“Hitch your wagon to a star:” The Kansas boom of 1887.

Luke Chennell*

Abstract. Kansas experienced a major boom in the late 1880s that touched nearly every aspect of economic and social life in the state. Wichita, for instance, was the third fastest growing city in the nation barring none. Other Kansas towns across the state entertained grandiose notions of growth including industrial developments and agricultural bounty beyond compare. By late 1887 and early 1888, the boom had largely collapsed, leaving some destitute and setting the stage for the growth of Populism and other economic reforms.

1. Introduction

This project grew out of studies in Kansas history undertaken during HI 535 Kansas History and was expanded on in HI 730 Seminar in American history, both with Dr. Craig Miner. The remaining physical evidence of the boom, primarily architecture, led the author to study the period through a number of primary source materials including newspapers, reminiscences, real estate records and assorted papers from the period. Previous scholarly work on the boom includes Craig Miner’s West of Wichita [1] and James Malin’s The Kinsley Boom of the Late Eighties [2]. Other than a few scant mentions, the boom has received little scholarly attention.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance.

Kansas history has been characterized by some as a series of reverses and disasters that shaped a unique regional character. Previous historians have focused on those reverses and disasters, but have paid little attention to the often wild build-ups that preceded them. A prime example is the boom of 1887.

Cresting in the summer of 1887, the boom brought about a wild atmosphere of opportunity, one that could produce men of great paper wealth virtually overnight and then leave them destitute a few months later. Kansans dreamed of and engaged in activities ranging from large-scale industrial manufacturing to creation of universities to construction of some of the grandest architecture in the West. 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.

As early as 1884, people had realized the potential for renewed speculation in the future of Kansas. Increasing numbers of people took up lands under the Homestead Act or purchased relatively inexpensive railroad lands, ceded to the railroads under the Land Grant acts.[3]

Settlement drove a number of initiatives that helped to create the boom. 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, the boom relied heavily on the external labor force and credit that railroads brought.

Boomers often tended to confuse causes and effects. Railroads are a prime example. It was thought at the time that railroads would 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.

Industrial prospects were also a large part of the boom. Of many ventures that Kansans undertook, two stand out: silk and sorghum sugar. Silk was hitherto normally produced in temperate, resort-like climates and was a trade good imported at great expense. Several attempts at sericulture were undertaken during the period. Boomers took the attempts at producing silk to mean that Kansas had a climate “similar to Italy”,[4] and that the land could be transformed into something entirely unlike it was by dint of labor and enterprise.
But by far the most tantalizing of any industrial prospect was sorghum sugar. The idea of producing sweeteners—a rare and valuable commodity on the frontier—at a fraction of their present cost from crops grown locally was an irresistible idea that often led those involved astray.

Agricultural—and agricultural industry—were bountiful in wet years. But drier years could prove much worse—and 1885-1887 were much drier years. Yet the realities of the weather didn’t reflect the realities of confidence. 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 shot through with an unrighteous design for spoils, a great ugly, riproaring civilization built out of the glittering fabric of credit.”

Credit helped to finance the most visible aspect of the boom—real estate. Town lots were an incredibly efficient way for the average person to get in on the boom—lots in newly platted towns often sold out in a matter of hours. Towns could go literally wild with excitement. The boom was a romantic process for some, but for others it was a very different experience.

People’s fortunes were literally being bought and sold in the process of the boom. 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 rhetoric to drive people to believe that all must be unified and solid to produce economic growth.

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 Wichita Eagle wrote an editor urging people to “Call a Halt” on February 24, 1887 the boom didn’t immediately stop. But the boom was built on two things—faith and credit. The latter couldn’t exist without the former, and 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.

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.” Out of this post-boom landscape came walking into St. Joseph, Missouri George Brooks, his wife and five children. Brooks, completely destitute, intended to return to “the wife’s folks” in Iowa, but had no ready way to get there. He and his family walked some 400 miles out of Kansas before receiving any kind of aid.

3. Conclusions

A number of factors played into the boom. But the most important factor in creating the boom was a masking of reality—a condition where 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 person were to back down, sell out, give up, the boom would puncture and be busted. But the end had to come, and it did.

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 technological progress across frontiers. 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. 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. Whether or not Populism came out of the harsh realities of the collapse is a debated subject.

But the promise of the boom never came back to Kansas. Places might boom on a local level, but never again would the state be caught in such a tide of optimism—and the survivors would likely say that was a good thing.