

The Great Plains Drain

Kansas and the Midwest face a 'demographic dead zone'

By WILLIAM B. DICKINSON

*Peace on my little town, a speck in the safe,
Comforting, impersonal immensity of Kansas....
Peace on my little town, haze-blessed, sun-friended,
Dreaming sleepy days under the world-champion sky.*

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Stray very far from I-70, the asphalt ribbon that bisects Kansas, and you soon enter a demographic dead zone. To be sure, there are towns of consequence along the interstate's 400-mile stretch through the state—Lawrence, Topeka, Manhattan/Junction City, Salina, Hays, Colby. But it's as if the highway has sucked the life out of the surrounding plains.

The Kansas countryside is dotted with remnants of once-prospering hamlets now occupied by old folks, families on welfare (housing is dirt cheap), immigrants working in meat-packing jobs, and the occasional "meth" dealer. Courthouse squares once packed with black Ford sedans on Saturday today lack drugstores or

diners, with storefronts boarded up or turned into makeshift residences. A defeated air hangs over these desiccated reminders of better times. What does this tell us about the future of the Midwest's rural societies in a time when urban America is siphoning off jobs and the young?



Family farms have been likened to a fading reflection in a rearview mirror. Where 80 acres once constituted a livelihood, new technology has enabled just a few farmers to work acreage 10 times that without strain. Thanks to computers, global positioning, and other advances, tractors, combines, and sprayers almost drive themselves. John Deere is introducing a product that will not only guide a farm

machine down a row but will turn it around without the driver's help. With corporate-style farming in its ascendancy, the traditional family farm becomes an anachronism.

Staving off depopulation won't be easy in



An abandoned farm house in rural Kansas.

what some observers already are calling "Abandoned America." Even though U.S. population grew by 6.4 percent between 2000 and 2006, 43 percent of all the nation's counties lost population. The most relentless decline came in a broad band stretching from West Texas to North Dakota. "Many rural communities, especially in the Midwest," concluded the Population Reference Bureau, "have been losing population for decades and are on the brink of extinction." Economic development efforts often are half-hearted. One executive charged with bringing in new industry for Kansas was quoted as saying:

William B. Dickinson has served as manager of the Washington Post Writers Group and currently holds the Manship Chair in mass communications at Louisiana State University. He continues to be associated with the Biocentric Institute at Airlie, Virginia, for which this essay was written. It is reprinted by permission.

“We ought to give each of the 300,000 people living in western Kansas \$5,000 to rent a U-Haul and move east.”

Such pessimism confounds the exceptionalist tradition of Kansas. Writing in 1910, Carl L. Becker captured the prevailing ethos when he wrote: “To understand why people say ‘Dear Old Kansas!’ is to understand that Kansas is no mere geographical expression, but a ‘state of mind,’ a religion and a philosophy in one.” This will come as news to the millions of travelers whose only view of Kansas has come from 30,000 feet in the air. But its origins lie in the pioneer spirit of those who in the nineteenth century settled what was then considered the Great American Desert and, with the steel plow, brought a tenuous prosperity to the region. William Allen White, the “sage of Emporia,” in 1922 wrote an essay, “Kansas: A Puritan Survival,” that captured the contradictions inherent in the state. “The Kansas prairies are as mysterious and moody as the sea in their loveliness,” he wrote, “yet we graze them and plow them and mark them with roads and do not see them.”

Can soaring commodity prices enable rural America to reverse a decades-long fall toward the bottom? The price of farmland is up more than 20 percent from a year ago in the region, thanks to world food demand. Kansas farmers also are profiting from high oil prices that have led to a renaissance of drilling previously unprofitable stripper wells. Passage of a five-year \$289 billion farm bill with new and bigger subsidies also is making the future look brighter. But farmers remain cautious, confirming the old joke that “Kansans never spend a nickel but they think it a dime.” Prosperity on the farm won’t translate into increased rural employment if computerized farming becomes the norm.



There’s a further paradox: The Great Plains drain comes at a time when U.S. population continues an inexorable climb. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that today’s 305 million people will grow to

400 million in 2039 and reach 439 million in 2050. Most of the increase seems destined to further clog our urban areas, where crumbling infrastructure, jammed freeways, and chaotic schools diminish quality of life. But small-town and rural living have little appeal to young people seeking bright lights and personal ambitions. Unless they can be given good reasons to stay down on the farm, the survival of rural America will remain problematic.

Optimists believe there are ways the plains can learn to live with a declining population. Wind farms could generate construction jobs and tax revenue. A proposed super-highway between Mexico and Canada could pass through the region, bringing jobs and people. Several academics have proposed turning the plains into a “buffalo commons” that would preserve vast unspoiled acreage for future generations. A small step in that direction can be found in the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in Kansas’ Flint Hills. It is the

only National Park System unit devoted to North America’s tallgrass prairie ecosystem, which once covered 140 million acres from Kansas to Indiana and Canada to Texas.

Less than 4 percent of the prairie remains today, much of it in Kansas. A private/public partnership involving the Nature Conservancy encompasses 10,894 acres in Chase County. Much of the credit goes to William Least Heat-Moon’s best-selling history of the county, *PrairieErth* (1991). “The Flint Hills are the last remaining grand expanse of tallgrass prairie in America,” he wrote. “The grasses can grow to ten feet, high enough that red men once stood atop their horses to see 20 yards ahead.... These (grasses) and their relatives make the Flint Hills an immense pasturage nutritionally richer than the Bluegrass country of Kentucky.”

There are those who believe that America’s unique province is her prairie. Preserving and nurturing it and its people will be a task for future generations. Ironically, that future may involve giving large swaths back to Nature and letting Nature take its course. ■

