivers. The second, in the late 1870’s, brought immigration to the rest of the state, largely in the form of foreign immigrants – Mennonites, Volga Germans, and other ethnic groups. This second 1870s boom also was tied to the Texas cattle trade. The third, in the late 1880’s, brought significant numbers of both native-born and foreign immigrants to the entire state.⁴

No “boom” in the state’s history was more far-reaching and all-consuming than that of the latter 1880’s. Cresting in 1887, the boom marked every part of the state in some way. An amazing build-up of confidence in the state, driven by railroad construction, industry, civic

⁴ Craig Miner, West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865-1890 (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1986).
improvements, and simple boomer rhetoric culminated in an atmosphere of high times and instant wealth that have never been seen again in the state. This atmosphere of high times and instant wealth gradually worked its way into a collective delusion in which huge figures flew like paper in the wind. Every moment, it seemed, the boom got bigger, until the time for sober reflection on the nature of speculation came. The following crash tempered and chastened the state, changing forever the character of those who lived through it.

As some have correctly noted, the boom in Kansas can be considered something of a microcosm of the national atmosphere and business cycle that led to the Panic of 1893 and the subsequent depression. But by far the upswing was more pronounced in Kansas. For instance, Abilene, then as now a small town, was surprised when in the early part of 1887 it drew national attention as a parcel of real estate adjoining the city sold for more than $140,000. The crash was also more spectacular, as several communities saw

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5 Miner, *West of Wichita*, 172. See also James Malin, "The Kinsley Boom of the Late Eighties," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 4 no. 1 and 2 (1935). Malin’s study is quite in-depth, and illustrates well the rhetoric that boomers used in a specific locale. Malin’s study is quite localized, however.

6 *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 21, 1887.
newly-built houses sell for a fraction of their initial cost and be carted away to nearby farms.\textsuperscript{7}

Although the boom was a common experience throughout the state, the individual experience of each town or city was quite different. While railroads and town lots were important in some communities, others boomed potential industry or agricultural enterprise. While some towns may have stressed internal improvements, such as street cars, waterworks, civic buildings and infrastructure, others chased cultural improvements – education, opera houses and the like. The experience of the boom was far from universal, as some won fortunes and some ineffably lost them.

Those who participated in the boom came from varying walks of life, and all had different perceptions, motives, and ideas about the boom. Indeed, the personalities in each town or locality could be key. A single person might get a “boom” going, starting a chain of wealth transfer that would draw more and more in until the place seemed incredibly alive with possibility. Such individual boomers came from different walks of life, but most tended to be immigrants from the eastern portion of the country,

\textsuperscript{7} McPherson Daily Republican, May 10, 1949.
adventurers of the spirit, those who gravitate towards the enigmatic places and times, hoping to win an advantage – the charismatic vagabonds and thrill seekers. Many were Civil War veterans, looking to find a new, urban life on the seemingly blank prairies. Money came from Eastern capitalists looking for quick and painless investment returns in real estate after the railroad investment debacles of the 1870s. Newspaper editors, using the opportunity to hone their literary skills and increase their circulations with flowing prose were perhaps the boom’s most visible catalysts. All worked together to create, maintain, and eventually bust the boom.

The boom was based on the capability of both older immigrant Kansans and recent immigrants to dream of and engage in a diverse cadre of activities ranging from large-scale industrial development to the creation of humanistic institutions and to the craftsman-like laying of ornate brick buildings. Railroads sprouted in every direction, town lots gained value in a surreal fashion and every new edition of the local weekly newspaper held some new enterprise guaranteed to make today’s boom seem like child’s play, in virtually every small town across the state. While many of these enterprises never left the minds and papers of a few ambitious dreamers, a number did
survive the later crash and left an indelible imprint on the people and the land. Colleges, ornate buildings and street grids all attest to the exuberance and endurance of boomers’ dreams.

To a great degree, Kansas and Kansans in the late 1880’s came across as a single, unstoppable entity. Everyone, it seemed, tried to perpetuate an image of invicibility. Though the state’s geography, climate and population varied widely, many spoke as though Kansas were something set apart, a unique place that by natural virtue would become not only the geographic center of the nation but an industrial and political powerhouse whose possibilities were unmatched. Such confidence gradually built itself beyond all reasonable speculation to become a delusional, all-consuming bonfire of borrowing and spending. In the heady summer of 1887, the boom exuded a wild atmosphere of opportunity, one that could produce men of great paper wealth virtually overnight and then, inexplicably, leave them destitute a few months later.

The boom itself has received scant scholarly attention. The scholarly tendency has been to skirt the issue. Paul Gates has studied land policy in *Fifty Million Acres*. Others have studied rhetoric, specific boomer enterprises, architecture and the aftermath. Little has
been done to research and illustrate the atmosphere and collective mental climate of the boom. The closest to that approach have focused specifically on the promotional efforts and rhetoric of boosters, as has David Emmons in Garden in the Grasslands, and most recently, David Wrobel, whose work Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West (2002), links both booster efforts and pioneer recollections to the creation of a significant part of the American past. James Shortridge, in Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas (2004), takes a geographical approach to deciphering the urban scape of Kansas, emphasizing dividing points in urban histories and contrasting different municipal boosters’ preference for certain amenities and the strategies of railroads versus town promoters, whose fortunes swayed variously. Shortridge, though, favors a very linear progression of Kansas’ urban past, virtually ignoring the boom of the 1880’s.  

It is important to realize that although the boom was a trend that affected not only the major metropolises of the area but also was a statewide, it was in many ways a

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mainly regional phenomenon. Much of the boom in western Kansas has been studied in reasonable depth, primarily through Craig Miner’s *West of Wichita*, though other literature is scant. Miner’s interpretation of the development of western Kansas emphasizes the cyclical nature of development, with several booms happening – the first one, in the 1870s, occurring as Volga Germans, Swedish immigrants, and other culturally specific, often communal peoples were recruited by the Santa Fe and other railroads to buy and homestead lands in western Kansas. Such a “boom” in settlement was something far different from the boom of the 1880’s, which largely drew immigrants from eastern states to settle on cheap Kansas land with promise of urban civilization.

Previous booms approached their intellectual purpose differently, drawing foreigners from distant lands with promise of religious freedom, tolerance and liberty. The boom of the 1880’s emphasized financial gain, cosmopolitanism and social promise. Such a pattern of the “boom” – driven by financial and social motives, discarding the moralistic undertones of religious colonization – made for far different effects in different areas. It also
meant that areas that had been previously settled could have a rebirth of their boom.⁹

Such a dichotomy meant that the central part of the state, an area within 50 miles east or west of the sixth principal meridian - the cities and towns of Salina, McPherson, Newton, Hutchinson, Marion, and Sterling, among others - boomed in a more spectacular and enduring fashion than the rest of the state. With the vast majority of land put into tillage only ten to fifteen years before, the allure of the frontier without the privations attracted much more speculative fervor to the area than the comparatively staid east and the youthful Western portions of the state.

Mortgage indebtedness, a key factor in determining how the boom affected an area, was heavy in central Kansas. In Glenn Miller’s words,

Throughout the decade the central region surpassed the eastern in all three categories of farm mortgage indebtedness. Moreover, the growth in the debt of central Kansas was more consistent than that of the east, and all three series under consideration reached their maximums in 1886. More mortgages were made and

⁹ Miner, West of Wichita, 203-211. Wichita’s boom has been studied in more depth than any other city in Kansas, owing largely to its spectacular rise in real estate value and rapid building. For resources on the Wichita boom, see Craig Miner, Wichita, The Magic City (Wichita: Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Society, 1988) and Earl Van Meter Long, “The Wichita Real Estate Boom” (Master’s thesis, Wichita State University, 1931).
more money loaned with farm land as security in the middle of the state than in either of the other regions... the central region had in each year except 1887 and 1888 a larger absolute number of acres placed under mortgage than did the western region. Over the decade as a whole the total number of acres mortgaged and the total amount loaned on farms in central Kansas far exceeded the combined totals of the two other regions.¹⁰

Studying this central part of the state illustrates the wide variety of boomer activities and shows just how fast and illusory, yet real the boom could be. The central part of the state was at a critical point of development in 1887. Its transportation infrastructure was more than rudimentary, yet it also had vast tracts of inexpensive or homestead land available. Towns and cities had begun to emerge, but dominance was far from clear. The promise of the frontier held, but the possibility of opulence was very real. Such a status created a psychological impulse that was hard to resist – unrestrained and unpredictable at the same time.

CHAPTER II.

“NEVER WERE MEN MORE IN EARNEST”

No boom comes without the right conditions. The Kansas boom of the late ‘80s was a product of a concerted effort by financiers, government, and indeed the populace of the United States to develop not only Kansas, but the Great Plains region as a whole. Taken together, these people often receive the term “booster,” when indeed each of their motives for promotion of the Plains region differed greatly.

The substantive transformation of the image of the Great Plains from a barren wasteland to an agricultural paradise was a result of concerted efforts among all involved to rearrange the cultural scheme of the Plains and of the country. To create the boom, fundamental changes were necessary in the financial structures of the country, the popular view of the Plains, and in the operation of the

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11 A statement of terminology is in order here. The pressure for settlement of Oklahoma, a concurrent event, entered into the lexicon a new term for those wanting to settle the area. Oklahoma advocates were generally termed “boomers,” and the connotations of that term have taken a decidedly negative turn in modern scholarly work. However, the newspaper editors of the time used the term “boomer” to indicate someone whom we would today call a “booster,” and as such I have used the term “boomer” as they termed it at the time. Indeed, over time, the two terms have proved to be interchangeable, yet Great Plains studies often compartmentalize the terms.
Federal Government. By the realignment and reform of each of these entities, the Plains seemingly overnight became a place of unlimited opportunity, easy money, and cosmopolitanism. The result was a rush to this new perceived paradise.

The financial relationship of the Northeast and the West is vital to understanding what happened in Kansas in the late ‘80s. Flush with post-Civil War and industrial capital, eastern money-lenders sought to invest in western lands, and the dispersal of that capital drove much of the boom. In the 1870s, before the construction of railroads in Texas, a substantial trade in longhorn cattle drove many Kansas towns to seemingly rise from nowhere. Using relatively new methods of lending – primarily the real estate and chattel mortgage – eastern lenders channeled the pent-up capital of the east to build up the West in the early 1870’s. After a reversal of favorable weather conditions and fortunes in the late 1870’s, western mortgages were considered a suspect investment. But with the return of wet weather and subsequent high crop yields and a world situation that brought prices up in the early 1880’s, western mortgages lost their stigma of risk – but still returned the high interest rates that made them very attractive.
One of these investors, Charles Hawkes, came from a solid New England background, having begun in the loan business in the 1850’s. Hawkes sought investments for a number of constituents, most notably Shaker colonies and societies in New York and New England. Hawkes’ actions as a broker of eastern capital were typical of many of his contemporaries – acting as a go-between for easterners expecting a safe return on their accumulated capital. By the end of the 1880s, Hawkes did a substantial business in Kansas – with a lower return – with the Shakers and others.12

Both immigrants and migrants, drawn by the lure of inexpensive or even free land, flocked to a place that promised them a potentially better life, whether or not that promise was real. That general population of arrivals did not come with large amounts of capital. Generally of a working class background, the eastern migrant or foreign immigrant population required substantial amounts of borrowed capital to improve the lands for agricultural use. Coupled with attractive financial returns for Eastern investors, a lax regulatory environment, and substantial

reserves of capital, the pattern was set for rampant speculation, which unchecked led to the “boom.”

As early as 1884, people had realized the potential for renewed speculation in the future of Kansas. Increased rainfall in 1883 and 1884 created bumper crops in the state. Tales of agricultural bounty, paired with easily available and inexpensive tracts of land, lured many to the state. One of the key factors in creating the boom was this large supply of inexpensive, or even free land. Paul Gates, the best source on Kansas land policy in the late 19th century, argues that a concerted effort among the federal government and the railroads served to dispose of a huge amount of the public domain – as much as 20 million acres of Kansas land – to private ownership over the course of the Homestead and Timber Culture acts. Combined with railroad lands and other incentives, Gates says, a climate developed in which

Westerners wanted the lands sold, their titles passed, the tracts assessed, and the land developed as rapidly as possible. The railroads felt the constant pressure of tax assessments and other influences, and for this reason they did not wish to retain ownership of land for any very long period of time... Exemption from taxes, combined with the low interest rate the railroads charged for the credit they granted their purchasers – 6 per cent compared with the 9-12 per cent charged by local lenders – placed the purchasers
in a preferred position and weighed considerably in their favor.\footnote{13}

Such financial incentives, brokered by the railroad Land Grant acts, took time to work out. Gates’ study of conflicts over the policies involved in dispersing of the vast public lands indicates that the process was always in a state of flux, and not until most of the public lands were dispersed did it become truly efficient. This attainment of efficiency – corresponding to the time of the Kansas boom – was a stunning achievement in land policy, and one that resonated in the development of the country. It also was the culmination of a shared vision for nature and lands that was as much a cultural product as a natural system.

During the late 1880’s, these policies resulted in a rush to take up the rest of Kansas’ available homestead land, largely in the central and western parts of the state. The northeast part of the state, populated largely during the Free State struggles and shortly after, had seen transfer to private ownership largely completed by the 1880’s. In central and western Kansas, increasing numbers

of people took up lands under the Homestead Act. In 1884, Kansas homestead entries totaled 3547. By 1886, they had skyrocketed to 20,688. In 1886, lands taken under the Homestead Act totaled more than one tenth of the state—some 5.6 million acres. The total of Kansas land claims through either the Timber Culture Acts or the Homestead Act between 1885 and 1887 amounted to more than ten million acres.14

Of course, as Gates has written, "the Homestead Law did not end the auction system or cash sales, as is generally assumed... speculation and land monopolization continued after its adoption as widely perhaps as before…"15 Railroad sales, Morrill Land grant sales, and outright sales from various sources continued to drive the patterns of settlement and speculation in Kansas. Still, cash sales didn’t mean that land was necessarily expensive. Forced to compete with the relatively inexpensive railroad lands and near-free homesteads, sellers often found that they could not sell unimproved land for much above the railroad’s


prices. There was simply too much available. Tracts sold for as little as 50 cents an acre, and quite often returns of sixfold the initial investment were possible in just a few years, once the local supply of cheap land was exhausted and improvements were made. Such a process made lending an almost sure bet:

A short period was sufficient to test the western loan business, the result proving that money placed on farms was both beneficial to the borrower and a perfectly safe investment to the lender... For years, say up to 1885, the success of the mortgage-loan business was marvelous. Seldom did the lender lose a dollar. The reason was plain: land increased in value regularly every year, and loans, although they may have been excessive at the time they were made, were given a safe margin by the increase in the value of the security.¹⁶

Inexpensive lands and easy credit created their own momentum for the boom. But, the fever-pitch climate of the boom was fired by the promotional efforts of those with an economic stake in the development of the Great Plains region in general. These stakeholders—railroad companies, eastern lenders with profits to reap, and town boosters, among others—used the availability of cheap or even free land to create a psychological phenomenon of limitless possibility. The promise of free or almost-free

land made it seem that there was a blank canvas to paint on – and it was vast.

David Emmons has summarized the efforts of railroads, state and local governments, and other Plains stakeholders to transform what had formerly been called the “Great American Desert” into an agricultural paradise. Particularly, boosters of the Plains Region attempted to create an image of unlimited bounty that would reward anyone who happened to be lucky enough to plant their feet – and seeds – on the Plains. Promises of an easy living and ideal climates were commonplace. “Rain follows the plow” became the buzzword among promoters. The idea that settlement created more rain, beckoning better yields and a more enjoyable climate, was easy to sell. It fed the hopes of those who had little money and were ready to make a quick buck – and as the logic went, all they had to do was open up the ground. Indeed, Emmons says, the “frontier, to an overwhelming degree, was founded on theories of increased rainfall.” And, as Emmons says, “promotion became its own reward.”

Newspaper editors were one key source of this promotion. Many editors, including William Allen White,

17 David Emmons, Garden in the Grasslands (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1971), 161-162. Wrobel’s Promised Lands works with similar themes.
Noble Prentiss, Eugene Ware, Ed Howe, Marshall Murdock, J.L. Bristow, and other political and literary lights honed their skills on Kansas newspapers during the boom. Murdock, whose Wichita Eagle kept up a constant din of rhetoric during the boom, used his paper consistently to champion the boomer cause and even helped the Wichita Board of Trade with their flamingly brilliant editions. Murdock, born in Virginia in 1837, came to Kansas with his abolitionist father during the Free State struggles. He later adventured in the Colorado gold rush, witnessed Quantrill’s raid and was a member of the Osage and Lyon county militias during the Civil War before settling in Wichita in 1872 to start the Eagle. Murdock’s inventive, literary boom articles set the tone for many editors of the state, and few could match his flourish. In describing the history of Wichita, Murdock compared founders “Buffalo” Bill Matthewson and “Dutch” Bill Greiffenstein to Romulus and Remus, and validated their “hard” struggle to build a civilization out of the prairie dog and rattlesnake country thus:

Up to twenty years ago, no rainfall had been known sufficient to render the country tillable... [but] as if the God of Battles, who had preserved them through the tumultuous perils of war, would now reward them for
their patriotic devotion, a climatic change, almost miraculous, immediately began.¹⁸

Soon, Wichita’s Arkansas valley was “unsurpassed in native fertility only by the famous valley of the Nile.” Murdock’s rhetoric might seem inflated, but it was commonplace in boomer literature, reflecting a shared vision for the Plains.¹⁹

Largely, the process of the Kansas boom – and much of Great Plains settlement – was driven by this shared 19th century ideal of progress. That progress sought to complete the transformation of the country’s economy from an agricultural economy to an industrial one. Such progress, says William Cronon, was based on the distinctly different spheres of rural and metropolitan areas, each with their own distinct identities and roles in society. In his work *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, Cronon says:

In the speculator’s dreams lay the urban promise--and the urban imperative--of frontier settlement and investment. The search for the great western cities of the future drove nearly all nineteenth-century townsite speculation, and the accompanying rhetoric always inclined toward enthusiastic exaggeration and self-interested promotion. But not all was fantasy… Taken as a group, the boosters offered a surprisingly coherent model of urban and regional growth. Unlike (Frederick Jackson) Turner, they saw the engine of


¹⁹ Ibid.
western development in the symbiotic relationship between cities and their surrounding countrysides. So powerful was their vision that it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. When the Potawatomis and the U.S. commissioners faced each other at Chicago in 1833, they expressed their cultural differences in the way they saw the landscape that stretched before them in the light of the setting sun. One saw the apparition of a great city upon it, while the other did not. To understand how so many nineteenth-century Americans came to share that urban vision is to discover much about their dreams for themselves and the Great West.\textsuperscript{20}

Inherent in such discussions of the future of urban civilizations and the “destiny” of the Great West, as Chicago boomers called it, were underlying technological assumptions. Cheap transportation, provided by the development of the railroad, was the engine that drove the boom. The form of that transportation carried certain assumptions with it.

The combination of easy credit, cheap land, exaggerated promotion and cheap transportation created the underlying framework of the boom. It also meant that those who controlled each of the disparate elements – lenders, politicians, real estate brokers and railroad officials, among others – were drawn into a sometimes uneasy alliance. While each had their own personal interests, the removal of a single one of these important factors could “bankrupt”

the boom and cause the collapse of a system profitable for all. Many times throughout the course of the boom would these collaborative alliances become strained.

Still, the collective whole of these factors – so long as they could be maintained – led to an atmosphere that is today hard to contemplate. Seemingly wherever one turned at the time, it was easy to make a fortune. Such fortunes could be reaped from the land, from railroads, or from the resultant technological change that the railroads helped to inaugurate.

Such a combination of factors also meant that the boom didn’t occur everywhere. Particularly, it led to a very specific and regional nature of the boom. While the Great Plains as a whole experienced the boom, Kansas was markedly different from other states, as boomers and outsiders both noted at the time. The speculation seemed wilder, more rampant, and carried higher stakes in Kansas. Why should Kansas, whose general terrain and climate are similar to some other Plains states, be so different? The answer is complex and lies in the political, social, and cultural background of the state. First, Kansas’ political climate was, for various reasons, largely ruled by a Republican hegemony in the late 19th century. The Free State struggles of the state led to an ingrained antipathy toward
Democrats. More importantly, an expansive attitude among Republicans toward Federal land policy created a sympathetic Republican base in Kansas. Such a symbiotic relationship on the issue of land policy meant that Kansas' own internal land policies were much more generous than that of other Plains states.  

Land policy might dictate political realities, but the political geography of the state was all but fixed. Multiple county seat "wars" that plagued the state during the 1880’s attest to the very real possibility of relocating the political centers of the state. Every place, it seemed, might be able to wrest power from another.

Also fueling the fire was the southern boundary of the State. What would become Oklahoma was closed to homesteading, though firebrands like David Payne would eventually attempt to break these barriers down. Such a geographical boundary only intensified the demand for cheap lands – at prices fixed by the government – in Kansas. More, many of the states on the Eastern boundary – most

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21 For an explanation of the political realities of post-civil war Kansas, see Jeffery Ostler, "Why the Populist Party Was Strong in Kansas and Nebraska but Weak in Iowa," *The Western Historical Quarterly*, vol. 23 no. 4 (1992): 451-474. For land policy, see Paul Gates’ *Fifty Million Acres*. 
notably Missouri – had little in the way of available Homestead lands available. While Nebraska experienced, to some degree, the effects of the boom, its boom was essentially played out by the Federal government with the construction of the Union Pacific railroad nearly twenty years before. Cheap rail transport was key to the sort of rural and urban boom that Kansas saw, and the Union Pacific, with its established transcontinental hegemony and resultant heavy traffic, had no need to lower its rates and thus feed into the boom. Such a hegemony that the Union Pacific enjoyed was not the case in Kansas, where the Santa Fe (whose recent completion of a transcontinental line to Los Angeles had yet to draw from its hinterland), Missouri Pacific, Rock Island, and the Kansas Pacific all competed with each other for rail traffic. The result was a substantial increase in trackage as each line attempted to out-do the other in a desperate ploy for the kind of hegemony the Union Pacific enjoyed in Nebraska. Such inter-line competition drove freight rates to rock-bottom levels, and gave much impetus for new construction to connect branches and competitively increase trunk line traffic.22

22 For an analysis of railroad strategy, see Julius Grodinsky, *Transcontinental Railroad Strategy, 1869-1893:*
Nor did the Union Pacific have a large surplus of railroad grant land to dispose of in Nebraska, having completed the process largely in the 1870’s. The result was that the boom, while bleeding over into some parts of southern Nebraska, was essentially hemmed in by the boundaries of Oklahoma, Missouri, and the Union Pacific mainline. Colorado’s largely arid eastern plains region was not nearly as attractive as the wetter lands available in Kansas at the time. While boomers worked in Eastern Colorado, they did not enjoy the substantial advantage of existing settlement – the amenities of civilization with the opportunity of the frontier – that Kansas did.

While some eastern Colorado towns saw substantial population increases, the effects were not nearly the same as in Kansas. As David Wrobel writes in Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory and the Creation of the American West, creating an image of a closing frontier was important to spur people into action –

but the theme of a closing frontier called for another delicate balancing act by the boosters... namely, emphasizing that the frontier wellspring of opportunity was not drying up so quickly that a potential settler might miss out... Yet for all their emphasis on diminishing frontier opportunity, western

boosters stressed that the remaining lands were absolutely devoid of frontier hardship. 23

Colorado’s arid eastern plains produced none of the agricultural statistics that boomers could cite to further the idea of a place devoid of hardship. Colorado’s mountains and their mining tended to eclipse the image of the state as an agricultural paradise. Once the mines were played out and irrigation was more practical, Colorado would experience its own agricultural boom in the eastern part of the state although this took place some forty years later.

Such an intensified effect in Kansas created rhetoric that was strong in its flourishes and sometimes outlandish. It can be difficult, sorting through what seem to be pulp productions with flaming rhetoric and outlandish claims to believe that anyone could really dream these things. There has been a tendency among scholars to brush off such flaming and sometimes eloquent rhetoric as nothing more than Victorian era fluff. Many an editor used language

23 Wrobel, 26-27. For an account of Colorado’s changing mining frontiers, see Phyllis Flanders Dorset, The New Eldorado: The Story of Colorado’s Gold and Silver Rushes (London: MacMillan, 1970), 281-287. Leadville’s silver boom had virtually collapsed by this time, but strikes in Creede and Aspen attracted many – and many more prospected all around the Centennial State without luck.
full of flourish, “boom poetry,” and spent hours devising
new methods of saying the same thing – times were grand.

It wasn’t just a paper ploy, as an Abilene editor
later explained:

People look back to those days now and wonder if a
wave of insanity swept over the West. It seemed
plausible that every town would be a commercial
metropolis or a great railway center—or both... not a
few believed that in time the greatness of the new
West would necessitate the abandonment of Washington
for a national headquarters on the Plains. It was not
joking, this wild inflation—never were men more in
earnest. The evidence of their sincerity exists today
in handsome brick and stone pillars and staircases
ornamenting half-empty schoolhouses and office
buildings, and in uneven road surfaces telling of the
sometime presence of street-railway ties.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{24} Charles M. Harger, “New Era in the Middle West,”
Harper’s New Monthly Magazine 97 (July 1898), 276. Harger,
an Abilene editor during the boom, later used his
experiences of the time to shape his editorial position as
he pursued national business journalism.
CHAPTER III.

"THE TRAIN OF PROGRESS"

Leslie Snow departed from a fast train on December 4, 1887 into the station at Junction City. He walked into an atmosphere of incredulity. Snow had recently graduated from Dartmouth in 1886, and received an appointment with the Pension Bureau of the Federal Government that took him to Junction City. Snow traveled the countryside interviewing veterans to verify their pension status, attempting to make sense of often contradictory claims, sometimes in far flung places. Snow’s somewhat staid Eastern upbringing as the son of a prominent New Hampshire merchant made his time in Kansas during the boom seem that much more exciting. He constantly referred to the Kansas countryside in terms of amazement, shock, and occasional disgust. Once the train he was riding sped up to the astonishing speed of 40 to 50 miles an hour west of Kansas City, he could hardly believe it. It seemed everyone was on the move, and the place was full of endless possibility. Kansas, he said,

has no villages. Only cities and single dwellings. Stopped of course at Gypsum House. This is a town of very rapid growth as is common in Kans. 18 m. ago, one house occupied the present city location. The old resident was the very man whom I wanted to see. He had risen suddenly from a simple farmer 20 miles from R.R. station to a grand nabob of a city. His
principal business was to stand and loaf and sell lots. This city... contained fifty houses. Has a bank, hotel and brass-band. Corner lots $500. Pigs in street. Citizens say it is to be the metropolis of the world.25

The Kansas that Snow entered in 1887 seemed to be expanding limitlessly - in all respects. Snow was the second agent hired for the pension bureau to cover the jurisdiction, and he wrote to his fiancée that there was "no end of work, 60 cases on hand to begin with; others have been sent till now I have 75. Can’t handle more than four or five per week." Indeed, he said, "Please don’t think you must write as much as I scribble. Everything is new here to me and I see so many things to write about I have no end."26

As Snow was writing to his betrothed in New Hampshire, he was witnessing an influx into the state that had only been matched in the heady days of the late 1870’s, as thousands poured into the countryside. Even Snow’s admonition that he was flooded with pension cases indicates the huge numbers of Civil War veterans pouring into Kansas at a steady stream. The millions of acres given away or


26 Ibid.
sold at a pittance drove an intense atmosphere of speculation.

Such settlement drove a number of initiatives that helped to create the boom. But by far the most profitable and enticing venture of the boom was the same force that had previously driven much of Kansas history and economics: railroading. Driven largely by the construction of the Rock Island and Missouri Pacific through the state in 1886-1887, railroad builders and promoters quickly discovered that they could create huge amounts of excitement by projecting a line between nearly any two towns. These promoters could come from a variety of backgrounds— they might be railroad officials looking to sell lots in a newly-platted town, or they might be existing town boomers who thought that another railroad might assure their future as a commercial metropolis. Charters abounded for railroads never destined to lay a mile of track, some of them financial swindles and others genuine but halfhearted attempts to connect mere villages with no need for instantaneous communication or shipping. Marion, for instance, once boasted of eleven railroads. Every single
one of them was on paper.\footnote{27}

Salina particularly was a railroad boom town in '87. The Kansas Pacific (Union Pacific after 1880) was the first railroad to reach Salina a number of years before the boom. Several branch lines had been established from this railroad to McPherson, Lincoln Center and other small communities around the city. But the attractions of main-line railroading did not take off in Salina until 1887. The city voted bonds for the Santa Fe, Missouri Pacific or "MoPac", and Rock Island, each of which were to reach the city by August 1, 1887, November 1, 1887 and May 1, 1888 respectively. These three additional major trunk lines were to provide the city with an infusion of cash, traffic, and tax revenue sufficient to make repayment of the bonds an easy certainty. Completion of the Santa Fe by the due date set the boomers looking forward to the arrival of the MoPac, some tantalizingly few months away.\footnote{28}

\footnotetext{27}{Marion County Commissioners, Record of Proceedings, Vols. 4, 5, 6 (1884-1888); Secretary of State of Kansas, Corporations, Vol. 24, 450-451. For a general description of rail speculation, see Craig Miner, West of Wichita, 190-195, and Shortridge, Cities on the Plains.}

\footnotetext{28}{Saline County Journal, August 25, 1887. For an incisive account of Salina's urban history and the railroads, see Shortridge, Cities on the Plains, 115-161.}
The roads had been financed using local municipal bonds, a common scheme that had been introduced by the Kansas legislature in the early 1880’s. The basic premise on the part of boomers was simple: entice as many railroads as possible to build trunk lines to one place. The resultant competition resulted in low rates, which thus brought cheaper goods and more profit on goods shipped out. The resultant increase in traffic, residents, and commerce would then add to the city tax rolls, in effect paying off the bonds without municipal sacrifice. The scheme worked well in the short run – unless the railroad defaulted and walked out with the cash. Provisions were often written very carefully into bond issues to present such a catastrophe, but legal maneuvering abounded. Railroads, in turn, saw an easy way to alleviate some of the capital burden of building their lines – but existing railroads decried such efforts as a foil to their traffic. Such a collusion between town builders and ambitious railroad officials meant that railroad construction in Kansas was unparalleled. Indeed, in 1887, the state added 1,680 miles of railroad to its existing 6,060 – more rail per capita than any other state.29

29Biennial message of Jno. A. Martin, Governor, to the
Railroads were unique in that they required a substantial capital investment before a single carload of cargo could be moved. Their operation required a distinct number of costs that couldn’t be reduced. Nor, once placed, could the line be moved. Idle steam engines required nearly as much care as operating ones, and the result was that

These fixed charges meant that perhaps two-thirds of a railroad’s total expenditures remained unaffected by how much traffic it carried. Once a company had built the tracks and equipment needed to serve a given territory, it had little choice but to provide that service. Its capital investment required it to earn a minimum income, and this had a surprising consequence for the way its managers set rates. The simple but paradoxical fact was this: when railroad business was poor, a company had to attract traffic—even when that traffic did not pay the cost of its own transportation. Since the company was going to pay fixed costs no matter what, earning something was better than earning nothing. If one could somehow earn $90,000 of cash income on transportation that cost $100,000 to provide, one lost only $10,000; if, on the other hand, one let the railroad sit idle, one was guaranteed to lose more than $60,000 in fixed costs. Curious as it might seem to an outsider, railroad managers sometimes had to set rates they knew would lose the company money.\(^30\)

Cronon uses this idea of “fixed costs” to explain the role of railroads in developing Chicago as the premier rail center of the 19\(^{th}\) century. However, these fixed costs also created boom conditions on the Plains – as Cronon says, the

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\(^{30}\) Ibid., 85.
interlinked metropolitan and rural spheres affected each other. Railroads needed to encourage traffic – in either direction – at any cost, and to do that meant cheap transport – artificially low, in fact, to recoup their fixed costs. In Kansas, the effect was multiplied, as most towns had allocated at least one railroad line by the middle 1870s. In the 1880s, they sought to increase the number to as many as possible.

In Caldwell, during the latter part of 1886, an enterprising 34-year-old boomer was trying, like the rest of the boomers, to get railroads. George Reilly, a newly elected mayor, knew that his town would be dead without some kind of railroad connection, and the more connections he could get, the better. Reilly began a campaign to entice railroads to his town – trying anything he could think of. After first finding a deposit of silver nearby, he received encouragement from a railroad official of the Denver, Memphis and Atlantic (also known as the Darling Mary Anne) that “I see that the prospects are most flattering for a solid boom for Caldwell and its good people.” Soon, Reilly was caught in a struggle with several roads over where the possible connections could be made. He went to great lengths to make anything happen. Indeed, in Caldwell’s particular case, a railroad – any
railroad — was vital to the future. The Cherokee Strip Livestock Association, another group pressuring for the settlement of Oklahoma, had been founded in the town and knew that any rail line near the territory could reap huge benefits — once the Federal government was out of the way.\footnote{John Blackburn to George Reilly, November 13, 1886, Special Collections, Wichita State University.}

Like an heiress looking for suitors, any of the railroads nearby had routes that were anything but fixed. While the rail builders knew that their road should run towards the south and Indian territory, they had no specific point at which to enter or leave. Kansas geography didn’t dictate a single route, so they could hunt for the best municipal bond deals. For Caldwell, in the early months of 1887, it meant certain death. The city was of the Third Class, meaning that it could vote no bonds. While Caldwell had the population necessary to become a city of the Second Class, Reilly’s predecessors hadn’t taken care of the opportunity. On December 25 – Christmas Day, 1886, J.J. Burns of the Denver, Memphis and Atlantic wrote Reilly that “Beaver Township in Cowley County has taken hold of our railroad proposition in good shape and will carry it through. This closes the matter.”\footnote{J.J. Burns to George Reilly, December 25, 1886, Special Collections, Wichita State University.}
But Reilly had been negotiating with more than just one road. On February 14 - railroad promoters seemed to have a penchant for holidays - J.L. Horning of the Kansas, Colorado and Texas wrote Reilly that “we’ll investigate it.” After a somewhat brief investigation, he wrote on February 22,

It is not so much a question of local subsidies, as it is a question of local business, it occurs to me that Caldwell and the immediate surroundings, with your present system of railroads, and what you have provided for, will certainly be able to render all the service that you will specially need... it will be necessary for us, under our Charter, to leave the state of KS., but just where that point will be is yet an open question. As to the matter of division HQ, it is a question that will have to be regulated somewhat for the convenience of operating the line.33

Part of Reilly’s problem was that only Kansas cities of the first and second could vote railroad bonds; without bonds, he was dead in the water. So, Reilly’s activities carried on with a third road, too: he wrote the Chicago, Kansas and Nebraska that he would much like to have their road, and by March 22, 1887, he had Caldwell declared a city of the Second Class. The boom was on. The necessary bonds were a simple matter to get voted in. But Reilly then wanted more - his own requisite railroad “pass” and

33 J.L. Horning to George Reilly, February 14, 1887 and February 22nd, 1887, Special Collections, Wichita State University.
other perks. He petitioned on May 13, 1887, to be put on the board of directors of a coal company organized to mine nearby fields in support of the railroad, so long as he could have a say in its operation. Once the road was completed to Caldwell, he received his railroad pass, printed on thick blue linen—a badge of honor so important that Reilly preserved it for posterity.34

The pattern wrote itself out across the state. Salina’s Weekly Journal soon claimed with pride that there were three railroads running parallel within 25 miles of each other between Salina and Abilene. Such an oversupply became cause for celebration and an advantage, not an overextension in the mind of boomers. With so many railroads, it soon became apparent that a grand depot to handle all of the railroad traffic was a necessity. Drawing on the tried and true methods used so many times to effect, a bond election was held proposing the construction of a $40,000 depot. By November, most of the north part of Salina was declared to be “mostly tracks,” and the Saline County Journal began a two-column feature of railroad

34 Chicago, Kansas and Nebraska Railroad to George Reilly, March 13, 1887, and September 5, 1887, and George Reilly to Chicago, Kansas and Nebraska Railroad, May 13, 1887, Special Collections, Wichita State University.
gossip and speculation under the heading of “Railroad Spikes.”

The *Journal* was driven to analogize the boom in railroad terms:

This is Kansas, who a little while ago sat on her hunkers and viewed the world, but the world knew her not. She gazed at the train of progress as it rolled heedlessly by. The thought stabbed her, and like a flash she seized the hindmost car and swung to her, off with the throng. She slid along through every couch, past baggage, express and all, and, seating herself on the cowcatcher, planted her banner there. It bore these striking words: ‘Ad Astra glorium pokum squeekum.’ That means, ‘Get there Eli, through thick and thin,” and that is what she did.

Railroads meant much to boomers. Every line brought possibilities of travel and commerce from distant, exotic locations. Every new road could produce a connection with another, making it possible to travel to places that previously seemed terrifically far flung. The *Journal* rhapsodized about exotic locations on August 25:

Regular trains are now in operation from Salina to McCracken, 126 miles distant. From the latter point the road is being rapidly extended to Pueblo 180 miles further westward... At Pueblo the Missouri Pacific makes direction connection with the...important commercial and mining centers in New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming Territory, and Utah, terminating at Salt Lake City. The Denver and New Orleans railroad, which is now being built will give the Missouri Pacific one of its

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35 *Saline County Journal*, November 3, 1887, November 10, 1887.

36 Ibid.
great outlets to southern centers, connecting the mountain regions with New Orleans and intermediate points.\textsuperscript{37}

Such possibilities made it seem as though the prairies formerly considered the Great American Desert were not the barren wastelands merely to be passed over in a rush to the next place. Securing trade with the coasts, connections to the mountains, and any place in between made the prairie an interconnected part of the world, a place that, through its communication, was relevant and important.

By creating connections and using the mysticism of the railroad, it became very easy to claim that Salina or Newton or McPherson or Hutchinson was a center of civilization. Commerce, culture, politics and diversity could all be brought nearly instantly through the daily trains, or at least it seemed so. Sprouting lines to all corners of the country – as one paper put it, “gridironing” the state with railroads – could instantly connect places that formerly had been distant. The world was getting smaller.\textsuperscript{38}

Fortunes could be made and lost on the course of a railroad. Boomers always hoped that a railroad would

\textsuperscript{37} Saline County Journal, August 25, 1887.

\textsuperscript{38} Newton Daily Republican, October 5, 1887.
locate some major facility at their location, such as a “division” point, a roundhouse, or a repair facility. The infusion of cash and a workforce would seemingly assure the town’s rosy future.\textsuperscript{39}

Such a strategy also had its problems. Newton’s experience with the railroads presents a counterpoint to the railroad boom of Salina. Newton was a division point on the Santa Fe, a place that was used to the smoky shops and constant bustle of out-of-town railroad travelers. Traffic carried its own pitfalls—Newton citizens rapidly discovered that their fortunes lay in the Santa Fe main offices in Topeka. The Santa Fe could rapidly withdraw its support from the town, or could vie another community against it for access to trade routes, as happened during 1872 when the road ran a line to Wichita that ended Newton’s cattle town status. Worse, the Santa Fe took away Newton’s status as a division point in 1879, favoring the better water available at Nickerson. The Newton Daily Republican’s Noble Prentis commented on October 20, 1887, “The superstitious idea that railroad builders can make no mistakes is rapidly disappearing.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39} See Shortridge, \textit{Cities on the Plains}, chapter 5, for a succinct explanation of this power.
Another Kansas town, Horton, sprung from the machinations of the Rock Island. As they began construction of their line, the officers of the railroad quickly became founders of a new town. On September 20, 1886, the town of Horton came into being in northeast Kansas. The officers of the Chicago, Kansas and Nebraska Railroad, the western subsidiary of the Rock Island, all bought into another subsidiary land company and began construction of the town on 620 acres. By November 12, Horton had the Rock Island, and the boom was on. The Horton Headlight projected the town would have fifteen thousand people in five years, and that industry would flock to the great new metropolis. The town had all of 325 residents. But the Rock Island officials located their first Kansas Division in Horton, and the resultant construction of railroad shops in March 1887 brought nearly five hundred jobs to the brand new town. Such intensive construction made everything a bit surreal, but the

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railroad officers made out well: they divested their land holdings and prospered.\textsuperscript{41}

In the wake of railroad construction, small towns could gain favor and lose it in a spectacularly quick fashion. To many in the state, “a railroad magnate is a little tin god on wheels.”\textsuperscript{42} Small towns, built on railroad route speculation, could spring up instantly and decline even faster if the railroad were to divert course. Speculation in Saline County over the routes and locations of the various trunk lines and their offices caused a spring of towns to come and many to go almost as rapidly as they came. Geneseo, one of the fortunates, recorded a population growth in nine months that was the match of no other city in the state.\textsuperscript{43}

But Lindsey, one of the unfortunates in Ottawa county, did not share the same fate:

Lindsey, once an aspirant for the county seat of Ottawa County, now loses its railroad office and is now a simple flag station. One sitting among its ruins, like Marius at Carthage, dreams of palmy days when it dared to contend with fair Minneapolis.


\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Newton Daily Republican}, October 25, 1887.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Saline County Journal}, September 29, 1887.
(Kansas) with a reasonable hope of becoming the shire-town of Ottawa County.\textsuperscript{44}

Railroads became a way for boomers to enhance the perceived qualities of their communities. From 1880–1930, railroads were in their golden age, says John Stilgoe, and by the turn of the century, Americans knew that railroad iron meant far more; train travel provided a distinctive, almost cinemagraphic vision of the built environment beyond the plate glass windows. Trains, right of way, and adjacent built form had become part environment, part experience, a combination perhaps best called \textit{metropolitan}.\textsuperscript{45}

Stilgoe uses a twentieth century term, “cinemagraphic,” to define the experience of rail travel, yet the surreal, mystic vision of the railroad pervaded the 1880’s.

Boomers often tended to confuse causes and effects. Railroads are a prime example. It was thought at the time that railroads could bring in the outside world and instantly transform a locale into a thriving metropolis. Railroads became a sort of faith, and the city that did not secure at least four or five clearly had a lack of faith in the train of progress that could so quickly pass by. In a sense, boomers put the cart before the horse – though local agricultural prospects might have dictated the necessity of

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.

at least one railroad, boomers assumed that by securing four or five railroads for their city, they could assure its future commercially. Industrial towns had railroads, so why should railroad towns not have industry?

The major problem with this was that railroads needed something to haul both ways - it made little sense for a railroad to simply bring in all the modern usufructs of the outside world for the benefit of a small agricultural village. Products must be hauled out, cars kept full, things moved. The fixed costs of the railroad dictated it. What boomers quickly discovered was that, though several railroads did guarantee low rates, the result tended to be that the railroads soon “pooled” their limited business, raising their rates and cutting off the cheap supply of transport that had driven the initial boom of their. In effect, the increase in railroad competition - because of the intensive amount of capital required to build a railroad - meant that the residents paid for the extra transport, eventually hindering their progress. While the railroad boom lasted, its effects were spectacular, and the miles and miles of trackage put together could hardly be equaled.
CHAPTER IV.

THE WORKSHOP AND THE GRANARY

Boomers realized that their frantic efforts to build railroads weren’t their only possible salvation. The logical next step was to develop some sort of year-round industry that could smooth out railroad traffic and make Kansas a net exporter - to build industry up. Such a strategy, by producing something for the five or six railroads of a town to haul, could ensure the cheap rates and fierce competition that kept everything moving. The booming of industry in Kansas was a venture based on a few simple tenets. First, the more industries that could be built, the better. Second, industry should take advantage of the agricultural products of the land. Boomers seldom sought to create steel mills or other heavy industrial projects on the plains. Instead, they sought to take advantage of the promoted their land as an Edenic paradise based on agriculture.

In the central part of the state, such efforts underscored the new nature of the country, by using a symbiotic relation with nature that was both logical and easy to sell. Producing silk, dairy products or sorghum sugar was a logical way to make use of the agricultural products of the region and yet maintain an industrial base
- semi-finished goods - to export. Creating much-needed frontier items like plows, sugar, cloth, and iron products assured that prices remained low for immigrants and kept the boom rolling. The idea that finished goods could be produced directly from the surrounding countryside in regional centers helped to feed the boom and to assure everyone involved that their schemes could endure.

One attempt to develop a native industry was the adaptation of silk culture to the state. Early attempts had been made by a French nobleman, Ernest Valeton de Boissiere, who established a socialist utopian colony based on silk production in Franklin county in 1869. His efforts netted little success. He did take an exhibition of silk to the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. Boissere eventually became disillusioned with the project and returned to France by 1884.46

Others picked up where Boissere left off. Russian Mennonite immigrants who came to central Kansas in the 1870s had been producing their own silk for many generations and continued well after the failure of

Bossiere’s colony. These efforts received a strong boost in 1885 when the State Fair was held in Marion County, and the Fair contained a display of Mennonite-produced silk. By early 1887, enthusiasm for silk, partly owing to its own intrinsic value and to simple boom enthusiasm, was strong. The state legislature appropriated some $13,000 to promote the silk industry in February, creating a Board of Silk Commissioners to establish an experimental station for the production of silk. In charge of this board was Isaiah Horner, an expert in sericulture from the East, and one of the strongest pushers of the bill. Four towns vied for the honor of the station – Hutchinson, McPherson, Peabody and Larned. Towns were “almost frantic to secure” the station. Larned was at first selected, and then after a reversal of the decision, Peabody was chosen. Supported by a bounty on cocoons, the station worked during the summer of 1887 to promote sericulture, sending supplies all over the state and buying the ready-to-reel cocoons.

By September of 1887, Horner had proven unfit for the job. In addition to being generally obstinate, Horner produced a silk dress for Mrs. John Martin, the governor’s wife. Horner’s attempt to promote his work was not well...

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47 Many were convinced that the Russians could pick up where Boissiere had failed. See the Atchison Champion, February 3, 1887.
received among the rest of the Board. The Board (correctly) stated that the silk belonged to the state, not to the board or governor. Horner was discharged September 29, 1887. Horner later accused board members of corruption, stating that Peabody had bribed the commissioners with $3500 to locate the station there.

A new silk commissioner, Abraham Thiessen, was appointed. He persisted until his death in 1889. Continued efforts were made through the 1890’s, but were unsuccessful, mainly owing to the large amounts of work required to “reel” the silk threads into fabric. More importantly, as with other crops, a bounty was placed on any silk produced. Thus, sericulture gained what was in essence a government subsidy. As with most bounties, once the incentive was removed in the early 1890’s, the silk industry collapsed.\footnote{Lee, 244-255.}

Producing silk held promise for boomers for its intrinsic economic value, but there was more to it. Silk, normally produced in temperate, resort-like climates and a trade good that was imported at great expense, held a promise for plains agriculture that could make the promotional literature seem to come true. Again confusing causes and effects, boomers took the attempts at silk to
mean that Kansas had a climate “similar to Italy”, and that the land could be transformed into something entirely unlike it was by dint of labor and enterprise. In a more extreme version of “rain follows the plow,” it became logical that human enterprise could change a climate simply through the production of agriculture. Perhaps something in the open prairie skies made the place seem a blank canvas to experiment on, or perhaps a relatively little amount of experience made it seem possible. But that possibility was very real to all of those involved.

The Washington Post thought otherwise, though, suggesting sarcastically that people ought to be glad to pay ten times as much for Kansas silk. More, tea should be grown in Maine and pineapples in Minnesota. Not all efforts at advanced agricultural industry were so exotic, however. Kansas boomers tried to locate dairy and other facilities in their cities. A creamery was developed in Manhattan, and many towns and cities across the state looked on jealously. Reports of 20 to 30 percent profits led most towns to think that a local creamery could add to their growing lists of industry. Creameries were a

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49 Newton Kansan, October 2, 1887.

50 Washington Post, May 5, 1887.
way to both boost the idea of Kansas as a dairy region and to provide a way to locally manufacture a needed item. They could also increase the amenities of the city.\textsuperscript{51}

Others thought that Kansas ought to have any number of crops and manufacturing industries – and they weren’t afraid to suggest them. The editor of the \textit{Saline County Journal} put it bluntly:

Salina needs the following industries: a paper mill, starch factory, tannery, boot and shoe factory, oatmeal and hominy works, canning establishment, soft felt hat factory, soap works, cracker factory, agricultural implement works, a large foundry and machine shop, and a variety of other industrial projects.\textsuperscript{52}

But by far the most tantalizing of any agri-industrial prospect was sorghum sugar. Sweeteners were a rare and valuable commodity on the frontier. Traditionally produced from sugar cane in the southern states and in the Caribbean, the cost of importing sweeteners – not only to the frontier, but across the country – was tremendous. It was clear at the time that anyone who could find a more inexpensive way to refine sugar from some other crop could make a substantial fortune. The most tantalizing crop around were grain sorghums, whose stalks contain a

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Marion County Record}, October 14, 1887.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Saline County Weekly Journal}, August 25, 1887.
relatively high percentage of sugars. However, refining the sugar from sorghum is a much more difficult process than from cane, and returns are somewhat lower. Sorghum sugar has traditionally been associated with a slightly strange taste, and it can be difficult to remove that taste. The process of refining sugar from sweet grain sorghum had been known in the United States for at least two decades. Sugar booms were nothing new in Kansas — sorghum sugar facilities were built in Larned, Marion and Ellsworth as early as 1880. These enterprises failed by 1881, although the exact reasons have never been determined.  

Factories at Sterling were somewhat more successful, though. Organized in 1882, the Kansas Sugar Company built a factory able to handle 250 tons of cane per day. The plant cost some $70,000. Yields of cane contained as much as ten percent sugar. Oddly, though, the company claimed that it was plagued by a bad season in 1883 — an early frost killed much of the crop, and though the factory worked frantically to produce what it could, much of the

crop was lost. Still, the works produced nearly 203,000 pounds of sugar.⁵⁴

The idea still held much promise, especially for Kansas Senator Preston Plumb, who had long argued for the production of sorghum sugar. With Plumb’s push, the federal government appropriated $100,000 in 1884-1885 for research and crop bounties. One of several experiment stations around the country was established at Ottawa, Kansas in 1884. By January of 1886 much of the experimentation with sorghum sugar was at Fort Scott. W.L. Parkinson had begun a sugar operation there earlier, and eventually the Ottawa experiment station moved to Fort Scott to keep up with Parkinson.⁵⁵

The rising tide of the boom in 1887 brought about a new interest in sugar. Promoting it with style was Parkinson. His mill employed Magnus Swenson, a government chemist who had previously studied sugar production in Wisconsin. Swenson was less than enthusiastic about the prospects of sugar, but gradually had better and better luck with the process. But that didn’t slow down Parkinson.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Chicago Tribune*, December 1, 1883.
⁵⁵ Socolofsky, 278.
Parkinson had the air of a god to the boomers. His movements were tracked daily throughout the state, his word on sugar taken as gospel. Parkinson’s enterprises at Fort Scott and a state bounty placed on sugar manufacture led many to believe that sugar would be the “coming industry of the state.”

“No flouring mill is more surely turning out flour from wheat than is this factory turning out sugar from sorghum. The sorghum goes in at one end of the mill and the sugar comes out at the other end, and the purest of and best of sugar, equaling the finest Southern sugar.”

Parkinson’s process was infallible, it seemed – and he picked up disciples easily.

Nearly all Kansas communities large and small were in favor of locating a sugar factory in their vicinity. Newton serves as a strong example. Newton moved to secure an $80,000 plant for the manufacture of sorghum sugar shortly after Parkinson suggested that Harvey County soil would be excellent for sorghum cultivation. Newton jumped on the bandwagon:

The alacrity with which the moneyed men of Newton subscribed for stock in the sugar works, and their promptness in getting matters shaped for the

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56 Ibid.

57 *Marion County Record*, October 9, 1887.

58 *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1887.
consummation of the work, have elicited much favorable comment from the press and the people of the state. The fact of Newton being the first city to provide the means for an extensive factory seems to about equally divide the honors with Fort Scott, for whenever the success at the latter place is referred to, Newton is also mentioned... The results flowing from this promptness will be many and continuous, while the benefits will be great and generally distributed among the citizens.\textsuperscript{59}

Newton’s sugar craze developed into a familiar pattern of a near-religious fervor that could not be quelled. On the news that came shortly after the location of the factory, the Newton papers learned that “Newton and Hutchinson are both to have sugar manufactories. The Newton plant, however, will be the more costly and will be run on far better plans.”\textsuperscript{60} When Marshall Murdock had the nerve to question the viability of the sugar process, Prentis called him “idiotic.”\textsuperscript{61}

Prentis later, in a somewhat shaky scientific analogy, compared sugar to diamonds, noting that both were made of carbon and water. Declaring that Kansas was endowed with four primary advantages, “Silk, Salt, Sugar, and Sunlight,” editor Prentis likened these four resources

\textsuperscript{59} Newton Kansan, September 29, 1887.

\textsuperscript{60} Newton Kansan, October 5, 1887.

\textsuperscript{61} Newton Kansan, October 2, 1887.
to the attributes of beauty, purity, sweetness and intelligence respectively. 62

Others quickly went crazy for the idea of sugar. Nearly every other Central Kansas town realized the possibilities of sugar, and rapidly began agitating for a sugar factory. The Salina Board of Trade eagerly took up the question of creating a sugar factory, declaring that it was a spectacular idea and opportunity. 63 Of all the projected sugar mills, some 24 were built in Kansas. Sterling had two, one of which was a government experiment station. Again, though, the same story that created silk created sugar. In collusion with the state legislature, who was only too happy to promote economic progress, the developers of sugar always seemed to declare that their process would take a little longer to perfect, and that if they could just have the bounty extended on the crop, the process would perfect itself and give the country a large amount of inexpensive sugar. But, as with silk, once the final bounty was given, the sorghum plants hung on for a while until their capital was expended and then closed,

62 Ibid.

63 Saline County Journal, Journal, November 3, 1887.

63 Ibid.
never to open again. Later inexpensive sugar production from beets in western Kansas helped to realize, at least in part, the sugar dreamer’s schemes.

However, these agricultural-industrial pursuits were not the only attractive ones to boomers. Seemingly any industry that could be attracted was fair game. Salina voted bonds to locate a carriage factory in the city, Newton agitated for a cannery, and others plunged holes into the ground in order to try and discover whether they sat on reserves of coal, oil or salt.\(^{64}\)

Perhaps the most famous of these operations happened in Hutchinson. Ben Blanchard, a real estate con man from Terre Haute, Indiana, bought a significant parcel of land south of Hutchinson in early 1887. He, not-so-imaginatively, called his new town South Hutchinson. His town boomed somewhat, and by May he had installed an electric light works and had buildings progressing “night and day.”\(^{65}\)

However, Blanchard’s town was flagging. In an attempt to boost his real estate, Blanchard drilled a well, salted it with oil, and tried to revive his boom. What Blanchard

\(^{64}\) Ibid., and Newton Daily Republican, Oct. 1, 1887.

\(^{65}\) Hutchinson Daily News, May 4, 1887.
little realized was that he also struck a vein of salt over 300 feet thick, and it quickly became clear to boomers that “Kansas is likely to be the best preserved state in the Union, she is so well salted.” 66 Another strike at Ellsworth led the boom of drilling operations. A company organized in Newton at $5,000 capitalization to drill for coal, oil, salt, or any other chance mineral discovery came to little. 67 But it was clear that Kansans needed not only to look at the ground they plowed, but to drill deeper to find wealth locked in the ground itself. “Kansans do nothing by halves... they are now seeking, and by liberal inducements are securing many valuable plants, and it will be but a few years until she becomes the workshop, as she is now the granary, of the nation.” 68

Boomers focused their attention on extractive industries in the state largely because agriculture, in a familiar pattern, had shown its chancy nature. Kansas could be the granary of the nation - if it rained. Though many had dreams of irrigation, few of these schemes had come to pass by the 1880’s. Those that had were

66 Newton Daily Republican, October 6, 1887.
67 Newton Daily Republican, November 1, 1887.
68 Newton Kansan, September 29, 1887.
speculatory dreams, carried on mostly in the southwestern part of the state.\textsuperscript{69}

The central portion of the state was generally conceded to not require irrigation. Kansas farmers at this point produced mostly corn, a crop that had been a staple of frontier living. In the wet years of 1883-1884, the state produced 182,084,526 and 190,870,686 bushels of corn on roughly 4.5 million acres. In the same wet years of 1883-1884, the state produced 22,322,119 and 20,516,560 bushels of wheat, respectively. Assessed valuation of farm lands increased from $87,179,101 in 1880 to $122,871,339 in 1885.\textsuperscript{70}

Drier years could prove much worse—and 1885-1887 were much drier years. The former 20,000,000 bushel wheat crop of the state never broke more than 10,000,000 in those years, though the acreages planted were still roughly 1,500,000. Yields that had been an average of over twenty bushels per acre in 1882-1884 counted an average of less than eight bushels per acre for the following three years. Corn was somewhat better, but not by much. In 1887, some


6,530,392 acres were planted into corn. These yielded only 75,791,454, or some 11.60 bushels per acre. In 1883-1884, this figure had averaged over forty bushels per acre.\(^71\)

Such statistics were important to boomers – and their positive retroactive nature let them use outdated statistics to bolster their grand ideas. Though 1886 and 1887 were dry, boomers could manipulate the statistics and point to the former good times of 1883 and 1884, when prices were high and farmers had much to sell. Their figures served to bolster the notion of the plains as an Edenic paradise that required little effort on the part of the populace to reap enormous bounty. Boomers referred to it simply as a “salubrious climate,” or spoke of how good the weather could be – but the implication of a good climate was distinctly tied to the idea of future development. As such, the weather was tremendously important to the boomers.

Weather helped to dictate much of the boom, and the variability of Kansas weather made the boom a variable entity in all parts of the state. Boomers used all kinds of measurements to test the weather – reports from the Universities, local weather trackers, anything they could

\(^{71}\) Ibid.
get their hands on to paint a picture of the “salubrious climate” that was supposedly so pleasant. As such, some of the figures are difficult to trust. Most important to boomer’s arguments were rainfall measurements. Seeking to dispel the image of the Great American Desert, boomers used a direct approach to refute it—cite the rainfall statistics. However, such measurements were also easy to distort.

In a sense, statewide agricultural statistics are a better measure of rainfall than actual rainfall measurements taken during the period. Kansas weather carries with it a large bit of variability, even in close locales. This can easily cloud the figures of an average, as one county or even town may see a series of deluges while another neighboring country parches with drought. For instance, Ellsworth in September of 1886 received 3.45 inches of rain, while Wilson, a bit more than twenty miles distant, received 2.18 inches. In February, Ellsworth received nearly 5 inches of precipitation while Wilson received a paltry 0.62 inches. This extreme variability in the state made for different characteristics of agriculture in different districts, or even different towns.\textsuperscript{72}
The central part of the state bears much of the brunt of this variability. While larger amounts of rain can generally be expected in the eastern part of the state, and low amounts in the western, the central part of the state can swing from being eastern in its abundant rainfall or western in its parching dryness. The 1890 report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture carries with it the first breakdown of data relevant to the geographical divisions in the state. For instance, in 1887 the rainfall in the Eastern part of the state totaled 27.25 inches. The central part totaled 25.25, and the western 20.28. In 1888, the eastern part of the state received 34.12 inches, while the central part received 18.95 and the western 18.62. In 1889, the rainfall was a whopping 38.96 inches in the east, 32.52 in the central part of the state, and 19.79 in the western. Precipitation in the central part of the state fell within a few inches of that of the eastern part of the state in 1887 and 1889, but was .03 inches off the western half in 1888. To some extent, this made farming, particularly corn, a chancier proposition in the central part of the state than that in either that of the

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eastern or western. The rainfall could simply go either way.\textsuperscript{73}

Boomers remained optimistic about the agricultural situation no matter how little the rainfall or bad the prospects might seem. As the hot, dry summer of 1887 dragged on, one editor remarked that:

Hot and disagreeable as the nights have been during the past month or more, and all the old settlers never before say they saw the like in Kansas, they are far from being as oppressive as the inhabitants of the eastern portions of the country are always subject to during the summer months. In fact, there is always someplace to be found here where one can enjoy refreshing slumber. \textsuperscript{74}

It was clear by late 1887 that nearly half the fall corn crop would not be worth harvesting, yet “half a crop in Kansas means the equivalent, at least, of a full crop in any other state.”\textsuperscript{75} Clearly, the bounty of the land could be had, even if there wasn’t enough rain.

Though the summer might have been dry, boomers didn’t let it get in their way. Optimism still held out. On reports from Kansas State University that rainfall for 1887 was nearly half of that of previous years, Professor F.H.

\textsuperscript{73} Seventh Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture, vol. 2, 226.

\textsuperscript{74} Newton Weekly Republican, August 11, 1887.

\textsuperscript{75} Newton Daily Republican, October 21, 1887.
Snow of the University of Kansas made the projection that the next two years would be two of excess, rather than deficient rainfall. Averages, he said, always worked themselves out.\(^{76}\)

Much of conventional agriculture and weather in the late 1880’s looked poor. As previously mentioned, however, this drove boomers to other enterprise. The wet and prosperous years of 1883–1885 lent credibility to the idea that the land was incredibly productive and could be again. Boomers could always use the statistics from those years to gain support for their enterprises and show the huge agricultural possibilities Kansas could afford – and the huge possibilities that it afforded those with money to lend. It was very common during these years to find that there was a strong perception among the populace that those in Kansas were people set apart – that their activities were being watched carefully by all involved. One editor found the Kansas wind to be a real estate agent’s friend – “Real estate was… moving about in the air, being borne on the gentle breezes.”\(^{77}\) But harvesting the crop would take another ingredient as important as weather – credit.

\(^{76}\) Marion County Record, July 1, 1887.

\(^{77}\) Newton Daily Republican, October 7, 1887.
CHAPTER V.

"THE GLITTERING FABRIC OF CREDIT."

In Marion, the editor had no question why Hutchinson boomed. “A town that supports a paper as it does the News, keeps thirty-odd columns of advertising standing in it all the time, and bought forty-six thousand copies of its recent illustrated edition in the east, is bound to boom.”

It was a common trend. Small-town newspapers were deliberately aimed not at the local population but at the vague set of “outsiders,” those who would read and hopefully invest in the speculative schemes. It was vital to keep money flowing in, and as such “putting on a good front” was necessary. Such an example also was Kingman:

Kingman is enjoying the greatest boom ever known in her history. It is mostly due to the efforts of her citizens through her newspapers. The newspapers publish the advantages of the town and county and the citizens are enterprising enough to purchase the papers and send them abroad. They do not do it on a small scale, either, for at one time they ordered twenty thousand copies... The result of the citizen’s enterprise is the fact that Kingman is one of the best towns in the state.

Such promotions had one major idea in mind: to secure more credit. Boomers needed to keep the cash flowing ever inward, and to do that required a concerted effort to

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78 Marion County Record, July 1, 1887.

79 Ness City Sentinel, February 24, 1887.
convince the “outsiders” that Kansas’ possibilities were always unlimited. Such outward optimism and faith was a fundamental tenet of the boomers – and it brought in a lot of money.

It was clear even during the boom times that much of the boom was built on credit. The Kansas State Board of Agriculture was quick to admit in 1890 that during 1885 and 1886 the state had been “flooded with money and farmers and city people all felt rich. Why? By the importation of capital, all who had land or city property could borrow. We grew rich by borrowing and inflating values.”

William Allen White called the decade of the 1880’s in Kansas a “vast swindle.” It was a time to “bring more money into the West. It was shot through with an unrighteous design for spoils, a great ugly, riproaring civilization built out of the glittering fabric of credit.”

Determining how much credit actually flowed into Kansas is a difficult proposition. An article in 1890 noted that $22,000,000 was owed five Topeka mortgage companies, and five companies in Kansas City were owed some

80 Seventh Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture, vol. 1, vi.

$68,000,000. These loans were made over a dozen western states, Kansas included.\(^82\)

What has been done with this vast borrowed capital? Labor has been employed. Thousands of villages, towns and cities have been built. Thousands of miles of railroads have been constructed. Millions of acres of land have been subjected to private dominion, have become a part of the estimated wealth of the country, and have been set to producing what the world wants... The growth which occupied a hundred years in the older States, has been here crowded into ten. The mortgage did this.\(^83\)

Because credit came in many different forms - from chattel mortgages to city bonds to loans between private individuals - tracking all of the various forms that new and old residents borrowed through can be difficult. Two major credit instruments were of primary importance in the boom. Mortgages drawn from eastern capital financed many individual farms and to some extent land speculation, while municipal and township bonds supported industry, railroads, colleges and internal improvements. These two sources of credit represented a major source of credit that would later become scapegoats as the boom collapsed and debts had to be repaid:

... men incur mortgage debt for almost every purpose for which wealth is required. People mortgage their real

\(^82\) James Willis Gleed, “Western Mortgages,” Forum, March 1890, 93.

\(^83\) Ibid.
estate to get married, to obtain divorces, and to pay alimony; to pay their taxes, their rent, and to pay interest to the money lender. They raise money by mortgage in order that they may travel, and that they may spend it in extravagant living; they speculate with it and they lend it. Politicians pay the expenses of their political campaigns by means of mortgages. The guileless are deceived into buying worthless patents, wives pay the debts of their husbands and educate them for the ministry. Men mortgage their real estate to pay their physicians, their undertakers, and their lawyers, to help their friends and relatives, to make good their defalcations, to educate their children, and to support their parents.

The weather and the elements are related to mortgages; rain and hail, the lightning that descends from the clouds, drought and heat all affect the wealth of men so as to make them mortgage. Mortgages follow plagues of grasshoppers and epidemics of hog cholera, they erect tombstones to the memory of the dead, buy pianos and organs, provide daughters with dowry, and make wedding presents. By means of them young lawyers and physicians are able to keep from starvation, fathers to defend their sons for murder, housewives to get sewing machines, workingmen to travel in search of work, and men to pay their gambling debts. Fathers raise money on mortgages to throw away on prodigal sons, owners of race horses to pay entrance fees for races, husbands to buy gowns for their wives and to celebrate wedding anniversaries... Men borrow money on mortgages to contribute to the building of churches, to pay for the expense of moving to other states, and to pay their election bets; to hunt for stolen horses, to pay the losses of theatrical ventures, of "bad luck" and bad management. They do this to bring their friends from Europe and to send back to Europe dependents whose support they want to escape. By deception or collusion, men place excessive mortgages on their real estate for the purpose of abandoning it, or they do this in order to inflate its value.  

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The “western farm mortgage” was a popular thing in the east of the late nineteenth century. Brokered through eastern agents like Charles Hawkes, these mortgages offered eastern investors a supposedly safe and profitable return. Several of these brokerage firms have been studied in depth, most prominently by Allan Bogue. His study of John and Ira Davenport of New York illustrates a number of trends important in the credit industry of the 1880’s. First, money loaned by the Davenports drew decreasing rates of interest through the decade. In 1880, the Davenports were able to negotiate loans at ten percent interest. But by 1885-1887, eight percent was the rule. Decreasing interest rates – due largely to the confidences built in 1883-1884 of the land – only increased the pace of borrowing. Such a rapid increase in the pace of borrowing was evident in the lower returns – though often loans were secured less than they previously had been.\textsuperscript{85}

Eastern firms were versatile in loaning monies – many would make loans from $250 upwards, with a guarantee of seven per cent interest, with loans totaling one third of the market value of the property. Security demanded on loans was usually quite high, as few eastern lenders had

any intention of winding up with Kansas real estate to dispose of.

Lenders were by no means reckless with their money. Most specified that mortgages be placed on farm lands. Town lot speculation was strongly discouraged in these lending ventures. Those applying for a loan would be required to swear information as to the condition, arability and acreage under tillage of the land, its location in regard to amenities, the amount of improvements placed on it, and swear to the title of the land. One or more independent agents would then verify this information. The broker would then find a lender, and reap a commission—often as high as fifteen percent—as his profit. The western mortgage business was profitable—one lender in Kansas was supposed to have made over $10,000,000 in the business.86

Lenders, however, were far from averse to risk in the farm mortgage business. Even during the good years of 1883-1887, they still wound up with defaults. The Davenports, for example, foreclosed on some 6 or 7 percent of the loans they made. Foreclosed Kansas lands tended to be hard to liquidate, particularly because foreclosures happened on the worst agricultural lands and there were

vast tracts available for small amounts of money. The Davenports received a mere one percent of return on farm lands which were foreclosed.  

Farm mortgages on unimproved property could present a risk more dire. The Kansas State Board of Agriculture conceded that in western Kansas, many “young men and others went there with no other purpose than to preempt a quarter-section of the land, at the end of six months get a loan on it (usually about $500) and leave.” This trend was not nearly so important in the central part of the state, yet it still happened.

Lending in the towns and cities of Kansas was a much chancier proposition, though it attracted a huge amount of money. Most newspapers devoted the better part of the front page of their advertising to loan agents during the peak of the boom. Such advertisements usually proclaimed large amounts of money to lend, usually at rates that were artificially low – six percent was the usual advertised rate. But few loans were made at those rates.

87 Bogue, 58.


89 For an example, see Newton Daily Republican, Oct. 1, 1887.
Charles M. Hawkes, the New England investor who brokered some $18,000 in Kansas towns during the 1880s, invested mostly east of the sixth principal meridian, though he did make one loan on a town lot in Stockton in 1887. Town lots drew a higher rate of interest – nearly 10 percent, but this was still below the legal rate of interest in Kansas, then fixed at twelve percent.

Many factors affected real estate loans in towns, however. Making such loans required constant attention to the particular town, as conditions could change rapidly during the boom. Building of a railroad, factories or other enterprises might increase the value of land in a town, but the resulting debt accrued from bonds voted for sugar factories, railroads and other enterprises could increase taxes and thus reduce the value of real estate.  

Hawkes thought the tide of town lot speculation more than slightly insane:

The West is full of real estate agents, dickering in Real Estate–exchanging etc. until it is too much like horse jockeying business. The agents displaying no more regard for the character of what they handle and careful only to secure their commissions... in this great Kansas enterprise so far as regarding anything to my Kan. Real estate of which I have plenty and fear to have more from foreclosures at prices way below those that the high jumping, optimistic, cheery boomer boometh. Just measure the territory involved in the

boom and estimate when all these “lots” can be sold to be built upon and so the length of time that the “lambs” buying will have to hold or take their chances of finding equally sanguine (or sanguinary) ones to unloan upon—and then with me you will get your enjoyment of the boom largely as a spectator... If I live ten years hence I shall look with complacency upon the few who are raised from small to large estate by their boom—few as compared with the poor multitude that will “get left.”

Though mortgages brought money to the individual, local governments also borrowed heavily. Bonds were an important part of financing the boom. Towns and counties had been allowed by the Legislature to vote bonds for a number of purposes in the early 1880’s, and much of this spurred the railroad-building boom. Boomers soon figured out that they could turn such local initiatives to boosting business in their own communities. Sugar factories were largely supported through the issue of bonds, as were a number of other industries. Locating any sort of industry in a city could be readily accomplished by providing “inducements” – bonds voted to subsidize the industry. Salina subsidized a carriage works in the city, as well as several railroads. Newton voted $5,000 for its

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91 C.M. Hawkes to S.N. Hawkes, March 29, 1887, quoted in Miller, “Financing the Boom in Kansas...”, 159-160.

92 Saline County Weekly Journal, November 3, 1887.
exploratory drilling operation.\textsuperscript{93} McPherson voted bonds for a waterworks and a new high school.\textsuperscript{94}

Wichita was perhaps the best of the bond-voting cities. The possibilities were first realized with the Burton Car Works. The factory, intending to produce railroad cars for shipping livestock, was induced to move to the city by a combination of bond issue and stock subscriptions from the local populace. Once the die was cast, bonds were voted for purposes today unimaginable. For instance, Wichita voted bond issues for packing houses, elevators, sugar factories, strawboard factories, canning factories, soap factories, and, in perhaps the most spectacular version, a watch factory. The watch factory would be run by Swiss watch-makers, and be housed in an immense stone plant.\textsuperscript{95}

Such bond-voting underscored a mark of creativity on the part of boomers. Bonds were a mechanism that could be used to finance any scheme that one could dream up for their city – whether it be a car works, watch factory, creamery, sugar factory, or any other seemingly promising

\textsuperscript{93} Newton Daily Republican, Oct. 12, 1887.

\textsuperscript{94} McPherson Weekly Republican, March 18, 1887.

\textsuperscript{95} Van Meter Long, 54.
idea. Towns vied against each other for the distinction of a unique industry – whether it be salt, watches, carriages, or shoes. Such limitless speculation brooded on itself, and soon town leaders realized that any of those industries, those things that could set them apart, were nothing more than a bond-vote away.

The total aggregate of bonds voted were immense. Governor John A. Martin of Atchison, a Republican who came to the state during the Free State era and an astute politician, showed special concern in his 1887 address that over $19 million in bonds had been voted and disbursed previously, with over $11,000,000 more pending. Most of these had been voted in the past few years, and some $23 million of those were for railroad construction. Martin expected that “fully half” of the railroad bonds thus voted would never be paid, but still thought that railroad bonded indebtedness should not reach $25 million. “Vast as are the resources of our State, wonderful as its growth has been, and bright as its prospects are, neither the productiveness and development of the present, nor the hopes of the future, will justify a continuance of such reckless folly in bond-voting.”

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William Allen White said:

We voted bonds for anything - schools, courthouses, city buildings, railways, factories without economic reason, streetcars, waterworks, electric lights - anything. Wherever we could borrow capital with bonds we got it, spent it riotously, with never a thought of payday. 97

White’s vision of reckless bond voting wasn’t always the reality. Though many illogical enterprises were subsidized, there was a clear point at which cities would mortgage themselves no more. By late 1887, a proposal to build a new $75,000 courthouse in Newton failed by a vote of 1664 to 1017. While people in the city limits of Newton voted heavily for the courthouse - 98-18 - the rest of the county resoundingly voted the proposition down. In one township, Lakin, 101 votes were cast against the courthouse. Not a single one was cast in favor of the measure. 98

96 Biennial message of Jno. A. Martin, Governor, to the Legislature of Kansas, 1887, 1-2.

97 Nelson, ed., 59.

98 Newton Daily Republican, November 12, 1887.
CHAPTER VI.

“BUY A CORNER LOT TODAY”

In April, 1887, a meeting occurred in Abilene that would today seem fanciful. Some six hundred delegates from central and western Kansas met to discuss the future of their state and of its capitol building. They drafted the following message:

Resolved, by the representatives of the citizens of Abilene and western Kansas, in convention assembled, that we will now, in the future, oppose any further appropriations by the State Legislature for the erectment of the present State institutions of whatsoever kind. That we pledge ourselves to oppose further appropriations for work on the State-house; that while we favor the maintenance of our present State institutions where located, we favor the adoption of a new policy, commensurate with our new growth, present and future importance, and that in this line we ask all of central and western Kansas to unite with us in the work of duplicating every one of the present State institutions, locating the new buildings most advantageously to the interests of the State among the several towns of central and western Kansas, and the State Capitol at some suitable central point to be determined by the ballots of the people of the State.\(^9\)

Such a movement of the state capital seemed to be a sign of the times. With towns growing and laying additions out in every direction, it seemed as if the balance of population had shifted in the state, and more, Topeka’s Santa Fe railroad’s long dominance in state politics might

\(^9\) Quoted in *Appleton’s Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events*, 1888 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1889), 459.
have faded as well. Thus, it seemed to some boomers, it
might be time to shift the political power to a more
central location. The reward — legislative traffic and the
intensive construction surrounding a town’s capital status
— could cement some central or western Kansas city as the
supreme winner in the contest that was the boom.\footnote{100}

McPherson, in particular, felt the power that it might
be able to wield with its nearly central location.
Agitation among westerners for a more centrally-located
Capital was not an uncommon sentiment. But McPherson took
it a bit farther.

It quickly became obvious to McPherson’s boomers that
McPherson needed something more than railroads and location
to make it really boom. Agriculture might make the town a
market center, but its dusty streets and oversupply of dogs
couldn’t make the town grow as the boomers envisioned.\footnote{101}

\footnote{100} James Shortridge, in Cities on the Plains, 375, suggests that the capital should be located along the principal transportation artery and should be located between the largest population cluster and the physical center of the State. In this light, Topeka makes railroad and population sense — but the boomers suggested that the Capitol should be equidistant to all — a purely geographical approach. Curiously, few cited their rail amenities as reason for political dominance.

\footnote{101} The apparent oversupply of dogs was used by boomers to illustrate the town’s impending growth and its prominence. Apparently, the canines’ proliferation didn’t cause anyone to consider hiring a dog catcher; they were an
For that, they needed all of the amenities of urban civilization, and some reason for that civilization to exist. All the amenities of the world couldn’t make anyone move to a place - the boomers weren’t crazy enough to believe that. But what would bring people?

Envious dyspeptics say that with street cars, five railroads, electric lights, a capacious opera house and hundreds of substantial business blocks and residences McPherson ought to be content. Not much! The needs of a booming city are never fully supplied. When we secure a fine system of water works, macadamized streets and gas we’ll rest on our laurels for a short time, and then the all absorbing question will be the removal of the State and National capitals; Cleopatra’s needle and the Washington Monument.\textsuperscript{102}

The movement in McPherson to bring the State capital had begun earlier. The Kansas Speaker of the House was a McPherson native, and on the state legislature’s visit to Wichita in the spring of 1887, he urged the delegates to visit more than just Murdock’s Peerless Princess. The train did, in fact, stop in McPherson, Hutchinson, and Wichita, bringing no end of speculation on the prospects of moving the capital to McPherson.

"The question of moving the state capital from Topeka is not so strange or preposterous as might appear on first obvious outgrowth of the boom, and where dogs were, people were likely to follow. See McPherson Weekly Republican, March 18, 1887.\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
mention of the subject.”

Western expansion of the state, so the argument went, placed a great deal of the constituency far away from the governing body. A more eastern capital might have made sense during the early history of the state, but a new day had dawned. What to do with the current capitol building? The McPherson interests declared that the state had a pressing need for both an insane asylum and a female reformatory school. The capitol buildings could be put to these uses. McPherson citizens added a Capitol Block to their freshly rebuilt downtown, and a new hotel began construction on it. The newly constituted McPherson “ne plus Ultra” literary society debated the subject, “Resolved that McPherson should be the state capital,” a local “Capital band” was formed, and the newspaper pined for the action of the town where the legislature was held, where “entertainment and hospitality can hardly be equaled.”

The legislature visited in middle February, 1887, and most of the town turned out for the event. The town’s opera house was chosen to fete the legislative body, a banner hung at the rear of the auditorium proclaiming “The first legislature session held in McPherson,” causing “no

103 McPherson Weekly Republican, Feb. 18, 1887.
104 McPherson Weekly Republican, Feb. 4, 1887.
little amusement.”\textsuperscript{105} The town seemed ebullient at its prospects.

The Topeka paper thought otherwise: “It is rumored that a daily paper will soon be started in McPherson — wonder if they are going to wait ‘till they get the State Capital?” The McPherson paper responded, “Not much. Here we are as lively as you please. Now bring on your Capital.”\textsuperscript{106}

However, the Topeka interests had their point. The McPherson paper, weekly that it was, often had trouble filling with news. In absence of any real happenings in the town, it printed long serials and encomiums to such hallowed institutions as Valentine’s day. Patent medicine advertisements, syndicated coverage of the legislature, personals, and W.C.T.U. news took up much of a four page weekly newspaper. The rest of the paper was filled with idle boomer rhetoric. In other words, the McPherson Weekly Republican had all of the hallmarks of a backwater country newspaper. To fill a daily with any sort of meaningful news from McPherson would apparently have been a difficult proposition, indeed.

\textsuperscript{105} McPherson Weekly Republican, Feb 25, 1887.

\textsuperscript{106} McPherson Weekly Republican, Feb. 11, 1887.
However fanciful the state capital debate might seem, though, the tide of real estate speculation told a story of real promise – and real danger. The vast amount of bonds, mortgages, outright loans and other credit devoted to develop towns and railroad prospects helped to drive by far the most visible and widespread aspect of the boom, the real estate market. Real estate in towns could take precipitous and wild turns.

By far the most spectacular boom was experienced in Wichita. Wichita was an established city, in its teenage years, as were most of the spectacular boom towns. Wichita drew national attention as real estate prices skyrocketed throughout the mid-1880’s and its prospects for future growth seemed unlimited. Though the fantastic story of Wichita’s rise has been told through a number of sources, it is clear that real estate speculation was a major part of the boom in nearly every Kansas town – the central part included.¹⁰⁷

By the middle of 1887, real estate speculation was rampant. President Grover Cleveland, speaking at Kansas City in October, spoke of a “friend who lately made a trip to the Pacific Coast, and, on returning, bought a lot here.

¹⁰⁷ Miner, Wichita: The Magic City, 45–92.
He went immediately home, and on reaching home found that his lot had been sold for a price so much in advance that it paid the entire expense of his travels across the continent.”

Town lots were an incredibly efficient way for the average person to get in the boom. Lots in newly platted towns often sold out in a matter of hours. Towns could go literally wild with excitement - the boom could come in a rush, as at Caldwell, where, once Reilly had secured the City’s Second Class status and a railroad, “people do not know what price to put on their property, for it is no sooner priced than it is taken up. Lots have changed hands as many as three times in one day, each man making a nice profit... Everybody is wild with excitement. One hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars worth of property was sold yesterday.” A story told of a Chicago drummer in Caldwell who stopped for a few days and invested the $7,000 he had been carrying with him for sales purposes. On a chance speculation, he invested the money of his suppliers - and came out later some $11,000 richer. At Winfield, some $800,000 worth of property changed hands between the 20th

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108 Marion County Record, October 21, 1887.
and the 25th of January, and $200,000 was subscribed to the opera house and other civic buildings.\textsuperscript{109}

A traveler through the region said in February, during the height of the real estate boom:

"The same may be said of Kingman, Caldwell, Salina, Kiowa and many other towns... From what I have seen, I can safely say that all through southern Kansas real estate has increased in value at least 75 per cent... the encouraging feature of the real estate increase is that all sales are cash transactions, and not exchanges at fancy prices."\textsuperscript{110}

His observations that transactions were not at "fancy" prices is perhaps true – so long as values continued to increase, there was no reason to believe that values were inflated. So the argument went, if someone else would pay more, had you paid too much? There was a very real element of mass psychology and delusion involved in the real estate boom. As Earl Van Meter Long wrote in 1931,

It was said that indebtedness enough was created on Christmas Day of 1886, the high light of single day speculation, to bankrupt fifty families. The office of register of deeds had piles of deeds and mortgages piling heaping up, unrecorded, and in great confusion... One merchant is said to have bought two hundred yards of body Brussels carpets for his fine home, in addition to a thousand dollars worth of furniture, and regretted, as he hurried back to his real estate speculating, the time he lost for these small home matters... Practically all the newcomers who came into

\textsuperscript{109} St. Louis Globe-Democrat, February 18, 1887, March 19, 1887.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid, March 19, 1887.
the city were at once infected by this deadly speculation microbe and started in to buy and sell with the feverish expectation of making a great deal of money. Wichita was a fool’s paradise.\textsuperscript{111}

The real estate boom was perhaps the most commented on of all the boom phenomena. The meteoric rises in property led Marshall Murdock to begin publishing real estate transfers as front page news in his Eagle. In Caldwell, George Reilly began to broker real estate transactions for people from around the country. In April, Reilly received a letter from Arizona asking him to “tell me if you think the present prices of real estate are to be permanent. Are factories, machine shops and other industries coming to Caldwell in numbers to assure a healthy growth?” Reilly, in his boomer guise, wrote back that there was no doubt that real estate prices were sound and that growth would continue.

Meanwhile, he began to broker lots for a Civil War veteran, Henry Lockwood, whose speculating son had bought 20 lots and was later killed in an explosion. Reilly attempted to purchase the lots from Lockwood for $3920, and quickly made calculations to resell them for $5300. Lockwood refused, offering them to Reilly at $8,000 a month

\textsuperscript{111} Van Meter Long, 50.
later. Reilly finally brokered the deal for a slightly lower figure. Values increased that rapidly.\textsuperscript{112}

In Newton, by mid-July, Noble Prentis commented that:

It is just as impossible to keep track of the numerous elegant and commodious business blocks and residence being erected in this city as it is to enumerate the stars of heaven. What is more, all of them are costly and remarkably handsome and would do credit to a city of one hundred thousand. Mechanics are busy as bees from early morn to dewy eve and have contracts for work that will keep them on the go from now until winter sets in. From all appearances the building boom is on and is certain to go through with a “razoo.
\textsuperscript{113}

In McPherson, the editor thought that the land in McPherson county “reminds one of the Kentucky Colonel’s description of whiskey. He said that there was good whiskey and better whiskey, but he had never seen any bad whiskey.”\textsuperscript{114} Settlers were rapidly pouring into the country – quarter-sections sold for as much as $12,000, lots on Main Street for $1250.\textsuperscript{115} Real estate transfers were published weekly, each new week bringing astoundingly higher prices for land both in town and in the country.

\textsuperscript{112} A.E. Wood to George Reilly, April 10, 1887, Henry Lockwood to George Reilly, February 23, 1887, June 7, 1887, June 18\textsuperscript{th}, 1887, George Reilly to Henry Lockwood, July 14, 1887, Special Collections, Wichita State University.

\textsuperscript{113} Newton Kansan, July 28, 1887.

\textsuperscript{114} McPherson Weekly Republican, Feb. 18, 1887.

\textsuperscript{115} McPherson Weekly Republican, March 4, 1887.
However real the values might have seemed, by late 1887, inflated real estate values became something of a standing joke. An editor writing a political column headed his musings “Being out here in the tall corn and away from the corner lot booms...”\(^{116}\) The *McPherson Republican* took special pride in making fun of Wichita’s real estate fantasies: “Even the children in Wichita have quit making mud pies and are tracing imitation real estate investments in sand banks.”\(^{117}\) Later, a man in a Wichita was reputed to have been heard saying that “I sold a piece of property yesterday for $935,000,000,000... that property cost me eleven cents three days ago.”\(^{118}\) “Wichita babies... are born with a quit claim deed in one hand and a bogus abstract of title in the other.”\(^{119}\) National newspapers even took up the fray, telling the story of a would-be speculator:

“I tell you I had a narrow escape from being done for out there,” he said on his return from Kansas the other day.

“Attempted murder?” was asked.

“Worse than that. I was about to invest my last dollar in vacant lots in a certain town, when I made a discovery.”

“Titles defective?”

\(^{116}\) *Marion County Record*, July 1, 1887.

\(^{117}\) *McPherson Weekly Republican*, March 18, 1887.

\(^{118}\) *Ibid.*, April 8, 1887.

\(^{119}\) *Ibid.*, April 1, 1887.
“No, the titles were all right, but I recognized the town and declared all business was off. Fifteen years ago the town was called Perkinsville. Now they are carrying it off as Bluff City... Same man is mayor now, and he had got his hair dyed, his teeth filled, and changed the name of the town on purpose to catch some of us again. If I’d bought those lots he’d have waited until the money was paid and the deeds passed, and then pulled me in and yelled: “Same man that beat the city treasurer of Topeka on the gold brick racket! Bought seven lots, eh? I want straight deeds to five for not giving you up to justice, and while you are about it you can throw in the other two as my counsel fee for advising you how to get out of the scrape!”\footnote{New York Sun quoted in Washington Post, October 27, 1889.}

Another vignette from the Washington Post played on the nature of the “rube” from Kansas taken in by the swindle:

Omaha Man—“Are you making a fair living out of your Kansas Farm?” Kansas Man—“Living? Why, I’m rich. You see, there was a little piece of poor ground back of the dugout which was not fit for anything. Well, one day brother Jake dreamed there was gold under it, and the next morning he offered for $100 for it, on long time, of course, for he hadn’t any money, and I sold it... Well, Brother Bill heard of Jake’s dream and bought the lot of him for $1,000, in the same way, you know. Then I got scared and bought it back for $5,000. Then I sold it to Bill for $10,000 and so it went on until a few days ago, when I got the lot and sold it to Jake for $100,000. Just think of it. No more farming for me.” “But what security have you to show for all that value if Jake has no money?” “Why, I’ve got a mortgage on the lot.”\footnote{Washington Post, May 29, 1887.}
CHAPTER VII.

"ONE BY ONE THE ROBINS SING"

In 1918, as the nation was in World War I 100% American fervor, George Morehouse, president of the Kansas State Historical Society, addressed its annual meeting, asking, “Why is the average Kansan an extremist in whatever view he takes of a question, and why does Kansas, like the pendulum, swing so regularly from one side to another?”

Tracing the state’s history of extremes even to prehistoric eras, Morehouse found an unbroken chain of upward and downward swings that the state’s “extremists” had fostered. In finance, he said,

Our people would go crazy over wildcat railroad building, land puffing, town-site development, county-seat and courthouse fights, oil and gas leasing, ‘gold-bearing shales’ without any gold, and all the usual accompanying orgies of stock jobbing, bond voting and mortgaging. Those were the days of railroads without trains or passengers, irrigation ditches and waterworks without water, incorporated towns and cities without inhabitants, courthouses without courts or litigants, schools and colleges without students, churches without worshipers, and all kinds of public improvements without a use – all promoted in some semiwilderness region during the inflation of that well-known commercial gas-bag commonly known as a ‘boom.’

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123 Ibid.
Morehouse could not help but draw parallels between his own era of extremism and that of the past. Kansas had long been known as a place to champion causes. Antislavery and prohibition both brought out a strongly flavored moral rhetoric. Kansas cultural leaders used this same sort of unique brand of rhetoric to drive people to believe that all must be unified and solid to produce economic growth. In a sense, Kansas boomers applied much the same sort of rhetoric that their Free State counterparts had a generation and a half before. The development of Kansas was, to their thinking, a sort of divine quest whose ultimate end would be the salvation of the land from neglect that it suffered under the depredations and ravages of unchecked nature and the Indian. David Emmons has examined the rhetoric of boomers, concluding that there was a concerted effort to change the image of the Great Plains to that of a garden. Rechristening the place into a paradise would attract immigration and implement the “safety valve” that many spoke of in the nineteenth century. The plains would be developed — because they had to.\textsuperscript{124}

Inherent in this development was, for lack of a better term, solidarity. Dissent from the vision of

\textsuperscript{124} Emmons, 11-19.
grandiose economic destiny for the state was a sign of infidelity and moral decay. Framing economic questions in this sort of moral light led the economic development of the state in a wild swing as boomers built up fervor and then their constructed faith fell away – Morehouse’s “extremism” at work. Such sentiments were echoed constantly in the papers: “The only way to advance, to grow, to prosper or succeed in any way is to put forth all your energy, every effort and make a path to travel in.”  

“Unlike poets, most booms are made, not born. Business booms and prosperity inevitably come from enterprise… Trade is not sentimental. It must be sought.”  

Anyone who “kicked” against the boom was clearly not one to be trusted. An editor at Marion, attacking a rival who claimed the town had no boom, put it thus: 

What do the business men of Marion think of that? What do the mechanics and laboring men, whose employment depends upon the prosperity of the city think of one who is not only prejudicing people against the place in his boomerang newspaper but is ‘nearly every day’ writing letters to strangers. Fine way, that, to boom a town, now isn’t it?

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125 Newton Daily Republican, October 20, 1887.
126 Newton Daily Republican, October 11, 1887.
127 Marion County Record, November 18, 1887.
More, the boom must go on. A Salina editor, under the heading “A Worthy Example,” told the story of two town lots that had been sold to finance a military academy:

Mr. Martin Johnson... came to Salina last Saturday and borrowed the money, one hundred and sixty dollars, to make the eighth payment on his two lots. He said he had very poor crops this year, but he had put his name down for the lots, and he thought the honorable way was to borrow the money and make the payments when due, so that the building now under contract could be finished.\textsuperscript{128}

Because of this psychological idea of a boom – that all should be 100% involved to keep it going, small events could have large impacts. When Marshall Murdock of the \textit{Wichita Eagle} wrote his now-famous “Call a Halt” editorial on February 24 1887, the boom didn’t immediately stop. Indeed, Murdock skirted the issue, officially denouncing the “additions craze,” referring to the dozens of additions that had been platted onto Wichita for the sole purpose of speculation. Murdock’s cautionary editorial wasn’t a polemic, nor did it contain any strong incitements against the boomers. The tide of economic development couldn’t simply be stopped by one man.

The psychological impact of that editorial was important. The boom was built on two things - faith and credit. The latter couldn’t exist without the former, and

\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Saline County Weekly Journal}, November 24, 1887.
the former wouldn’t get anyone far without the latter. But there was a limit to both, and the limit of one or the other was reached by the late months of 1887. Murdock simply was the first to voice it.¹²⁹

The collapse of the boom was much sharper than has been previously realized. The dry summer in 1887 and a consequently low harvest in the fall of 1887 combined with the obvious spectacle of the by-now idiotic real estate boom eventually served to quell the faith of boomers and to thus burst the bubble. Indeed, one could envision the buildup of the boom as agricultural, flowering finally in a strong urban boom. But when the underpinning agricultural statistics were gone, there was nothing to support the urban boom – and it collapsed spectacularly.

What can be particularly deceiving is that many boomer enterprises and particularly buildings got their start during the summer of 1887 but were not completed until the beginning of 1888, making it seem as though the boom of new ideas continued longer than the real amount that optimism and fresh capital held out. Studying the records of the late fall of 1887, it becomes quite clear that the boom

¹²⁹ Wichita Eagle, February 24 1887. Malin’s study of Kinsley also illustrates the same collapse – credit was clearly gone by October or November of 1887.
took a precipitous turn for the worse, never to reach anywhere near its crest again.

The frantic drive and energy that characterized Wichita ended with the summer, as a mad rush for more credit to keep the speculation going swept outward from Murdock’s Peerless Princess of the Plains. Some sought loans at rates as high as six per cent a month. Noble Prentis at the Newton Kansan commented, “financial matters appear costive in the Peerless Princess, judging from the Promised Princely Premiums.”

Across the rest of central Kansas in the hot summer of 1887, papers filled with telltale signs: pages and pages of delinquent taxes on real estate, sheriff’s sales, the closing of local stores. By late November, in Newton, “Constable Partridge is the most versatile business man in town. One day he runs a store, next day a hotel and so on.” The Economy store was to be auctioned. The Brunswick hotel was foreclosed on. Smith Center had a “bond fire.” The times had changed. But a bit of optimism still remained:

The coolest winds are those that herald spring, the darkest hour is before the dawn, the greatest crooks

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130 Newton Kansan, September 29, 1887.

131 Newton Daily Republican, November 17, 1887.
are those that never swing, the finest watch is the one we have in pawn.\textsuperscript{132}

A Salina poet put it thus:

One by one the leaves are falling,
One by one the robins sing,
One by one the booms are dying
That were started in the Spring.\textsuperscript{133}

Even as the boom began to collapse in the early chill of October, Noble Prentis looked out on the construction and wrote,

The Kansas way is to undertake to pave, sidewalk, lower, raise, extend, widen, ditch, culvert and generally boom all the streets at one and the same time; and in the ‘fall of the year’ drop the same unfinished, like a ‘serial story,’ the ‘next number’ whereof is lost. The winter, the season of reflection, is approaching. Then the spring will come and the meadowlarks will sing that the boom has come. Will Kansas cities have any more sense then?\textsuperscript{134}

In Salina, October thoughts still seemed to be directed at the “outsiders:”

The boom wave which swept over Kansas has been succeeded by a healthier and more durable condition of prosperity. Few, if any, of the cities which were ‘boomed’ have suffered materially from what was deemed an unhealthy growth. Property prices which were in any way reasonable have not gone back, which shows that the various booming cities were not ahead of the country. Business continues good in most of these places... Kansas is really much more prosperous now than she was a twelve-month ago, and it is but the

\textsuperscript{132} Newton Daily Republican, November 22, 1887.

\textsuperscript{133} Saline County Weekly Journal, November 10, 1887.

\textsuperscript{134} Newton Daily Republican, October 25, 1887.
commencement of the grand and wonderful prosperity yet to prevail.\textsuperscript{135}

In Marion, the editor thought of the boom construction and the look it had wrought on towns:

The Kansas man is apt to think that when he dies the world, or at least Kansas, will stop growing. Everything must be done at once while he is on hand to superintend. The Kansas man of this generation is overburdening himself, while not providing for future generations. He had better build less and build better.\textsuperscript{136}

The college boom was perhaps the last major gasp. Typical of the pattern was McPherson College, whose April founding came to an abrupt and less-than-satisfactory end when the Brethren church was forced into hiring four agents to travel in a vain attempt to sell the now-worthless lots that constituted half of the college’s endowment – and collect on the ones they could sell. More often than not, these lots were later taken at a sheriff’s sale. The college, supposed to open in October of 1887, was delayed until September of 1888 for want of a building. The initial building, Fahnestock Hall, served as dormitory, classrooms, museum and indeed as the entire college facility until enough money could be raised to complete a second building, Sharp Hall, whose construction lasted in phases from 1887–

\textsuperscript{135} Saline County Journal, October 27, 1887.

\textsuperscript{136} Marion County Record, July 1, 1887.
1898. Later, the college, bankrupt, had to be reorganized under the control of four faculty members. A committee charged with investigating the problems, found that “the lot sale at the first was not in Brethren hands, that those who had invested for gains ought to be willing to lose, that the prosperity of the city had caused an unduly high estimation of values, and that the price of real estate had materially declined.”

Indeed, McPherson's troubles were hardly the worst. Several hundred people attended the laying of the cornerstone for Bethel College in 1887, but the institution did not commence operation until 1893 – its unfinished buildings a point of contention and embarrassment for those who looked north from Newton. Indeed, says historian David Haury, “The motives of the early supporters of Bethel College are not clear. They primarily emphasized the need for an institution to train religious workers but planned a liberal arts college.” Such confusion and contention was a result of the boom – the masking of reality and the seeming opportunity that pervaded Kansas.

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137 Craik, 72. In addition, there is a file of letters in the McPherson College Special Collections of President Solomon Z. Sharp letters to various lot-buyers attempting to collect on the College’s finances with varying success.

138 Haury, 32-33.
Looking back on the aftermath of the boom, Rea Woodman said it had been “purging as a fire, devastating as an earthquake... It was like recovering from a champagne drunk, or waking from a nightmare in which you had fallen into an abyss that had no banks.”¹³⁹

In Caldwell, George Reilly tried to maintain enthusiasm, but after his brief and spectacular rise in February and March, he found on July 14 1887 that “we are having a very dry season in this particular section of the country and as a consequence real estate is in very poor demand.” Reilly hoped that the arrival of the Rock Island would revive the boom, but his hopes were dashed. Reilly later shifted his boom energy to Oklahoma, working with the “boomer” movement to open lands in 1889 from Wichita. Reilly lived out the rest of his life in Wichita, dying in 1919 at the age of 68. Caldwell’s type – the gambler, looking for his next fix – found it in Oklahoma and the Cherokee Strip.¹⁴⁰

Historian James R. Shortridge identified the boom as one of the watershed events that led to the creation of the

¹³⁹ Rea Woodman, Wichitana, 1877-1897, (Wichita: Privately printed, 1948), 129.
¹⁴⁰ George Reilly to Henry Lockwood, July 14, 1887, Special Collections, Wichita State University. Reilly’s biographical information comes from accompanying information in the collection.
"middle west" as a geographic cultural entity. Breaking the financial ties from the East – a difficult and sometimes emotionally charged process – led people in the region to think of themselves as people set apart from the traditional East and to identify themselves in a new way.

He says:

Much Eastern capital had been invested in Kansas and Nebraska prior to 1887... Some fortunes were made from this speculation, but when hard times... produced defaults on loans, the two regions blamed each other for the troubles. Prairie farmers were irresponsible spendthrifts in Eastern eyes; Easterners were selfish, unfeeling exploiters from the Western perspective... The financial crisis affected familial as well as financial ties, dividing peoples who had already begun to drift apart. Kansans and Nebraskans who had been Eastern born and thus were ‘full of Eastern thought, energy, method and sympathies’ were replaced by a generation who had known only the prairies.141

This post-boom identity was very strong. Many found themselves of a similar mind as to what should be done about the vast amount of debt that saddled Kansas, and through this thinking the soft-money Populist Party gained strength.

Whether or not populism came out of the harsh realities of the collapse is a debated subject.

Essentially, two schools of thought exist on the subject. Some, including Raymond Miller, have argued that the high

debts created during the boom led immediately to the growth of populism in the agrarian Western states. Such an argument assumes that the Populist Party’s seemingly key issue – free silver and the resultant “soft money” – was the primary impetus behind the party’s existence and the sole reason for its creation.142

While monetary policy received much contemporary attention, historians writing recently argue that the populist revolt was based on a shared vision of the world that included more than money:

Farm reformers believed that part of the solution was equity. The relative poverty and lack of progress in agriculture was the result of the railroad manager’s discriminatory freight rates, the corporate purchase of corrupt legislators, and the bankers’ control of credit and money. However, the reform imagination went beyond simply establishing a level playing field between industry and agriculture. Farm reformers also sought a more cultured, more productive, more modern life—a life that would transcend the limits of overwork, mud, and desolation, to realize a “higher civilization” in rural America.143

The strains of the history of populism are many and varied, from Richard Hofstadter’s Age of Reform whose suggestion that the Populists were a movement that played

142 For a traditional account of Populism and the boom, see Raymond Curtis Miller, “The Background of Populism in Kansas,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review, vol. 11 no. 4 (1925): 469-489. For a newer and much different take on Populism and its origins, see Ostler.
on people’s desire for an agrarian past, obscuring the real issues that faced an increasingly urban nation to more modern scholars that have tried to explain the populists as a genuine movement that sought to undo the inequities of Victorian-era society. What is perhaps lacking in explanations of populist origins is that those swept up by the boom of the 1880’s had already tried to remake their world in a shared vision of 19th century progress. They had, in essence, fought what was supposed to be the good fight, and were left with nothing but excessive debts and little way to pay them off.\textsuperscript{144}

The crash didn’t take any of their enthusiasm, energy, or “push” as it was termed at the time. What it did was to redirect some of them to remake again the world that they lived in. Viewed in such a light, populism’s relationship to the boom is not the sharp divide from the boom years that some believed, though no one can argue with the high amount of indebtedness and poverty that plagued the plains region in general through the 1890’s. Instead, populism was something of a continuation of the boom — another attempt to reshape the world, albeit on a different set of terms. Such a radical change brought much criticism and

\textsuperscript{144} Richard Hofstadter, \textit{The Age of Reform} (New York: Knopf, 1955). For contrast, see Postel’s 2007 history.
turbmoil at the time, but many historians argue that the populists did, indeed, alter and reform the political system. Such was and indirect but lasting legacy of the boom.

A number of factors played into the boom, the most important being a masking of reality. People became so infatuated with the possibilities that the land held that they exceeded all reasonable faith. But the way the boom worked, no one could turn back. If one influential person were to back down, sell out, give up, the boom would puncture and be “busted.” Such an atmosphere led not only to a wild atmosphere of instant wealth, but carried with it a significant imperative to all involved. Such rampant speculation could not stop, else the participants involved would lose their paper wealth. While viewing the boom from a modern vantage point, or even from an outsider’s perspective in the 1880’s, it is easy to point out the fallacies of the various boomer schemes to make Kansas the epicenter of commerce in the world. But faith in the “boom” was vital – and it held out for a long time.

Patricia Limerick suggests that “If Hollywood wanted to capture the emotional center of Western history, its movies would be about real estate.” Limerick also suggests that the role of speculation has been underplayed in the
Western past. Such an explanation makes sense, because, as Limerick says,

To the beneficiary, accumulating profit, it was just another legitimate reward for getting there first – for having the nerve, the enterprise, and the instinct to acquire title at the right time. To those who came later and faced the higher prices, speculation was an economic activity bordering on criminality and playing on unfair advantage; speculative profits were an unearned increment by which selfish individuals took advantage of the innocent and hard-working, whose labors constituted the real improvement of the country... Faced with the reality of speculation, historians can still react with an emotion suggestive of a Baptist who, in the course of compiling a history of church socials, discovers that a good many in the congregation have been drinking from a spiked punch bowl. Speculation is extremely disillusioning if you are trying to hold on to the illusion that agriculture and commerce are significantly different ways of life, one representing nature and virtue, and the other artifice and temptation to vice.145

Kansans expected a lot out of the boom – clearly more than was reasonable. Railroads had given access to a form of instant civilization – one that could transport all of the technological progress of the 19th century across vast frontiers and bring it right to one’s doorstep. Faith in technology thus became an important idea of the boom. No matter whether schemes relying on technology – such as silk and sorghum sugar – worked or not, there was a strong and abiding faith that they would make things better.

Machinery had revolutionized agriculture, and thus more faith was built. Out of this faith came credit – and the interplay of the two finally reached a breaking point in late 1887. After it did, the state learned lessons that would persist a long time. The promise of the boom never came back to Kansas. Places might boom on a local level due to specific natural resources – oil, gas, or wheat, but never again would the state be caught in such a tide of optimism.
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