

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

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Kansas experienced a major boom in the late 1880s that touched nearly every aspect of life in the state. Wichita, for instance, was the 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 1888 and early 1889, the boom had largely collapsed, setting the stage for the growth of Populism and other economic reforms. Studying the rhetoric of boomers primarily through newspapers, memoirs and other written accounts, this study has focused on the boom as it was experienced in central and south-central Kansas during the late months of 1887, when it became apparent that the boom could not go on forever. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of boom institutions and boomer rhetoric have been combined in the paper to produce a picture of booming communities in the central part of the state. Much boomer rhetoric contained a sort of fervor in much the same vein that was exhibited during the Kansas Free State movement. By the end of the boom many were left with a feeling that approximated, as Rea Woodman of Wichita put it, “a giant hangover.” The end of the boom also brought on the Populist movement particularly in Kansas, which later became a national political force.