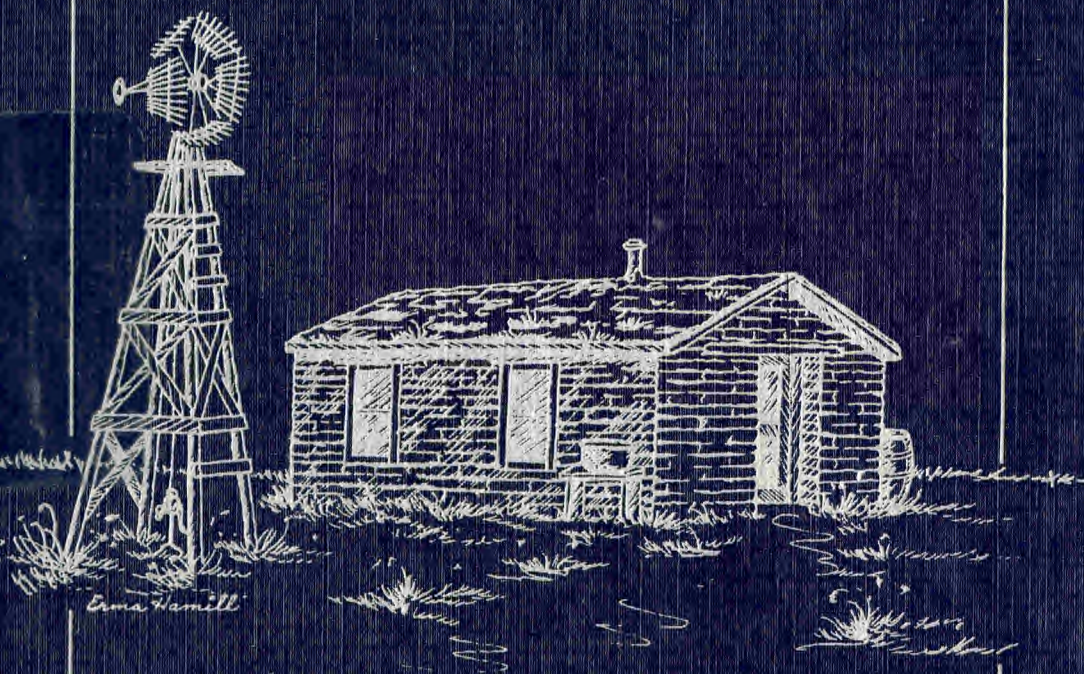


A History of Thomas County, Kansas 1885-1964

WAYNE C. WINGO



About the Author



Wayne Clarence Wingo was born in Winona, Logan County, Kansas, on December 18, 1927, the son of Ewell Elmer and Lona Ethel (Groves) Wingo. His parents came to Northwestern Kansas in 1919 from Beaver County, Oklahoma, where their parents had settled land claims in the era of the early 1900's. Following Ewell's discharge from the United States Army after service during World War I he rejoined Ethel, whom he had wed on Christmas Day, December 25, 1917. In finding no future in Oklahoma, the Wingo's followed Ethel's father, mother, and their nine other children to the Chardon, Rawlins County, Kansas, region where her father, Frederick Arthur Groves assumed his Lay Methodist minister position at Stevens Chapel. Ewell took a teaching position in a country school in the area, and he and Ethel moved in with her parents in the small parsonage.

As was then customary in the Methodist Church of that time, he was moved to Long Island, Phillips County, to serve a charge there in 1921-22 and then into Thomas County and the Gem Kansas, Methodist Church during 1923-24. The Wingo's had followed along to both places where Ewell found positions as school custodian and bus driver. When Reverend Groves and his family moved to central Kansas in 1924, the Wingo's with their new daughter Eulah Evelyn moved to Levant, Thomas County, Kansas, where he was employed at the Levant School. During this time Ethel's brother C.C. "Preach" Groves taught and coached in the grade school and married Wilma Touslee of Levant. In 1927 Ewell moved his family to Winona after securing a job in a creamery. Shortly after their arrival Wayne was born, but because the job ended when the business failed, the family of four moved to Colby in 1928. Wayne's parents remained in Colby until their deaths; Ewell died in 1960 and Ethel in 1966. They were buried in Colby's Beulah

Cemetery as were Frederick Arthur and Anna May Groves and later Wilma and "Preach" Groves. The one true Thomas County native, Eulah, lives in Rexford with her husband James M. Dible, whom she married in May of 1942. Jim was engaged in farming and after spending three years in the service during World War II, he returned to the Rexford community and to farming.

Wayne, like Eulah, attended the Colby Public Schools, the Consolidated Grade School and Colby Community High School. Growing up in the desperate depression years made material needs skimpy for the family, but Ethel's influence upon her children proved invaluable. She left an indelible impact on Wayne's recognition of the value of education. After graduating from junior high in May, 1941, Wayne's high school years at C.C.H.S. were the traumatic years of World War II. It was the influences of all his fine teachers that spawned Wayne's interest in becoming a teacher if ever he would have the chance to attend college. Teacher-coach Kenneth S. Norton was Wayne's idol during his formative junior high years. Band director William Beck was another teacher that abetted his goal during his high school days. However, perhaps Principal Floyd M. Farmer's influence as his basketball coach and history teacher who counselled Wayne to go to college in 1945 rather than volunteer for military service following his graduation in 1945. Dr. Farmer's rationale was that, being seventeen in December of 1944, Wayne could perhaps get in at least a semester of college before being drafted. About the time World War II ended in August, Paul "Busch" Gross, basketball coach and athletic director, came to Colby and convinced Wayne to attend Fort Hays State College and play for him that winter of 1945-46.

From 1945 to 1949 Wayne pursued his goal for a college degree, and in May, 1949, he was graduated with a B.S. in Physical Education. As in high school Wayne was active in athletics, student government, and clubs. He was elected president of his freshman class, student council member, a basketball letterman, K-Club, Phi Sigma Epsilon social fraternity, and a member of Seventh Cavalry, the men's leadership organization. In the spring of 1949 he signed a contract to teach and coach at Scott City Junior High. On August 7, 1949, Wayne married Wanda Lee Lowe, the daughter of Aaron Lee and Bertha Lowe of WaKeeny, Kansas. After one year at Scott City, he spent a year in sales work, but he returned to the education profession in 1951 when he took a position as a teacher-coach at Utica, Kansas, High School. The next two years in Utica, 1951-53, were followed by his acceptance of a similar position at McDonald Rural High School from 1953-56. In the summers of 1953-55 the Wingo's attended the University of Wyoming where Wayne earned his M.A. in Educational Administration and Wanda completed her education, receiving a B.S. Degree in Elementary Education. From 1956-59 the Wingo's moved to Kinsley where Wayne taught and coached in the Kinsley Junior-Senior High School and from 1959-62 he served as an administrator in the high school but taught two classes as well. In the spring of 1962 and the unification of schools in Kansas causing some bitter feelings Wayne had assistantship offers from Wyoming U. and Fort Hays State. Wyoming's offer was to pursue an doctoral degree in education while the Fort Hays State offer was to pursue a second master's degree—in history.

Weighing his options with Wanda they both agreed his real love was teaching and not administration. So he spent the years 1962-64 completing work on his M.A. in History. His second year during the fall semester he was assigned to teach a required section of Western Civilization and got a taste of college teaching. However, it slowed his choosing his required thesis topic. Encouraged by his adviser, Dr. Wilda Smith, he determined to write a history of Thomas County.

In the spring semester of 1964 for a period of nearly three months, Wayne drove from Hays to Colby each Monday afternoon and, staying at his mother's home from then until after the Court House closed on Friday; he then returned to Hays. Most of the research came from the official county papers stored in the County Clerk's office. These were his primary sources. Other newspapers of the county, tape recordings and personal interviews were done in Colby. Time and financial limitations limited his research but one additional sojourn to the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka gave him the materials from which his *History of Thomas County* evolved. Much rewriting was required and when completed, he received his M.A. in History at the summer graduation exercises in 1964. He had been honored in the spring by selection to the prestigious national academic honor society of Phi Kappa Phi.

In 1964-65 he attended on yet another assistantship the University of Kansas where he began work on his doctorate. His duties were teaching one section of United States History each semester. In the spring of 1965 he was hired as a full-time employee of the Extension Division, but during that summer it became very clear to him, now in his late thirties, that although he enjoyed college teaching, he truly missed high school young people. This realization, this "looking back" as more mature folks and most older folks do, convinced him that upon such scrutiny he truly desired to be a high school classroom teacher rather than a college professor where pressures are more directed at publishing "learned works" rather than at attempting to "broaden the minds" of high school youth. He seeks to make an impact upon his students just as his Colby Public School's special teachers had done for him. And so—since 1965 this commitment to young people continues his life's work at Topeka West High School.

A HISTORY OF THOMAS COUNTY, KANSAS

being

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the Fort Hays Kansas State College in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts

by

Wayne C. Wingo
B.S., Fort Hays Kansas State College
M.A., University of Wyoming



FORWARD

The Thomas County Historical Society hopes that after reading Mr. Wingo's thesis it will be an inspiration for others to continue further historical research after the period covered in the book.

We sincerely thank Dr. Floyd L. Smith for his encouragement and support in publishing this book. The Society gratefully acknowledges with appreciation the art work on the front cover contributed by Erma Griggs Hamill.

The Thomas County Historical Society is also indebted to Larry Barrett for using his expertise on the computer to index the book.



ABSTRACT

This study of Thomas County is a general history of the county from 1885-1964 with stress on the social, political, and economic aspects of its development. Agricultural conditions are particularly significant throughout the history of the area, and the outstanding events of each period are recorded. The history is divided into five eras following a brief introduction. These include the early settlement and rapid growth, 1885-1888; hard times and recovery, 1889-1916; World War I and the 1920's; the drought and depression years of the 1930's; and World War II and the postwar years. The final chapter is one of summarization and conclusions reached by the author in this study. In addition, six figures and five tables are included to help portray the story of Thomas County.

Primary sources utilized consist of various county newspapers from March, 1885, to January, 1964, the many volumes of the *Biennial Reports of the State Board of Agriculture* from 1886 to 1960, and records and laws of the county and state. Secondary sources include the publications of the Kansas Historical Society, various newspaper and magazine articles, books, booklets of the Prairie Printers, pamphlets, and a few personal interviews and tape recordings.

The title 'ACKNOWLEDGEMENT' is centered within a highly decorative, symmetrical frame. The frame consists of a central oval containing the text, with elaborate scrollwork, floral motifs, and flourishes extending outwards from the top, bottom, and sides. The overall style is reminiscent of late 19th or early 20th-century book design.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Sincere appreciation is extended to Dr. Wilda Smith for her assistance, suggestions, and constructive criticism in the writing of this thesis. Deep appreciation is also extended to Dr. Donald Chipman, Dr. Roberta Stout, Mr. Richard Marcus, Mr. John Creighton, and Miss Eleanor Bogart for their invaluable help in reading and correcting the preliminary drafts of this work. The author is indebted most of all to his wife, Wanda, for her patience, assistance, and understanding during the writing of this history.

W. C. W.



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CHAPTER I

Introduction

It is generally believed that a complete history of Kansas will not be possible until there has been a compilation of all county histories. Such a view seems valid, and the purpose of this study is to compile such a history of Thomas County, Kansas.

Much of the research undertaken in this study was done in Colby, Kansas. Research quickly indicated that little had been written about the county except for a few short works of a limited nature. Visits were made to the President of the Thomas County Historical Society, W. D. Ferguson; Mrs. B. V. Dimmitt, Librarian of the Pioneer Memorial Library; and Kim Phillips and Bill James, newspapermen in Colby. These people all urged the writer to undertake such a project since they felt there was a definite need for such a study. All were most helpful.

Since there was very little previous work to turn to, it was necessary to utilize the newspapers of the county as primary sources for this study. Such a prospect was forboding, for it meant a perusal of some seventy-five years of such papers covering a period from 1885 to 1960. Although such an undertaking was most tedious and time-consuming, it was rewarding as well as essential; for, as noted historian, George L. Anderson, states:

... the most fruitful technique for the historian is to study a community in its entirety, with the emphasis upon the role of individuals as portrayed in local newspapers and manuscript sources.¹

Since a fire in the *Colby Free Press-Tribune* building had damaged the bindings of the bound volumes of Thomas County newspapers, it was necessary to utilize the filed official county papers in the office of the county clerk. The solicitous attitude of Thelma Connelly and her assistant, Mrs. Alice Upchurch, made possible, in large measure, the bulk of the resources of this work.² A few other newspapers were checked at the archives of the Kansas Historical Library at Topeka, Kansas.³

Research uncovered some excellent published accounts of the early period. Specifically, these accounts included the publications of *Thomas County Yesterday*

and *Today*, a twelve volume (one volume a month) series of booklets edited by Prairie Printers, Inc. of Colby. The other source was a 1935 compilation of George H. Kinkel, published by the *Rexford News* and entitled *The Golden Jubilee Anniversary of Thomas County and its Neighbors, 1885-1935*. In addition to these sources, Bill James and Daughn Avery of the Prairie Printers, Inc., loaned the writer taped interviews with old settlers made during the Diamond Anniversary year of 1960. Many pictures and papers were also available at their offices.

Population and agricultural facts and figures were secured in the various *Biennial Reports of the Kansas State Department of Agriculture* from 1885 to 1960. Another source of this type was the various volumes of the *Kansas Historical Quarterly*.

Both the Thomas County National Bank and the Farmers and Merchants Bank of Colby were most generous, making available booklets and other valuable papers and clippings. The few people interviewed gave valuable comments and significantly added to this study. Their views helped elaborate on facts found in the primary sources.

The history of Thomas County seems to be typical of the region of Northwestern Kansas. Since the era of the Indian had ended in this region before the county was founded, there were but two early Indian "scares"; and on both occasions not an Indian was seen in the county.⁴ Agricultural pursuits have been the dominant means of livelihood during the county's history.

The study has been most interesting. At some future time the author would like to delve more deeply into more specific aspects of the county's history, but the lack of time makes such a detailed study impossible at the present time.

¹George L. Anderson, "The Administration of Federal Lands in Western Kansas, 1880-1890: A Factor in Adjustment to a New Environment," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XX (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1953), 233. Hereinafter cited as Anderson, "Federal Lands."

²Included among the various papers were the following newspapers of the county: *Thomas County Cat*, *Colby Tribune*, *Colby Free Press*, *Rexford News*, and the *Colby Free Press-Tribune*.

³These newspapers included: *Brewster Gazette*, *Colby News*, *Hastings Gazette*, and the *Quickville Courier*.

⁴George H. Kinkel (comp.), *The Golden Jubilee Anniversary of Thomas County and its Neighbors, 1885-1935*. (Rexford, Kansas: *Rexford News*, 1935), 18, 20. Hereinafter cited as Kinkel, *Golden Anniversary*.



CHAPTER II

Early Settlement, Boom, And Recession

Thomas County is located in the northwestern corner of the state of Kansas in the second tier of counties south from Nebraska and the second east from Colorado. The first recorded statement concerning the area now encompassed as a part of Thomas County was noted in a government survey, the *Index of Field Notes of Thomas County*, a bound volume found in the offices of the county engineer in the court house at Colby, Kansas. The survey began May 18, 1869, and was completed in 1870.¹

The surveying party set up sandstone markers along the correction parallels at the north and south lines of the county and extended the township lines both west and south. The group was led by George F. McClure, and he made copious notes and observations on the county. They also surveyed the section and half-section lines in the eastern tier of townships during the summer and fall of 1869 and returned to complete the work and extend it westward during 1870.²

According to Frank W. Blackmar in his comments on the region of Thomas County, the land had the following appearance:

The general surface is undulating prairie with bluffs and rough lands along the streams. The native timber is limited to clumps of cottonwood trees. Bottom lands are not extensive. Sandstone is found in several localities. The Saline river has its source in the southwest and flows east across the southern tier of townships. The south fork of the Solomon flows east across the county, somewhat south of the center, and the north fork of the same river has its source in the west and flows northeast into Sheridan county. The north and south forks of Sappa creek and Prairie Dog creek enter in the west and flow northeast, the two former into Rawlins county and the latter into Sheridan county.³

These observations are substantiated by the survey notes. The survey began in the northeast corner of the county. There were few creek beds, and all were dry except for occasional pools of water. The soil was variously described as level,

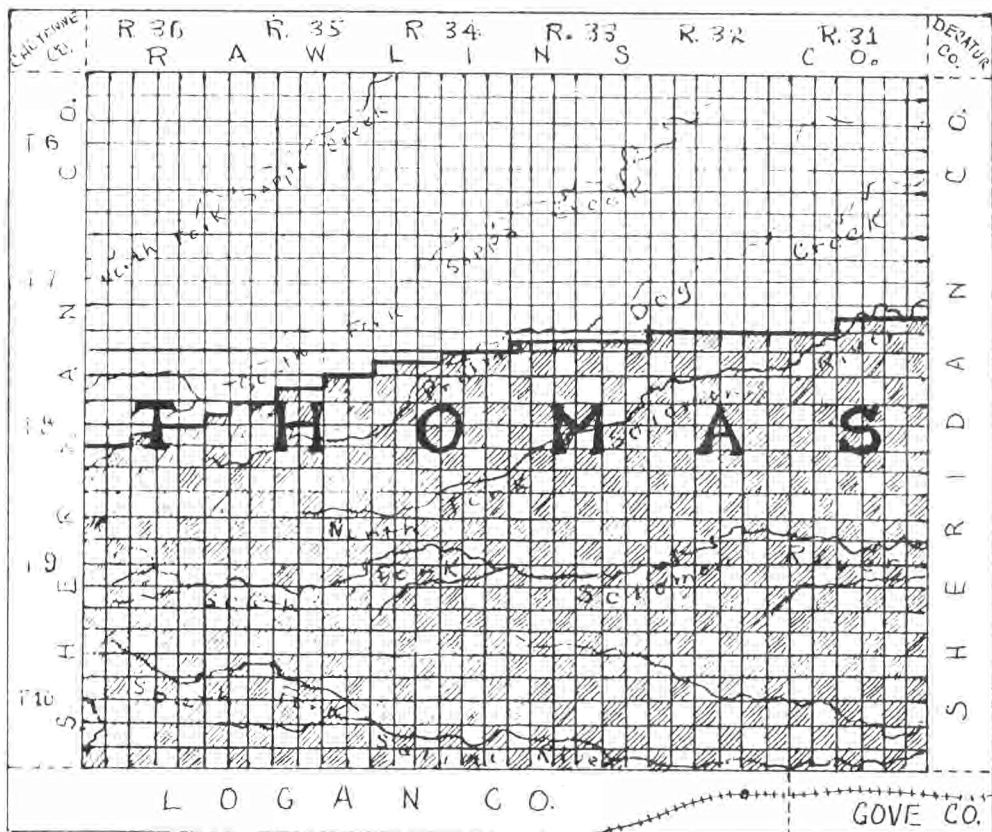


FIGURE 1

Thomas County (1885) Showing the Principal Waterways
and The Union Pacific Land Grants
□ (Photostatic Map in The Kansas Historical Library)

broken, or rolling. Beaver Creek, (another name for Sappa Creek), in the northwest part of the county was found to contain the most water. The Prairie Dog and the south fork of the Solomon were specifically described as dry.⁴

In 1884 this original examination was rechecked by an eight-man group headed by Henry C. F. Hackbusch. They relocated the sandstone markers and usually placed the new markers on mounds of dirt two or three feet high. This body noted that there was a scarcity of water and, in the main, the area was lacking in timber. Furthermore, they noted that there was little stone for building purposes. This survey made reference to various homesteads which already existed in the area. Some areas were listed as "unfit for cultivation" and others as "useful for grazing purposes only."⁵

On March 7, 1873, the Kansas Legislature defined the boundaries of twenty-nine counties; and Thomas County was included.⁶ There were some changes of county boundary lines; but on March 5, 1880, the boundary of the county was defined as it is now. When Sheridan County was organized, Thomas County was attached to it for judicial purposes.⁷ As was true of many counties formed by the Kansas Legislature, this newly-organized area had been named for a Civil War hero, General George H. Thomas.⁸ The county as organized contained a total of 691,200 acres of land within its 1,080 square miles. It was thirty-six miles east and west and thirty miles north and south. About one-fourth of the land of the county was owned by the Union Pacific as provided by the original land-grant terms. The railroad had a twenty-mile deep right-of-way on both sides of the original Kansas Pacific, the land under its control lying in alternate sections in the southern half of the county.⁹ This substantial portion under railroad control together with more waterways in the north caused this area of the county to be more slowly settled than the northern part.

In 1879, the earliest settlers of the county arrived. Many came by covered wagon; and from the sources studied, there seems little doubt that the Andrew Reed family from Dubuque County, Iowa, was the first to settle in Thomas County, doing so in the spring of 1879. Accounts vary as to the exact number who made up this particular venture. However, these people settled south of the present site of Gem and filed on their respective quarters of ground. These land claims had been filed in the United States Land Office in Kirwin, Kansas, on May 31, 1879. The Reed migration was the climax of a dream of settlement in the region growing out of a hunting trip of one of Reed's sons, Tom, and Andrew's son-in law, Mark Witham, who had viewed the land the previous year.¹⁰

Before these pioneers could complete their homes, Mark's wife, Mary, gave birth to a son, Oliver Reed Witham, on September 27, 1879. The Colby Townsite Company recognized him as the first child to be born in the confines of the new county and deeded to him Lot Twelve in Block Sixteen of Colby in commemoration of the event. The lot was valued at twenty dollars.¹¹

Early settlers who arrived during this period in the history of the county

remarked that the area was primarily cattle country with its vast expanse of virgin prairie covered with buffalo grass as far as the eye could see. Early hunters credited the area with being a favorite grazing area of buffalo, and the present site of Colby was a particularly fine grazing spot.¹² There were no fences or roads, and the land was covered with the bleaching bones of buffalo. Many settlers' accounts and later newspaper articles made mention of the large herds of antelope and wild horses in the vicinity. In the early 1880's the cattle business, catching wild horses, and the gathering of buffalo bones to haul to railroad towns were the principal means of livelihood.¹³

George L. Anderson, in his writings on this period, pointed out that "the adaptation to the physical characteristics of the grassland region was the greatest single problem confronting the settlers in the western half of Kansas."¹⁴ The early view of the surveyors concerning the dearth of timber resources in the county must surely have presented grave problems to these hardy souls who wended their way to this grassland area. Such a flat treeless region must have been a dismal sight to people used to seeing at least a few trees. George Grady's arrival with his parents by stage coach from Oberlin was one example of the lonely feeling that all new settlers must have experienced. After unloading the Grady family, the stage driver immediately departed, leaving the newcomers alone on the empty prairie.¹⁵

Since there was no timber or stone available in most of the area, the settlers constructed sod houses, dugouts, and combinations of these two types of dwellings. This was one example of "adaptation" to the environment referred to by Mr. Anderson.

Inasmuch as the number of settlers did not increase greatly until the fall of 1884 and during 1885, the area remained primarily a cattleman's paradise. It was during this time that great herds of cattle were driven north from Texas through Grinnell to North Platte and Ogallala, Nebraska. These cattle were used to replenish the northern plains following the extermination of the buffalo and to feed the Indians. However, no conclusive evidence could be found that these trails covered much of Thomas County, if indeed they even passed through the county at all. The trails seemed to pass across the Beaver Creek southwest of Oberlin so it might have skirted along the extreme eastern edge of Thomas County.¹⁶

From all the early accounts of settlement it was apparent that the few choice lands adjacent to waterways were held by cattlemen. As might be expected, when the influx of settlers moved into the area, there were conflicting land claims between the cattlemen and the homesteaders. One specific incident involved a land speculator named Dr. Bretts who shot any cattle that strayed onto his land and shared the meat with other homesteaders. This action resulted in three cattlemen's going to Bretts to warn him that a continuation of such behavior would lead to trouble. Upon their arrival they were met by an armed Bretts who proceeded to place one man in each of three corners of his one-room house while he sat with his weapons in the other corner. After a time the three men were

allowed to leave and the affair ended.¹⁷

There was also an incident between cattlemen and a sheepman named Rider that resulted in Rider's being killed. The murder occurred when a group of the cattlemen went to Rider's dugout to resolve their problems and, when the sheepman stood in the open doorway, a shot was fired. All attempts to revive Rider were futile. The incident caused a good deal of furor at the time, and two men, William Salesbury and John Barber, were tried for the killing but both were acquitted.¹⁸

In 1881, a second land office was opened at Oberlin, Decatur County. Since the first land office was located at Kirwin, Phillips County, it meant that both were so situated that the immigrants moving into Thomas County settled the northern portions of the county. This logical pattern of settlement was further enhanced by the fact that the Union Pacific Railroad controlled such a large amount of the southern part of the county. As the early Federal Surveys had indicated, most of the limited running water available was also in the north. It is easy to see why trouble between different groups developed over lands located along the few waterways.

Most of the settlers took land on the prairies and were forced to dig wells to secure water. Water was reached at depths of 75 to 150 feet, but digging a well to such depths was quite a project and resulted in the settlers' cooperating in such ventures and the sharing of the water. George Grady remarked on his water-carrying chores from the Benjamin Bottorff claim which was a mile from his father's land, "We didn't waste any water."¹⁹ Many other settlers carried water much further. Businessmen in Grinnell, Gove County, in an attempt to gain the trade of northern Thomas County and southern Rawlins County, had a well dug on the North Solomon River since there was no water between Andrew Reed's place south of Gem and Grinnell.²⁰

The first post office in the county was established at Letitia in 1879, and Letitia Reed was its first postmistress.²¹ Other post offices that were established in the county were, in order: Streator in 1880, and Otterbourne, Cumberland, and Colby in 1881.²² The first mail route in the county was the weekly Oberlin (Decatur County) to Wallace (Logan County) route established in 1879. A second mail route was set up between Monument (Logan County) and Quickville, a town in the northwestern part of Thomas County, in 1882. This route was later changed from Quickville to Colby and became a daily route.²³

The first town in Thomas County was Otterbourne.²⁴ The first post-mistress of this town was Mary Hay, one of the most colorful pioneers in Thomas County history. She arrived in the county in 1880 with her father, and they homesteaded on the south fork of the Sappa. She was neither an ordained minister, nor a licensed doctor, nor an experienced farmer upon her arrival; but she soon found herself serving in all three capacities. Miss Hay soon became known to all as "Auntie May" Hay. She conducted the first Sunday School in the county, stocked

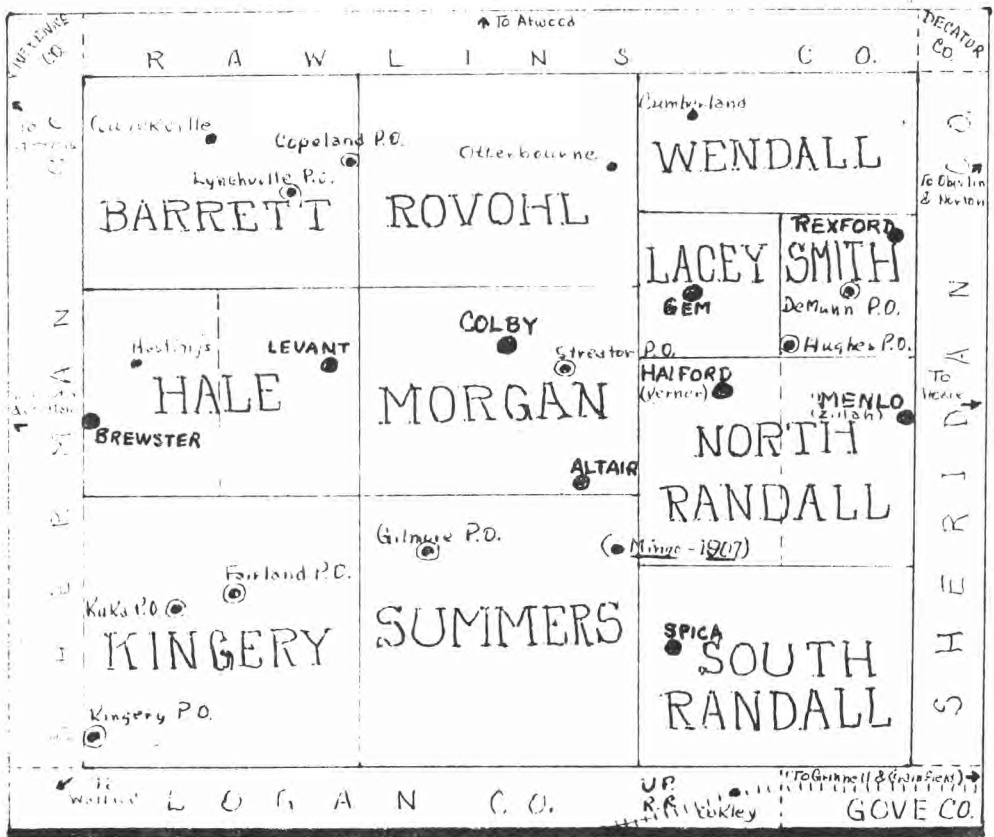


FIGURE 2

Townships, Towns, and Post Offices of Thomas County, 1887-1888. Hale Now Is Divided Into "East" and "West;" And The East Half of North Randall Is Now "Menlo."
 -Towns Still in Existence. -Towns No Longer in Existence. -Post Offices
 (From The 1886 and 1888 Biennial Reports of the State Board of Agriculture)

some medicines and medicinal supplies, and served as midwife at many of the early births of the area. For several years she was the only "doctor" in the Otterbourne area. One other notable milestone in the life of this remarkable woman was her appointment as the first superintendent of Thomas County schools. Such a position was well-placed in the very capable hands of this "Jill-of-all-trades," for she had maintained a school in her home where children from the neighboring area came for instruction.²⁵ She was a most ambitious woman and even laid out and platted the town of Otterbourne, but the town never succeeded, and she was quite disappointed.²⁶

The rapid settlement of the area in the fall of 1884 continued into 1885 and resulted in the organization of the county during the fall of this year. In an article by Glenn H. Miller, he pointed out that the Western Frontier underwent a boom during the 1880's.

During the 1880's, Kansas, along with the rest of the Western frontier, underwent a boom in agricultural lands, town lots, and railroad building and manufacturing. The first two were principally by real estate, mortgages and bonds that facilitated the movement of money from the East (and from Europe) to the capital-deficient West. This was done through the establishment of land mortgage companies. Of these, there were several types: individual brokers, private mortgage companies, and corporations issuing debentures backed by land mortgage security.²⁷

There were three methods by which settlers could secure land. This could be done by pre-emption, homestead, and timber culture. By all of these methods land was easily obtained. All were inexpensive, and later when the railroad lands were made available for sale, even they were within reach of most settlers since terms were available.²⁸

In 1881 the Colby Post Office had been located some three miles south of the present site of Colby and was very near the geographical center of the county. It was situated on the homestead of J. W. Irwin who was named postmaster. The man instrumental in getting the post office and Mr. Irwin's appointment was J. R. Colby, a Civil War veteran for whom the post office was named. Mr. Colby who had long held a dream of starting his own town, secured a government patent toward this end on April 10, 1884.²⁹ However, he never did carry out his plan; and on March 10, 1885, the Colby Townsite Company recorded the original plat of Colby at Kenneth, Sheridan County, since Thomas County was still attached judicially to Sheridan County.³⁰

On April 16, 1885, Secretary of State, E. B. Allen, certified that two days before a private corporation was established under the Laws of the State of Kansas with the name of the Colby Townsite Company. The townsite company's purpose was to purchase real estate in Thomas County, Kansas. Its members were to lay out a town site after a location was secured and then to sell lots or subdivisions. They

were given other rights to "perform such other labor and make such improvements as are incident thereto."³¹

The corporation was granted a 99 year charter and its seven directors were: D. M. Dunn, president; Mike Donelan, vice-president; S. C. Mills, treasurer; J. B. McGonigal, secretary; Winfield Freeman, attorney; H. Wallace Miller; and D. D. Hoag. All of these men were from Colby except D. D. Hoag and Winfield Freeman who were from Wyandotte (Kansas City, Kansas). Shares of stock were \$100 each with a capital stock of \$10,000.³²

According to the *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, the Colby Townsite Company seemed to have been spearheaded from Kansas City, Kansas, although a number of the members of the company went to Colby and became permanent residents of the town. Notable among this group were D. M. Dunn and J. B. McGonigal. The latter, as secretary, has often been called the "father of Colby" since he had so much to do with the details of the establishment of the town.³³ His brother, W. C. McGonigal, made the original survey and signed the recorded plat.³⁴

Prior to the Colby Townsite Company's securing one hundred acres from the Union Land Company, a subsidiary of the Union Pacific Railroad Company, an agreement had been reached with J. R. Colby "that he would give up the idea of starting his town and they would name the town 'Colby' and give him a business lot and a residence location."³⁵

Because of a delay in acquiring title to the land, many people were camped around Colby Post Office waiting to purchase lots in the new town. Although some became discouraged, most of these land-seekers remained; and when the townsite Company opened land for sale, there was a rush for lots.³⁶

Mike Donelan's mercantile store was the first building started in Colby and he is credited with being the town's first merchant although there were some others who sold goods from the back of wagons prior to the opening of Donelan's store. However, the first building to be completed in Colby was one to house the *Thomas County Cat*. This building was located on the west side of Franklin Avenue at the present site of Paden's Shoe Store. Donelan's store was located where Duckwalls is presently situated.³⁷

The first paper printed in Thomas County was the *Enterprise*, which was published by "Brown and Son" on March 19, 1885. However, the paper published but one issue. Prospects were not bright; and the elder Brown, said to be a little childish, gave as his reason for leaving that he was "afraid of coyotes."³⁸

However, the *Thomas County Cat* was the first paper issued in the county (March 12, 1885), but it was printed in Minneapolis, Kansas, by D. M. and C. M. Dunn, publishers of the *Minneapolis Messenger*. E. P. Worcester, their foreman, left for Thomas County on March 8, 1885. Upon his arrival in Colby, Worcester set up shop in the sod house of H. W. Miller near "Old Colby."³⁹

After the first month of operation the paper had but fourteen subscribers, but by 1887 there were 1,300. The paper accepted, as the editor remarked, everything

except "native fuel" for subscriptions, and the salutation of the paper said merely, "Here's Yer Cat."⁴⁰ The editor viewed this paper in this manner:

The *Cat* will purr for Thomas county, and what we deem the best interests of all her people. The *Cat* will be located at the new town site on the Dog. The *Cat* has velvet paws, but will not allow the fur to be stroked the wrong way. To all concerned it would be well to remember that a *Cat* has nine lives, and farther that a *Cat* is greatly attached to a place where located.⁴¹

Commonly called the *Cat*, the paper printed many of the comments made by neighboring papers concerning its beginnings. The mere fact that its name was "Cat" made it a conversation piece. Even its title had a picture of a cat inserted in it. Since it was founded approximately a month prior to the establishing of Colby, it followed the development of both the new town and the county. Included among some of the interesting news items was one about "wild horses seen west of Colby."⁴² In the May 14, 1885, issue there was a published account of the Charter and By-laws of the Colby Townsite Company.⁴³

Settlers continued to move in and the growing importance of the town was reflected in the transfer of the post office to the new town in August. A. J. Senter was appointed postmaster. The growth of the area was noted in many issues of the *Cat*. Such growth demonstrated the need for a county organization and resulted in the settlers' holding a mass meeting in Colby on August 8, 1885.⁴⁴ Three men prominent in this move were W. H. Archer, Tom Reed, and A. B. Jardine, all of whom were some of the earliest residents of the county. The result of this gathering was the circulation of petitions to secure the necessary 250 signatures to present to Governor John A. Martin calling for a census to be taken. This successful enterprise resulted in the appointment of W. G. Porter as the census enumerator. By the end of September, Porter's work had been completed with a population count of over 1900 people recorded for the county. On September 28, 1885, he left for Topeka to report his findings.⁴⁵ On October 8, 1885, Governor Martin proclaimed the organization of Thomas County and the appointment of the temporary county officers.⁴⁶ The county was divided into three commissioner districts: ranges thirty-one and thirty-two were made the first district; thirty-three and thirty-four, the second district; and thirty-five and thirty-six, the third district. Six townships were named by the Governor after soldiers killed in battle under General Thomas' command: Wendall, Randall, Rovohl, Morgan, Barrett, and Hale.⁴⁷

On October 24, 1885, a mass convention of two hundred voters was held in Colby, and candidates were nominated for county offices. At the first general election there were 247 voters, and they almost unanimously selected Colby as the permanent county seat. The following officers were elected: J. N. Fike, County Clerk; N. D. Bean, County Treasurer; J. W. Irwin, Register of Deeds; W. W. Walker, Superintendent of Public Instruction; W. H. Copeland, Representative;

W. G. Porter, County Attorney; W. H. Kingery, Sheriff; M. L. Lacey, Probate Judge; E. J. Paine, Clerk of the Court; T. P. Chambers, County Surveyor; M. M. McGreevy, Coroner; M. W. Witham, Frank Pingree, and R. T. Hemming were elected County Commissioners of, respectively, the first, second, and third districts.⁴⁸

Numerous problems faced these newly-elected county officials, not the least of which was no money and no court house. Practically all the land in the county was either homestead or railroad land and could not, therefore, be taxed.⁴⁹ To pay the bills the county commissioners issued warrants. They had to find those who would accept them and advance money and wait until the county got revenue to pay these warrants.⁵⁰ The problem of a court house building was solved following a mass meeting held in May, 1886. Funds were raised by private donations, and the two-story, thirty feet square structure was erected on the land set aside by the Colby Townsite Company in its original plat. At the regular county commissioners' meeting on July 15, 1886, the building was presented to the county and the commissioners ordered the scattered county offices to move into the building by July 15, 1886. Thus the first court house of Thomas County cost the county government nothing whatsoever.⁵¹ The task of transferring the records from the Sheridan County seat, Kenneth, was begun on December 16, 1885, when County Clerk J. N. Fike and C. C. Siggins began the process of transcribing records dealing with the newly-organized county.⁵²

Thomas County's population was given by the *Cat* as 3,000 on December 1, 1885.⁵³ From articles in the paper during the period from March, 1885, until the end of the year, it was recorded that there was a good deal of breaking up of sod ground and the planting of crops. The biggest void was the lack of lumber, and many surrounding towns advertised lumber for sale.

The year 1886 opened with a snow which was to be remembered in later years as the worst blizzard ever to sweep across the Great Plains. It was very cold with the temperature below zero and the roads impassable. Snow drifts piled up to twelve feet and snow on the level prairies was fourteen inches deep. All accounts indicated tremendous stock losses, and four men were frozen to death in Thomas County.⁵⁴ There were tragic tales of blinding snow lashed by howling winds that overtook those unwary enough to challenge the fury of the storm. Those who are not familiar with these storms can not, perhaps, visualize what terrible havoc can result from them. The *Cat* had received no newsprint for four weeks because of snowbound trains, and so wrapping paper secured from Mike Donelan was used for the January 21, 1886, issue. For weeks there were numerous comments about the frightful conditions that had developed during the storm and the havoc caused by it.

By January, 1886, Colby was a thriving town with three lumber yards, three general merchandise stores, three drug stores, a bank, two hardware stores, four hotels, a stationary store, two livery stables, seven real estate men, a harness maker, a shoe shop, two billiard halls, two blacksmith shops, a wagon shop, three coal dealers, a barber, three physicians, a furniture store, and one meat market.⁵⁵

Thomas County continued to grow after 1886. According to Everett Dick three factors accounted for the great influx of settlers in the Western Frontier in the period of 1886-1888: (1) the land hunger of the people in the eastern states who longed to exploit the western domain, (2) the anxiety of the railroads to convert land grants into cash before they became a tax liability and their desire to create carrying trade, little caring whether an immigrant bought railroad or took free land, and (3) the immigration activities of the local government.⁵⁶ A theory of Paul Zickefoose that the Western Frontier as a region of "low population pressure" attracted migrants from "high population pressure" regions in the East (if transportation and communication channels were open) seems to be a valid one with respect to Kansas at this time.⁵⁷

As early as 1885 there were rumors that the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad planned to build to Pueblo by way of Colby. The *Cat* editor printed the following news clip from the *Oberlin World*:

The wide-awake town of Colby is about to meet with some help that will scoot that city into a wealth of prosperity. The K. P. railroad company owns thousands of acres of land in that county which it is holding out for higher prices to give it a boom, a branch line will be built from Oakley, on the K. P. to Colby, a distance of only twenty-one miles. Fifty cents an acre on its land will build the road and under these circumstances there can be no doubt of the construction of this line that will give Colby a railroad.⁵⁸

This prophetic pronouncement resulted in the following headline in the *Cat*: "Colby to Have the Union Pacific Railway."⁵⁹ The second week of June, 1886, found officials of the Union Pacific in Colby with a proposition that if the Townsite Company would give them depot grounds they would run the road to Colby. Quickly, the Townsite Company in turn submitted a proposition to the people to raise \$1,000 to partially pay for the property, and such funds were raised without much effort. As quickly, the Union Pacific secured the right of way to Colby, and the surveyors started placing grade stakes.⁶⁰

During the remainder of 1886 there was little news about the Union Pacific line except that the Oakley-Colby line contract was let for construction.⁶¹ The reason for the delay was the struggle of the Union Pacific with the Santa Fe in Central Kansas, and an extension was granted in July, 1887, with the agreement made that it should be completed by October, 1887.⁶² All during 1887, speculation was rampant concerning railroads that were supposedly coming to Thomas County and Colby. These included, at one time or another, the Rock Island, Santa Fe, Burlington and Missouri River, Missouri Pacific, Leavenworth and Denver Short Line, and the Chicago and Northwestern. The editor of the *Cat* urged the people to merely check the map, and it would prove that these various railroad possibilities would develop. He urged investors to "buy and make a fortune."⁶³

Materials were stockpiled at Oakley preparatory to the laying of track to Colby. By late July, 1887, there were twenty-four cars of railroad ties, and on

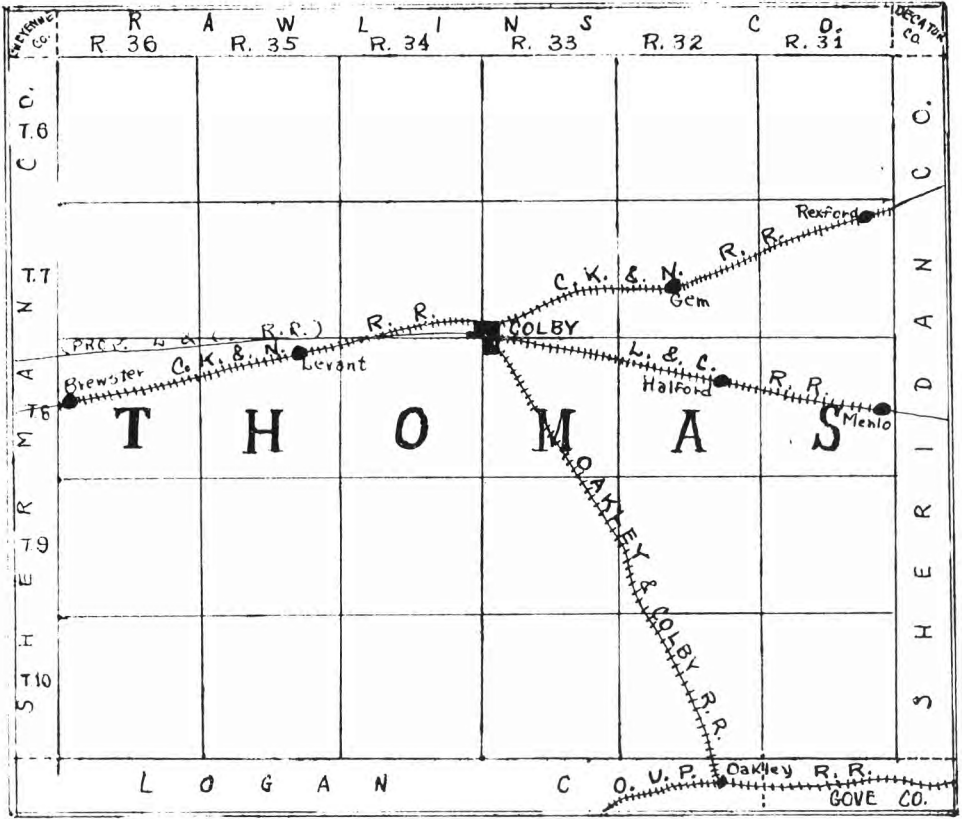


FIGURE 3
 Railroads and Proposed Railroads in Thomas County, 1889
 (From Thomas County, Yesterday and Today, May, 1960)

August 2, Union Pacific officials came to Colby and informed the people that track-laying would start August 10, since all the needed supplies were at that time in Oakley.⁶⁴ Progress was rapid, and by early September track was laid eleven miles north of Oakley with sixty men at work.⁶⁵ On October 1, 1887, the Union Pacific rails of the Oakley-Colby Branch were laid into Colby; and the locomotive and work-train passed over the track. Notice was then posted that mixed trains would be started immediately and on a regular basis to run every day except Sunday.⁶⁶

While the track-laying project was going on in the southeastern part of the county, surveyors of the Chicago, Kansas, and Nebraska Railroad (a companion line of the Rock Island) were in the western part near the permanent survey run by the B. & M. The fall of 1887 and the year of 1888 were marked by great railroad speculation on the part of the people of the county and actual track-laying by the railroad companies.

When the surveying force of the Union Pacific was in Colby, on October 28, 1887, there was the belief that the railroad intended to lay track west to Eustis in Sherman County, north to Chardon in Rawlins County, and east to Hoxie in Sheridan County, making Colby the center of all these important lines.⁶⁷

As the year 1888 opened, Union Pacific officials met with the Colby Board of Trade on January 10 wanting to relocate their depot since they were planning to extend a railroad line from Salina west to Hugo, Colorado, passing through Hoxie, Colby, Eustis, and Burlington, Colorado. The railroad officials proposed to purchase the right of way through town and desired a depot either at First Street and Franklin Avenue or on the north side of town to junction with their existing line which ran on the east side of Colby. They desired no money only reasonable rates for new depot grounds.⁶⁸

The following month, the C. K. & N. president, M. A. Low, proposed to the Colby Board of Trade that Thomas County vote \$60,000 in county bonds for construction of a railroad through the area from Norton to Colorado. A mass meeting was called; and J. B. Morrison, speaking for Mr. Low, said the C. K. & N. would run the lines through the county and locate five depots at places convenient for the settlers.⁶⁹ This proposal by the C. K. & N. evoked a good deal of discussion throughout the county. Between the February meeting and a special election held on March 20, 1888, to consider the bond proposal, the *Cat* editor enthusiastically endorsed the proposition to the citizens of the county. Many arguments and supporting figures were presented for the passage of the bonds. The pro-bond forces were successful as the issue carried by a vote of 934 to 539.⁷⁰ Only the townships in the extreme northwestern, southeastern, and northeastern corners of the county were opposed to the proposition.⁷¹ Surveyors began immediately to survey the route through the county, and the populace of Colby was especially jubilant. The *Cat* referred to Colby as the great "Wichita of Northwest Kansas" with special emphasis given to the railroad activity of the county.⁷²

By May, railroad construction in the county was very active with the Union Pacific having laid one mile of track west of Colby and further west railroad ties were being unloaded. At month's end the C. K. & N. had track laid into the county close enough to Gem that smoke from the work train's locomotive could be seen in that town.⁷³ When the track was completed into Colby in mid-June, 1888, the *Cat* printed a long enthusiastic story of the event. At the same time the people were urged to be "up and doing" and work for securing a division point on the new Lincoln and Colorado Railroad that was being built east to connect with a track-laying project moving west from Salina.⁷⁴ Hopes had been high for such a division point on the C. K. & N., but as those hopes had faded there was anticipation that such a possibility might be realized in the L. & C. When the L. & C. was completed to Colby in October, 1888, Thomas County had three rail lines which proved to be the end of railroad construction in the county.⁷⁵

Although there was no further railroad construction in Thomas County, there was a good deal of speculation about new railways or the extension of the existing lines to the north and west. The intention of the Union Pacific to extend its road into Colorado was time and again assured by officials of that line. For a few years there were occasional accounts in various newspapers of purported meetings of Rock Island and Union Pacific officials. It was rumored that these discussions were attempts on the part of the two railroad companies to reach agreement on joint use of existing track in Western Kansas and Eastern Colorado. Speculation was especially strong concerning the Rock Island's use of the Union Pacific's track from River Bend (Limon), Colorado, to Denver. Despite such hazy reports over the next few years the Union Pacific never did build their lines west from Colby to Colorado and did, in fact, take up what track had been laid and forgot about such expansion ambitions.⁷⁶

Colby's growth was demonstrated by the following list of business houses and professional men in town in the spring of 1888: four agricultural implement dealers, fourteen attorneys, five banks, two brick makers, three blacksmiths, three billiard halls, a barber, four carpenters and builders, two bakeries, a book and stationery store, a boot and shoe maker, a clothing store, two drug stores, five dry goods and merchandise stores, a flour and feed store, three fruit and candy stores, two furniture and undertaking establishments, a grist mill, three grocery stores, a harness shop, five hardware stores, four hotels, fifteen loan and real estate offices, three lumber yards, three meat markets, four dray and express lines, two papers, two painters, five physicians, four restaurants, and two watchmakers and jewelers.⁷⁷

With the coming of the railroads other towns sprang up on the railroad rights of way. As had been promised, the C. K. & N. established five depots interspersed across the county which became the towns of Rexford, Gem, Levant, and Brewster. Likewise, the Union Pacific established two towns on its L. & C. line, Zillah and Verner. Mingo was the only other town platted in Thomas County

after this time, and it was platted in 1907.⁷⁸ Quickville, the early trading center for the settlers of the northwestern part of the county, ceased to exist as a town shortly after the railroad activity passed it by. Otterbourne and Cumberland, both in the east north central part of the county, suffered a similar fate.

Perhaps the most poignant story of all the speculative townsite ventures of this time concerned the establishment in western Thomas County of the town of Manchester by a group which included some Colby businessmen. The town later changed its name to Hastings to comply with some postal regulation and, like all towns of this period, had high ambitions. The *Cat* carried many advertisements about the available lots and opportunities to be had in the new town. From February 10, 1888, to August 18, 1888, the town had its own newspaper, the *Hastings Gazette*. From its first issue, Volume I, Number 1, to the last, Volume I, Number 28, the whole panorama of the optimism and anticipation of a new town was found in this four-page journal. Throughout its history one central theme was unfolded, the coming of a railroad that would transform the town into the most important town between Colby and Eustis, Sherman County. The first hope had been the B. & M. which had surveyed through the county in 1887. In 1888 the Union Pacific announced it would move west from Colby and promised to build a depot in Hastings.⁷⁹ After the Rock Island bonds passed in March, 1888, it appeared there would be two railroads heading west towards Hastings. By early April the *Gazette's* editor, G. F. Roberts, was referring to the town as "the coming Metropolis of Western Kansas" following the completion of the Union Pacific roadbed to the county line.⁸⁰

By June 23, the C. K. & N. track layers were in Hastings to erect a railroad fence and telegraph poles were also put up. *The Gazette's* editor commented: "Hastings can no longer be called an inland or out-of-the-way town now that the C. K. & N. is here."⁸¹ A news item in July, 1888, mentioned that a townsite named Brewster had been established and that the railroad had passed into Sherman County. No indication was given, however, that such a situation was causing any concern in Hastings. The only indication of any shift was not forthcoming until the very last issue printed under the banner of the *Hastings Gazette*. Then, in a very matter-of-fact manner, the editor mentioned that the following week the paper would be published as the *Brewster Gazette*. Business buildings were removed from Hastings and rebuilt in Brewster. Even the Hastings Post Office was transferred to the new townsite and plans were made to establish a new school district with a new school building. It was rather ironic that in this last issue the editor urged that the people purchase lots in Brewster, the same type of encouragement that he had given to his readers in the first editions of the *Hastings Gazette* to stimulate the growth of Hastings.⁸² The first issue of the *Brewster Gazette* sounded very much like the first issue of its predecessor as it mentioned that the city needed all lines of business.⁸³

Population figures alone indicated that the county was undergoing a tremendous influx of immigrants. Towns were founded, businesses were

established, school districts organized and school buildings constructed, and churches. Homesteaders settled on the available government land; and by the figures available in October, 1888, there was no more such land in the county and only 320 acres of school land. The Union Land Company in advertisements run by its agent, Isaac Mullholland, was selling railroad land at this time. These railroad lands, which totaled 120,305 acres, were sold for \$3.00 to \$6.00 an acre, with the average cost being \$5.00 an acre. Terms were available over a ten-year period with one-tenth due at the time of purchase. At the end of the first year no part of the principal was due, but the seven per cent interest on the deferred principal was due. There was no discount of the principal for payment in cash. However, if a purchaser paid the full amount before the maturity of the ten-year note, he was charged interest only to the date of final payment.⁸⁴

No particular settlement of any nationality group developed in Thomas County. Among some of the early settlers in the northeastern areas of the county were a few Swedish families, but they were in no sense an entity unto themselves. Many of the early arrivals had come from Nebraska and states to the northeast, many of whom still had title to those lands recently departed from. After the railroads came to the area, about forty families of Mennonites settled in the south part of the county but there was never any evidence that they organized a self-contained community of any type. This one group was the only such specific account of a particular migration into Thomas County.⁸⁵

The C. K. & N. ran many excursions through the country during these early years to encourage settlement. Later, Ike Crumly went east in an attempt to encourage recently-arrived immigrants to the United States to settle in Thomas County after many people left the area during the drought period of the 1890's.⁸⁶

George Anderson pointed out that the climatic conditions of alternate periods of drought and rainfall that has always been the weather pattern of the Great Plains brought a mixture of humanity to an unfamiliar environment and so piled up legal entries in the land offices with contested claims until the plat books were "Hopelessly out-of-date and the basement and corridors of the land office were piled high with unclaimed patents, unsettled contests, and unstudied correspondence."⁸⁷ He further expressed the opinion that this did not imply that any fraudulent situation abounded in the region. He viewed the situation in this manner:

The sequence of entry, abandonment without record, relinquishment or sale may have added up to fraud in the humid regions farther to the east and south; but in western Kansas it may have meant that optimistic settlers, becoming discouraged by death, drought, dust, and grasshoppers, were giving up the fight and were only trying to salvage enough from their battles with and on Uncle Sam's land to get out of the country.⁸⁸

Such a condition evidently existed in Thomas County in the late 1880's as the population was greatly reduced.⁸⁹ The optimistic *Cat* editor had expressed the

belief that, unlike the speculators of other areas of Western Kansas, settlers in Thomas County intended to stay as permanent settlers. In 1891 the *Colby Tribune* editor commented that the repeal of the Pre-emption and Timber Culture Acts as land-gaining devices would have greatly aided Western Kansas had such laws been repealed years before.⁹⁰

In 1888 all government lands had been taken⁹¹ but in 1892 there was some available for settlement.⁹² All through this period there was evidence that land claims caused many legal problems. Many times the newspapers contained practically a complete page of complaints filed against lands being listed for final proof. As Anderson pointed out, such a condition was not unusual.

Recording of moisture amounts did not start in the county until September 12, 1888.⁹³ However, moisture amounts must have been sufficient for by March, 1888, there were over six thousand people living in the county.⁹⁴ By March, 1886, the value of farm products was \$484,854 and crops included a variety of small grains, corn, sorghum and millet, potatoes, castor beans, various grasses, broom corn, and even some tobacco. Livestock being raised included horses, cattle, milk cows, sheep, mules, and swine. For the period from March, 1886, to March 1887, the figure was \$472,571.10.⁹⁵

Colby was incorporated as a third-class city in July, 1886. The following men were elected to hold positions in the local government: Mike Donelan, mayor; C. E. Corporan, Thomas Freehan, Robert McGonigal, W. W. Walker, W. M. Edwards, city council members; N. J. Adams, police judge. The mayor's first appointed officials included: E. P. Green, city clerk; J. E. Meglemre, city treasurer; William Yocum, city marshall; and W. S. Wilcoxon, city attorney.⁹⁶

Three churches were founded in Colby in 1886. The Christian Church was the first organized religious denomination, and the Methodist Episcopal Church was established about a month later. November, 1887, the Presbyterian Church was organized. About a year later, in October, 1886, the first Catholic Mass was held. In February, 1888, the Baptist Church held its organizational meeting. Of these five denominations, the Methodists were the first to construct a church building in 1886. The other groups met in the homes of various members.⁹⁷

By 1888 there were thirteen churches in the county, with the following distribution: five Methodist Churches and 154 members and two buildings, four Christian Churches and 175 members, two Baptist Churches and 24 members, a Roman Catholic Church with 60 members, and a Presbyterian Church with 23 members and one building.⁹⁸ By 1890 the Baptists had built a church structure, two of the Christian Churches had ceased to exist and three German Lutheran Churches had been organized.⁹⁹

In the early days of Thomas County there were many banks, but by March, 1888, only four remained: The Thomas County Bank, Farmers and Merchants Bank, Hall and Martin Bank (First National Bank), and the State Bank of Colby.¹⁰⁰ The story of Colby and Thomas County is interestingly entwined with

two of these banks, the Thomas County Bank which opened December 6, 1886, and the Farmers and Merchants Bank which was formed January 3, 1887. These institutions still exist and were controlled by members of the same families who started them until W. D. Ferguson sold the controlling stock in the Thomas County National Bank to another group in 1963.¹⁰¹ The grandson of August Lauterbach, also named August, is still very much a part of the Farmers and Merchants State Bank. W. S. Ferguson, one of the early founders of the Thomas County Bank, and his friendly rival, Mr. Lauterbach, together with other associates, were instrumental in the founding of other banks in the county.

Schools in Thomas County were quickly organized as was characteristic of the western frontier; and by March, 1886, there were twenty-seven organized school districts. By March, 1890, there were ninety-one school districts. The school population jumped from 817 of school age in 1886 to 1,989 in 1890, according to figures in the Biennial Reports. Apparently, prior to the founding of public schools in the county, interested parents sent their children to ladies like Mary Hay to receive training. Anna Colby, daughter of J. R. Colby, is usually credited with being the teacher of the first public school district organized in the county in 1882 at a site five miles south of the present location of Colby.¹⁰² The first schools had terms ranging from three to nine months.¹⁰³ As more and more people came into the county, more and more white frame school houses dotted the prairies, the sod houses being gradually replaced as the years passed.

The first school building in Colby was a frame structure forty by sixty feet located on School Avenue between fourth and fifth streets, but by 1887 the building was too small, and school was held in the upper room of the courthouse. A proposal for a new school house was approved by a 132-50 vote, July 1, 1887. It called for a \$10,000 building which was subsequently built in Block 79 in the west addition of Colby. The citizens believed the two-story brick building with a basement under two-thirds of this structure to be the finest in the whole area. The editor of the *Colby Tribune*, on May 17, 1888, mentioned the school in this way:

In the line of public buildings constructed this spring which stand out most prominently to the eye, may be mentioned the handsome and imposing building built by District No. 4 which stands in the west part of town. The building is of brick 68 X 68 feet, two stories with basement, seven feet in the clear, and a tower 78 feet from the ground.¹⁰⁴

Instrumental in the development of the county in general, and of Colby in particular, were the early newspapers of the county. Although the *Thomas County Cat* was the first permanent paper of the county, by March, 1888, there had been three other papers started. One, the *Thomas County Democrat*, started on August 11, 1886, by C. R. Marks, had a short-lived journalistic life. The other two, the *Brewster Gazette* of G. F. Roberts, and I. A. Kelley's *Colby Tribune*, were printed for a number of years. In addition to these newspapers there were also papers in Rexford, Menlo, and Gem down through the years.

Another early business venture that became a great force in the history of the county was the three-story Newell House commonly referred to as the "Brick Hotel."¹⁰⁵ This imposing structure made a great impression on many people. Numerous printed comments attesting to the grand accommodations enjoyed by satisfied visitors appeared in the *Cat* along with borrowed comments from other newspapers. It is today a part of the Cooper Hotel and during a good deal of its existence was famous as the O'Pelt Hotel.¹⁰⁶

The combination of this fine structure (plus other hotels) and a convention hall called the Armory (which was located on the west side of Franklin Avenue just southwest of the Rock Island depot) made Colby the convention city of Northwest Kansas.

However, the principal reason for the early prominence as a site for these various meetings was the excellent transportation facilities of three railroad lines entering Colby. As a result of its geographical location, Colby was destined to become a center of the activities of Northwest Kansas.

According to Raymond Curtis Miller, the following conditions existed in Kansas in the late 1880's and early 1890's:

The peak of Kansas prosperity was reached in 1887 to be followed by several years of depression. Inadequate rainfall, poor crops, low prices for items sold and high prices for goods purchased, foreclosures, high interest rates, bank failures, bankruptcy, restrictions on credit, loss of confidence, unemployment and flight of large numbers of people completely disillusioned with Kansas, created times of stress and strain. For instance, between 1887 and 1892, the population of western Kansas decreased by one half. . .¹⁰⁷

The peak population of the late 1880's and the early 1890's in Thomas County was 6,174 in 1888. By 1891 the population had dwindled to 4,069. From 1885 to 1891 the population of the county declined as the weather conditions proved unfavorable. The years of 1889 to 1890 were years of below average rainfall based on the average rainfall of 18.02 inches during the time from 1888 to 1946.¹⁰⁸

Another significant indication of farm problems during these years was the value of farm crops produced in 1888 and 1890. In both instances the totals were below \$400,000. Above-average rainfall amounts yielded the zooming figures of \$918,509.55 and \$878,443.49 in the next two years. However, there was a steady decline in population thereafter with an unstable, fluctuating agricultural production to 1897.¹⁰⁹

The pattern of varying farming productivity and fluctuating population which were directly related to rainfall amounts at this time, may be traced throughout the history of the county. However, in later years many farmers plagued by these conditions turned to politics for a solution rather than by emigrating.

¹Harold Upchurch, *The Colby Free Press-Tribune*, May 27, 1936. The original recorded evidence may be found in the office of the county engineer although the brief accounts of ex-county engineer Upchurch are quite complete. Hereinafter cited as Upchurch, "Land Surveys."

²*Ibid.* See Figure 1, p. 4.

³Frank W. Blackmar, (ed.). *Kansas, A Cyclopaedia of State History*. 2 vols. (Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912), II, 807. Hereinafter cited as Blackmar, *Kansas, A Cyclopaedia*.

⁴Upchurch, "Land Surveys."

⁵*Ibid.* The lack of timber, water, and stone caused members of the survey party to wonder how people could subsist in this area.

⁶C. W. Wilder, *Annals of Kansas*. (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1886), 606. Hereinafter cited as Wilder, *Annals of Kansas*.

⁷State of Kansas, *Session Laws of 1881*. (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1881), 202. Hereinafter cited as *Laws of Kansas*.

⁸Blackmar, *Kansas, A Cyclopaedia*, II, 806.

⁹Wilder, *Annals of Kansas*, 1054. A map of this Union Pacific grant in Thomas County is found in Figure 1, p. 5.

¹⁰Ernest Snell, "History of Thomas County," *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, April 16, 1959. Hereinafter cited as Snell, "Early History."

¹¹*Deed Records*, Thomas County, I, 18-19.

¹²*Colby Free Press*, November 9, 1922.

¹³Kinkel, *Golden Anniversary*, 8.

¹⁴Anderson, "Federal Lands," 233.

¹⁵*Thomas County Yesterday and Today*, a monthly Historical Journal. (Colby, Kansas: Prairie Printers, Inc., January, 1960). Hereinafter cited as *Yesterday and Today*.

¹⁶Kinkel, *Golden Anniversary*, 33. ¹⁷*Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁸Kinkel, *Golden Anniversary*, 172-173.

¹⁹*Yesterday and Today*, January, 1960.

²⁰Kinkel, *Golden Anniversary*, 173.

²¹*Colby Free Press*, November 16, 1922. ²²See Figure 2, p. 13.

²³*Colby Free Press*, November 16, 1922. ²⁴See Figure 2, p. 13.

²⁵*Yesterday and Today*, June, 1960.

²⁶Kinkel, *Golden Anniversary*, 174-175.

²⁷Glenn H. Miller, "Business and Agricultural Conditions in Kansas, 1871-1888," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XXVI (Spring, 1960), 67.

²⁸*Thomas County Cat*, December 17, 1885. Specific terms were not pointed out.

²⁹*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, April 11, 1945.

³⁰*Plat Maps*, Thomas County.

³¹*Colby Free Press*, December 14, 1922. ³²*Ibid.*

³³*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, April 11, 1945 ³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.* A common joke was to tell Colby, who had moved to town and opened a hotel, that the Townsite Company was thinking of changing the name of the town. It would make Colby furious, and he would vow to start another town.

³⁶*Ibid.* ³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Thomas County Cat*, April 1, 1886; and G. Raymond Gaeddert, "The First Newspapers in Kansas, 1870-1886," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, X (November, 1941), 393. The paper had been located in J. R. Colby's house.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 394. Since Miller's sod house also served as a hotel at night and was only twelve by fourteen feet, there were some humorous accounts of complications relative to printing the paper.

⁴⁰*Ibid.* ⁴¹*Ibid.* ⁴²*Thomas County Cat*, April 2, 1885.

⁴³*Ibid.* ⁴⁴Snell, "Early History," April 20, 1959.

⁴⁵*Thomas County Cat*, October 1, 1885. The editor also urged the voters to file for the various political offices to be filled. The fee for such filing was three dollars.

⁴⁶Snell, "Early History." Samuel Stewardson was appointed County Clerk, and E. A. Crouse, W. H. Kingery, and B. F. Hestian were appointed as County Commissioners. They were responsible for holding the first general election to select permanent officials for the county. They met October 17, 1885, and called this election on November 17, 1885.

⁴⁷*Colby Free Press*, November 16, 1922. ⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹The exact number of acres owned by the Union Pacific varied with the different sources checked. The discrepancy was undoubtedly due to the time of the sources. All sources, however, stated that such acreage was over 200,000.

⁵⁰Snell, "Early History," April 20, 1959.

⁵¹*Ibid.* This building is now a residence in Colby and is presently located on the northwest corner of Block 108 at Court and Seventh Street.

⁵²*Thomas County Cat*, December 17, 1885. ⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, January 14, 1886. Those losing their lives were a man named Griffith, two teenage brothers, Alfred and Fred Gould, and a very prominent figure of early Thomas County history, Samuel Stewardson. The accounts of these tragic events may be found in the compilation of George Kinkel referred to on many occasions in this work. At the time of this article in the *Cat*, Stewardson was still missing, and his body was not found until March 17, 1886, which would attest to the ferocity of the storm.

⁵⁵*Yesterday and Today*, January, 1960.

⁵⁶Everett Dick. *The Sod-House Frontier, 1854-1890*. (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1937), 187. Mr. Dick pointed out that "immigration schemes of local governments" were the propagandizing efforts of the local newspapers of Western Kansas. Their shouting of the virtues of their particular community as a veritable "Garden of Eden" here on earth certainly fit the article found in the January 28, 1886, issue of the *Thomas County Cat*. Advertisements of McGonigal and Rogers called Thomas County "The Garden Spot of the Garden State."

⁵⁷Paul W. Zickefoose. *Population and the Labor Force*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 1953), 1.

⁵⁸*Thomas County Cat*, December 31, 1885.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, June 17, 1886. In this same article the editor proposed that steps be made to secure both the B. & M. from Oberlin and the Missouri Pacific from Stockton.

⁶⁰*Ibid.* ⁶¹*Ibid.*, July 22, 1886. ⁶²*Ibid.*, July 28, 1887.

⁶³*Ibid.*, April 7, 1887. ⁶⁴*Ibid.*, August 11, 1887.

⁶⁵Statement by George Grady, taped interview. Grady, at twelve, drove a team of mules for a nickel an hour and board. He felt overpaid.

⁶⁶*Thomas County Cat*, October 2, 1887. The trains left Oakley at 3:00 pm and arrived in Colby at 4:20 pm. They left Colby at 8:45 am and arrived at Oakley at 10:15 am.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, October 30, 1887.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, January 12, 1888. The original depot was located near the present Co-op elevator. The First and Franklin site was selected and is still the site of the U. P. depot. See the Appendix, Figure 6.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, February 9, 1888. This was the usual method of financing railroads at this time. The C. K. & N. was a branch of the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific and both were commonly known as the "Rock Island."

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, March 22, 1888.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, March 29, 1888. Specifically, these townships were Barrett, North Randall, South Randall, and Wendall. From their location it would seem that they opposed such railroad prospects as they had hopes of railroads nearer their locale. The northern townships had hopes of the B. & M. running a line down from Oberlin; and the southern townships already had access to the facilities of the U. P.'s Oakley-Colby Branch.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³*Ibid.*, May 31, 1888. All during the railroad construction of this period farmers worked for the various lines helping to build their road grades. Such employment had been one of the *Cat* editor's arguments for voting the bonds for the C. K. & N.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, June 14, 1888. This new rail line, like so many early railroads, was referred to by many names. It was known as the U. P.'s "Lincoln Branch," the "Salina Branch," and the Salina, Lincoln, and Western Railway, among others.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, November 1, 1888. The completion date for the L. & C. was November 1, but it was completed before that time as U. P. officials inspected the new line on October 31, 1888. See Figure 3, p. 14.

⁷⁶It is still possible to see the old L. & C. road grade that was constructed in those years of railroad activity. It is especially easy to see in the pasture areas northwest of Levant. The L. & C. and C. K. & N. roadbeds, though about a half-mile apart at Colby, paralleled one another for about four miles west of town. However, the two roadbeds crossed at a point about five miles west of Colby as the C. K. & N. line made a west-southwest turn and crossed over the L. & C.'s roadbed which continued on in a westerly direction. Just how much track had been laid by the L. & C. was not learned and some of the old settlers could not recall that any track had been laid west of Colby, so it must not have been a great amount.

⁷⁷*Thomas County Cat*, April 5, 1888.

⁷⁸Plat Maps, Thomas County. The towns of Rexford and Brewster were both named after the foremen who were in charge of the track-laying in those areas. Gem was named after J. W. Ellsworth's "Gem Ranch" which existed where the right of way passed. The names of Zillah and Verner were later changed to Menlo and Halford, respectively, although there was no explanation found for such action. These two towns had been platted by the president of the Union Land Company, Thomas L. Kendall.

⁷⁹*Hastings Gazette*, February 10, 1888. The town at this time had three general stores, a hotel, a livery barn, a blacksmith shop, and the *Gazette*. Of course, the town also had a post office.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, April 6, 1888.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, June 23, 1888. Though each issue contained the latest railroad news there was no mention of the Union Pacific's activities beyond their track-laying efforts east of Colby; nothing at all was said about any western expansion as had been promised.

⁸²*Ibid.*, August 18, 1888.

⁸³*Brewster Gazette*, August 25, 1888.

⁸⁴Kansas State Board of Agriculture. *Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture*. XI (Topeka: The Kansas Publishing House, 1888), 210. Hereinafter cited as *Biennial Report*.

⁸⁵*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, March 28, 1929.

⁸⁶*Colby Free Press*, February 23, 1893.

⁸⁷Anderson, "Federal Lands." ⁸⁸*Ibid.*

⁸⁹See the Appendix, Table IV. Hereinafter all references to Tables will be found in the Appendix.

⁹⁰*Colby Tribune*, March 12, 1891,

⁹¹*Biennial Report*, XI, 1888, 210. ⁹²*Ibid.*, XIII, 1892, 275.

⁹³*Thomas County Cat*, November 1, 1888. See Table V.

⁹⁴See Table IV. ⁹⁵*Biennial Report*, X, 1886, 559.

⁹⁶*Colby Free Press*, November 16, 1922. Colby became a second-class city in 1930.

⁹⁷*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, (50th Anniversary Edition), October 4, 1939.

⁹⁸*Biennial Report*, XI, 1888, 498.

⁹⁹*Biennial Report*, XII, 1890, 225.

¹⁰⁰*Biennial Report*, XI, 1888, 499. Anybody could simply hang out a sign stating he was opening a "bank" during these early years before any banking regulations were in evidence.

¹⁰¹W. D. Ferguson still serves on the Board of Directors at the Thomas County National Bank and has an office in the building. He is at this writing the president of the Thomas County Historical Society and continues to take a most active interest in affairs of the area.

¹⁰²*Yesterday and Today*, February, 1960. ¹⁰³*Ibid.* ¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵Directly across the street west of the Newell House was constructed a most imposing two-story brick business building called the Warden Block. For years it was known as the "Thomas County Bank Building" and was a landmark of the town.

¹⁰⁶August Lauterbach, one of the co-founders of the Farmers and Merchants Bank, often told those who asked why he came to Colby that he was confident of the success of the town that could house such a fine brick hotel.

¹⁰⁷Raymond Curtis Miller, "The Background of Populism in Kansas," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, VII (March, 1925), 467-489, cited by Emory Lindquist, "Kansas: A Centennial Portrait," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XXVII, (Spring, 1961), 37.

¹⁰⁸Thomas County National Bank, "Charts of the Precipitation at Colby, Kansas With Comparisons Fifty-Nine Year, 1888-1946 Compiled from the Records of the United States Weather Bureau," (Colby, Kansas: Thomas County National Bank, 1946). Hereinafter cited as *Thomas County Weather*. See Table V for the annual moisture amounts.

¹⁰⁹*Biennial Reports*, 1888 to 1897.



CHAPTER III

Populism of the 1890's and Recovery of the Early 1900's

Late in 1889 the Chicago, Kansas and Nebraska Railroad, which was a branch of the Rock Island, was foreclosed by the parent Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific. This meant the loss of the \$60,000 in bonds held by Thomas County in the C. K. & N. and caused not only the officials of Thomas County but other counties of Kansas, through which the Rock Island branches ran, to attempt to go through the courts to stop this action.¹ In the end it proved a futile attempt and the bonds were lost.²

The first year of the new decade, 1890, found a sharp decline in the value of farm products. Below average amounts of moisture during the latter months of 1889 and the early months of 1890 resulted in very poor corn and winter wheat yields. The crop yield was valued at \$233,430.30, about half the \$450,411.09 crop yield value of the previous year.³ The result was a demand for "diversification," a pattern that was to be followed down through the history of Thomas County. Every time there was a period of drought and "hard times" farmers began turning toward other means of farming activity. Often there was an increase in the sale of cream and eggs to supplement a dwindling farm income. However, these exhortations soon faded with the return of good weather conditions and a resultant upsurge in the value of farm products.

The *Colby Free Press* was started by Joseph A. Borden and Sam W. Edmunds in August, 1889. The owners proclaimed that it was a Democratic paper and would be uncompromising in its stand on various issues. Its aim "besides giving the full and complete news of the city and county, was to maintain pure and economical politics in all public affairs, and especially in Thomas County."⁴ One of the more interesting developments of the 1890's and early 1900's was the "feud" that ensued between the various editors of the *Free Press* and the Republican *Colby Tribune*. This became true after Nat Turner took over the *Tribune* and J. R. Connelly became the owner-editor of the *Free Press*.⁵

The summer months of 1890 found farming conditions so desperate that, with corn and wheat both failing, seed was made available to the farmers by the State of Kansas. From time to time news items appeared in the *Free Press* which lashed out at the Republican policy of tariff protectionism as the cause of the depressed conditions. Connelly averred that the tariff was of no value to the farmer.⁶ In the fall of 1890 the discontent of the people was so overwhelming that the complete Republican ticket was defeated in the county. Such an outcome was not just one of a local nature, however, for the entire state followed a similar pattern. Following the landslide defeat of the Republican candidates, Turner felt the outcome had been a "real surprise" but conceded that many conservative protectionists felt the McKinley Bill, along with the depressed conditions of the farmers, was the cause of the Republican ouster.⁷

Conditions were so desperate by March, 1891, that a good many people around Gem were talking of going to Colorado for the summer as there was no work at home. However, some who had left earlier in search of better conditions began to return after having found that the opportunities elsewhere were no better. The wheat prospects were said to be hopeless by some, but others felt the crop could be saved. Many farmers did not have enough money to purchase seed grain for putting in a spring crop, and livestock prices were so bad that, as one farmer near Gem commented:

I have got some hogs, and if I would catch a man stealing them I would help him load them, but I guess times are going to get better as one of the merchants of Gem sold in one day a nickel's worth of chewing gum.⁸

By September, 1891, after sixteen inches of rain during the summer months, a rainmaker who called himself "Melbourne" was in the area trying to convince people of his power to produce rain when and where it was needed. People felt it would be a tremendous benefit if he could indeed make it rain as he claimed. Although his trial efforts failed, during the following months many notations of his rainmaking attempts in Texas (where he had gone for "more favorable weather conditions") were found in the *Tribune*. The heavy rains of the summer and moisture in the fall resulted in over a half million bushels of both wheat and corn. In addition, over two hundred thousand bushels of barley were produced. Farm products totaled \$918,509, the highest total in the history of the county up to that time⁹.

Optimism was the tenor of the *Tribune's* articles in the fall of 1891. The political fortunes of the Republican party were rejuvenated as all the county offices were won with the exception of coroner and county clerk. Turner was so sure that the G. O. P. had regained its political supremacy in the area that he remarked "the Alliance (Democrats and Populists) will be but a small factor in national politics in the future."¹⁰

The year 1892 opened most optimistically and crops looked great. One

significant event of this year was the construction of Colby's first elevator, long recognized as a definite need, but not realized until this time. There had been earlier attempts made to secure such a necessary business but they had all failed to materialize. When the subject had been broached in the pages of the newspapers prior to 1892, it was easily observed that such a deficiency aggravated the Colby editors. It was pointed out that both Brewster and Rexford had two elevators and the new Sherman County seat, Goodland, had three elevators.¹¹

A period of building expansion engulfed Colby during 1892, and Turner felt that the town and area were entering a time of prosperity. A decline in population had plagued the county since the peak year of 1888. During that three year period, Thomas County lost almost two thousand people, but during 1892-1893, the area regained about half that number.¹² A good wheat crop in 1892 helped produce such optimism in the *Tribune* editor that he opined that the county was one of the great wheat-growing counties in northwest Kansas. From 90,000 acres he felt there would be harvested some one and one-half million bushels of wheat. He expressed the belief that wheat was the best crop for the area, that it would succeed despite the hot summer months. He remarked, "Corn may fail as it did two years ago, but not wheat."¹³ Such optimism was ill-timed, however, for although the wheat harvest was a record at that time, the following four years were most dismal and the population once again began to decrease.¹⁴

The result of the good crops of 1892 benefitted the farmers and bank deposits increased. Sod homes were replaced by frame houses. Land sales were also at a premium with most of the purchasers coming from Iowa, Illinois, and Ohio. Thirty-six sections were sold at one auction in early August. All indications pointed to an era of good growth for the county with a wheat harvest so bountiful that all the shipping points in the county except Colby experienced a shortage of boxcars. Much of the bumper crop was piled on the ground.¹⁵

Even with such apparent prosperity, a combination of Democrats and Populists defeated the Republicans in the 1892 elections. Turner once again called the results a "great surprise" and remarked that the reason for such a Republican loss was the decisive swing of the Democrats to the Populist Party. He called this union the "Fusionist Party" and contended that on orders from Topeka, certain opposition "henchmen" poured money into the county to defeat the Republican nominees.¹⁶

In the early months of 1893 both the *Colby Free Press* and the *Colby News* carried accounts of prairie fires. One in January burned from south of Gem to Menlo and required railroad section crews from Colby and Gem, fighting all day long, to bring it under control. Later, the *News* reported that these fires were causing more damage than at first believed. All over the northwestern part of the state the dry prairies broke out in a rash of such fires.¹⁷

As the months passed and the dry conditions persisted, crop prospects deteriorated and caused the farmers to "wear long faces."¹⁸ One of the big events of the summer was the visit of James B. Weaver to Colby. This famous Populist

leader attracted a crowd of two thousand people for his two-hour speech.¹⁹

Total rainfall for 1893 was only 9.69 inches at Colby. It was to be the third lowest annual recorded moisture amount from 1888-1960.²⁰ The year proved to be a disheartening time, and the following comments of the local news items from over the county were representative:

Colby is dull, dry, and thirsty. No crops in its immediate vicinity this year and no feed for stock. . . . The ground is dry underneath the surface and a little moisture on top with a stout south wind and hot sun do more damage to what vegetation there is than no rain. . . . Corn is getting thirsty in this part of the country and if we don't have a rain soon, it will be a total failure the same as the small grain.²¹

The dearth of local advertising in the papers was evidence of the fact that things were getting somewhat desperate. It was also indicated by the declining population figures. An approximate gain of about six hundred people in 1893 over the previous year was lost by 1894's end. One other evidence of trouble was the drop in the value of farm products from over \$500,000 to only \$153,224.42 by 1894, the lowest figure ever in the history of the county.²²

Conditions did not improve in 1894, and the farmers had to plant spring crops in dry ground. In an item of local news from Rexford it was noted that "wheat is looking billious and in our opinion a stimulant is needed. We would suggest water."²³ A Brewster report of a week later said "every one here has about given up the crops and much talk of migrating to other counties is heard; but where shall we go?"²⁴ Finally, one note from Menlo mentioned, "Farmers are busy praying for rain."²⁵

Drought in the mid-1890's became serious enough that the *Free Press* began to run advertisements from the Canadian Pacific Railroad in 1894. Lands in Saskatchewan were free and a settler could secure 160 acres.²⁶ These serious conditions were perhaps best shown through the years by the annual publication of the delinquent tax lists. In the summer of 1894 such a list covered all of the front page of the *Free Press* with the exception of one column.²⁷ The fact that the county overwhelmingly supported the Populist Party in this year would indicate the discontent of the usually-Republican county. Quite definitely the populace was hopefully searching for a political party that could somehow alleviate the problems confronting the region.

Conditions did not improve and by the summer of 1896 the tax list included not only the front page of the *Free Press*, but an inside page as well.²⁸ However, weather conditions began to show signs of improving as early as 1895 and good moisture amounts in 1896-1897 gave rise to a population increase that began in 1898.²⁹

With the increased moisture amounts of 1896-1897, wheat prospects also improved. In 1897 the wheat crop had a value of \$418,221.76 from a harvest of 615,032 bushels, a record at that time. The following year the harvested crop

totaled 694,818 bushels which exceeded the 1894 yield but lower prices resulted in its being valued at only \$375,201.72.³⁰

It was during the period beginning in 1897 that winter wheat was established as the most important crop in the county. Prior to this time corn was more often than not a bigger yielding crop than winter wheat. Of course, at this time there was a good deal of spring wheat planted.³¹

In the late 1890's a prosperity of sorts seemed to have developed. A form of creamery called a "skimming station" was built in Colby in 1899 and later other towns of the county built similar stations. The success of such businesses was indicative of the attempts of farmers to diversify their farming operations.³²

A dry spring in 1899 resulted in a wheat crop of only 389,990 bushels, but rains through the summer months made corn the leading crop for the year with a yield of 384,180 bushels. Even so, the wheat harvest was valued at almost twice the corn crop. By 1900 the wheat harvest yielded 553,689 bushels but the price per bushel remained low as this crop was valued at only \$276,844.50.³³

Despite the slow rise in prices in the late 1890's prosperity began to be evidenced by the various accounts of the new homes of the county in general and of Colby in particular. Colby and the county were "dry" in another way, however, a position it was to retain until the repeal of the prohibition status of Kansas after World War II. Over the years the biggest "criminal news" of the county was the arrest of some would-be bootlegger. Since the editors of the county were most vociferously outspoken to their denunciation of, as some termed it, "snake medicine," many references were made to the "joints" found in surrounding counties. Occasionally, a joint was opened only to incur the wrath of the local citizens, who, with the help of the law officers and the journalistic efforts of the newspaper editors, quickly effected the cessation of such an enterprise. Troubles were often attributed to excessive drinking and it was not uncommon for the newspapers to measure the success of a celebration, such as the Fourth of July, by the fact that there had been no drinking. One account of the fate of such a joint will give an insight into the feelings of the majority of the people of the county:

Menlo's joint and its stock of snake medicine passed out of existence in smoke and flame last week and those who "smile" occasionally are forced to visit neighboring towns or else not "smile." It is thought that the fire was started by church people who thought the proper way to rid the community of the evil was to touch it up with a little of the principal feature of the lower regions.³⁴

Alcohol was not responsible, however, for the most celebrated gun battle in the annals of the history of Northwest Kansas—the infamous Dewey-Berry gun fight of June 3, 1903. Though the incident occurred in the southeast corner of Cheyenne County, there were significant aspects of the episode that involved not only the people of Thomas County but of all Northwestern Kansas. Both of the factions involved in the altercation were well-known figures in Colby and Thomas County.

Dewey's Oak Ranch was located in the southwestern corner of Rawlins County and encompassed some 40,000 acres. Primarily a cattle enterprise, it had been one of the biggest ranches in the area in the 1870's. Its owner was C. P. Dewey who, in 1903, was living in Chicago and came to Northwest Kansas on occasion to check on his holdings which were run by his son, Chauncey. On such visits the father usually stayed in the O'Pelt Hotel.³⁵

The Berrys who were involved included Daniel, Alphaeus, Burchard, Roy, and Beach. They had property in Cheyenne County, and the incident that occurred in 1903 was the result of a long-standing feud, set off by the Deweys' purchase of a water tank previously owned by the Berrys. The tank had been bought on June 2 at a Sheriff's Sale in St. Francis and had evoked bitter words between the two groups.³⁶

On June 3 when the Dewey ranch hands went to pick up the tank on Berry land, the Berry men also made an appearance. Just who started the shooting was never determined in the later trial; but in the ensuing gun battle, Daniel, Alphaeus, and Burchard were all slain. Roy was badly wounded and Beach alone escaped unscathed. The only loss sustained by the Dewey forces was one dead horse. These were the only points agreed upon at the trial, everything else was a mass of conflicting testimony.

Immediately after the episode tempers flared up in the region and led to the State Militia's being called from Osborne. These men arrived in Colby at seven o'clock in the evening of June 7, 1903. After spending the night at the O'Pelt Hotel, the troops set out for St. Francis, Cheyenne County, the next morning.³⁷ Newspapers of the region seemed to take sides according to the accounts in the *Free Press* which proclaimed itself neutral and stated its intention to report only the facts.

Understandably, at the trial held in Norton, Norton County, under a change of venue, each side accused the other of starting the gun fight. The trial opened in February, 1904. Chauncey Dewey, W. J. McBride, and Cloyd Wilson were accused of the murder of Alphaeus Berry. During the trial feelings for one side or the other ran high. Many people felt the Deweys were trying to re-establish their cattle kingdom and some even charged Chauncey Dewey with trying to set himself up as a feudal baron. The result of the trial was acquittal of the accused.³⁸ Old-time residents still recall the episode with nostalgia.³⁹

Even though conditions were improved as the twentieth century opened, there was still a great mobility of people. Covered wagons moved both east and west and caused the *Free Press* editor to remark that such people should settle down for mobility was not a sign of prosperity. During this time one of the biggest business ventures in all Western Kansas took place in Colby. It was the Colby Mercantile Company's "Loom Sales" which annually brought thousands of people to Colby. Such notoriety gained for Colby and Thomas County coverage in the *Topeka Daily Capital* in an article that called the men of Colby and the

county "progressive and conservative in turn."⁴⁰ This was to be but one of many newspaper articles about Colby and the county in years to come. All such coverage elicited justifiable pride in the pages of the local press.

The early 1900's marked the beginning of some mechanized farming and a few attempts at large-scale farming methods. In early 1903 eight men from Indiana and Ohio purchased 20,000 acres of Thomas County land and started a company known as the Security Lands and Investment Company of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Their land lay west of Colby along the Rock Island Railroad.⁴¹ So it was that the two complimented each other, mechanization and bigger farms, a trend that was to develop into the biggest business venture in all the Great Plains region.

One of the earliest large-scale operators was one of Colby's most prominent early settlers, James N. Fike who could justifiably be referred to as the first "wheat king" of Thomas County. He had been the first elected county clerk of Thomas County, and when the Oberlin land office was moved to Colby, he was appointed registrar. Fike served as a member of the State Board of Railroad Commissioners and was also a mayor of Colby. Together with I. W. Haynes, he conceived the idea of using a traction steam plow for farming operations. In 1908, using a thirty-two horsepower steam tractor which pulled twenty-three disc plows, they plowed and seeded 1,600 acres. From this acreage they harvested 15,000 bushels of wheat⁴² out of a total Thomas County yield of 940,882 bushels.⁴³

In 1907 the two men purchased a 32-horsepower Reeves engine and seeded 5,000 acres. Even with light crops they did not thresh less than 40,000 bushels of wheat. They developed the practice of plowing for the next wheat crop immediately following the harvest. While headers were running on one side of a field, their steam plow would be turning stubble under on the other side of the same field.

As an example of the expanding operations of the Fike-Haynes combination, the *Free Press* had this to say:

During the recent harvest these wheat kings were harvesting, loading a train of cars with grain and plowing with two steam outfits on a section of land. . . . This year they will plow and seed 8,000 acres. At one time during the last harvest they had 20 headers at work. They claim that by plowing in the right season and seeding at the right time the farmers of Thomas County can do away with wheat failures, as they have so successfully demonstrated.⁴⁴

A later article traced Fike's various positions and mentioned that he had seeded 2,000 acres of his own land. He had a farm named "Wheatridge" located about twelve miles northeast of Colby. There he farmed some 2,240 acres.⁴⁵

It was a result of the success of these two men, Fike and Haynes, that Colby had hopes for its first big industrial plant in 1909. It was the Jones Traction Company. Both men were members of the board of directors. Editor Connelly felt the new industry would mean "twenty to thirty more families in town and a great boon to the town and to agriculture in the whole area."⁴⁶ In spite of the hopes for

such a business it never met with any success. Though the company manufactured an engine and demonstrated its pulling power on one occasion,⁴⁷ it was doomed by the advent of the gasoline engine, drought and its own lack of adequate finances.

Each year of the Fike-Haynes partnership news items appeared concerning their harvest operations. They advertised for their harvest help since they employed so many headers and crews. In 1909, J. R. Connelly, the *Free Press* editor, mentioned that he had been shown the books of this operation. He reported that from June to November of 1909 their gross receipts were \$124,505.19 and their expenses totaled roughly \$80,000.00. They had seeded 11,500 acres with 500 acres more to be planted. Even though it was December the operation still had 1,000 acres of the 1909 crop to harvest.⁴⁸ Connelly quite evidently admired the two men, but confessed that he did not have the nerve to play the game as high as they did. He saluted their game fight which he believed they had apparently won and predicted that both men would clear from \$30,000 to \$50,000 in 1910 should the year turn out as it promised.⁴⁹

To bring out the point that the success of the partnership was based on hard work, Connelly, while visiting the Fike farm north of Levant in the summer of 1910, commented that Haynes worked more hours out of every twenty-four than any other man in the county. Certainly the job of overseeing the seeding of 12,000 acres of wheat and all the other work connected with it must have kept Haynes quite busy.⁵⁰

The culmination of Connelly's admiration came in 1919 when he advocated the naming of the Colby Park as "Fike Park." While mayor in the early 1900's, Fike had started the tree-planting project in the area known as "Carp Lake" in the hope of making an attractive park of the area. Though no longer the editor of the *Free Press*,⁵¹ Connelly's views on Fike were printed in the paper as follows:

He was a booster for the town and the county for thirty years and was always foremost in every effort to make the town a good place to live. The history of his efforts to grow wheat is still fresh in our memories. He was unfortunate only in the time that he made the effort. Such an attempt at almost any time before or since would have brought him wealth and fame. Others have followed in his footsteps and have grown rich in the effort. He was the pioneer in an effort to make Thomas county the banner wheat county of the state. . . . It would be a fitting remembrance of his life and his character and his devotion to the town and county if we could make the beautiful park that he sponsored and we are all proud of, a memorial to him by calling it "Fike Park."⁵²

As this article indicates, Fike failed in his attempt at large-scale farming; and his death of a heart attack in May, 1914, ended the first spectacular attempt at extensive farming operations in Thomas County.⁵³

In the first ten years of the twentieth century the value of farm products

increased from \$619,605.00 in 1900 to \$1,089,541.55 in 1910.⁵⁴ Thomas County went over the one million dollar mark in the value of farm products for the first time in 1905.⁵⁵ It was during this period as well that the first million bushel wheat crop was harvested.⁵⁶

A specific indication that conditions were desperate was found in June, 1911. A *Free Press* news item appeared which stated that the farmers were turning to selling cream to pay expenses as a result of the fading wheat prospects.⁵⁷ Over the years this seemed to prove out. During good times very little notice was paid to diversification concepts of farming. However, as soon as poor conditions plagued the farmers, the latter started supplementing their income by other means. Cream seemed to be the most common.

The first definite news story concerning the poor crop prospects was this one:

People driving over the country say that seldom if ever has [have] crop conditions been so poor at this season of the year. No use covering up the real conditions. Our farmers and business men will not make any money this year. The thing to do is to shape up so as to stay and reap the reward that will come with the crops which will soon come.⁵⁸

In July the editor of the *Free Press* advised the people "not to give land away and move elsewhere but to 'stay on and to tide over right here.'"⁵⁹ The county lost 1,019 people during the 1911-1912 period and Colby dropped from 1,029 to 828 during this same time.⁶⁰

By August the Rock Island was offering to make seed wheat available at no cost if the county commissioners would designate a man to distribute it at each location where seed was made available to the farmers of Northwestern Kansas. In the late fall jack rabbits became so numerous that farmers were demanding that the commissioners place a bounty on them.⁶¹ The year was indeed bad. The following statement indicated the plight: "The past year is the worst that has ever been known in the history of the country. . . . the prairies hardly took on a green hue all season."⁶²

Drought conditions resulted in some of the farmers attempting irrigation. Foremost among them was John Ackard, the first man in Thomas County to install a gasoline engine on a pump for such purposes. Ackard first became famous for his irrigation attempts and later as a farmer-real estate dealer, automobile dealer, and oil-well driller in Wyoming. This irrigation attempt, though not a failure, like diversification and the selling of cream, was attractive only during those years when poor weather conditions caused wheat crop failures.

In March, 1912, perhaps the worst blizzard for drifting ever experienced in Thomas County stalled everything for four days. Drifts completely covered a Union Pacific train in a draw two and one-half miles east of Colby. The value of such a fantastic snow was negated by its melting rapidly and running off quickly. The *Free Press* reported that the Prairie Dog and Solomon had overflowed. The Solomon had been 100 to 200 yards wide with cakes of ice swept along in its turbulent waters.⁶³

Heavy amounts of rainfall during the summer months produced good crops and the value of farm products skyrocketed to \$1,196,605.63 in 1912 after a drop to \$402,866.49 in 1911. However, these improved conditions were offset when September ushered in a mystifying disease of the horses of the county. Since so many farmers had turned to raising horses because of the crop failures, this became most serious. It was not confined to the local area but reports of the condition came from over the state. Experts and veterinarians were never sure what it was, but they did decide it was an infectious type of spinal meningitis. Dissection of a horse under chloroform and even bleeding were tried. In Quinter, Gove County, people of three churches even resorted to prayer. Governor Stubbs offered a reward of \$1,000 for a sure cure of the epidemic.⁶⁴

During these dry years there was an area of central Thomas County which "blew out" completely. The big moisture amounts of 1912 did not solve the problem; and by February 6, 1913, the situation was so bad that a citizens' meeting was held by the people of Colby and the farmers east of town to devise means of keeping the blown territory in this region from doing further damage. It was agreed that the area should be listed,⁶⁵ but to make it effective it was agreed that all had to do their part, for if some did not, the efforts of the others would be futile. The area was a barren waste. Finally, the State Legislature was petitioned to give the county commissioners the legal right to take over the problem and to pay the cost of such a project with tax money.⁶⁶

The area was known by such names as the "Blown Area" and the "Brown Strip." It covered an area about nine miles wide and twenty miles long. It extended from east of Colby to Rexford. It was called by many a "freak of nature" and brought Thomas County unwanted publicity.

In May, 1913, a great movement was underway to reclaim the area and the ground was listed to cane and milo maize in strips about a rod or two apart. People and teams pushed to complete the project since it was agreed that this method was absolutely certain to stop the dirt from blowing and drifting. Rock Island officials did all they could to help in the venture. With good rains during the summer, the maize flourished and even provided employment for many men of the area who were hired to help harvest the crop.⁶⁷

However, in the spring of 1914, nothing was growing, not even weeds, and the process was repeated but on a more organized basis. The county commissioners hired men and teams to plow the land and get weeds to grow. This project proved successful and soon weeds were up and so dense that the ground could not be seen. Among the men who supervised the work to the northeast and east of Colby were W. H. Williams and Sherm Houston.⁶⁸

One very significant development of this blown area was the purchase of some 15,000 acres by Ben Foster in the area between Gem and Rexford. The value of the land was very low.⁶⁹ The famous lumber man from Kansas City bought all these acres between 1911 and 1913. Here was established a farming program supervised

by managers and the beginning of the Foster Farms that were to become famous in the 1920's for the purebred Herford Cattle that garnered top honors at all the major stock shows of the Midwestern United States. E. D. Mustoe was the manager who supervised this enterprise from 1918 until he was succeeded by his son, Dale Mustoe. Perhaps the greatest number of livestock on the farm was 2,640 in 1919, a year when 280 men were employed during the harvest season.⁷⁰

In 1914 and 1915 Thomas County produced its first million bushel winter wheat crop and 1916 was the first two million bushel year. The bumper crops of 1914 and 1915 were valued at over one million dollars, while the 1916 crop had a value of \$3,490,494.72.⁷¹ European war-time needs dramatically affected the wheat prices received by Thomas County wheat producers between 1915 and 1916. An average wheat price of eighty-four cents per bushel in 1915 increased fifty cents per bushel by 1916 when farmers received an average of \$1.34 per bushel for their wheat.

Improved economic conditions resulted in a tremendous building boom which was first evidenced in 1905. Editor Connelly had first broached the subject of the need for a new court house in December, 1904. By June, 1905, even many farmers over the county were convinced of the logic of such a project. Support continued to develop and resulted in a special election's being held to vote on the issue of \$50,000 in bonds to build a new court house. The issue passed handily. The low bids for constructing the court house totaled \$48,327.26; and on November 17, 1906, the cornerstone was laid.⁷² Connelly, early in 1916, next urged the city council to construct concrete sidewalks on Franklin Avenue between the two depots.⁷³

Another need which was filled was that of a new opera house which replaced the Armory as a special meeting place. The *Free Press* editor had first brought up the subject in late 1902;⁷⁴ but until January, 1904, no action was forthcoming. On that occasion a meeting was held and the decision made to sell stock in such a venture. However, another two years passed before the proposition came up again, this time in February, 1906, just after the voting of bonds for the court house. The argument Connelly used was that as the logical Sixth District Convention city, Colby had to build some structure to replace the Armory.⁷⁵ Connelly and J. B. Hampton, an early drug store owner, evolved a plan for raising \$8,000 to \$10,000. Their idea was to sell \$50.00 tickets on the building which entitled the holders to attend all shows presented. They promised that if the citizens of Colby purchased one hundred tickets these two would build and furnish a good, suitable building for not less than \$8,000 or more than \$10,000.⁷⁶ When those in favor of an opera house voiced the feeling that a better plan could be devised, Connelly encouraged any suggestions as long as the project was undertaken.

With the court house project underway the editor of the *Free Press* turned his journalistic talents to the needs for a new County High School building since the

Consolidated School was getting overcrowded. This "campaign" began in September, 1906. Connelly had just successfully opposed an acceptance of funds from the Carnegie Foundation for a Carnegie Library in Colby.⁷⁷

One of Colby's biggest years for building was 1907. As the year opened a petition which called for construction of a \$12,000 high school building was circulated following a meeting of members of the Colby Commercial Club held on December 31, 1906. A special election was held on January 22, 1907, and resulted in the overwhelming approval of a new high school by a 412 to 3 vote.⁷⁸ In a special election the site for the new building was selected just southwest of town where the present hospital is located.

Similarly, the projected opera house, after years of delay, got underway and subscriptions were taken by leading citizens and business houses.⁷⁹ After the opera house became operational on January 2, 1908, it became the center of activity for a number of years, and the papers (especially during the first few years) carried advertisements of the various attractions playing there. These productions included many touring road show companies with plays, variety acts, and music concerts. Later, when the Chautauquas came to the area it was used for these programs. In later years there were exhibition wrestling matches held in the building.

The Farmer's Elevator Company decided to construct an elevator on the Rock Island right of way west of Franklin Avenue. Completion of the Odd Fellows Building and an adjacent building belonging to Will Pratt were other fine additions to the growing town and Thomas County. The latter two were brick structures.

One old landmark was destroyed by fire when the Windsor Hotel burned on September 20, 1907. Located on the northeast corner at the junction of Franklin and Fourth Street, it was not rebuilt. However, in the fall of 1908 another hotel was built just southwest of the Rock Island depot at the corner of Franklin and Eighth Street. In later years it was known as the Commercial Hotel.

Prosperity was the keynote of this period even though no spectacular production had been enjoyed since 1905. Conditions proved most favorable in 1909, however, and in July a \$30,000 land deal in Barrett Township evoked the comment in the *Free Press* that it was one of the biggest tracts of land still intact in the county and that a few years before such a transaction would have been difficult to locate.⁸⁰ This year a crop of winter wheat yielded 969,612 bushels, a record at that time.⁸¹

In September, 1909, President Taft passed through Colby by train. The same issue of the *Free Press* in which this was reported carried an account of the dedication ceremonies of the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church on September 28, 1909.⁸² In October the Commercial Club voted unanimously to request that the mayor and city council call a special election for the purpose of voting bonds to put in a city water works and lighting system. In December,

proposals for a \$55,000 water and light system were agreed on at the city council meeting and in February the bonds carried by a 189 to 44 vote.⁸³

In January, 1913, the county commissioners met in a special Saturday session with many citizens to discuss the possibility of securing a state experimental station for Thomas County.⁸⁴ It resulted from a bill introduced in the State Legislature by Senator Malone for the establishment of such a station on a quarter of donated land located near Colby. It was decided at the meeting to donate such a piece of land, and petitions circulated to be sent to Topeka urging such action. The project was approved by the State Legislature and on March 1, 1914, they established an Experiment Station near Colby. A half section of land was purchased southwest of the power plant, and the first director of this station was Stanley P. Clark. Experimentation was devoted primarily to dry land farming techniques as the region was just emerging from the dust storm era.⁸⁵

Another significant change of this period was the advent of the automobile. Ira Thompson, an early businessman of Rexford, is credited with having purchased the first automobile in Thomas County in 1903.⁸⁶ Prior to 1910 there were not many automobiles. However, once the "car fever" began almost every issue of the *Free Press* carried news stories about some prominent citizen's having purchased a new automobile. On one occasion John Ackard drove the twenty miles from Brewster to Colby in forty-five minutes at the rate of almost twenty-seven miles an hour which was considered high-speed traveling at the time. In the period following World War I, automobile advertisements and news items concerning accidents and the need for better roads became commonplace news on the pages of the county's papers.

It was in the years just before the entrance of the United States into World War I that the road building fever spread across the country. Thomas County businessmen and other interested people played an active part in attempting to get good roads throughout not only Thomas County, but all of Northwest Kansas. The most prominently mentioned early highway of the county was the Golden Belt Road that ran from Oakley to Colby and then west. Another road was the Sunflower Trail connected to the Golden Belt Road and running east to Beloit. There was also the Rock Island Highway (later called the Ocean to Ocean Highway) that ran alongside the railroad to Norton.

Signs of prosperity were noted throughout the 1914-1917 period as news items commented on the need for houses. Many farmers bought property in Colby so their children could have a place to live while going to school. Another characteristic of prosperity, as Connelly pointed out, was the number of men who were "worth" \$20,000 in 1915 but who had had nothing at all a year previously.⁸⁷

Labor unrest that was to plague not only Thomas County but much of Kansas for years began during the harvest season of 1915. As was always the case during these years, the farmers depended on men following the harvest for their harvest labor. The labor organizers of the Industrial Workers of the World tried to get

workers to stay united and hold out for more money. All during the period from 1915 into the 1920's there was trouble with such men. Violence occurred at times during those years.

The prosperity of the post-drought period continued into 1916 with the harvesting of the greatest wheat crop to that time. Optimism was exuded from every issue of the *Free Press*. To handle such a large crop many farmers hauled harvest hands from other towns of the region, and once again the I. W. W.'s caused trouble.⁸⁸

As in the past, prosperous conditions stimulated business. One impressive new building was completed in 1916 on the northeast corner of the intersection of Franklin Avenue and Fourth Street. It was the Louis Building constructed by Frank Louis who was one of the most active boosters for improved roads. The 125 feet square two-story structure was quite an addition to the Colby business scene.

An addition to the banking family of Thomas County was the Levant State Bank, established by August Lauterbach of the Farmers and Merchants State Bank.⁸⁹ By the end of 1916 the Farmers and Merchants State Bank and the Thomas County National Bank, both of Colby, and the Rexford State Bank were all in fine financial shape and reflected the conditions existent throughout the county.

Increasing prosperity was evident in the fact that more automobiles were purchased. The *Free Press* continually carried items about the hazards of speeding automobiles. Though no crusade for better roads was undertaken by Connelly, he did point out that many accidents were caused by the graded roads' being too narrow to allow two cars to pass.⁹⁰ Although there was some discussion about road improvement, definite plans toward this end were interrupted by the United States' involvement in World War I.

¹Colby *Free Press*, December 26, 1889.

²Colby *Tribune*, August 13, 1891. On February 8, 1891, the *Tribune* bought the *Thomas County Cat* and the latter ceased to exist.

³See Table I.

⁴Colby *Free Press*, August 29, 1889.

⁵Statement by Mrs. B. V. Dimmitt, personal interview. Mrs. Dimmitt mentioned that people eagerly took both papers just to see how each editor would try to get the better of the other. She said that people knew that the two men were on good terms and undoubtedly the two men might well have gotten together and decided on their next "feud." She stated that Turner was physically a very little man while Connelly was quite large. It made an interesting contrast.

⁶Colby *Free Press*, January 2, 1890.

⁷Colby *Tribune*, November 6, 1890. ⁸*Ibid.*, March 26, 1891.

⁹See Tables I and III.

¹⁰Colby *Tribune*, November 12, 1891.

¹¹Over the years there has developed a very definite rivalry between Goodland and Colby which has usually been of a friendly nature.

¹²See Table IV. ¹³*Colby Tribune*, October 20, 1892.

¹⁴See Tables I and IV.

¹⁵*Colby Tribune*, November 3, 1892. Turner, commenting on the boxcar shortage, explained that the competition of two railroads in Colby was the reason why the county seat did not suffer as did other towns of the county. Even today farmers of these outlying areas of the county express this same opinion.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, November 10, 1892.

¹⁷*Colby News*, April 8, 1892. There was continual reference to the lack of rainfall. One significant comment in this particular issue was this one, "...men who are making the money in this country and who are making the country are pushing right ahead as though it rained often."

¹⁸*Colby Free Press*, June 22, 1893. ¹⁹*Ibid.*, June 29, 1893.

²⁰*Thomas County Weather*. A study of the monthly rainfall amounts in late 1892 and early 1893 certainly makes clear the reason for the many accounts of prairie fires. See Table V.

²¹*Colby Free Press*, July 27, 1893. ²²See Table III.

²³*Colby Free Press*, April 12, 1894. ²⁴*Ibid.*, April 19, 1894.

²⁵*Ibid.* ²⁶*Ibid.*, June 14, 1894.

²⁷*Ibid.*, August 2, 1894. ²⁸*Ibid.*, June 23, 1896.

²⁹See Table IV. ³⁰See Table I.

³¹*Biennial Reports*, 1885-1897. The supremacy of wheat as the most important crop (except for rare occasions) may be seen in Tables I and II.

³²*Colby Tribune*, April 20, 1899.

³³See Table I. ³⁴*Colby Tribune*, May 18, 1899.

³⁵*Colby Free Press*, April 2, 1903. On this particular visit the Colby Cornet Band played at the O'Pelt Hotel in C. P. Dewey's honor and Dewey gave them a \$25.00 check to help the band buy new uniforms.

³⁶*Ibid.*, June 11, 1903. There had been mentioned in earlier issues of the *Free Press* incidents involving the Dewey Ranch. On July 20, 1902, the Deweys had unloaded 2,600 Texas cattle in Colby. Since it was Sunday, no cowhands were in town and when the cattle broke loose, townsmen had to round up the stray stock. Only a week later somebody killed ten bulls at the Dewey Ranch and ten others were injured so badly they were useless.

³⁷Taped interview of George Grady for Bill James. Grady mentioned that as the militia moved west of Colby a woman rushed up and "cussed the leader of the State Militia." The episode indicated the extreme views of some people over this shooting.

³⁸*Colby Free Press*, March 24, 1904. The fact that Dewey was acquitted only of the murder of Alphaeus meant that there were charges still pending on the other murder charges. However, nothing further happened until 1915. In September, 1903, just after the shooting incident, Beach and Roy Berry were charged with cattle rustling which would seem to substantiate the pro-Dewey forces' contention that the Berrys were less than sterling citizens.

³⁹Statement by Mrs. B. V. Dimmitt, personal interview. Her father was Will Pratt who ran a livery barn at this time. He had often cared for the Berry' horses prior to the gun fight and during the furor caused by the incident many of his regular customers refused to do business with Mr. Pratt and took their horses to competitors of her father. When the incident calmed down these same men returned. Both Will and his brother, Sam (who was perhaps the most famous sheriff in the history of the county), felt that the Berrys were not very trustworthy men although they did not take either side in these events.

⁴⁰*Colby Free Press*, May 8, 1902. Held in the early 1900's, these sales were advertised in the *Free Press* for weeks in advance with bargains available in all lines of goods. The *Capital* article said there was a "circus air" about Colby during these "Loom Sales." The store was managed by Fred A. Wertz who bought the business in 1907.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, January 15, 1903. Reverend F. E. Brooke was the leader of this group and had ambitions of starting a colony on this land, but it never materialized.

⁴²*Ibid.*, September 17, 1908. ⁴³See Table I.

⁴⁴*Colby Free Press*, September 17, 1908.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, October 15, 1908. ⁴⁶*Ibid.*, February 18, 1909.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, May 29, 1911. ⁴⁸*Ibid.*, December 16, 1909.

⁴⁹*Ibid.* Connelly felt they had been the principal firm to give men employment and scatter money over the county.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, August 18, 1910.

⁵¹The paper had been sold to J.P. Phillips on November 19, 1918. Phillips had been the principal of the Colby Consolidated School. (Connelly, too, had been an educator prior to his journalistic and political career). J.K. "Kim" Phillips, the present owner-editor of the *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, is the son of J.P. Phillips.

⁵²*Colby Free Press*, July 31, 1919. In August, 1919, *Country Gentleman* told of Fike's wheat operation, bad luck, and subsequent death.

⁵³Fike was a victim of the 1911-1913 period of drought and dust storms. People interviewed expressed the belief that it was worse than the more famous "Dirty Thirties." Of course, all agreed it neither covered anywhere near the area nor did it last as long as the latter catastrophe.

⁵⁴See Table III. ⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶See Table I. It included 62,748 bushels of spring wheat in addition to the 951,102 bushels of winter for a total of 1,013,850.

⁵⁷*Colby Free Press*, June 1, 1911.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, June 15, 1911. The *Biennial Report* for 1911 carried the note that no winter wheat was planted and some 103,000 acres of corn and other small grains yielded nothing at all. Only a crop value of \$192,774 was produced from 294,701 acres planted.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, July 6, 1911.

⁶⁰See Table IV.

⁶¹*Colby Free Press*, November 9, 1911. A bounty was imposed. The author is not aware of whether jack rabbits are really a "dry weather crop" but throughout this study and as far as his knowledge of the 1930's goes, these rabbits seemed to be more numerous during dry periods. Hunts and drives became part of a way of life during these periods.

⁶²*Ibid.*, December 28, 1911.

⁶³*Ibid.*, March 23, 1912. ⁶⁴*Colby Tribune*, September 19, 1912.

⁶⁵A "lister," a farm implement ordinarily used for planting corn, was used in this case to make several furrows on the field at intervals of from ten to twenty feet. In blank (or solid) listing, the groups of furrows were close together as they would have been on a field of planted corn.

⁶⁶*Colby Free Press*, February 6, 1913.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, June 5, 1913. B. V. Dimmitt stated that snow plows had to be sent ahead of trains to clear the tracks of dirt. Dirt piled up to the roof eaves of houses north of town. However, people did not leave in great numbers. One woman, after her husband had finally located a buyer for his

land for \$35.00 an acre, refused to go, saying "I can't stand to have anybody endure the things we have had to go through."

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, June 25, 1914. To see the area today it would hardly seem possible that such a condition ever existed.

⁶⁹A. B. Macdonald, "Kansas an Ocean of Wheat," *Country Gentleman*, LXXXIV (August 2, 1919), 30-31. Foster paid from \$5.00 to \$10.00 per acre. One farmer, overjoyed at selling his land so he could leave the county, after selling his land for five dollars per acre whispered to a friend: "What do you s'pose the durned fool is going to do with this cussed land?" Foster had wheat planted in 1914 and harvested enough in 1915 to pay for the land purchased.

⁷⁰*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, October 4, 1939.

⁷¹See Table L.

⁷²*Colby Free Press*, November 15, 1906. They placed many items in the cornerstone. Included were histories of various school districts, churches, and even an article by Connelly.

⁷³*Ibid.*, February 8, 1906. These two examples show how important a role J. R. Connelly had in the progress of Colby. He also backed progressive county projects. Certainly his efforts would not have borne fruit had there not been progressive citizens who agreed that such improvements were needed. Connelly was only one of the many progressive newspaper editors that have characterized this spirit throughout the county from the beginning of the county to the present time.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, November 13, 1902. ⁷⁵*Ibid.*, February 22, 1906. ⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, June 14, 1906. Connelly stated that he favored a library if the people wanted to vote bonds for it, but he was "anti-Carnegie," and he enumerated his reasons. His objection to such money was based on the manner in which Andrew Carnegie had accumulated his fortune.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, January 24, 1907.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, February 28, 1907. Each issue of this paper listed the names of the latest share purchasers and gave the total amount of money raised to that time. The contract was let in May to the Topeka firm of Crosby & son who were building the court house. The project cost \$11,955 and the dedication of the building took place on December 31, 1907.

⁸⁰*Colby Free Press*, July 29, 1909.

⁸¹See Table L. ⁸²*Colby Free Press*, September 23, 1909.

⁸³*Ibid.*, February 3, 1910. ⁸⁴*Ibid.*, January 30, 1913.

⁸⁵*Colby Free Press Tribune*, October 4, 1939.

⁸⁶*Yesterday and Today*, April, 1960. The car was a one-cylinder Oldsmobile and cost \$950. F. O. B. Omaha.

⁸⁷*Colby Free Press*, April 1, 1915.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, July 13, 1916. It was during this period that Mel Bever purchased a \$4,000 gasoline tractor which he demonstrated for interested citizens including editor Connelly who commented that such a tractor, though expensive, was worth it in time saved.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, November 23, 1916.

⁹⁰The December 7, 1916, issue of the *Free Press* revealed that there were 613 cars in the county in 1916.



Sod home of C.E. McGuire, 1908, 8 ½ miles southwest of Colby.



Harrison Chapel, first Methodist Church, organized in 1889 by Rev. W.W. Morrow.



Snowbound Union Pacific train following a blizzard in March, 1912.



Rabbit drive in Thomas County in 1911.



First Thomas County Courthouse built in Colby in 1886 and later moved to 685 N. Court as a residence.



Thomas County Courthouse built on the site of the first courthouse of 300 N. Court in 1906.



Thomas County High School at 210 S. Range, 1908-1936.



High school torn down and St. Thomas Hospital built in 1939 at 210 S. Range.



Kansas State Experiment Station, Colby branch 1914.



Foster farms, headers cutting wheat at 250 acres a day, 1919.



Colby Fair from top of grandstand, 1929.



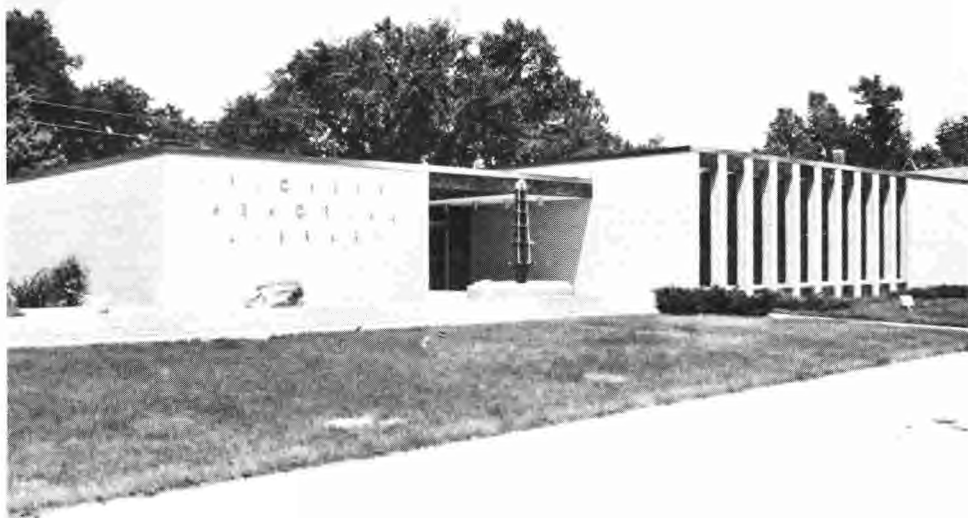
Marion Talley in front of Farmers and Merchants State Bank, 360 N. Franklin, June 12, 1929. L-R Herb Fryback, Postmaster, Sam H. Alexander, Helen Talley, John Sanders, Florence Talley, Mrs. John Sanders, Mayor Ed Bensen, Marion Talley, Mr. August Lauterbach, Sr.



Colby Opera House, 265 W. 4th, 1907-1959.



The Newell House built in 1886 was later called the O'Pelt Hotel and the Cooper Hotel, 505 N. Franklin.



Pioneer Memorial Library, built in 1964, first home of Thomas County Historical Society.



Colby Community Building, center of many activities such as this tractor show, was built in 1955.



Main street Colby, looking south from 6th St. on Franklin, 1907.



Hemstrom swimming pool, 4 miles north and $\frac{3}{4}$ miles east of Colby.



Tractor Show, west side of 400 block on Franklin, early 1930's.



Brewster band shell where auctions and band concerts were held, 1927.



P.V. Elevator, Colby, 135 N. Franklin.



One of the first concrete elevators in Thomas County, 1950.



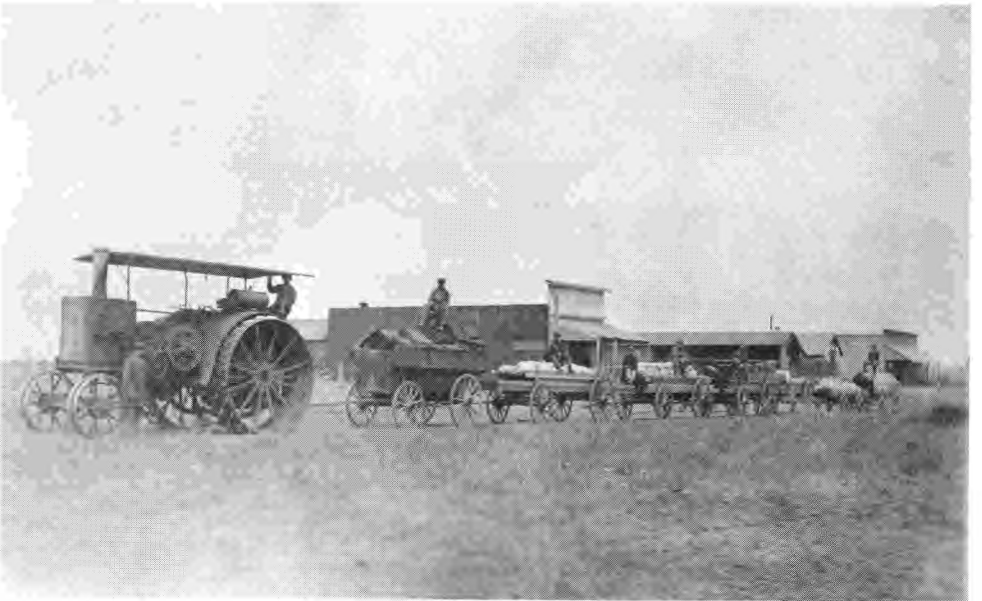
Menlo arial view.



Menlo main street.



Mingo main street



Levant, Beaver Lumber Co., 1912.



Gem railway station.



Gem main street.

The Carmen Hospital, Rexford, Kansas



The Carmen Hospital, Rexford, built in 1908, Dr. B.J. Patterson.



Rexford, Ira Thompson in front of his store with the first car in Thomas County, 1903, 1-cylinder Oldsmobile, \$950.00 FOB, Omaha.



J.W. Fike, Wheat King, 1909, pictured is 32-horse powered steam tractor.



Dr. V.C. Eddy, Physician and Surgeon, 1937.



J.R. Connelly, Congressman 6th District, 1937.

CHAPTER IV

World War I and the 1920's

Articles by J. R. Connelly were printed in the *Colby Free Press* during his terms as Sixth District Congressman. Elected for the first time in 1912, Connelly successfully retained his position against Republican opposition in 1916 and 1918. During his six years as a Representative he wrote the editorials from Washington, D. C. Consequently, Thomas County was kept aware of conditions in the nation's capitol. Like many Democratic Congressmen, Connelly was unseated in the 1918 election as the Sixth District reverted to its norman Republicanism.

However, the residents of Thomas County seemed to be more concerned with local affairs. The big news of Colby at the beginning of 1917 was that the finishing touches were being put on the Louis Building. One of the significant organizations that leased rooms on the second floor was the Commercial Club of Colby whose purpose was to work for a better, larger, and more progressive Colby.¹ By this time the population of Colby and Thomas County was once more on the upswing and by March reached 5,046 in the county and 1,039 in Colby.²

During the last part of 1916 and the early months of 1917 moisture amounts were considerably less than normal, and crop prospects dimmed. After the United States entered World War I and the Council of Defense for the county urged all to plant every available acre, a violent June hail storm wrought "the worst hail damage in the history of the county."³ It covered an area twelve to fourteen miles wide in the county and did \$3,000's worth of damage to windows in Colby. Flat roofs, trees, and gardens in Colby were damaged badly, and hail was one and one-fourth inches deep. The wheat, barley, corn, and other small grains were a total loss in many places.⁴

By July the wheat crop was termed "short," but the *Tribune* optimistically noted that not once in twenty years had there been two successive poor wheat crops. Once more aid for the farmers in the form of seed wheat was undertaken by the county and the state to help win the war. A county-wide organization was established to work to this end with J. T. Fitzgerald as chairman.⁵

Just prior to the entrance of the United States into the war the road improvement frenzy was the big news in the area. Frank Louis was a member of the executive council of the Rock Island Highway organization. However, once

the country was at war, the war took over the biggest portion of the news stories. Business and professional men were helping to meet the production objectives of the farmers, and the whole county was being organized. As had been the case during the drought years of 1911-1913, the Rock Island Railroad sent in a "Silo Train" to give demonstrations on the building of silos. Once again diversified farming techniques were urged on the farmers.

By August 2, 1917, the first thirty Thomas County men were called up for military service. One hundred and four of the first 120 men called asked for exemption, which evoked a scathing article on the "slackness" of the men of Thomas County by the editor, O. M. Beauchamp.⁶ He felt that history would show Thomas County to be a "slacker county" in furnishing men for the war. At such a rate, he stated, it would require twice the number of eligible men to fill the first call for forty-five men. O. M. Beauchamp called those men not seeking exemption "heroes" and offered to send free editions of the *Tribune* to each man going to service without making such exemption claims.⁷ The first men from the county called for service were Carl B. Lishen and Eugene O. Tracey, but when the latter was said to be in Missouri, Aaron Mallory took his place.⁸ On September 20, seventeen additional men were called, and a big send-off was held for them at the O'Pelt Hotel. The men then gathered at the court house, and from there they were accompanied to the train by their relatives and friends. It was a sad time as weeping townspeople congregated to watch their departure.⁹

The various programs and campaigns undertaken by the county during the war proved successful. The record showed that Thomas County went "over the top" in three Liberty Loans and a Victory Loan in addition to the Red Cross drives. A War Conference, one of two held in the Sixth Congressional District, was convened in Colby in March, 1918, for the purpose of "bringing the war home to the people of Kansas." It stressed saving of fats and sugar so that Americans would be doing their part toward winning the war.¹⁰

Letters from soldiers datelined "Over There" and "Somewhere in France" were reprinted in the pages of the *Colby Free Press*. Propaganda movies were shown at both Rexford's Electric Theater and Colby's Lyric Theater.¹¹ Heavy fines were imposed for hoarding. Notices were printed in the papers requesting those having over thirty days' supply of flour to return their excess, since the allowance was only six pounds per person.¹²

Perhaps the most significant evidence of the patriotic fervor of the people of Thomas County was the erection of a flag pole at the intersection of Franklin Avenue and Fourth Street. It was raised at the outset of the Fourth Liberty Loan in October, 1918.¹³

During the final months of the war the Spanish Influenza epidemic swept the entire country. Not many cases were reported in Thomas County although the schools and other meeting places were closed for most of October. A number of servicemen from the county, stationed in different camps in the United States and

France, died from pneumonia brought on by "flu."¹⁴ During the war the county medical services were provided by the pioneer doctor, V. C. Eddy, since all the other doctors of the county were in the armed forces. Burdened though he was, Dr. Eddy devotedly carried on throughout the epidemic.

Rains during the summer and fall of 1918 were too late to produce a bumper wheat crop although some 642,288 bushels were produced; and with wheat near two dollars a bushel the crop was valued at \$1,252,461.60. For the next eight years the wheat yields were over a million bushels a year, although the average price per bushel dropped below one dollar a bushel after 1920.¹⁵

When word of the armistice arrived, the citizens celebrated with a War End Rally in Colby: the fire whistle sounded, church bells rang, flags were displayed, guns fired, bonfires were built, and bands played over the county. By noon of November 11, cars filled Colby—patriotic speeches were made by E. H. Benson and J. R. Connelly, and it was a great day in general.¹⁶

A milestone in Thomas County history was the November, 1919, sale of the *Free Press* by Connelly to J. P. Phillips which ended Connelly's twenty-one years as both owner and editor of the paper. Certainly J. R. Connelly was one of the "giants" of Thomas County, as the editor of one of the leading newspapers and as a three-time Populist-Democratic Congressman from a normally Republican Sixth District. His influence on issues and the growth of Colby and Thomas County cannot be measured, of course, but without a doubt it was most significant.

Rainfall amounts from 1919 through 1923 were above average;¹⁷ and the harvests were, as mentioned previously, very successful. In the two years immediately following the war the Thomas County farmers enjoyed long-hoped-for high grain prices which resulted in their planting over 200,000 acres each year.¹⁸ The prosperity was evidenced by an article in the *Rexford News* that said that Thomas County was first in per capita bank deposits in the state despite its being eighty-seventh in population.¹⁹ The first three million bushel wheat crops in the history of the county was produced in 1920 following a bumper crop of 2,835,420 bushels in 1919.

With such prosperity there were evidences of civic improvement in Rexford and Colby. In May, 1910, a big improvement was made in Rexford with the pouring of a concrete sidewalk on the west side of the main street from the school house to the railroad tracks. There was also a movement under way in Rexford to combine with their Sheridan County neighbor, Selden, to build an electric line to the Colby Light Plant. However, it was felt the price of nine cents a kilowatt-hour was too high, and the two towns decided to look for other possibilities.²⁰

Throughout Colby's history there had been numerous notices of the poor condition of Franklin Avenue, either that the street was a quagmire, rutted, and needed grading, or that it was dusty and needed watering. With the continued mechanization of not only Colby but all of Thomas County, the problem of

paving and street improvement became an issue after the end of World War I. Consequently, petitions were circulated in August, 1919, which proposed paving Franklin Avenue from depot to depot and a few streets one block off the town's main street. The overwhelming desire for such paving was apparent in the fact that ninety-five per cent of the property owners bordering the streets to be paved favored such a project.²¹ At a special meeting in January, 1920, the Colby City Council decided to let bids for paving and a sewage system. In February a paving contract calling for 30,000 square yards of brick pavement costing \$160,000 was awarded to L. L. Beyes of El Dorado, Kansas. At the same time the Gordon Construction Company of Denver, Colorado, was granted the contract for the construction of sewers at a cost of \$50,000. Thus, the citizens of the county seat assumed the obligations of \$210,000's worth of much-needed city improvements.²² The actual paving (curbing and guttering) began April 14, 1920, and continued throughout the year. By August the base street work was begun; and on September 29 the Negro laborers, who laid the brick, started their work. The street project was completed in the second week of December after the sewage system had been finished in November.²³ The citizenry of Colby and Thomas County were justifiably proud of these projects, and the *Free Press* felt confident that in a few years Colby would have a population of three thousand people.²⁴

In May, 1920, Rexford citizens were enthusiastic over prospects for a second bank. Three Atwood men, all associated with banks in Rawlins County, sold shares in the soon-to-be chartered bank called the Farmers State Bank.²⁵ This gave Thomas County nine banks, and all were doing well.²⁶ This was graphically evidenced by the fact that deposits of the Farmers and Merchants State Bank of Colby had exceeded one million dollars and the Thomas County National Bank was near this figure. Conditions seemed quite prosperous with people buying cars, homes being constructed, and two new elevators being built in Colby during the year.

These aspects of prosperity, unequalled to that time, had repercussions even in the small, unincorporated town of Halford, located east of Colby. C. E. Williamson, a land holder of note in that part of the county, had a "dream" for the town; and the *Rexford News* viewed his ideas as follows:

It will not be long until many different lines of business will be represented there. The public sale of town lots will be held the last of this month and he says a lot of fellows have their eye on the town. So far they have stock sold for a bank, and an application is on file for a charter to be known as the Halford State Bank. As soon as the charter is granted they plan to commence the erection of a building. Arrangements have been made with a company to put in a lumber yard and work has started on another grain elevator. A man is in line for a general store and the promoter says that after the sale they expect to have practically all lines of business represented there. Halford is well located and the growth of the town might surprise us all.²⁷

Perhaps the circumstance of poor crop prices which began plaguing the farmers of the county in the fall of 1920 contributed to the curtailment of Williamson's ambitious designs for Halford. By May, 1921, prices were fifty per cent below the high point reached during the war years.²⁸

Meanwhile, Rexford moved progressively ahead during the fall of 1920. The city constructed a fine City Building, and the regular bimonthly meetings of the forty-two member Rexford Commercial Club met in the new structure.²⁹ One of the biggest events ever held in Rexford occurred during 1920. A big jubilee was held in September which included a rodeo, airplane rides, auto race, and other forms of entertainment. The event was a huge success, and the celebration was enjoyed by the many people of the county who attended the festivities.³⁰

It was during the 1920's that Thomas County, like counties all over Kansas, consolidated its numerous school districts. When the consolidation issue came up, many educators gave talks throughout the county in support of the proposition. The result was that consolidated school buildings, all of brick, were constructed in Gem, Menlo, Brewster, Colby, Levant, and Rexford. One other consolidated school building was erected at Brownville in the southwestern corner of the county in Kingery Township. At this time only a frame building was erected although a more permanent brick building was constructed in 1933.

The \$60,000 Gem Consolidated School building was the first of the new edifices to be finished; and it was dedicated on May 26, 1922.³¹ When patrons of the Menlo School District passed, in April, 1922, a \$50,000 bond issue (by a vote of 97-21) calling for a new building, J. P. Phillips of the *Free Press* chastised the people in the Colby School District for procrastinating on their need for school building construction.³² These *Free Press* articles, coupled with the efforts of interested citizens, resulted in a crystalization of the issue. Posters were placed in the windows of business houses whose proprietors favored a new school building. The show windows of Bellamy's Drug Store carried the poster slogan, "Why we need a new school building." Five hundred voters signed petitions for a special bond election and on May 1, 1922, a \$130,000 bond proposal carried by a vote of 378-48.³³ In September, Brewster voted bonds in the amount of \$80,000 for a new school building.³⁴ These four new buildings were the beginning of better educational facilities for the county and were followed by new school structures in Rexford in 1923, and in Levant in 1924. All these buildings are still used except for those at Menlo and Levant where schools are no longer in operation.

Once again, Colby was the scene of a good deal of construction. Two fine, impressive church buildings were constructed in 1922 and 1923. The Presbyterian Church congregation voted, in April, 1921, to build a new sanctuary. The cornerstone was laid on July 9, 1922;³⁵ and the \$30,000 project was finished in 1923. In the summer of 1922 the Methodists began construction on a \$40,000 building "to be one of the most up-to-date structures in western Kansas." The cornerstone was laid on December 15, 1922,³⁶ and the building was completed in

1923. With these two fine, new sanctuaries and an impressive consolidated school building, Colby's religious and educational facilities were greatly expanded.

The Opera House was purchased by the Baptist Church of Colby in 1924.³⁷ The once-great pride of the town had not succeeded as had been hoped. For a number of years the traveling road shows and Chautauquas were held in the Opera House but even so it had proved unprofitable. In 1920, Charles Deeves purchased the building and attempted to make it into a movie theater,³⁸ but this venture had likewise failed possibly because it could not compete with the established Lyric theater. Thus, the advent of moving pictures and the lack of traveling road shows helped doom the Opera House. There had been propositions that the city purchase the building, but these failed to materialize.

In 1921, Dr. W. J. Lewis, Wilbur and Jay Warner, and Henry Schroeder erected adjoining buildings north of the Louis Building on the east side of Franklin Avenue. The Lewis Building had two floors with office space on the second floor and business space on the ground floor. The Warner Brothers Clothing Store flanked this structure on the north, and Schroeder's Furniture Store was south of it. These three new brick stores were yet another progressive sign of the growth of Colby.³⁹ One of Colby's biggest enterprises of this time was the Carpenter-Shafer wholesale grocery house which became one of the most important businesses in the Northwest Kansas region.

In November 1925, the Citizens State Bank and the Farmers and Merchants State Bank merged to form one of the biggest banking houses in Western Kansas or, for that matter, in the entire state.⁴⁰ Another significant business merger was effected when J. P. Phillips purchased the *Colby Tribune* on June 27, 1925, and moved its equipment to the *Free Press* building. Thereafter the paper was known as the *Colby Free Press-Tribune*.⁴¹

One other landmark was the erection in 1926 of a brick building by J. R. Connelly on the corner north of the post office on the east side of Franklin Avenue. The Connelly Building completed a fine block of impressive business offices. Like the Lewis and Schroeder Buildings, it was a two-story structure with a basement. Offices were located upstairs, and businesses on the lower floor included a beauty shop.⁴²

Two chain stores moved into Colby during 1929 and 1930 when the J. C. Penny Store and the A. L. Duckwall Store opened businesses replacing individually owned stores. A telephone company that had come to Colby in 1902 constructed a brick building across the street and directly west of the new Connelly Building.

In July, 1925, enterprising Colby businessmen decided to organize a Chamber of Commerce whose purpose was stated to be "to promote the general welfare, the commercial, industrial, civic, and educational interests of Colby and the surrounding territory."⁴³ It was felt that this body could do this job better than the Colby Commercial Club. Another new organization started was the American Legion.⁴⁴

The Rotary and Lions Clubs of Colby were started in 1924 and 1927, respectively. The first president of the Rotary Club was Ray H. Garvey,⁴⁵ an attorney and real estate man, who later became one of the most prominent names in wheat-raising circles throughout Northwestern Kansas and Eastern Colorado. Dr. E. M. Davis was elected the first president of the Lions Club.⁴⁶

Good wheat harvests in the early 1920's resulted in a population increase from 5,884 in 1921 to a 1926 peak of 7,559. Bad weather conditions in 1927 caused a loss of over 900 people in the county. However, with the return of good weather conditions the county's population went back up to 7,115 in 1929. Colby's population by 1929 was 1,895.⁴⁷

The big land companies were started during the prosperous period following World War I. The most prominent real estate agency was that of A. A. Kendall whose ads in the papers of the county often filled three-quarters of a page. Ray Garvey became part of this company and later organized his own real estate agency, known as the Garvey Land Company. A Western Nebraska land group combined with Kendall to purchase several thousand acres of land in Thomas County.⁴⁸

During the 1920's there was a great amount of road construction which had been advocated earlier but delayed by the war. People in Western Kansas hoped to secure improved roads; and under the federal aid provisions for roads, Thomas County was eligible for eighty-two miles of such aid. The Federal Bureau of Highways was planning three major transcontinental highways through the United States, and Colby businessmen hopefully sought the proposed central route, U. S. 40. There were two possible routes from Manhattan west through Kansas. One was to follow the Union Pacific Railroad while the other possibility was over the Roosevelt-Midland Trail through Clay Center, Beloit, Hill City, to Colby. In either case, Colby hoped to secure this roadway, for the people felt the logical route of the former road would come north from Oakley to Colby over the Victory Highway rather than going west from Oakley along the Union Pacific.⁴⁹ Many meetings were held, and representatives from Colby attended state gatherings and even a national meeting at Chicago in attempts to secure U. S. 40's passage through Thomas County and Colby. Early in 1926 a decision was reached to run highways over both proposed routes, the Union Pacific route (which continued along the railroad west of Oakley) being designated U. S. 40-South and the northern Manhattan-through-Colby route designated U. S. 40-North.⁵⁰

By mid-1929 all the county roads were recognized as improved earth roads and all were graded. U. S. 40-N was being relocated and improved. The old road which followed the Rock Island Railroad from Norton to Colby was known as either the Ocean to Ocean or the Rock Island Highway. In June, 1929, a furor arose among the towns along U. S. 40-N from Colby to Denver, when it was learned that the Highway Bureau intended to designate the road west from Norton through Decatur, Rawlins, and Cheyenne counties as U. S. 36. A meeting was held in

Burlington, Colorado, to "raise a patch of good old hell about it."⁵¹ The towns from Colby west into Colorado were very unhappy, for it meant that instead of auto traffic flowing down to U. S. 40-N by way of the Rock Island Highway, such traffic would go to Denver by way of Oberlin, Atwood, and St. Francis. Many arguments were presented by the businessmen of the towns along U. S. 40-N in an attempt to change the Highway Bureau's decision. All these efforts were to no avail, however; and U. S. 36 became a reality through the northern tier of Kansas counties.

Two famous institutions of Colby and Thomas County, the Thomas County Free Fair and the Colby Tractor Show, had their beginnings during this time. For a number of years a Farmer's Institute had been a fall feature of the county. There had been discussions about holding a fair; but until the the State Legislature provided that each county could vote \$15,000 for construction of fair facilities, the proposal never developed beyond the "talking stage." In the 1926 general election the proposal carried by 217 votes.⁵² In the spring of 1927 a County Fair Committee was established, and its members visited other towns with such facilities to get ideas for building a fair grounds.⁵³ In July the county commissioners approved the purchase of the east forty acres of the State Experimentation Station's property southwest of Colby for the site of the fair grounds, and in the second week of October, 1927, the First Thomas County Free Fair was held.⁵⁴

Perhaps the event that over the years became synonymous with Colby was the annual Tractor and Implement Show. It was first discussed in 1928 and was the idea of a few Chamber of Commerce members.⁵⁵ At the beginning of 1929 a great deal of interest was stimulated in Colby and Thomas County. The implement dealers of Colby had long favored the idea of such a show, since it afforded them the opportunity of displaying the latest farm implements to farmers of the region. Tentative dates of April 11 and 12 were selected, dates which immediately followed an already-established show of a similar nature held at Dodge City. Implement companies enthusiastically agreed to show their equipment on the main street of Colby since tractors, combines, and other implements could be easily moved from Dodge City. The Tractor Show was a huge success.⁵⁶

In 1923 the worst black rust ever to hit the wheat crop in Thomas County reduced a promised average yield of twenty-five to thirty bushels per acre to actual yields of five to ten bushels. The crop was of very poor quality and brought but 70¢ a bushel. Though succeeding crops were much better, farm prices remained low, and Thomas County farmers began searching for solutions to their problems. Many became interested in various cooperative organizations of farmers in Thomas County. Two were especially significant, the Farmers Union and the Kansas Co-Operative Wheat Marketing Association commonly called the Kansas Wheat Pool. The latter group was a joint enterprise of the Farmers Union and the Kansas Wheat Growers Association and was an attempt to halt the steady decline in wheat prices by enrolling farmers who would sign contracts pledging not to sell

their grain. By withholding wheat from the open market these organized farm bodies hoped to effect a raise in prices. The Pool had started in Oklahoma in 1920 and in Kansas, at Hutchinson, in 1921. From the outset it had evoked stern opposition from all sides as being too radical. H. N. Goetsch of Brewster was a member of the Executive Council and Board of Directors in its first year, 1924.⁵⁷

Lack of moisture in 1926 caused fear that the land would start to blow, and the county commissioners established a reclamation project in an attempt to avert such a condition. Coupled with these dry conditions, a July hail storm⁵⁸ devastated crops in the western part of the county and resulted in a harvest of only 438,288 bushels from 146,096 acres sown. As in 1923 corn was the big crop, and large piles of corn were seen all over the county that fall.⁵⁹

The county bounced back once more with a bumper crop in 1928 which was close to a million bushels. New ideas in farming were developed at this time which ushered in practices that helped make the county famous. Summer fallowing techniques were discussed, and farmers got together and talked over their common problems. In the next four years the county produced over four million, two million, three million, and one million bushels of wheat; but the price continued to remain at less than one dollar per bushel.⁶⁰

It might seem strange that the Ku Klux Klan should play any part in the story of Thomas County, but once in 1923 it was front page news in the *Free Press-Tribune*. The KKK advertised in July that a meeting would be held; and the July 31, 1923, gathering drew an estimated crowd of 1500-1600 people who came in 400-500 cars. They assembled in John Ackard's pasture east of Colby, and a public initiation was held. The editor noted that people came from all over Northwestern Kansas including some from the towns of Goodland, Atwood, Oakley, and Winona. The setting included a raised platform, cross, candles, a fiery cross in the background, and white-robed KKK members. The proceedings were cut short, however, by the coming of a thunderstorm.⁶¹ As far as could be determined it was the one and only foray by this group into Thomas County.

In 1926 Thomas County sought one of four State Lake sites that the legislature was known to be considering. In January a 150-acre site in the northeastern area of the county near Cumberland was appraised since there were apparently some good springs located there. Surrounding towns were urged to support the bid for such a lake. Several men went to Topeka to agitate for the location of one of the lake sites in Thomas County. In February, dynamite had been used to improve the flow of the springs. The State Fish and Game Commission⁶² approved the location of a lake in Thomas County in June, and it seemed the efforts of the Issac Walton League and the various businessmen's trips to Topeka had proven successful. The good news of June turned to gloom in July after a visit by geological experts. Their analysis of the proposed site made it apparent that a lake was impractical because the geological strata of the area were not conducive to water retention since water would seep through a forty-foot gravel deposit.⁶³ Thus

ended, once and for all, Thomas County's ambitions for a State Lake.

The possibility of some kind of lake was not doomed, however, for Art Hemstrom, a farmer who lived about four miles north of Colby, proposed that a resort area be made of some abandoned sand pits located in his pasture. He sought forty men willing to put up \$50.00 each to help with the project and offered them fishing, hunting, and similar privileges. Whether such investors were found could not be substantiated, but this "summer resort" was developed and opened June 19, 1927.⁶⁴ For a good many years it proved to be a most popular spot.

During the late 1920's Colby and Thomas County gained national prominence as a result of its Water and Light Plant. Increased demands for electrical power had overloaded the plant by fifty per cent in early 1921 which resulted in a special election in February which approved a bond issue of \$60,000 for the plant's expansion by a vote of 237 to 22.⁶⁵ In March suggestions were made that the plant convert from coal to oil as fuel to run the plant's generators. This conversion was made after much investigation and proved most beneficial as diesel fuel was much more economical, and from that time on the plant profited greatly. Another outlay of \$49,360 was made by the city in December, 1924, to purchase a 600-horsepower engine for this plant and a new city fire truck. These purchases did not require a bond election since the plant was making money. Similarly, a 500,000 gallon water reservoir was constructed in 1926 to meet the increasing water needs of Colby, especially during the summer months. This facility was likewise paid for out of the profits of the power plant.

By 1927 the plant was so successful that many private power companies wanted to purchase the facility. The plant was considered one of the best in the state. On a total investment of \$214,000 (which included the original steam system), all but \$60,000 had been paid off, so it seemed doubtful if the city would sell a plant which was making money.⁶⁶ The Colby City Council, in a special meeting in May, 1928, adopted a resolution to waive all property tax levies within the city limits. Net earnings of the power plant were to take care of all the administrative and police expenses, park upkeep, library, cemetery, and the \$190,000 bonded indebtedness on paving, sewer, and the light and water plant. Council action also lowered electricity rates to four cents per kilowatt-hour (after the first 5,000 kilowatts used per month) for the six cities purchasing power from Colby.⁶⁷ Newspapers over the country took up the story of the "taxless town," and before long a great many comments made in other papers throughout the country were being reprinted in the *Free Press-Tribune*.⁶⁸

In November, 1928, the Central Kansas Power Company bought the transmission lines furnishing electricity to Rexford and Selden. The Menlo and Gem lines were owned by the Rexford-Selden system. The Brewster lines owned those in Levant, but they sold to other interests for the sum of \$26,000 while the C. K. P. paid \$27,200 for the eastern lines.⁶⁹

In July, 1929, a second "taxless year" was voted by the city council. The noted

writer, Arthur Brisbane, commented on the "no-tax" status of Colby, Kansas, in the following manner:

... That publicly-owned light and water plant means that several fine American families may have to go to work, instead of going to Europe. Above all, it does away with tax paying, that saps the foundations of national patriotism.⁷⁰

More renown for Colby and Thomas County came in 1929 when Marion Talley, the famous 22-year old metropolitan Opera Star, purchased a section of land northwest of Levant, some twelve and one-half miles from Colby. Miss Talley, her parents, and her sister, Florence, stated their intention of building a fine home on the land.⁷¹ On June 11, 1929, Miss Talley and her family were in Colby and purchased another 320 acres adjoining her original purchase on the west. These land purchases had been handled by August Lauterbach and Sam Alexander of the Farmers and Merchants State Bank. It was during this visit that a number of photographers arrived in Colby to film the events for Paramount and Fox film interests. Indications that the whole affair was a publicity stunt were evident: a hundred or more citizens were "posed" in "greeting" Miss Talley at the O'Pelt Hotel, where the Talleys stayed; pictures were taken of Miss Talley on tractors, in wheat fields, and doing other such "work" (like picking cherries at the Experiment Station) as the photographers deemed appropriate.⁷² One afternoon she visited the Foster Farms. All these activities evoked the following *Free Press-Tribune* comment:

... naive and simple in spite of her great popularity and wide renown... exceedingly amiable toward photographers, reporters, and curious questioners. She was quite willing to pose in any manner suggested and numerous pictures were taken of her... in the afternoon Miss Marion met quite a number of local citizens who arrived on the keen jump, all red and panting and a bit timid.⁷³

The stir caused by the Talleys' visit died down somewhat thereafter, but in the November, 1929, issue of *McCall's* Miss Talley told the famed Mary Margaret McBride the "inside story" of her decision to retire and return to her farm in Thomas County. In the introduction by Miss McBride it was pointed out that in 1927 Marion had made the statement that "she was looking forward to buying a nice farm where we (her family) can have a front and back yard and chickens."⁷⁴ Miss Talley claimed her purchase of land was not a publicity stunt. At the time of the land purchases in May and June, many articles in the *Free Press-Tribune* referred to the jealousy of neighboring counties who had wondered what Colby and Thomas County had offered Miss Talley to choose a farm site in their county. Thomas Countians denied any such offer and charged that there were indications such offers had been made by other communities. In the *McCall's* article Miss Talley verified that these offers had been made from towns all over the country but she and her family preferred to buy their land "like other people."⁷⁵ The envious

newspaper comments led E. E. Sprague of the *Sherman Theatre Post* to comment, "Without question this Marion Talley buy is the greatest piece of publicity Western Kansas ever received, and it is the one and only favorable notice it has gotten in the press of the country at large."⁷⁶ Sprague went on to congratulate Colby and, evidently in reference to those critics who claimed Colby gave land to Miss Talley to get her to settle in Thomas County, said such criticism was merely sour grapes and advised Colby not to be "fussed" by it.⁷⁷

Miss Talley's farm had 640 acres in wheat, 40 acres of corn, 200 acres of barley and 80 acres of pastureland. The singer told of the ambitious building plans of the Talley family. She hoped to construct an eight-room, two-story house with a living room, dining room, bedroom, kitchen, and bath on the first floor and four bedrooms and a bath on the the second floor. She said both she and Florence hoped to learn to milk the cows they wanted to purchase. In referring to the farming operation, she indicated that she hoped to make money from the venture. Colby was called a "nice town" by Miss Talley who stated that she planned never to go back to the Metropolitan Opera.⁷⁸

The Talley family came to oversee the harvest in July, 1930, and stayed at the O'Pelt Hotel since their house had not been built (and never was). In February of this year Miss Talley purchased an adjacent section which gave her 1600 acres.⁷⁹ In later years little was seen of Miss Talley, for she went to California and tried her hand at movie-making.⁸⁰ Her land dealings and visits did a great deal to bring recognition to Thomas County, but drought and depression soon replaced such fame with adverse publicity. However, there can be no doubt that both the "taxless town" status and Miss Talley's land purchases brought the area more publicity than ever before.

¹*Colby Tribune*, March 15, 1917. ²See Table IV.

³*Colby Tribune*, June 7, 1917.

⁴*Ibid.* Most of the remaining wheat dried up later that summer. See Table I.

⁵*Ibid.*, July 5, 1917.

⁶*Ibid.*, August 9, 1917. The situation did not turn out as badly as Beauchamp feared since many of those seeking exemption were turned down. Of course, there were some exempted for just causes.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*, September 6, 1917.

⁹*Colby Tribune*, September 20, 1917.

¹⁰*Colby Free Press*, March 7, 1918. In the harvest of 1918 women worked in the field, and businessmen of the county also aided greatly in this venture.

¹¹The most publicized of these films was "The Beast of Berlin," and both theaters showed it.

¹²*Colby Free Press*, May 9, 1918. Mrs. B. V. Dimmitt stated that "the worst part of the war to me was the awful substitutes we had to cook with."

¹³*Ibid.*, October 17, 1918. This flagpole was taken down in the summer of 1930. It was used very little after the war.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, Etta Coover, a nurse at Camp Funston, Kansas, also died of pneumonia caused by flu and was to be remembered for her devotion by having the Colby American Legion Post named in her honor in 1922.

¹⁵See Table I. ¹⁶*Colby Free Press*, November 14, 1918.

¹⁷See Table V.

¹⁸See Table I. One of the great wheat farmers of Thomas County during this period was Jacob "Jake" Lewallen. He gained recognition in two articles in *Country Gentleman* during 1919 as the result of his post-war wheat harvest successes.

¹⁹*Rexford News*, April 10, 1919. The *Rexford News*, owned by A. A. Gillispie, was the official county paper from 1918-through 1920, the only time in Thomas County's history that a non-Colby paper was so designated.

²⁰*Ibid.*, October 23, 1919; November 6, 1919.

²¹*Colby Free Press*, August 21, 1919. Research by the *Colby Tribune* in the county treasurer's office revealed that the county had 824 cars and 37 trucks by December. Ford cars and Republic trucks predominated.

²²*Colby Free Press* and *Rexford News*, February 5, 1920.

²³*Colby Free Press*, December 9, 1920.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*, October 13, 1921. The bank was opened with a capital stock of \$10,000 and a surplus of \$5,000. By October it had a capital of \$17,000 and a surplus of \$4,250. C. C. Thompson, E. T. Thompson, and W. S. McIntyre headed the bank's operation.

²⁶The Menlo State Bank was robbed of \$5,000 in September, 1921, by a bandit that was apparently never caught.

²⁷*Rexford News*, June 3, 1920.

²⁸William F. Zornow. *Kansas, A History of the Sunflower State*. (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 273.

²⁹*Rexford News*, December 16, 1920.

³⁰*Ibid.*, September 23, 1920. ³¹*Colby Free Press*, June 1, 1922.

³²*Ibid.*, April 27, 1922. In this particular issue a picture of the Thomas County Court House was run on the front page of the paper, and the editor referred to it as the "\$50,000 pride of Colby and Northwest Kansas." In contrast, the editor called the local school buildings "the poorest of any town half its size in Kansas." There were also articles by other men interested in getting action on the issue, and the Colby Commercial Club went on record as favoring a school bond election.

³³*Ibid.*, May 4, 1922.

³⁴*Ibid.*, September 21, 1922. As might be expected, all these new structures were very similar in appearance.

³⁵*Ibid.*, July 6, 1922. ³⁶*Ibid.*, December 21, 1922.

³⁷*Ibid.*, June 5, 1924. ³⁸*Rexford News*, September 2, 1920.

³⁹*Colby Free Press*, September 1, 1921.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, November 5, 1925.

⁴¹*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, July 2, 1925.

⁴²*Ibid.*, March 11, 1926. ⁴³*Ibid.*, July 23, 1925.

⁴⁴*Colby Free Press*, March 16, 1922.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, April 17, 1924.

⁴⁶*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, June 9, 1927.

⁴⁷See Table IV. ⁴⁸*Colby Free Press*, May 6, 1920.

⁴⁹*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, December 17, 1925

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, January 21, 1926.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, June 20, 1929. ⁵²*Ibid.*, November 11, 1926.

⁵³*Ibid.*, April 14, 1927.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, October 13, 1927. The "Tabernacle," a wooden building owned by the Pilgrim Holiness Church and located on west Fourth Street and the old Farmer's Institute Horse Barn in west Colby were both removed to the Fair Ground. A grandstand and some other buildings had been built as well. The location may be seen on the map of Colby, Figure 6, in the Appendix.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, December 20, 1928. ⁵⁶*Ibid.*, April 18, 1929.

⁵⁷Ernest R. Downie (comp.), *The Kansas Wheat Pool*, (The Kansas Co-Operative Wheat Publishing Association, 1927), 441.

⁵⁸*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, July 7, 1927.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, November 24, 1927. ⁶⁰See Table I.

⁶¹*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, August 2, 1923.

⁶²*Ibid.*, June 3, 1926.

⁶³*Ibid.*, July 1, 1926.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, June 23, 1927.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, February 17, 1921.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, September 29, 1927.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, May 17, 1928. In addition to Brewster, Gem, Levant, Menlo, and Rexford, Selden in Sheridan County also purchased electricity from Colby.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, May 31, 1928. Some of the towns were: Fort Myers, Virginia; Paducha, Kentucky; Chicago; Washington, D. C.; Portland, Maine; Colorado Springs; Shennandoah, Iowa; Chadron and Minden, Nebraska; and Carterville, Georgia. The Denver Post also ran an article.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, November 15, 1928.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, July 25, 1929. ⁷¹*Ibid.*, May 20, 1929.

⁷²*Ibid.*, June 13, 1929.

⁷³*Ibid.*, June 13, 1929.

⁷⁴Marion Talley, "Going Home," *McCall's*, LVII (November, 1929), 25. Hereinafter cited as, Talley "Going Home."

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 90.

⁷⁶*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, June 27, 1929.

⁷⁷*Ibid.* It was noted after Goodland defeated Colby in baseball in an earlier issue that Colby had “Talley” but lacked “tallies.” In the August 1 issue of the *Free Press-Tribune* the headline was “Colby Has Talley and Plenty of Tallies.”

⁷⁸Talley, “Going Home,” 90.

⁷⁹*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, February 6, 1930.

⁸⁰At the time of this study (1964), Marion Talley still owns these 1600 acres. A check of the county treasurer’s records revealed that her address is Beverly Hills, California. The Farmers and Merchants Bank in Colby still writes her annual small grain hail insurance business.



CHAPTER V

Depression and Drought Of the 1930's

The history of Thomas County during the period of the 1930's could best be described by the word, adversity. The county's farmers, plagued by low prices in the 1920's, found the blight of drought and dust storms added to the continuing price problems in the 1930's. By July, 1931, Thomas County farmers were confronted with a record low wheat price of twenty-five cents per bushel. It was little wonder that, faced by such problems, these farmers resorted to divergent methods of grain storage until wheat prices improved. Many went so far as to dump it on the ground rather than sell it for such low prices.¹ Consequently, the Kansas Wheat Pool was very active in Thomas County during the early 1930's as it attempted to organize the county's farmers. By contractual agreements not to market their grain, farmers hoped to get a government loan to erect their own elevator. The ex-secretary of the Kansas Wheat Pool, Ernest Downie, came to Colby to encourage such a development.²

By March, 1930, various parts of the county were being signed to contracts under the Wheat Pool banner. Some 200,000 acres were enrolled around Colby, Gem, Mingo, Levant, and the south part of the county. Farmers around Brewster were enrolled under the Farmer's Union program. It was felt that having elevators of their own would mean an increase of five cents per bushel.³ The Wheat Pool ran into many difficulties, primarily in the form of law suits lodged against farmers who broke their contractual agreements and sold their wheat as prices improved. This same problem hampered the Pool's efforts throughout its existence, and consequently the entrance of the various governmental agencies eventually negated its efforts in Thomas County.

The years, 1933 to 1935, found production sharply falling from the 1931 production. The 1932 yield of 1,503,350 bushels was valued at only \$451,005; so the low price per bushel offset a fair production in bushels. Starting in 1933 the respective yields were 687,895 bushels; 247,800 bushels; and 144,800 bushels.⁴

The drought period that developed throughout the entire Great Plains region earned it the dubious title of "Dust Bowl" in the early 1930's, and such a derisive term explains the weather conditions existent in Thomas County during this

period. Surprisingly, despite such harsh weather conditions, the population of both the county and Colby continued to rise until 1934. The 7,833 people living in Thomas County in 1934 represented the greatest population in the county's entire history. Another trend, which became noticeable during this period and has continued to the present, was the movement from the farm to the county seat. However, during this time there was no great reduction in the number of farms in the county. A check of the population statistics indicates that even though the population declined it did so by just a few hundred a year in the county, and Colby never lost as many as one hundred people a year.⁵

Records of rainfall amounts at Colby during the period, 1930-1940, showed that only in 1930, 1933, and 1937 was the precipitation above the normal 18.02 inches. In 1934, 8.60 inches was to be the second lowest precipitation figure between 1888 and 1946. The decade of 1930-1939 was the driest in the history of the country.⁶ This coincided with the general weather conditions in Kansas during this period which constituted the hottest and driest ten-year period in the state's history since the recording of weather information was begun in 1880. Such disastrous climatic conditions produced the worst agricultural problems ever experienced in Thomas County.⁷

The news accounts of the *Free Press-Tribune* in 1932 frequently mentioned that the conditions were dry, and on March 29, a late afternoon dust storm hit the county from the northwest and raged into the night. About six o'clock the storm was at its worst. "Old timers" could not agree whether this storm was worse than any during the 1911-1914 period, but all agreed it was bad.⁸ Dirt storms could be very violent. On May 22, 1933, one especially severe storm came in from the south on winds of fifty miles an hour doing damage to Western Oklahoma, Eastern Colorado, and Western Kansas. Like many of these storms it hit the Colby area at about five o'clock in the afternoon and hid the sun which necessitated turning on the street lights. The storm hung over the city for two hours; and, as it lightened, there was a marvelous glow in the sky, "something no one had ever seen before. All overhead and to each horizon there was a dull red glow in the sky as the sun strove to pierce the clouds of dust with but partial success."⁹ It was said that such a halo could never be imagined. The storm was called the worst since 1912, and the accompanying wind was clocked by the wind velocity instrument of the Experiment Station as the most intense since 1914. All vegetation suffered: tree leaves looked withered the following morning, some wheat fields were badly scorched, and flowers exposed to the elements were ruined as "they crumpled in one's hands like dead and blew away like powder."¹⁰

In the fall of 1933 clouds of grasshoppers migrated into the county, and the farmers hurriedly set about poisoning them. This was the beginning of another problem that became exceedingly serious in the late 1930's and especially in 1937.¹¹ Every year the continuing drought and the grasshopper problem were the big news. Time after time accounts of various local events mentioned in passing

that the event was marred by a dirt storm.¹² Despite the disheartening years of drought, the people remained optimistic and retained their sense of humor. One example of this optimism was the decision of the school patrons of the Brownville School District in the the southwest corner of the county to construct a \$25,000 brick school building.¹³ A sense of humor was evidenced by the editor of the *Free Press-Tribune* when he commented on one occasion that the song "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" should be retitled "Dirt Gets in Your Ears."¹⁴

In 1932 the decision was made by the merchants of Colby to sell only on a cash basis in these "hard times."¹⁵ The feeling was unanimous that with the increasingly serious economic conditions, credit was a detriment to the retailers and wholesalers who were being burdened by all the problems existent at this time. This was evidence that the local citizens were trying to solve these economic difficulties on their own.¹⁶

The banks of the county seemed to be stable. Prices and wages both dropped, and harvest wages for 1931 were but two dollars a day making the wheat harvest one of the most economical in the history of the county. By the fall of 1931 diversified farming interests included planting row crops, milking cows, raising chickens and hogs, and cattle feeding.¹⁷

With winter coming on unemployed men became a problem which city officials tried to help alleviate by asking all who had job openings to list them at the city office. In the spring of 1932 the School Board, rather than raise the mill levy, decided to lower teachers' salaries. A *Free Press-Tribune* newspaper article mentioned that the teachers were "going along in fine spirits."¹⁸ Civic Clubs in Colby responded to the challenge of hard times and the Lions Club considered operating a breakfast kitchen during the winter months to solve the hunger situation. The idea was proposed to use wheat in its natural state and make warm meals for those who "desired to come and eat."¹⁹

An indication of the serious conditions which gripped Thomas County was the loss of four of the Protestant ministers of Colby. Economic reasons resulted in all these clergymen's moving to other towns except the ministers serving the Methodist and Pilgrim Holiness Churches.

When the Methodist congregation in September announced it could not support a minister after the conference meeting, Colby businessmen discussed the problem for the adverse publicity it would bring the town. It was agreed that if they could get the Methodist Conference to return Reverend Lester R. Templin, perhaps some form of interdenominational church could operate for one year.²⁰

With unemployment a growing problem, the city government tried to assist private committees dealing with this dilemma. One of the biggest projects to relieve unemployment was the beautification of Fike Park. Jobless men were put to work removing the numerous unnecessary trees in the park; and this wood, in turn, helped solve the need for fuel. Later, when Federal Projects were instituted

to relieve the problem of unemployment through public improvement projects, Colby set up a committee to work out potential projects to take advantage of this solution to a distressing situation. Mayor W. G. Shafer drew up tentative plans to improve Fike Park, the streets, and the storm sewer system if there was enough money available.²¹ During the fall and winter of 1932, Thomas County was divided into twelve districts, and people worked diligently to secure clothing and relieve hunger and suffering.

Discontent with the economic situation resulted in an overwhelming Thomas County vote for Franklin D. Roosevelt in November, 1932.²² He had visited Colby on his campaign tour in September and the whole town and the surrounding area turned out for this short stop by his special Rock Island Train. Businesses closed and the school band paraded to the depot. After the band played, Mr. Roosevelt commented that the band played well and led the applause for the group. He was accompanied by his son, James; his daughter, Mrs. Curtis Dall; and James' wife. He introduced his family and told the assembled throng of his deep personal interest in the farm situation and intention to cooperate in bringing farm prices back to a level of profit for the farm operators.²³

Other hopeful politicians visited Colby including the three gubernatorial candidates, Alf Landon, Harry Woodring, and the infamous Dr. Brinkley. The early September visit of Brinkley received a good deal of advance publicity which resulted in his being greeted by a tremendous crowd. Commenting on this visit, the editor exclaimed that presidential candidates often drew but half as many people, and that many actors and great men and women in other lines would "gladly sacrifice their heavenly hopes to get half the attention."²⁴ Certainly his truck with its powerfully equipped loud speakers called Ammunition Train No. 1 impressed many in the crowd. The editor was somewhat prophetic when he remarked in the *Free Press-Tribune*:

. . . He treated the people of Kansas to a political situation they may never know again. He has given political affairs something new to ponder upon, and maybe never again in your lifetime will anything remotely resembling it again come upon the stage²⁵.

The indication that the economic and financial conditions of the county were strained was evidenced by the Gem State Bank's going into receivership on September 6, 1932. Very briefly in early 1933 during the shortage of money and the Federal Bank Holiday, Thomas County, like some other counties, issued \$3,000 in scrip to be used for emergency purposes and to pay the expenses of the county. When the banks were reopened, this scrip was recalled. There was never a panic in the county.²⁶

The work on Fike Park's beautification progressed during the spring of 1933 by utilizing the funds made available by the Federal Government. A car load of ornamental rocks from Wyoming were placed along the drives of the park. Many clubs developed flower plots, park benches were built, and a Greek-type theater

was constructed. Tom Bellamy, Othel Pratt, and Dr. E. M. Davis at an Abilene, Kansas, Lions Club Convention saw a 1,200 pound concrete lion and felt it would be an asset to the park. Named "Zimba," the lion was put on a concrete base and located near the drive that entered the park from the southwest corner. Two clay tennis courts and a wading pool were among the final touches to Fike Park. All of its recreational facilities made the park a center that was enjoyed by not only the local people but many tourists. The dedication ceremonies were held July 4, 1933.²⁷ In the spring of 1934 additional work was done in the park including the building of fireplaces and the provision of more picnic tables and benches. The Union Pacific hauled in two World War I cannons. Some large rocks were placed at the northwest and northeast entrances while other large rocks were used in the construction of a circular cement bench which had a fish pond in the center. It was located in the south central area of the park.²⁸

In July 1933, the National Industrial Recovery Administration (and its employment codes) was established in Colby and Thomas County. In September the allotment for wheat acreage was adopted by farmers of the county, and they cooperated almost one hundred per cent. Another interesting Garvey Land Company advertisement, signed by Ray H. Garvey, was published in the *Free Press-Tribune*. In it Garvey pointed out that as a large wheat producer who practiced summer fallowing techniques he was not allowed to count his unseeded wheat acreage in his allotment. Many small farmers were upset because they felt the large land owner was favored by such government aid more than they.²⁹ According to John Kriss of Colby, an associate of Garvey's at the time, on one occasion a large group of such farmers gathered in the street between the Connelly Building (where the government offices were located) and the O'Pelt Hotel to voice their protest of the program to the government official who was in charge of the local office. He told them the program was based on what a farmer planted, not on what he wished he had planted. Kriss stated that both he and Garvey were in the office at the time and that the crowd finally dispersed. Kriss admitted that he was upset by the episode as the feelings of the crowd were quite high.³⁰

President Roosevelt's New Deal Program, which attempted to alleviate the distress the nation was experiencing at this time, resulted in the establishment of various programs in Thomas County. The most prominent were the Civil Works Administration, Public Works Administration, and the Works Progress Administration. These different programs employed many of the jobless in Thomas County. By April, 1934, some 764 people were registered at the Colby office of the National Reemployment Service. Of this number the CWA employed 246 men and nine women, the PWA employed 164 men, 135 men and women were sent to private employers, and 180 referrals were made to employers. When the CWA was terminated in April, 1934, its last payroll was \$28,000.15. In April, 1934, the PWA had a monthly payroll of \$32,440.00, and contracts let under this agency

totaled \$109,454.97. This included road work on Kansas Highway 25 north of Colby and the new viaduct constructed over the Rock Island tracks plus two blocks of paving on Range Avenue to Fourth Street and junction with U. S. 24.³¹

Thomas County CWA projects had included forty blocks of street sanding in Colby, the erection of a new clubhouse for the Colby Golf Club, street-sanding projects in Gem and Rexford, and the gravelling of thirty-eight miles of the county's roads. Work done at the Thomas County Fair Grounds included sanding the entrance and painting buildings. Other CWA projects included the refinishing of walls, furniture, and other minor jobs at the Thomas County Court House.³²

By the summer of 1934, with the continuing drought conditions, employment opportunities became more difficult. A dream of Mayor W. G. Shafer of Colby was the construction of a city hall, library, and fire department in a building to be located at the southwest corner of the park. He felt such a structure could be built of native limestone hauled from the Smoky Hill River area south of Oakley.³³ It was his belief that the American Legion could be influenced to furnish the material for a basement of thirty by seventy feet under part of the proposed building, while the Business and Professional Women's organization might be interested in the other forty by forty feet of basement.³⁴

In August, 1934, Thomas County was listed as a primary drought county, and livestock owners were therefore eligible for emergency loans. The federal government bought about two thousand cattle from Thomas County cattle owners. Cattle that were too old or too "poor" were shot and the others shipped out to pasture areas.³⁵ Conditions worsened in 1935 as the result of many terrible dust storms, and in the spring of this year a land survey of Thomas County was undertaken. It was found that more than one-third of the land required listing to halt erosion. One-half the cultivated land in Thomas County needed solid listing, and less than one-fourth of this type of land was not blowing. The survey indicated that the worst area of the county was the southwestern corner, especially the northeast corner of Kingery Township where twenty-nine sections needed solid listing. The northeastern area near Rexford was least affected with only 320 acres in need of solid listing measures.³⁶

The late 1920's and early 1930's found attempts being made at corporation farming in Thomas County. The *Free Press-Tribune* carried an excerpt from a *Rock Island Magazine* article on the county which mentioned that the Western Kansas Farming Corporation had 27,000 acres in Thomas and adjoining counties.³⁷ Certainly there were many big wheat operations at this time. One of the biggest was headed by Claude Schnellbacher who owned some 4,000 acres of farm land.³⁸ Together with an Omaha, Nebraska, doctor named Geiger and Ray Garvey, Schnellbacher formed the Mutual Land Company and attempted large-scale farming techniques.³⁹ Such ventures were declared illegal by the Kansas State Legislature in March, 1931.⁴⁰ However, this enactment did not put an end to

	R.36	R.35	R.34	R.33	R.32	R.31
T.6	1- 5,800	1- 8,080	1- 3,700	1- 2,380	1- 6,240	1- 8,640
	2- 4,980	2- 5,240	2- 8,360	2- 7,920	2- 3,440	2- 820
	3- 7,540	3- 4,180	3- 4,640	3- 2,320	3- 4,560	3- 7,680
	4- 4,720	4- 5,540	4- 6,340	4- 10,730	4- 8,800	4- 6,400
T.7	1- 7,200	1- 6,820	1- 8,420	1- 3,960	1- 4,440	1- 13,680
	2- 6,230	2- 4,440	2- 480	2- 13,080	2- 2,240	2- 840
	3- 3,680	3- 5,300	3- 7,520	3-	3- 10,580	3- 2,520
	4- 5,930	4- 6,480	4- 6,620	4- 6,000	4- 5,780	4- 6,000
T.8	1- 2,740	1- 2,120	1- 1,280	1- 1,200	1- 1,480	1- 680
	2- 11,160	2- 9,500	2- 15,320	2- 14,580	2- 8,640	2- 9,780
	3- 3,200	3- 5,080	3- 1,900	3- 1,630	3- 5,000	3- 5,900
	4- 5,940	4- 6,340	4- 4,540	4- 5,630	4- 7,920	4- 6,680
T.9	1-	1-	1- 1,340	1- 580	1- 1,760	1- 4,560
	2- 14,040	2- 19,140	2- 6,610	2- 12,060	2- 8,210	2- 5,520
	3- 2,240	3- 960	3- 8,510	3- 4,710	3- 5,620	3- 3,720
	4- 5,800	4- 2,940	4- 6,580	4- 5,690	4- 7,450	4- 9,200
T.10	1- 7,200	1- 1,560	1-	1- 4,760	1- 7,520	1- 2,960
	2- 11,040	2- 15,020	2- 17,880	2- 8,740	2- 560	2- 2,220
	3- 1,520	3- 600	3- 2,480	3- 4,220	3- 7,000	3- 9,200
	4- 3,280	4- 5,860	4- 2,680	4- 5,320	4- 7,960	4- 8,660

FIGURE 4
 Thomas County Soil Survey Compiled in 1935
 Condition of Acreages in the County

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1- Cultivated land not blowing .
2- Cultivated land to list solidly . | 3- Cultivated land to strip-list .
4- Pasture, roads, and other lands. |
|--|--|

large-scale individual farming operations. Some of the other large land owners of this time included E. D. Crabbe, 3,500 acres; H. A. Hills, 2,900 acres; M. W. Bever, 2,400 acres; and S. A. Lunsway and his son, Harry, with 2,400 acres.⁴¹ Of course, Ben Foster's land holdings between Gem and Rexford exceeded 15,000 acres. The two men who became locally famous in the 1940's, Kriss and Garvey, farmed during this period; but the land they farmed was rented at this time and neither bought much land until the 1940's.⁴²

From the beginning of the New Deal and its numerous programs, Thomas County was a most enthusiastic area in supporting such allotments and reductions as were instituted. A hint that the Agricultural Adjustment Act might be declared unconstitutional appeared in the *Free Press-Tribune* in October, 1935. When the United States Supreme Court did render its famous decision in January, 1936, a mass meeting was held in Colby. Some 400 farmers and businessmen urged the AAA's restoration, and when resolutions to that effect were circulated, about 300 signed them. William Ljungdahl of Menlo headed the meeting, and on January 21 he spoke over radio station KRWL at Garden City and the following day on KMMJ at Clay Center, Nebraska, on this issue.⁴³

The continued deterioration of the economic and financial structure of Thomas County and the surrounding area was evidenced by the fact that half the fall docket of the 1935 District Court was foreclosure cases.⁴⁴ Financial conditions caused the closing of two banks in Thomas County in 1936. The Levant State Bank closed on July 18,⁴⁵ and the Brewster State Bank closed its doors in December.⁴⁶ Though both banks were solvent institutions, it had become uneconomical to continue operations with so little business. Their closing left the county with five banks. This number was further reduced to but four when the Gem State Bank ceased operations in August, 1937, after five years of receivership control. Thus, the first bank in the county to encounter financial difficulties closed its doors on August 5, when its furniture, fixtures, and five lots were sold at public auction.⁴⁷

In March, 1937, the United States Agriculture Department announced that Thomas County had been one of the few counties in the United States selected as an experimental site for the development of a new farm program. This program was known as the National Farm Program Laboratory and gave the farmers of the county the opportunity to develop their own farm plan. Forty-five men, mostly farmers, met at the court house. Embert Coles, the superintendent of the Colby Branch Experiment Station and Joe Kuska, a government agronomist connected with the station, were added to the body in advisory capacities.⁴⁸ The editor of the *Free Press-Tribune*, J. P. Phillips, remarked that the government said to the farmers of the county, in effect:

Write your own ticket on a farm program. We think, with your actual experience, you can give the experts in this department some very valuable suggestions and can tell them how to write them into the farm act.⁴⁹

This opportunity was limited in that it had to comply with the United States Department of Agriculture program. The feeling existed that this honor resulted from the cooperation given the USDA throughout past years and from the fact that the county was a strong Farm Bureau county. The county's farmers were said to have one of the highest percentage of members in farm programs and in compliance with the government regulations. Added to these reasons was the spirit of the various business organizations, especially the implement dealers, merchants, and professional men who were active boosters of the program.⁵⁰

Dust continued to be a problem in the mid-1930's in the Great Plains. Vance Johnson, in his book, *Heaven's Tableland*, viewed the situation in this way:

. . . Plainsmen abandoned individualism and resolved to fight back against the dust as a united people.

Individually farmers had worked their hearts out to stop the dust. But dust grew steadily thicker and more menacing. Like a festering sore, an untended spot of blowing land spread poison for miles around.

The situation long ago had passed the stage where individual farmers, or even counties or states, could handle it. . . . Tax delinquency was mounting and municipalities were hard pressed to keep up essential functions.⁵¹

Even though January dust storms indicated that 1938 would be repetitious of the preceding five years, good rainfall amounts in the spring (which resulted in a year of above-average moisture) produced 1,817,600 bushels of wheat which was the biggest harvest since 1931.⁵² The various governmental conservation programs of shelter belts, contour plowing, and other soil-saving ideas eventually aided in the restoration of the area of the Great Plains. These ideas coupled with rains which fell at opportune times, though they did not completely eradicate the problem, helped to increase wheat production to nearly two million bushels in 1938, an increase of almost twice the 1937 production. After a near-miss of the one million bushel mark in 1939, Thomas County never again failed to produce at least one million bushels of wheat except in 1957.⁵³

In March, 1938, Thomas County farmers overwhelmingly approved the farm allotment program drawn up under the unique National Farm Program Laboratory. Farmers felt this plan encompassed ideas superior to the federal government's program.⁵⁴ The Agricultural Conservation Program of 1939 allotted to Thomas County 361,821 acres of its 491,291 acres of cropland for crop use; of this acreage, 240,685 acres could be planted to wheat. Government payments were apportioned with seventy-six per cent of the payments going to farms complying with the acreage allotment program and the other twenty-four per cent's going for soil-building practices. Deduction in payments was made for excess wheat, an excess of soil depleting crops, failure to reach soil-building goal, cropping land designated as restoration land, failure to prevent wind and water erosion, breaking out sod and for failure to reach the wind erosion goal.⁵⁵

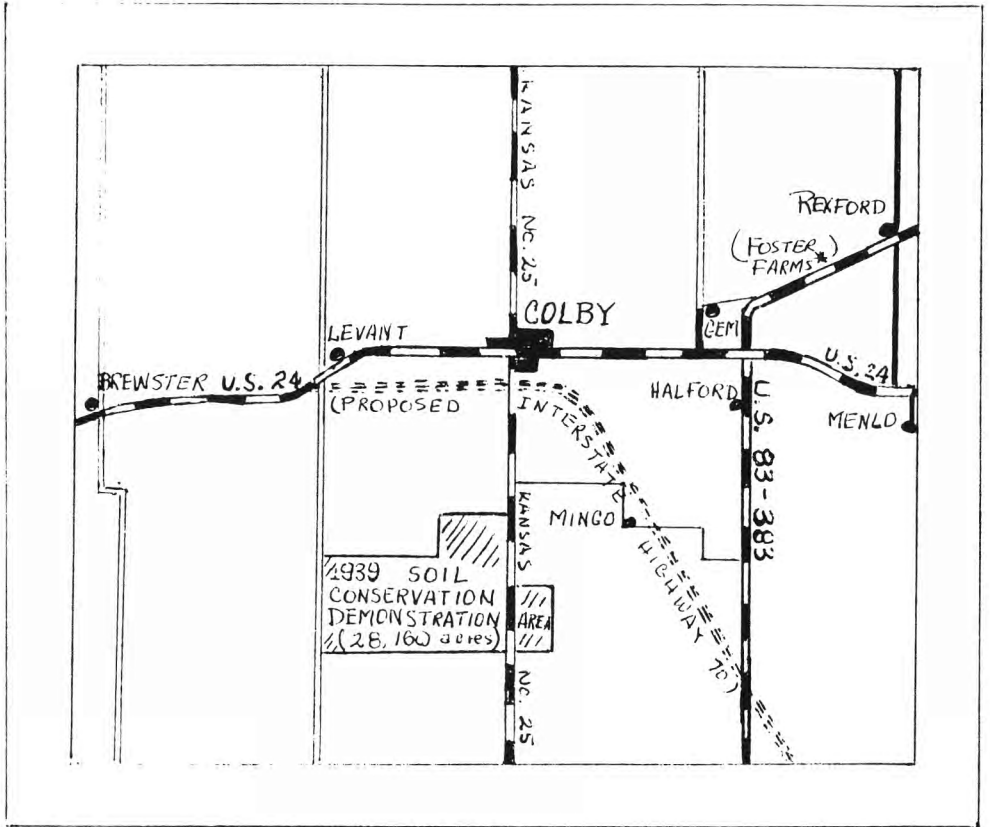


FIGURE 5

Major Highways and Roads of Thomas County With The Soil Conservation Demonstration Plot of 1938. (From Road Atlas and The Colby Free Press-Tribune)

In the summer of 1939 another government program was approved for Thomas County. This was the establishment of a Soil Conservation Area to be used as a demonstration area.⁵⁶ Such an experiment required a block of 25,000 acres. Landowners throughout Thomas County were interested in this program, but there were more farmers in the south central region of the county in Summers and Kingery Townships than any other area where the needed contiguous acreage was available. Morgan and Rovohl Townships also had shown interest in such a plan. However, the 28,160 acre area selected was chosen because a majority of the owners were willing to cooperate. Of seventy-six owners, fifty-three percent were resident owners owning 15,360 acres. Nine thousand acres were owned by seventeen owner-operators while eleven non-resident operators controlled the balance of the acreage.⁵⁷

With more favorable weather conditions and the continued development of better farming practices, in the remaining years, until the entrance of the United States into World War II, there was an increase in the production of wheat. However, the problem of poor prices still plagued the farmer.

Despite the depressed conditions of this period many significant building programs were developed during the 1930's. The *Free Press-Tribune* had started airing the issue of the need for a new school building, but when wheat prices dropped in the spring of 1931, editor Phillips stated that nobody had "nerve enough to ask a farmer to sign petitions."⁵⁸ The fall of 1933 found Phillips outlining the needs and costs of a new high school, and in March, 1934, the voters of Colby School District No. 4 voted bonds for a new high school building by a margin of 1,031 to 280.⁵⁹ By this time the Superintendent of the Colby School System was R. L. Dennen who was to remain at the head of the system until 1963 and was to gain a reputation as one of the leading educators in Kansas.

Once the plans were drawn up, the frequent PWA regulations and price changes held up construction since the building was constructed with government assistance. The bid letting turned out to be a problem, for all bids were more than the \$200,000 available for the project, but on the third attempt in December, 1934, the bids were accepted.⁶⁰ Work began in February, 1935, and the students and faculty moved into the new building in mid-February a year later.⁶¹

Thomas County had long considered the need for a hospital, but it did not become a reality until 1941. Various doctors had started small private hospitals, but these were not as satisfactory as the people and the doctors themselves desired. When Dr. V. C. Eddy and his son, Dr. Murray Eddy, closed their hospital in the fall of 1931 because of a lack of sufficient numbers of patients to make it a paying proposition, the county was left with no institutional facilities for care of the sick. Therefore, many people hoped that a hospital could be built with government assistance, and in September, 1936, such a Relief Project of the Works Progress Administration was discussed, and by October prospects looked good. Hopes were dashed again in November when it was learned no WPA funds were

available.⁶² Spring of 1937 found three projects in the offing, one of which was the hospital; the other two were the swimming pool and a scheme to bring natural gas into the city of Colby.⁶³ By January, 1938, many groups were behind a move to build a hospital, and \$15,000 was pledged for such a purpose. With federal funds available they hoped to erect a \$40,000 to \$50,000 structure on the old high school site at the southwest corner of the city. Throughout the fall and winter of 1939-1940 many benefits and drives were held to promote the hospital and construction began in 1940. In August, 1941, during the Thomas County Free Fair, open house was held; and the hospital opened in September. Claude Schnellbacher, the noted Thomas County farmer discussed earlier, was the hospital's first patient; and his doctor was Dr. V. C. Eddy. The Roman Catholic Order of the Sisters of St. Agnes was put in charge of this Thomas County Hospital (now called St. Thomas Hospital).

Other WPA projects included the long-desired Municipal Swimming Pool which opened on June 5, 1941, after a number of delays due to lack of funds. This pool and the four WPA constructed tennis courts were located on Fifth Street just east of the O'Pelt Hotel.

Some projects of a private business nature and pre-federal aid civic projects included the 1932 sewage plant and the 1933 building by a Dodge City group of a sale barn on the Union Pacific right of way east of Colby. The latter enterprise was of great importance to the farmers of the county and all of the Northwestern Kansas region. Early in 1931 a gas franchise that had been awarded failed to materialize, and in 1941 the Kansas-Nebraska Natural Gas Company was awarded the franchise, and lines were run into both the county and Colby.⁶⁴

In 1931 a proposal was submitted to Colby voters for approval of pool halls within the city; but Colby, which had always been proud of its reputation as a "jointless town," rejected it by a vote of 221 to 208.⁶⁵ A year later at the next city election, however, the outcome was reversed and pool halls were approved by a vote of 347 to 214.⁶⁶ Evidently, the moral tenor of the populace had changed since 1920 when a *Rexford News* item noted that three Colby boys had been hauled into police court and fined for "flipping nickels" at the cracks in the sidewalk.⁶⁷ January 1, 1920.

In 1930, Brewster built a water and sewer system, and some new businesses and homes were constructed which indicated a potential growth. Boasting a fine Chamber of Commerce, Brewster seemed on the move. For a few years this town on the Rock Island was the heaviest shipping point on the railroad between Kansas City and Denver. The first Summerfield Scholar from Thomas County was a Brewster boy named Frederick Wirth who astounded Kansas University officials by completing both a bachelor and master's degree in three years. Such a feat had never been accomplished previously at that school.⁶⁸

The magic hope for oil had long been a dream of landowners of Thomas County. Any drilling activities in nearby counties always evoked a good deal of

excitement. A bit of "oil play" in 1936 led many landowners to lease their ground to the oil companies doing exploratory work in the region. In January, 1938, there was some drilling undertaken in the southern part of the county. Perhaps the most exciting possibility of an oil discovery occurred in the late summer of 1938 when drilling was started on Al Ryan's land two miles south of Halford close to U. S. 83. Known as "Ryan No. 1," it caused a good deal of interest, and a favorite pastime of the men of Colby was to take a trip out to the drilling operation to check on the progress of the well. So encouraged was the Colby Chamber of Commerce by this oil activity that this body purchased five hundred copies of *Oil in Kansas*, Volume IV, a booklet which told about the geological conditions and oil prospects in the Northwest Kansas area.⁶⁹ These oil prospects led to the Colby Chamber's designating Saturday, October 8, as "Oil in Kansas Day," selling the oil booklets for 75c each, and urging everybody to come to Colby. A good deal of the land around Halford was leased to various oil companies; but the Ryan well, after some oil had been discovered, proved to be a "dry hole." It was an experience that has been repeated on numerous occasions since 1938.

During the 1930's oil was also a topic in Thomas County in another vein, that of highway "black-topping." The first road surfacing began in 1931 east of Colby on U. S. 40-N and was a test-type project of the Kansas State Highway Department. The composition of the surfacing material was of bituminous oil, and the road was finally finished in the fall of 1931 and opened to traffic. The *Free Press-Tribune* termed it "very satisfactory."⁷⁰ During the 1930's a good deal of road work was carried on as part of the PWA and WPA programs. Sanding projects were undertaken in the various towns of the county as well as on the county roads. Many roads were graded which gave work to some of the county's unemployed men. This was especially evidenced on Kansas No. 25 both north and south of Colby where bridges and a Rock Island viaduct were constructed.

The designation of the U. S. 40-N route as U. S. 24 in 1935 aroused a storm of protest as had the 1926 "road numbering." All up and down the highway businessmen were incensed at such a proposal, and letters and telegrams were sent to various state and federal officials. All endeavored to convince those in authoritative positions that U. S. 40 should be routed north from Oakley to Colby and continue west along the northern road of the existing U. S. 40-N. The feeling was prevalent that the designation of U. S. 40-N as U. S. 24 would make the highway one of secondary importance since U. S. 24 had no eastern terminus. The fight was carried to State Road Commissioner Harry Darby. Claims were made that a road west from Colby was a better route, shorter, and that there were better and larger towns along this road with better accommodations. The pronouncement by the highway department that road improvements would be made on U. S. 36 did not upset the disturbed Colby businessmen as long as such improvements did not hurt the road through Colby.⁷¹ In early December Colorado towns along U. S. 40-N took up the fight. However, the efforts were to no avail, and the road was

renamed U. S. 24. For a time it left some bitter feelings, but in the late summer of 1937 a publicity campaign was started to encourage tourists to travel U. S. 24.⁷² Since that time there has been a continual struggle by supporters of both U. S. 24 and U. S. 40 to secure the major portion of highway traffic. With U. S. 83-383, running through Oakley from north to south and junctioning with U. S. 24 nine miles east of Colby, all north-south traffic can move to either U. S. 24 or U. S. 40 over a good highway. Consequently, interested businessmen along both routes erected huge signs either to "convince" traffic to continue on the route they were travelling or to "persuade" traffic to use U. S. 83-383 to change to the "better" route. On U. S. 36 west of Norton is a sign urging traffic to take U. S. 383 to U. S. 24.⁷³

The Colby Tractor Show was held in every year of the 1930's with the exception of 1935 when a combination of many things caused its cancellation. High school band contests were added to the final day's activities. Each year the *Free Press-Tribune* carried huge advertising supplements prior to the annual event. Each year it was said to be bigger and better than ever. For the occasion all vehicles were removed from Franklin Avenue, and farm implements of all types were put on display. In the beginning, the city set aside five blocks from Second Street to Sixth Street; but as the years passed and the show grew, it was necessary to increase this to seven blocks. In 1934 there were an estimated ten thousand people in Colby on the traditional Friday closing day (the day when both Class "A" and "B" bands performed in the marching contest). This large crowd turned out despite the bad drought conditions and came from as far away as: Stratton, Colorado to the west; North Platte, Nebraska, to the north; Liberal, Kansas, to the south; and Minneapolis, Kansas, to the east.⁷⁴

The Thomas County Free Fair also continued during these desperate times. Each year the county commissioners would ponder the advisability of trying to hold the fair (as did the Colby merchants in considering the Tractor Show issue) and the decision was always the same: it was held. One of the early federal works projects had enlarged the grandstand at the fairgrounds. Succeeding years found the construction of additional buildings and the painting and general improvement of existing structures. In 1931, some old-timers constructed a sod house at the fairgrounds which was used for their annual Old Settlers' Day, a one-day celebration held as a part of the fair. The "soddie" was a one-room, ten by fifteen feet edifice. Among those mentioned as helping in this work were J. P. Phillips, J. L. Wallace, and George Kinkel.⁷⁵

During the 1930's many nationally-known celebrities passed through Thomas County and stopped in Colby. In June, 1933, the famous movie actress, Jean Harlow, stopped for lunch at the O'Pelt Hotel Coffee Shop and then left immediately after a lunch of a hot beef sandwich and a bottle of beer. One waitress, after recognizing the famous platinum blonde, remarked that Miss Harlow did not look so beautiful without her make-up.⁷⁶ In the spring of 1934, the woman

referred to as the world's greatest woman athlete, "Babe" Didrikson, came to Colby as the featured star of the famous House of David baseball team. The United States' woman star of the 1932 Olympic Games, Miss Didrikson pitched with skill as she "threw like a man" and demonstrated her prowess as a runner. One morning she toured the Colby Golf Course in near-par figures and was of the opinion that she would like to devote more time to golf. She was attraction enough that the merchants of Colby closed up to attend the game.⁷⁷ The famous dog, Rin-Tin-Tin, even stopped in Colby and had dinner at Pete Bergman's cafe. He had hamburger.

In the late 1920's and early 1930's an ex-Colby music teacher, Juliet Buell, gained some fame as a singer over Pittsburgh radio station KDKA. She also appeared on stage in some musical productions in the east. In the mid-1930's the two adopted daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Ray Crumly, Marilyn and Carolyn, accompanied by Mrs. Crumly, went to Hollywood with ambitious dreams of becoming movie stars. They did succeed in part as they performed on the Orpheum Circuit on the Pacific Coast and were signed by Warner Brothers Studio and even appeared in some of the Shirley Temple movies. Infrequently, the girls would return to Colby, and on at least one occasion they performed for the two civic clubs of Colby.⁷⁸

Local celebrities have often been the athletes of the towns of the county. Athletics have always been a significant part of the life of Thomas County. In the 1920's and 1930's local luminaries were found not only on the various high school teams but on so-called "town teams" that were formed. Baseball, basketball, and football were all played by these town teams with baseball being perhaps the most popular. Football was quite popular during the 1920's but thereafter faded from the athletic scene. On the other hand, baseball was popular throughout the history of Thomas County, and most of the towns had a baseball team at one time or another. It was not at all unusual for the smaller towns of the county to defeat the "county seat boys."

All the high schools of Thomas County had outstanding basketball teams at one time or another. This sport was the most popular among the high schools since most of them were too small to have enough boys to field a football squad. Twice, undefeated teams got to the finals of the Class "B" State Basketball Tournament only to lose their first game of the year and finish runners-up to the state champions.⁷⁹

Colby High School athletics have been very important to the people of Thomas County as well as Colby. Many teams have been produced which have gained state-wide recognition. However, perhaps the best-remembered game involving a Colby team was the 1939 Colby-Ellis high school football game. Not only was the event memorable to Thomas Countians, it was perhaps the classic football game of the tri-state area. Other contests in Eastern Colorado, Southwestern Nebraska, and Northwestern Kansas were played the night before so that

football fans from over the region could see this game. Many Ellis supporters and the Ellis band journeyed to Colby for the game in a special eight-car Union Pacific train. Sports editor Jim Reed of the *Topeka Daily Capital* covered the epic contest, and he publicized it as the "Championship Game of Western Kansas." Colby won 33-0.⁸⁰ Though there have been many other great athletic contests of note in the tri-state area, for sheer drama, this contest remains the most outstanding. Perhaps the publicity and the special train made it so.

While athletics were making headlines through the years, the more grim realities of Thomas County life were less frequently found in the pages of the county newspapers. However, there were a few tragic occurrences that marred an otherwise tranquil existence of the people of Thomas County. Through much of the county's history fires have not been too serious. Until World War II, Brewster seemed to be more plagued by such catastrophes than other towns of the region. Fires in the 1930's were responsible for the destruction of these buildings in the county: the Gem Depot in July, 1930; the Menlo Methodist Church in March, 1939; the Colby Catholic Church in November, 1938; and Morehead's Drug Store in Colby in January, 1934.

Though there has not been a great deal of violence in the region, Thomas County has suffered isolated tragedies. The attempted kidnapping of Cora Parrott in July, 1901, enraged the citizenry of Colby and the outlying areas around the county seat even though the girl had been quickly found near her parent's home north of Colby. A posse was organized and bloodhounds were dispatched from Beatrice, Nebraska, to use in the manhunt; but the crime was never solved. Colby's first murder took place in 1905 when August Roupetz shot and killed Henry Kersenbrock near the Colby Mercantile Store.⁸¹ Roupetz was tried and convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to a term of from five to twenty-one years in the State Penitentiary at Lansing. The whole episode was most tragic and was culminated in December, 1911, when Roupetz died in prison, a physical and mental wreck.⁸² In August, 1925, the county was shocked by the murder of long-time Thomas County Sheriff Sam Pratt by two fleeing Nebraska bank robbers at a road block six miles north of Colby on Kansas No. 25.⁸³ There have been many instances of altercations between neighbors but nothing serious enough to result in murder although often a shooting incident accompanied such disputes. Over the years, especially in the trying early days of settlement, there were a number of references in the various newspapers to people's becoming mentally deranged. Often the press of financial problems was given as the reason for such breakdowns. Occasionally someone became violent, but in most instances the situation was merely a very sad affair.

Perhaps the most violent incident involving Thomas County citizens took place in April, 1932. A young Thomas County man, Richard Read, who lived with his parents north of Rexford was the central figure in a most deplorable incident. On April 13, Read abducted eight-year old Dorothy Hunter of the Selden

community of western Sheridan County and on the following day murdered her and put her body in a hay stack in Rawlins County north of Achilles. After this act Read drove to Colby where he informed Deputy Sheriff Don McGinley and County Attorney Guido Smith that he had been kidnapped and then released. Sheriff Ed McGinley (who had been at the Foster Farms' annual judging contest with a carload of boys from Colby) upon his return from Rexford told Don (his son) and Guido of the girl's disappearance. Upon his learning of Read's tale, the men immediately went to Rexford and questioned Read about the missing girl since he had been previously convicted of a similar crime in Colorado. Considered a prime suspect, Read was arrested and returned to the Colby Jail where he confessed to the crime. When people heard of the arrest, they were in an ugly mood; and so the prisoner was transferred to the Cheyenne County jail at St. Francis. After the murdered girl's funeral on Sunday, April 17, a caravan of cars filled with men from the eastern region of Thomas County and Selden headed for St. Francis. A filling station attendant learned of the men's destination and told Sheriff McGinley who got word to the Cheyenne County Sheriff of the threatening entourage headed for St. Francis. While the car in which Read was being taken to safety was being filled with gas, the mob arrived and forced the sheriff at gunpoint to surrender the prisoner. The mob drove away toward Atwood, turned south at McDonald (just inside the western boundary of Rawlins County) and stopped at the Lyman Ranch where they hanged Read.⁸⁴

In reporting the terrible incident, the *Free Press-Tribune* noted that the people of the area were not opposed to the action that had been taken. Estimates of the size of the mob varied from 200 to 1,000 with some 50 men seemingly the leaders of this group. The *Free Press-Tribune* article said it was the biggest mob ever gathered in Western Kansas. Though State Attorney-General Roland Boyington personally came to Thomas County and conducted an investigation, no charges were ever brought against anybody and the Cheyenne County sheriff was absolved of any negligence on his part in surrendering his prisoner to the mob. Certainly there were many people who abhorred the hanging, but the only *Free Press-Tribune* information to this effect was the reprinted sermon of Methodist Minister L. R. Templin presented the Sunday following the hanging. It was, of course, a condemnation of mob action.⁸⁵

Though infrequent, such violence always shocked the people of Thomas County. However, gruesome and appalling as they were, these incidents were almost insignificant in the light of the horrors that World War II evoked.

¹Colby *Free Press-Tribune*, July 15, 1931.

²*Ibid.*, February 6, 1930.

³*Ibid.*, March 13, 1930.

⁴See Table I.

⁵See Table IV. ⁶See Table V.

⁷*Biennial Report*, XXXII, 1940, 317.

⁸*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, April 6, 1932.

⁹*Ibid.*, May 24, 1933. ¹⁰*Ibid.* ¹¹*Ibid.*, June 23, 1937.

¹²*Ibid.*, April 24, 1935. One specific example was Easter of 1935 which was spoiled by such a storm.

¹³*Ibid.*, May 10, 1933. ¹⁴*Ibid.*, May 2, 1934.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, October 5, 1932. This issue was selected at random to check on commodity prices. They included: coffee, 25-35c (lb.); butter, 21c (lb.); lard, 13c (lb.); Great Northern Beans, 15c (5 lbs.); powdered sugar, 15c (2 lbs.); brown sugar, 20c (3 lbs.); bread, 15c (3 lb. loaf); cookies, 10c (doz.); Ginger Snaps, 5c (2 doz.); large donuts, 20c (doz.); tea rolls, 10c (doz.); cinnamon rolls, 15c (doz.); oranges, 15c (doz.); salt, 5c (2 lbs.); peanut butter, 22c (2 lbs.); Oxydol, 22c (large size); soap chips, 33c (5 lbs.); spaghetti or macaroni, 7c (7 oz. can).

¹⁶*Ibid.*, June 29, 1932.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, September 16, 1931. Ray H. Garvey's ad for the Garvey Land Company in the January 7 issue was most interesting in its "prodiversification" message.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, March 16, 1932.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, July 27, 1932. Nothing was ever found to indicate that such a program was ever carried out.

²⁰*Ibid.*, September 14, 1932. This step was not taken, for the Methodist Conference and the Colby Methodists solved this problem together.

²¹*Ibid.*, October 19, 1932.

²²*Ibid.*, November 2, 1932. The vote was 1787 for Roosevelt and 962 for Hoover. In this issue some prices at Colby included: wheat, 28c; corn, 12c; barley, 10c; eggs, 20c (doz.); and cream, 15c (pt.).

²³*Ibid.*, September 14, 1932. The writer well-remembers Mr. Roosevelt's brief stop though his young age kept him from realizing the event's significance.

²⁴*Ibid.*, September 7, 1932. ²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.* March 8, 1933.

²⁷*Ibid.*, May 24; June 14; June 28; July 5, 1933.

²⁸*Ibid.*, April 11, 1934.

²⁹Ray H. Garvey, "Allotted Acres," *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, September 6, 1933. He indicated that he had some co-partners and eighteen tenants.

³⁰Statement by John Kriss, personal interview. Hereinafter cited as Kriss, personal interview.

³¹*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, April 11, 1934.

³²*Ibid.*

³³This stone had been used to build the clubhouse of the Colby Golf Club mentioned earlier.

³⁴*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, June 13, 1934. As it turned out, the American Legion and the American Legion Auxillary raised \$3,000 for the materials for the basement and received a 99-year lease on it.

³⁵*Ibid.*, August 15, 1934. Under this program the farmer agreed to reduce his cattle program. This was similar to a hog program which had been established earlier.

³⁶*Ibid.*, April 3, 1935. See Figure 4 on page 83.

³⁷*Ibid.*, August 7, 1930. ³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Kriss, personal interview. Kriss said the Western Kansas Wheat Farming Corporation, headed by John Bird and others of Hays, Kansas, did not have the land holdings in Thomas County that this company had. He did not recall the exact holdings of each of the three men but stated that the body ceased to exist when wheat prices dropped so drastically. It was his contention that this company was different from the Hays operation.

⁴⁰*Laws of Kansas 1931*, 232.

⁴¹*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, August 7, 1930.

⁴²Kriss, Personal interview.

⁴³*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, January 15, 1936; January 22, 1936. Ljungdahl is still one of the leading figures in the county's agricultural circles.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, October 30, 1935.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, July 15, 1936. The assets were merged with those of the Farmers and Merchants State Bank of Colby.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, December 2, 1936. This bank's assets were absorbed by the Thomas County National Bank of Colby.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, July 21, 1937.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, March 10, 1937. Mr. Kuska was renowned for his work and for a number of years was the official Thomas County weather observer. His wife was quite famous for her hobbies, especially her collections of dolls. She was also a Kansas "Mother of the Year" in 1952.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, March 17, 1937. The Farm Bureau was a firm supporter of New Deal policies during the 1930's.

⁵¹Vance Johnson, *Heaven's Tableland*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Company, 1947), 198. Hereinafter cited as Johnson, *Heaven's Tableland*. This book is one of the best sources for gaining an insight into the problems of the farmers of the Great Plains.

⁵²See Table I. ⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, March 30, 1938.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, February 1, 1939. These soil-building practices included: tillage pasture, tree, weed cover, engineering, legumes and grasses, temporary grasses, restoration of cropland, and wind erosion.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, June 14, 1939.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, September 27, 1939. See Figure 5 on page 118.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, October 18, 1933. ⁵⁹*Ibid.*, March 21, 1934.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, December 19, 1934. ⁶¹*Ibid.*, February 12, 1936.

⁶²*Ibid.*, November 25, 1936. ⁶³*Ibid.*, March 31, 1937.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, May 7, 1941. ⁶⁵*Ibid.*, April 8, 1931.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, April 6, 1932. ⁶⁷*Rexford News*, January 1, 1920.

⁶⁸*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, October 19, 1932.

⁶⁹*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, September 21, 1938.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, October 28, 1931.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, December 4, 1935.

⁷²*Ibid.*, August 11, 1937.

⁷³Though the attempts failed to secure the northward swing of U. S. 40 from Oakley to Colby at this time, the contention was made that more traffic moved up to 40-N than went west from Oakley over 40-S. Such a belief would seem to be borne out in the routing of the proposed Interstate 70 north from Oakley (see Figure 5). Through the years a good deal of interstate truck traffic and the Greyhound Bus Lines have followed the U. S. 24 route from Denver to Colby and thence to Oakley. Similarly, much of all west-bound traffic follows the same route. The writer's father-in-law, A. L. Lowe of WaKeeney, Kansas, verified that a good deal of money was spent by himself and fellow-businessmen along U. S. 40 to publicize the "merits" of this route. Long a service station operator, he said that such action was necessary to offset similar tactics by the businessmen along U. S. 24. The new I-70 might put an end to this rivalry.

⁷⁴*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, May 2, 1934.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, August 19, 1931. ⁷⁶*Ibid.*, June 28, 1933.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, May 23, 1934. ⁷⁸*Ibid.*, August 19, 1936.

⁷⁹Probably Levant's greatest fame resulted from the record of the record of its outstanding high school team of 1936. Likewise, Menlo's 1940 team was perhaps its most famous squad. In both 1936 and 1940, Colby won the Class "A" regional tournament but lost at the state level.

⁸⁰*Topeka Daily Capital*, November 28, 1939.

⁸¹*Colby Free Press*, January 26, 1905.

⁸²*Ibid.*, October 19, 1911; December 14, 1911.

⁸³*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, August 27, 1925. The two bandits were later apprehended with one being captured in New Mexico while the other was killed in Oklahoma.

⁸⁴*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, April 20, 1932.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, April 27, 1932.



CHAPTER VI

World War II And Postwar Prosperity

The coincidental factors of war and plentiful rainfall combined to prove most vividly that the prosperity of Thomas County depended upon the well-being of the farmer. If ever there was any doubt that agricultural pursuits were the basis for growth of the area, the years since World War II have dispelled it.

As "Plant more wheat" had been the cry in World War I¹ so during World War II the demand to produce for the needs of the nations engaged in the struggle against the Axis Powers was the impetus for tremendous crop outputs. The early years of the 1940's saw the unfolding drama of many "rags to riches" successes in Thomas County. Characteristic of these successes was the willingness to risk everything to gain everything. There were a number of men with this "willingness" in Thomas County.

In the 1930's the area had gained great notoriety from the terrible dust storms and the belief that Rexford Guy Tugwell had been right in referring to the "Dust Bowl" as an area that would become the Great American Desert.² However, with the return of consecutive years of adequate moisture amounts in the early 1940's, Thomas County became once more a tremendous wheat-producing area. The big wheat crops resulted in newspaper and magazine articles in such periodicals as the *Kansas City Star*, *Omaha World-Herald*, *Topeka Daily Capital*, *New York Times*, *Look*, and *Reader's Digest*.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor shocked the people of Thomas County although at first many people felt the report of the attack was just another one of Orson Wells radio programs. War's reality was brought home to Thomas County with the news that a Colby man, Everett Windle, had been killed in the sneak attack. A navy man serving on the *U. S. S. Oklahoma*, he was the first of thirty-three Thomas County men to lose their lives in World War II.³

Wartime in Thomas County was undoubtedly much like wartime in other parts of the United States. The issues of the *Free Press-Tribune* of these years were full of mobilization news from the early days of December, 1941, to late 1945. In every drive conducted, Thomas Countians enthusiastically "went over the top."

Restrictions and rations were endured; and though inconvenient to the usual way of life, adjustments were made to help contribute in whatever manner possible to the winning of the war.

Agriculturally, the county flourished. Above-normal moisture in both 1941 and 1942 restored vital subsoil moisture,⁴ and in the summer of 1942 the county produced the greatest wheat crop in its history to that time. Wheat bins were set up in the county's towns to hold 60,000 bushels of wheat, and by June 150 bins were under construction.⁵ Perhaps the biggest concern of 1942 was the tire problem. As an example, the county was allotted only 47 tires during June (which was nine more than the May quota), and with harvest beginning there was a feeling of anxiety over the shortage.⁶ Replacement parts for machinery were also scarce, and farmers and blacksmiths of Thomas County were challenged to the utmost to keep machines going.

Rainfall began in June and continued through July to give a total of almost five and one-half inches during the two months. This hampering weather (coupled with a good deal of inexperienced help) made harvesting operations a virtual nightmare, although a most rewarding one. By July the serious tire shortage for trucks and implements led to talks of pooling possibilities.⁷ Wheat prices began to improve and were to continue the upward climb that was to bring unparalleled prosperity and near three-dollar per bushel wheat by 1947. The wheat harvest of 6,344,000 bushels ranked Thomas County third in Kansas for 1942. It was nearly two million bushels above the previous high of 1929.⁸

In early 1943 Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard released wheat under AAA marketing quotas for sale without penalty. Thomas County had 4,142,082 bushels of government-loan wheat in storage which was the largest amount in the state.⁹ Cooperative use of farm machinery was adopted in the fall, and Agricultural Conservation Program directors placed no restrictions on what crops were planted or what amount could be seeded. Farmers were being asked to plant more grain, and no penalties were imposed. Government payments were based on the farm rather than on the crop as had been the policy in the past.¹⁰

Although moisture amounts were below normal for 1943 and the 1944 crop was less than half the 1943 crop, the farmers continued to seed great amounts of wheat. As Johnson said:

Hardly anyone, it seemed, "played it safe" after 1943. In Kansas, men who had built up good flocks of sheep sold their ewes and went in for feeder lambs imported from the big ranches in New Mexico and Colorado. In Texas, cattlemen sold their cow herds and became "steer men." The turnover was faster that way. Lambs and steers were bought and sold by the pound. They gained rapidly on winter wheat pastures, and on a steadily rising market there seemed no way to lose. A sudden storm might wipe out every lamb a man owned. . . but nobody worried about that. Big money was to be made. A man could afford to gamble on the weather.

Everybody was making money. Even the more cautious farmers, who

held pretty much to their normal operations, saw their income double, then triple. Land prices kept step with the prices of wheat and hogs and cattle. Up in Thomas County, Mrs. Mollie Gordon sold a quarter-section of land to a dealer for \$4,000. The dealer resold it, at a reported profit of \$400, a few days later to Dutch Melton. Soon after he bought it, Melton planted eighty acres to wheat, but before the crop was ready for harvest the next year he sold the land to Duke Lewallen, old Jake Lewallen's son. . . for \$8,000. The price had more than doubled in less than two years. But Duke was pleased with his deal—he sold the wheat crop for \$5,000 and had the land left.¹¹

Thomas County ranked first in Kansas wheat production in 1943 even though the total yield was nearly one and one-half million bushels less than the 1942 production. Following a production of just over two million bushels of wheat in 1944, the succeeding three years yielded crops in excess of five million bushels with the 1947 production topping the seven million bushel mark for the first time. Such great yields put Thomas County once again in the limelight of national magazines and prominent midwestern newspapers. Due to the efforts of John Hay, Secretary of the Colby Chamber of Commerce, *Look* magazine sent reporters and photographers to cover the 1946 harvest. The *Look* story told of the gradual but sure climb in grain prices with the money thus gained being put in the banks of Thomas County and into U.S. Bonds and other safe investments. It called Thomas County the "top wheat-producing county of the top wheat-producing state of the top wheat-producing nation of the world."¹² When the 1300 copies of *Look* (which contained four large pictures of wheat scenes) hit the newstands of Colby in September, they quickly disappeared.¹³

The wheat crop of 1947 was the largest crop in the county's history until 1960, and it is still the highest valued at \$17,421,000.¹⁴ This great crop resulted from three successive years of better-than-average moisture amounts. In the spring the *Free Press-Tribune* had continually noted the excellent crop prospects and in June reported that there was little rust in the wheat, that it looked very good, and that ripening conditions were perfect. The paper predicted a crop in excess of seven million bushels.¹⁵ As it happened, an official government figure of 7,803,000 bushels made the county the 1947 leader of wheat production in the state once again.¹⁶ Because of this great crop, Thomas County received a good deal of publicity during the summer and fall of 1947. Many newspapers of the Midwest wrote stories of the farming operations.¹⁷

The success story of John Kriss symbolized the "rags to riches" prosperity of many farmers of the Great Plains in general and Thomas County in particular. A transplanted Nebraskan, Kriss came to the county with his parents in 1920 where, after three discouraging years of farming endeavors in the south part of the county, the farm was lost and the parents went to Arkansas. However, Kriss remained to work for many farmers in the region, barely managing to stay solvent for a number of years. Undismayed by such adversity, Kriss in 1933 accepted the offer of Ray Garvey of Wichita to manage 3,800 acres of his properties around Colby. Not only did Kriss serve as manager but he also farmed the land on shares.

Like all farming operations in the Great Plains during this period, the Garvey-Kriss partnership was plagued by drought and dust storms. In 1936, Kriss formed another partnership with banker W. D. Ferguson. Land farmed by the partnerships was mostly rented ground during the 1930's, and Kriss did not purchase much land until 1939 with most of his present land holdings bought after 1942.¹⁸

Increased rainfall for Thomas County began in 1939 and brought with it great wheat harvests in the early 1940's. Kriss began to pasture sheep on wheat pasture as early as 1939 and during the war years and the postwar period he was one of the county's biggest sheep raisers. The Garvey-Kriss combination (commonly referred to as G-K Farms), favored by the improved weather conditions, increased grain demands, and higher grain prices, became a farming bonanza during the mid-1940's. In 1945, the Ferguson-Kriss partnership became known as the Kriss Farms. Tremendous wheat harvest prospects in 1947 resulted in the many newspaper articles about Kriss and his farming of 40,000 acres of summer fallowed wheat and another 14,000 acres of "volunteer" wheat.¹⁹ All the articles were similar and the *Kansas City Star* account gave a thorough examination of the complex but interesting story of large-scale wheat farming.²⁰ In the fall of 1947, *Reader's Digest* carried a condensed version of the *Minneapolis Star-Journal* article of September 28 and called his operation "possibly the biggest individual planting in history."²¹ Certainly, the 1,250,000 bushels of wheat harvested by Kriss in 1947 was a graphic example of the tremendous enterprise that wheat farming had become. Although the Garvey-Kriss relationship dissolved after the 1947 harvest, the two men remained good friends and prominent farming figures in Thomas County, Western Kansas, and Eastern Colorado.²² By the early 1960's, Kriss and his sons owned about 10,000 acres (seventeen quarter-sections in Thomas County), rented an additional 5,000 acres, and had 400,000 bushels of their own storage facilities.²³ Kriss had come a long way from a penniless hired hand in the 1920's.

Another big operator, Albert Frahm, the son-in-law of Claude Schnellbacher, harvested 3,000 acres of wheat in 1946 which was noted in a 1947 *Reader's Digest* article about wheat farming.²⁴ Again in 1949, Frahm was given further publicity in an *Omaha World-Herald* story. It described his farming operations and especially the harvest techniques which involved the cutting of 8,000 acres of wheat.²⁵

One other prominent Thomas County figure was Willard Cooper. Like Kriss, Cooper was not a native of the county, having come with his folks to the area to harvest wheat in the fall of 1925. After his parents returned to their home in Jewell County, Kansas, Cooper remained to finish high school in Colby and began farming near Gem. He rented some land and later bought some cattle. His success as a farmer-stockman was somewhat erratic, and so he struggled to remain solvent throughout the late 1920's and the 1930's.²⁶

In 1942, in partnership with Leonard Harrison, Cooper purchased the old wooden elevator of the Russell Milling Company in Colby, located on the transfer tracks at Fifth and Nashville. After buying out Harrison, Cooper added further storage capacity to his elevator in 1945 and again in 1947. Recognizing the tremendous need for increased commercial storage after the bumper crop of 1947, Cooper constructed a 500,000 bushel concrete facility on the Rock Island right of way.²⁷ Thus, Cooper became a most successful businessman in the post-World War II era. He built a commercial feed lot, some business buildings, and purchased both the O'Pelt Hotel and the Louis Building. During the 1950's Cooper added more bins to his new elevator and also added a tremendous flat storage facility which brought Cooper Grain's storage capacity to three million bushels.²⁸

During the early 1950's, Cooper served three terms as mayor of Colby. His six years in such a position coincided with a period of improvements in Colby which made him a somewhat controversial figure. Long outspoken in his views, Cooper nonetheless contributed in no small way to the city's growth. Following his terms as mayor, Cooper's feed lot made him the center of a heated public protest concerning the stench emanating from this facility located southeast of town near Beulah Cemetery. Both the Thomas County Board of Health and the State Board of Health ordered the area cleaned up; and, after much legal maneuvering, the clean-up was finally effected in the summer of 1958.²⁹ A good many Colby citizens became quite unhappy with Cooper over this issue, and he remains a somewhat intriguing personality with some staunch defenders and many vociferous critics.

There is a certain parallel in the success stories of John Kriss and Willard Cooper. Both men succeeded in agricultural pursuits, even though they were in different areas of endeavor in that business. Cooper, like Kriss, was also quite a big sheep raiser during the 1940's, in addition to his cattle interests already mentioned. Cooper was more directly involved in the civic affairs of Colby, although Kriss served as a city commissioner for a time beginning in 1947. However, people were more harsh in their criticism of Cooper, for as mayor, he was the "scapegoat" for all the griping about increased taxes and any project which anybody objected to in any way. Kriss, on the other hand, was the focal point of a more subtle type of criticism. As for example, on one occasion, when Kriss traded an old car for a new Oldsmobile, his daughter was quite upset. As might be expected, human nature being what it is, she was concerned that her classmates would feel the Krisses were "showing off." Kriss said that she had made him promise that he would never buy a Cadillac. Such is the price of fame.³⁰

Among many whom death claimed during the war was J. P. Phillips, the long-time owner and editor of the *Colby Free Press-Tribune* who died in November, 1944. The death of the ex-principal, who was also the owner of the Lyric and Colby theaters in Colby, was a great loss and left a big void in Colby and Thomas County. J. K. "Kim" Phillips, his oldest son, became the new editor of the

newspaper. During the war, both the *Rexford News* and the *Menlo Mentor* were forced out of the newspaper business because of increased costs.³¹ This left the *Free Press-Tribune* and the *Brewster Booster* as the sole newspapers in Thomas County. In 1955, the *Booster* quit which left the *Free Press-Tribune* as the only newspaper until the *Prairie Drummer* began operations in Colby in 1960.

Life on the home front in Thomas County was high-lighted by the various War Bond rallies. At a rally in November, 1944, before an estimated 1,200 assembled citizens from the surrounding region, a commemorative Thomas County Honor Roll was dedicated. It was located at the corner of Sixth and Franklin at the southwest corner of Fike Park.³² Thomas County's War Loan drives totaled \$4,070,654 which was \$837,054 over the assigned quota totals. In addition to the War Bond drives there were three Red Cross campaigns which netted \$29,000; and the United War Fund (including the U. S. O.) was \$16,500.³³

One organization that did an especially fine job during the war was a group of ladies of Colby who called themselves "The Gals About Town." These women did many useful and worthwhile things, but perhaps their biggest first-hand effort to help the men in service occurred in the summer of 1944. Their first opportunity occurred on July 23, 1944, when a convoy of three hundred soldiers stopped in Colby and stayed overnight at the Thomas County Fair Grounds. Upon learning of the soldiers' arrival, these ladies, the American Legion, the Chamber of Commerce, and various individuals all combined to fete the troops. A dance was arranged at the high school gymnasium with high school girls serving as partners. The Colby Golf Club and the American Legion Hall were made available to the soldiers. The Red Cross Emergency funds and the Thomas County U. S. O. helped: and with volunteer help, 1,500 sandwiches were made. Soft drinks were iced and served while the Lewis Drug Store and Duckwall's presented the men with favors. The commanding officer commented on this treatment:

I have heard a great deal about western hospitality, now I have seen it at its best. To have a group of our size drop in on such short notice and be well taken care of and entertained takes cooperation and planning, and you folks seem to know how to do both. May others be as kind to your men in service as you have been to us.³⁴

Shortly after this, a force of 1,000 soldiers moving from Colorado to Fort Riley were cared for in a similar fashion. Sixty of these men, upon arrangements made before their departure, stopped in Colby for lunch on their return trip to Colorado a few days later. One soldier commented at the time that he had been stationed all over the United States, but only at Winona, Minnesota, had the army been treated as well. He stated that he would always remember both towns.³⁵ In September, Mayor J. V. Pratt received a letter from Commanding Officer Lieutenant General L. R. Fredendall of the Second Army Headquarters at Memphis, Tennessee. The general acknowledged his appreciation for the treatment afforded his troops passing through Colby.³⁶

V-E Day in May, 1945, evoked no great outbreak of spontaneous celebrating in Thomas County, but V-J Day in August, 1945, was quite different. When the news was announced, the fire siren was blown in Colby, and "within thirty minutes sober but happy people gathered at churches for prayer, thanksgiving, and meditation."³⁷ The *Free Press-Tribune* ran the big headline, "War's Over." Accounts mentioned that there was no great din other than auto horn blowing. There were handshakings and comments that the nightmare was over. In the evening Colby's Fike Park was the scene of picnics; there was a dance at the skating rink and a free movie at the Colby Theater. The following day all businesses suspended, and the rejoicing continued quietly.³⁸

One humorous incident which occurred during the early part of the war and that bears repeating concerned Colby High School's first Summerfield Scholarship winner, Glenn Warner, and the long-time Colby Superintendent of Schools, R. L. Dennen. Warner, who had been honored in the summer of 1941 by being elected Governor of Boys' State at Wichita, was in Topeka in the spring of 1942, along with other Boys' State officials, to "take over" the reigns of the state government for one day. In this "official" position, Warner sent a telegram to Dennen, which said: "Dismiss school at once pending investigation of alleged Jap aliens in the Junior Class." Dennen replied in kind: "In compliance with request, am dismissing school but holding students for investigation till four o'clock."³⁹

One of the first projects considered after the war's end was that of attempting to secure air service for Colby and Thomas County as it had become most evident that such a transportation outlet would be most desirable for a growing town and county. Residents had long desired air service, but their hopes had not been fulfilled prior to World War II. Thus, hopes were high that with the postwar advances in air travel Colby would be able to secure service from some source. As an indication of such long-cherished desires, Colby voters had voted \$65,000 in bonds in April, 1943, for the construction of an airport to be built after the end of the conflict.⁴⁰ On September 7, 1944, the Civil Aeronautics Authority approved the Colby Airport and the recently-formed Colby Pilot's Association.⁴¹ After the war, flying in Thomas County (like many areas in the nation) became quite a popular pastime, and the Flying Farmers Organization became quite active in the county. Interest in flying died out after a time, but at the time that the airport was constructed during 1947 and 1948, it was greatly used. Construction of one main building and a number of hangers was carried out, but the best feature of the airport was a 2,600 x 50 feet concrete runway which, at the time, was the finest strip between Salina and Denver. The airport was dedicated on September 18, 1949, with Governor Frank Carlson doing the honors. It was an investment of \$150,000, and there were fifty private planes at the airport, estimated to be one plane for every eighty people in Colby.⁴² By 1959, however, when a proposed \$87,500 bond issue was voted down by a count of 458 to 315, it indicated that the citizens of Colby no longer had any illusions about getting air service connections

and did not wish to burden themselves with more obligations.⁴³

The airport was but one of a number of projects considered by the Colby City Council during the war. Another issue was a March, 1944, decision which approved plans for paving seventy blocks and thirty-eight intersections after the war was over⁴⁴. Paving work began in the spring of 1947 after the contract for \$213,349.90 of paving was let February 27, 1947. In 1950, the further improvement of Colby's physical appearance was aided by the decision to install a new "White Way" for Franklin Avenue.⁴⁵

With the end of the war, buildings were begun, plans were made to get back to a more normal way of life, and Colby enjoyed an almost unprecedented growth for fourteen months both in population and in residential and commercial construction.⁴⁶ The housing situation in Colby became desperate, and increased needs for electricity meant that expansion of the power plant was necessary. Ernest Snell, the long-time manager of this facility, gave facts on the power needs of the growing area which resulted in the purchase of a new 1,200 horsepower generator in April, 1946.

About this time, John B. Hughes, a famous war commentator from the West Coast, made known his plans to apply for a license from the Federal Communications Commission for a 5,000 watt regional radio station.⁴⁷ The organization formed by Hughes was known as the Western Plains Broadcasting Company, Incorporated. Hughes made known his plans for programming which included coverage of fairs, festivals, sporting events, man-on-the-street programs, and important news events. A good deal of the station's major emphasis was to be put on agricultural subjects and included weather reports, crop reports, market quotations, and farm news of all kinds.⁴⁸ The prospect of this station was of great interest to the people of the tri-state area of Kansas, Colorado, and Nebraska, long a dead area of radio reception. In April, 1947, the license for the station was approved, and the company established studios in the basement of the Cooper Hotel. Licensed as KXXX (the station was commonly called "K - Triple - X,") the first broadcast took place on July 14, 1947, "at 790 on your radio dial" as the station proudly proclaimed.⁴⁹

The first spectacular news story covered by the radio station was that of the fire of 1948 which was the most destructive in the city's history. A \$150,000 blaze, it started in George Harrison's Garage where, unfortunately, the Colby Fire Department housed its only fire-fighting equipment which included a fire truck. The garage was located on the east side of Franklin Avenue, the second building north of the intersection of Colby's main street and Third Street. The fire broke out about 7 o'clock in the evening of April 27 after KXXX had signed off the air. However, the station came back on the air on an emergency basis and informed the listening area of the unfolding drama. Urgent calls for help were made to surrounding towns and resulted in fire-fighting units being sent from Atwood, Brewster, Goodland, McDonald, Norton, Oakley, and Rexford. For a time it was

feared that the whole business block on the east side of Franklin between Third and Fourth Streets might go up in flames. With the aid of the equipment rushed to Colby from the other towns and the volunteer help that had quickly materialized, the conflagration was confined to the garage and Smith's Electric Store just north of the garage. The Colby Theater north of this appliance store suffered some smoke damage, but no great loss was sustained. The losses included some fourteen cars in the garage (and the fire truck, of course), equipment of the garage, and all appliances and stock of the electrical appliance store.⁵⁰ Though Colby had been spared any previous rash of fires in its long history, a number of fires followed during the next few years. One business, the Farmers' Cooperative, suffered two disastrous fires, one in 1949 and the other in 1951 shortly after the elevator had been rebuilt following the first fire. The aftermath of the fire found the city utilizing a fire truck loaned by Goodland, and the unfortunate loss of its own fire truck under such unusual circumstances eventually led to the construction of a fire house at the city hall.

Another significant wartime decision had been the approval of a proposed \$100,000 addition to St. Thomas Hospital. In 1946, a maximum loan of \$350,000 was secured (from the Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, headquarters of the order of St. Agnes) and led to the 1947-1948 construction of an addition that more than doubled the size of the original structure. The completed 100-bed facility was valued at \$1,000,000 and was the finest hospital west of Hays in Northwestern Kansas. With polio a most serious disease in the years following the war, the establishing of a Polio Ward in St. Thomas's in 1948 for all Northwest Kansas indicated the hospital's pre-eminent position among hospitals in the area.⁵¹ Accreditation of St. Thomas's by the College of Surgeons in 1952 made it the only hospital west of Hays so accredited.⁵² Thus, it was little wonder that the city proudly proclaimed itself the "Medical Center of Northwest Kansas" on signs near the city limits.

Thomas County has been fortunate in having good banks throughout its history. The two Colby banks, in particular, have given the town and the surrounding territory exceptional banking facilities down through the years. Following the war, bank assets at the two Colby banks and the Rexford State Bank steadily increased. The Thomas County National Bank remodeled its building (once called the Warden Block) in 1949; and in January, 1959, the bank's directors announced construction plans for a \$123,000 building to be located on the same corner as the existing bank. It was to have a floor space of 4,700 square feet and the recent innovation, drive-in windows. Such plans meant the razing of the old land mark's southern portion, but the project was undertaken and finished in January, 1960, with an open house on January 7.⁵³ When the Farmers and Merchants State Bank absorbed the assets of the Menlo State Bank on December 15, 1951, it not only left the county with but three banks but boosted the Colby bank's assets over the six million dollar mark for the first time. In

March, 1955, the Farmers and Merchants State Bank made known its plans to build a new building on the same location it had always occupied. Formal opening of the fine structure was held in September, and the bank's assets at that time were over seven million dollars.⁵⁴

With most of the population of Thomas County concentrated in Colby in the postwar years, many of the events of these years have centered about the county's largest city. The farm-to-city movement of population in the United States was evidenced in a small way in Thomas County while the smaller towns' population remained relatively static.⁵⁵ An indication of this significant change in the population was the closing of schools in Levant and Menlo after the wartime shut-down of the school at Brownville. Rexford and Gem still have both grade and high schools, but the recent movement for reorganization of school districts has patrons in those two areas uneasy. Neither school has added to its original structure erected in the early 1920's, and diminishing school populations have paralleled the dwindling populations of these small communities. The Brewster school patrons, on the other hand, have done quite a bit of improving of their school facilities since the war. In addition to remodeling their original structure, a gymnasium-auditorium with a lunchroom and other room space was built in 1954-1955 with dedication ceremonies being held on April 9 1955.⁵⁶ One of the biggest events in the Brewster community is its annual High School Homecoming each fall.

Colby's school patrons have found it necessary to vote five bond issues totaling \$1,300,000 since 1948.⁵⁷ The crowded conditions in the grade school led to a \$75,000 bond issue, but as the issue was not sufficient to build primary rooms and still needing room space, the school board converted the north and south ends of the gymnasium of the Consolidated Building into classrooms. An additional \$75,000 bond issue was voted in February, 1949, and this made possible (with the remaining funds from the previous issue after the gymnasium conversion) the construction of a new primary building. Again, in the fall of 1952 a \$300,000 bond issue was passed by a 1237-508 margin which provided for seven classrooms and lunch room in a new primary building, bus barn, and other improvements.⁵⁸ Further expansion was necessary, and a proposed \$750,000 bond issue for construction of a new junior high school building was approved by a vote of 545 to 437 in a special election in December, 1959.⁵⁹ The most recent bond issue was one for \$100,000 in 1961 for construction of a band room.⁶⁰

Wheat production after the tremendous 1947 crop exceeded two million bushels in both 1948 and 1949. During the 1950's wheat yields varied with the moisture amounts, and harvests in 1950, 1952, 1958, and 1960 were all over five million bushels. Significantly, in Thomas County's seventy-fifth anniversary year, 1960, the wheat harvest was the greatest in the county's history with almost eight million bushels harvested. It made Thomas County the leading county in wheat production in Kansas for the third time since World War II.⁶¹ Conversely,

harvests in 1951, 1956, and 1957 were poor. The prediction was made in the spring of 1951 that the wheat crop would be poor; it was borne out later that year when Thomas County harvested its poorest crop since 1939.⁶² Milo was the county's biggest crop, not only in bushels produced, but in the value of the crop. This condition dramatically pointed up the fact that for a number of years milo had been the second crop for the county, having replaced corn when it became apparent that corn would not do well in most years for lack of rainfall. Milo was to prove a "life-saver" to many farmers during the dry years of the 1950's, and these dry conditions in the early 1950's led farmers to turn to an old hope of the Great Plains, namely, rainmaking. The technique in the more modern procedure of rainmaking was more scientific than in the 1890's. The newest method utilized was to "seed" cloud formations with dry ice dropped from airplanes. In April, 1951, trials in the tri-state area seemed somewhat successful, and some contracts were signed with concerns operating out of Denver. As had been true of the earlier rainmaking era, there were those who felt it would solve the dilemma of the need for rain at critical periods of crop development. This newer rainmaking endeavor eventually proved to be no more beneficial than the earlier attempt, however, for too often violent hail storms accompanied the rains induced by such seeding practices.⁶³

Another area of interest of progressive-minded Thomas Countians in the period following the war was that of industrial development. Like all Western Kansas, some forty counties in all, the feeling existed that small industry might help solve some of the unemployment caused by the seasonal-type economic pattern prevalent in the agricultural Great Plains. From the desire for industry, these counties formed the Western Kansas Development Association in 1947.⁶⁴ For years the organization tried to stimulate industrial development in Western Kansas with but partial success. Some of the larger towns of this region benefitted, naturally, but Thomas County has not developed any industrial capacity for the most part. Of course, many new business were started in Colby but they were not industrial in nature. The postwar era did see the return of the Colby Tractor Show and the Thomas County Free Fair which were both proclaimed to be "bigger and better than ever."

Cultural programs were brought to the people of Thomas County and the Northwest Kansas region in the postwar years by the well-known Community Concert Series. These programs were under the direction of the University of Kansas which also set up an extension office for the Northwest Kansas region in Colby. The concerts and the extension services are still available to the people of the area and have proved to be most successful.

Many religious denominations erected beautiful new edifices in the years following World War II. Some groups constructed fine sanctuaries while other church bodies built educational additions to existing church structures. Towns in the county situated along the Rock Island built new churches. These beautiful

churches were the pride of the smaller towns as they represented, in most cases, the finest new building project in these towns. Colby Christian Church members bought lots on West Third in 1946 and in 1950 erected a beautiful new sanctuary just one block east of their old church. Ground-breaking ceremonies took place in March, 1950, and the church was dedicated October 22, 1950.⁶⁵ After the original Catholic Church's destruction by fire in 1938, its members had constructed a basement-type sanctuary preparatory to plans for a new church. The combination of the war and lack of funds delayed this work until 1951. The open house for their new, modern edifice was held in April 1952.⁶⁶ Levant and Rexford Community Churches dedicated new churches in 1952 and 1954 respectively.⁶⁷ The year, 1955, was quite a busy one for church construction in Thomas County as Lutherans of Brewster completed plans in April for a new building at this time, and Colby Baptists completed a new church on Webster Avenue which was dedicated in 1956.⁶⁸ Perhaps the finest effort of any religious group in Thomas County in erecting a new church was that of Gem Baptists. With a total membership of but 115 members, they erected a beautiful \$100,000 edifice.⁶⁹

The greatest construction boom throughout the county during the late 1940's and the 1950's was the completion of numerous silo-type elevators. Almost all towns in the county erected at least one of these commercial storage facilities. Mingo's 16,000 bushel elevator owned by long-time county resident, William Engelhardt, burned in April, 1952.⁷⁰ From the ashes of this old wooden elevator, Engelhardt constructed a new concrete elevator in 1954. Additions were made in 1957 and 1958, and the elevator increased its capacity to 830,000 bushels. Brewster was the site of construction of two concrete elevators in the postwar years. Charles Coffey constructed Brewster's first such elevator in 1947, and additions to this structure plus buildings for flat storage made Coffey's total capacity in excess of 500,000 bushels.⁷¹ In addition to the Coffey elevator in Brewster, the Farmer's Cooperative also built a 600,000 bushel elevator.

Rexford's Fred and Chris Mosher constructed a concrete elevator in 1948 which, with additional concrete bins and flat storage buildings, gave them a commercial storage facility of 825,000 bushels by 1959.⁷²

Levant and Menlo also had elevators of this type built during this postwar period. The second longest commercial storage facility in the county was the Hi-Plains Cooperative Elevator. This successor to the old Farmers Elevator Company purchased Willard Cooper's wooden elevator at Fifth and Nashville on the east side of Colby in 1951. In 1956 the Co-op, as it is commonly called, erected concrete bins with a capacity of 500,000 bushels, and in 1958 another one million bushel addition was constructed. The Co-op also built a feed mill near the rest of their buildings in 1952.

These new elevators steadily increased Thomas County's commercial storage space from 3,202,000 bushels in 1954 to 11,855,000 bushels in 1960. Thus, Thomas County had the greatest commercial storage capability in Northwestern Kansas

and ranked tenth in the state.⁷³ In addition to these commercial facilities many individual farmers constructed flat storage buildings on their own farms. To show how conditions had improved from the 1930's when the delinquent tax list often ran to nearly twenty columns, in 1953 there were but four and one-half columns, and in 1958 it was but three columns long. A check of these listings revealed that about half of the delinquent taxes were owed on properties in the towns of the county. Whether true or not, the *Free Press-Tribune* indicated that undoubtedly many of those lots were on the list as a result of owners who merely forgot to pay their taxes.

Throughout the postwar period the municipally-owned power plant was unable to keep up with the expanding needs of Colby and the towns that it provided with electric power. More generators were purchased and money was expended to meet these needs. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars in bonds were voted in November, 1945, to expand the plant but no property taxes were involved in the plans. The "taxless town" status of Colby, however, was abandoned when the city adopted a city-manager type of government with three commissioners.⁷⁴ In November, 1952, a council-manager type of government was adopted at the general election. When further power needs were revealed by a survey conducted in 1957, there was division among the six councilmen on the course of action to be taken. The alternate possibility for more power was to buy it from the Central Kansas Power Company that had constructed a one million dollar plant northeast of Colby. This facility had an output of 7,500,000 kilowatts, and it opened October 6, 1951.⁷⁵ In December, 1957, the decision was made by the city council (by a vote of five to one) to buy a 1,750 kilowatt generator for the Colby Power Plant. Petitions were circulated in January, 1958, to stop this action and to purchase power from the C. K. P. Company. Signatures on the petitions were checked and so many invalidated that there were not enough valid ones to void the decision of the council. A second petition also failed and the generator was purchased.⁷⁶

One of the most significant postwar advances of Thomas County was the electrification of the rural areas. Farms of the county had long depended on individually-owned, battery-powered generators. In 1947, the Great Plains Electric Cooperative, Incorporated, was organized (with offices in Colby) and in October the Rural Electrification Administration approved power line contracts.⁷⁷ A loan of \$630,000 was granted by the REA in 1948⁷⁸ for construction of 600 miles of power lines to serve 530 farm customers in Thomas and Sherman Counties, with the first electric service being provided in 1949.⁷⁹ Through the years, Great Plains Electric grew and served not only Thomas and Sherman Counties, but Logan and Wallace Counties as well.

By a close vote of 427-395 in a city election held in April, 1954, Colby voters approved a \$370,000 bond issue for a Colby Community Building. Such a center had long been considered necessary by certain businessmen who felt Colby's

long-time "convention city of Northwest Kansas" reputation was at stake. With no existing facility large enough in Colby to hold the crowd which expanding organizational meetings would draw, the city council called the election for March 18 after first discussing the issue two weeks before. Voters approved the project just about one month after official discussions began. Constructed on the corner of Fifth and Court, just east of the Colby Swimming Pool it was the grandest meeting hall in all Northwest Kansas. Dedication ceremonies were held on November 11, 1955; and Senator Frank Carlson gave a speech.⁸⁰ The building also houses the Chamber of Commerce offices, dining rooms, and smaller conference rooms.

The Foster Farms' announcement in June, 1955, that they were going to dispose of their stock of purebred Hereford cattle was received with regret by many people. Over the years, the many Foster Farms show cattle had won prizes throughout the entire Midwest. The attention of this famous livestock enterprise was thereafter devoted to the production of commercial cattle. The sale ended thirty-seven years of purebred breeding operations, and the sale drew buyers from twenty-five states. Purchasers of stock represented fourteen states.⁸¹

Like many cities over the country, Colby developed a tourist attraction in 1955 when the decision was made to repair the sod house at the fairgrounds. It had fallen into a very run-down condition during the war years. Vernie Kear took charge of the "Sod House," as it was advertised; and it became a big tourist stop. In its first year of operation over 35,000 people from forty-seven states visited the attraction making it the fourth ranking tourist attraction in the state for that first year. By 1959, hoping to capitalize on the drawing power of the attraction, Kear moved the location of the Sod House to land two miles east of Colby adjacent to U. S. 24. The claim was made that only the Eisenhower Museum in Abilene and famed "Boot Hill" of Dodge City attracted more visitors annually. Filled with many artifacts of pioneer life, the Sod House has a most interesting collection. Kear even started an organization called the "Sons and Daughters of the Soddies." Eligibility in this group was limited to those who had been born in a soddie, lived in one, or attended school in such a structure; and by 1959, over six thousand people were members.⁸²

Southwestern Bell Telephone Company announced in November, 1956, its intention to build a \$970,000 one-story office building in Colby. Located on the corner just south of the corner where the Community Building was located, the structure was opened in August, 1957.⁸³ Housing new dial equipment, this office is Southwestern Bell's regional center for all Northwest Kansas. Catholic parishioners in October, 1958, decided to raise \$150,000 for construction of their own school to house the first eight grades, and by November this quota was not only reached but an additional \$16,500 was pledged. Land for the school was purchased across the street west from the Catholic Church, but the school was delayed, and occupancy was not realized until December 22, 1960.⁸⁴ Methodist

and Presbyterian congregations approved construction of educational facilities in 1959 and 1960, respectively. The Methodist facility, a \$155,000 edifice, was built in 1959-1960 and was dedicated in March, 1960.⁸⁵ The \$40,000 Presbyterian addition, attached to the north end of the church sanctuary, was approved in January, 1960, and completed the following year.⁸⁶ KXXX, which had moved its studios in 1951 to an old residence at the corner of Fourth and School west of the Blakesley Hotel, completed a fine, new studio in 1961 on the south edge of Colby just east of Kansas 25.⁸⁷ At the same time, a long-needed facility was also under construction, a National Guard Armory.⁸⁸ Prospects for securing a National Guard unit had first come up in February, 1947, and approval was granted later that year upon the condition that some temporary armory facilities be provided. The old Opera House, then owned by Harold Hills, was made into suitable quarters and these temporary quarters were used until 1960. A bond issue was passed in July, 1956, for a new Armory; and Representative J. V. Pratt secured passage by the state legislature of a bill which set aside 24.8 acres of Thomas County land for this purpose. This land was selected from the east side of Thomas County Fair Grounds' territory. More fair grounds' land was utilized as a site for a Thomas County Rest Home which was built between St. Thomas Hospital and the National Guard Armory following passage of a \$217,580 bond issue in November, 1960.⁸⁹

Newspaper coverage of Colby and Thomas County in the 1950's did not compare with the numerous articles of the 1940's, yet there were two instances of recognition gained in noted newspapers during the decade of the 1950's. The first was a one-page pictorial account by the *New York Times Magazine* of the life of "custom cutting" harvest crews who migrate from the wheat fields of Texas to Canada. These pictures were taken in Thomas County and near Colby. They included harvest scenes, and the article noted in closing that Colby called itself "with justifiable pride the 'Golden Buckle of the Wheat Belt.'" ⁹⁰ The second article was a two-page story run by the *Denver Post* in April, 1956, and was quite good. It contained pictures of some of the leading figures of Colby and shots of some of the buildings. One aerial photo of Colby was also included along with a night-time picture of Franklin Avenue. The written commentary enumerated pertinent facts and carried quoted remarks by those whose pictures were run along with the article.⁹¹

Several Thomas County men have made a name for themselves over the years in state political circles. In the period between the wars attorney and ex-mayor E. H. Benson was noted for his efforts at the state level. Joe O. Gunnels was also a noted legislator during the 1940's and early 1950's. Though not strictly a political position, two Colby men have served on the Kansas State Board of Regents. W. D. Ferguson, the noted banker, was the first so honored in 1933.⁹² Governor George Docking appointed Leon N. Roulier, an attorney, to a four-year term in 1959.⁹³ Businessman J. V. Pratt, an ex-mayor and state legislator, was the 1956 campaign

manager for Warren Shaw, the unsuccessful Republican gubernatorial nominee. Perhaps more state-wide recognition was accorded to State Senator August W. Lauterbach than any other Thomas County political figure. Lauterbach, son of the co-founder of the Farmers and Merchants State Bank, first was projected into prominence at a state level as President of the Kansas Bankers Association. In the early 1960's, Lauterbach was one of the most powerful figures of the Kansas Senate until his untimely death in a Topeka hotel in 1963.

Thomas County celebrated its Seventy-fifth Anniversary in 1960. In commemorating this event its people followed the usual pattern for such milestones by planning a gala June Diamond Jubilee Celebration. The usual beard-growing, adoption of western-style wearing apparel, and the revitalized interest in all things of the early days were evidenced over the entire county. In general, an attempt was made to recapture this spirit of the early pioneers, and the climax to the anniversary year was the June 13-16 production of a historical spectacle in front of the grandstand at the Thomas County Fair Grounds. Entitled "Saga of the Soddies," the production portrayed the history of Thomas County from the early days of Indians who roamed the prairies to the atomic age. The significant milestones of the county's history were recounted, and people from over the entire county participated in the production with citizens from each town being cast in one scene or another. The panorama was narrated by Mrs. Don Second, Sam Lowe, and Leon Little with John S. Clubley directing the spectacle.⁹⁴ LoRita White, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Gerald White, was chosen as Thomas County's Diamond Jubilee Queen from a list of twenty candidates.⁹⁵

Much of the credit for the preparation and planning of this Seventy-fifth Anniversary Celebration must go to the ladies of the Leisure Hour Club. This organization, started in 1897 by ladies who gathered at each other's homes to discuss topics of interest, later was instrumental in organizing the Thomas County Historical Society.⁹⁶ As a result of all the interest in pioneer Thomas County and the very evident need for more library space, citizens of Colby and the county started a drive for \$100,000 in contributions to construct a building to house a library and museum. The project was successful as enthusiastic citizens met the assigned goal, and the same spirit that has always seemed to permeate the lives of the people of Thomas County was once again exemplified.⁹⁷ In 1963 construction began on a beautiful building at the corner of Fourth and School Avenue. Though a fine addition to the city of Colby, it was even more a commemorative endeavor to honor those hardy pioneers who had successfully conquered the barren wilderness that was Thomas County in early years. Despite adversities of all sorts, they had a faith that has carried down through the years to the people of today. In dedication ceremonies held January 26, 1964, such attributes were referred to by the various speakers. Since that time, and indeed before the completion of the building, the Thomas County Historical Society had started assembling materials to be placed in the museum which had been appropriately

named the Pioneer Museum and Library. Though the west portion of the building will house the museum, it is presently being used to store the many mementos gathered, preparatory to arranging the materials for display. The library, meanwhile, has been opened for use and the long-needed space is now available which will be a fine opportunity for a new librarian to work in since Mrs. B. V. Dimmitt, the librarian for thirty years, recently resigned.

Great names have dotted the history of Thomas County: big-time wheat farmers, outstanding newspapermen, successful bankers, prosperous businessmen, and renowned political figures have left their imprint on the county's history. Yet, when Kansas celebrated its diamond anniversary in 1936 and each county nominated one of its citizens as its choice for the honor of being the "outstanding Kansan," it was not from these ranks that Thomas County's choice came. Though James Fike and J. R. Connelly were among those nominated, and justifiably so, the man who was recognized as exemplifying the outstanding qualities of the county was Dr. V. C. Eddy. This decision showed that the people of Thomas County respected the efforts of a man who had faithfully cared for the needs of the people of the county for over fifty years. Dr. Eddy was the personification of the typical county doctor, and his selection was, in a way, recognition of the efforts of those other early doctors of the county such as the county's first doctor, W. M. Edwards, and Dr. W. M. Beaver. Dr. Eddy's one-man efforts throughout the entire county during World War I (when all the other physicians had gone to service), made him truly a man of the whole county. Often more sick than his patients, Dr. Eddy would go to the bedside of any person who needed his services. His efforts to serve all during the influenza epidemic of 1918, perhaps best personified his character and personality. During the campaign for funds for the expansion of St. Thomas Hospital in 1947, the drive was known as the "Dr. V. C. Eddy Memorial Campaign." It was just one final tribute paid to Dr. Eddy who had died just a few short months before after serving the people of Thomas County for sixty years. He was eighty-five years old. It seems fitting that the name "Eddy" should still carry on in medical circles with both his son and grandson still serving many people of Thomas County even though both are located in Hays. No more fitting climax to the history of Thomas County could be made than to recognize the efforts of its "Number One Citizen," Dr. V. C. Eddy.

¹Johnson, *Heaven's Tableland*, 109

²Alvin S. McCoy, "With Two Million Dollars at Stake the Wheat King Eyes the Sky," *Kansas City Star*, July 20, 1947, Section C, 1. Hereinafter cited as McCoy, "Wheat King."

³*Roll of Honor*, Thomas County Court House. ⁴See Table V.

⁵*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, June 17, 1942.

⁶*Ibid.*, July 1, 1942. ⁷*Ibid.*, July 15, 1942.

⁸See Table I. ⁹*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, February 24, 1943.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, November 24, 1943.

¹¹Johnson, *Heaven's Tableland*, 275-276.

¹²"Food for the Starving," *Look*, X (September 17, 1946), 26.

¹³*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, September 4, 1946.

¹⁴See Table I.

¹⁵*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, June 5, 1947.

¹⁶Roy Freeland, "A Crop to Remember," *Biennial Report*, XXXVI, 1948, 48. Mr. Freeland pointed out that the crop was especially unique in that it featured the happy, but most unusual combination of high acreage, high yields, and high prices. The total Kansas crop was 251,885,000 bushels. Thomas, Ford, and Finney counties all produced over seven million bushels and Thomas County alone produced as much as half the nation's forty-eight states.

¹⁷They included the *Kansas City Star*, *Omaha World-Herald*, and the *Minneapolis Star Journal*.

¹⁸Kriss, personal interview.

¹⁹*Ibid.* ²⁰McCoy, "Wheat King."

²¹"Miracle in the Dust Bowl," *Reader's Digest*, LI (November, 1947), 75-77.

²²In 1957, Garvey Farms, Inc., received a \$278,187 Soil Bank payment which was the largest amount paid to any single enterprise. This included all of Garvey's land. Garvey Farms still has offices in Colby.

²³Kriss, personal interview.

²⁴Carroll P. Streeter, "Here Come the Combines," *Reader's Digest*, LI (August, 1947), 44.

²⁵*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, July 7, 1949. The author of the *World-Herald* article was J. Harold Cowan. Frahm lost 300 acres of wheat as the result of hail storms, and Thomas County (north of the Rock Island tracks across the area) suffered \$1,000,000 in hail losses. This catastrophe, coupled with too much rain and humidity greatly reduced the wheat yield.

²⁶Statement by Willard Cooper, personal interview. Hereinafter cited as Cooper, personal interview.

²⁷*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, January 15, 1948.

²⁸Cooper, personal interview; *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, June 24, 1954; August 5, 1957. For these locations, see the Appendix, Figure 6. In 1959, Cooper also built a 1,250,000 bushel elevator at Hoxie.

²⁹*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, October 7, 1957; May 29, 1958.

³⁰Kriss, personal interview.

³¹*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, November 24, 1943.

³²*Ibid.*, November 15, 1944. Ironically, the Honor Roll Board, like the flagpole erected at the intersection of Fourth and Franklin during World War I, was later taken down. The board is now used to inform tourists of the whereabouts of points of interest in Colby.

³³*Ibid.*, August 29, 1945.

³⁴*Ibid.*, August 2, 1944.

³⁵*Ibid.*, August 30, 1944.

³⁶*Ibid.*, September 20, 1944.

³⁷*Ibid.*, August 15, 1945.

³⁸*Ibid.*, During the war the skating rink was a most popular place. Of course there wasn't much to do, but it was one place where "war widows" could go to have a good time without causing a lot of gossip.

³⁹*Ibid.*, April 8, 1942.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, April 7, 1943. The site selected for the airport was located one and one-half miles north of Colby on the east side of Kansas 25. The first landing field in Colby's history had been in the pasture of the experiment station, but the state later ruled that this was illegal, and an airport was made in Forrest Wallace's pasture just across the road west from the experiment station. This was the location until this action.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, September 13, 1944. The officers of this body were Merlin Taylor, field manager; Harold McKenzie, assistant manager; J. O. Gunnels, treasurer; and Dwight Murray, chief pilot.

⁴²*Ibid.*, September 15, 1949. ⁴³*Ibid.*, January 12, 1959.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, March 29, 1944. ⁴⁵*Ibid.*, February 2, 1950.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, April 24, 1946.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, October 30, 1946. The famous by-line of Hughes was "News and Views by John B. Hughes."

⁴⁸*Ibid.* ⁴⁹*Ibid.*, July 24, 1947.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, April 29, 1948.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, October 16, 1947.

⁵²*Ibid.*, June 9, 1952. An example of the hospital's annual usage was the 2,156 patients admitted to St. Thomas in one year, 1949.

⁵³*Ibid.*, January 12, 1959; January 7, 1960.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, December 17, 1951; March 21, 1955; September 8, 1955. In January, 1963, C. M. Miller said the bank's assets were over \$10,000,000 and just a year later it had gone over the \$11,000,000 mark. The Thomas County National Bank's assets were over \$8,000,000 by 1964.

⁵⁵Biennial Reports, XXXIX, 1956, 290. The number of farms in Thomas County: 1920-822; 1930-940; 1940-955; 1950-755; and 1955-731.

⁵⁶*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, April 7, 1955.

⁵⁷R. L. Dennen (comp.), *A Story of Growth*, (Colby, Kansas: Prairie Printers, Inc.), 4-5. Hereinafter cited as Dennen, *Growth*.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 4; *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, October 13, 1952.

⁵⁹Dennen, *Growth*, 5; *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, December 7, 1959.

⁶⁰Dennen, *Growth*, 5.

⁶¹The price of wheat was lower in 1960 than it had been in 1947 which meant that, though larger, the 1960 wheat crop was not as valuable as the famous 1947 crop. In addition to these two crops, Thomas County led the state in 1955 although it was not one of the larger Thomas County crops. The one other 7,000,000 bushel crop in the county's history was second only to Sumner County's perennial leadership. See Table I.

⁶²*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, April 9, 1951. See Table I.

⁶³For the past eight years, the author has been a summertime hail adjustor on damage to small grains. Such work has taken him throughout the entire region of the Midwest from Oklahoma to the Canadian boundary. At no place are the hail rates on such crops any higher than in Western Nebraska and Eastern Wyoming. Many farmers in that region, without equivocation, stated that the violence of the hail storms were due to such seeding practices. Certainly, their hail rates substantiate this belief.

⁶⁴*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, May 26, 1947.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, March 13, 1950; October 26, 1950.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, April 10, 1952.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, February 7, 1952; August 23, 1954.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, May 31, 1956. ⁶⁹*Ibid.*, September 2, 1954.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, April 10, 1952.

⁷¹*Yesterday and Today*, October, 1960. Like Willard Cooper, Coffey has built elevators outside Thomas County. Coffey's other elevators are located at Kanorado and Goodland in Sherman County.

⁷²*Ibid.*, May, 1960.

⁷³*Biennial Report*, 1960, 179. In 1956 Thomas County had commercial storage of 5,155,000 bushels, and in 1958 it had been increased to 8,074,000 bushels which shows how these facilities were expanded during the 1950's.

⁷⁴*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, March 13, 1947. The special election vote on March 12 was 334-140 in favor of this change. Don Collier was the first manager; and it was through his efforts, according to Mrs. B. V. Dimmitt, City Librarian, that property taxes were instituted. For her part, she mentioned it was a blessing, for under the "taxless set-up" funds were never available for expanding the library.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, October 8, 1951.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, January 6, 1958; January 9, 1958; January 27, 1958.

⁷⁷*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, October 9, 1947; and Great Plains Electric Cooperative, Inc., *Annual Report*, 1963. (Colby, Kansas: Fletcher Print Shop, 1964). Hereinafter cited as *Great Plains, Annual Report*.

⁷⁸*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, December 2, 1948; and *Great Plains, Annual Report*.

⁷⁹*Great Plains, Annual Report*.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, November 14, 1955; statement by C. M. Miller, personal interview. Now president of the Farmers and Merchants Bank, "Mose," as he is called, mentioned that he was one of a number of men who had felt the need for such a building. These men "pushed" the project quickly through to reality, and many who had opposed the project at the time are now most happy that it was built. Mose said a survey was taken in the early 1960's which showed that more than one meeting a day every day of the year is held in the building. All kinds of conventions, tournaments, and programs are held in this hall. The State High School Wrestling Tournament has filled the building each year it has been held in Colby. The CBS television coverage of farmers' views on the Federal Farm Program was held in his hall in 1963.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, June 16, 1955.

⁸²*Ibid.*, July 6, 1959. Over the years, Kear has gained renown in the tri-state area by "playing Santa Claus" to the children of the region.

⁸³*Ibid.*, August 15, 1957. Colby citizens attempted to raise \$40,000 to buy the old telephone building for a library but were unsuccessful.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, October 30, 1958; November 24, 1958; December 19, 1960.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, March 31, 1960. ⁸⁶*Ibid.*, January 11, 1960.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, March 31, 1960. John B. Hughes had left KXXX in November, 1949, just after an August article carried his reasons for liking Kansas.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, November 10, 1960. All the aforementioned locations may be found in Figure 6.

⁹⁰“Harvesting a Wheat Surplus,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 26, 1953, 11.

⁹¹Don Cieber, “Profile of a City,” *Denver Post Pictorial Page*, April 29, 1956, 1AA. In 1946, at the time of the *Look* article which covered the harvest, the *Look* photographer took a picture of Franklin which made the December 10, 1946, edition of that magazine. It was unique in that it was taken with the aid of a flash of lightning for lighting. The caption was “Lightning Took This Picture.”

⁹²*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, July 12, 1933.

⁹³*Ibid.*, January 28, 1959.

⁹⁴*Yesterday and Today*, June, 1960.

⁹⁵*Colby Free Press-Tribune*, June 13, 1960.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, November 16, 1959. The first step had been taken at an October 20, 1959, meeting at the City Library located in the City Hall. At the November 12 meeting these officers were elected: Carl Eddy, president; W. D. Ferguson, vice-president; Jessie Dimmitt, secretary; Bertha Louis, treasurer; and Harry Eicher, Lulu Hutchinson, and Esther Sewell, directors.

⁹⁷Interestingly, Marion Talley was among the many contributors.



CHAPTER VII

Summary and Conclusions

I. Summary

Thomas County was first surveyed in 1869 and first settled about 1879. For a few years the region remained sparsely settled, but in 1885 a great influx of settlers transformed it into an area with enough population to become an organized county in October, 1885. Early settlement had been in the northeastern part of the county, but the first town, Colby, was located near the geographical center of the county in April 1885. From a population of but 160 at the beginning of 1885, Thomas County had nearly three thousand people by the end of that year. Continued settlement during the next two years pushed the county's population to over six thousand as railroad prospects increased.

The first railroad to enter Thomas County was the Union Pacific's Oakley-Colby Branch which was completed in September, 1887. Speculation was rife during these years, but the next actual rail-laying project was that of the Chicago, Kansas, and Nebraska Line, a subsidiary of the Rock Island. This railroad entered Thomas County in the spring of 1888 following the county's voting of bonds for that project. According to the agreement between Thomas County and the C. K. & N., four depots were developed by the railroad that became, respectively: Rexford, Gem, Levant, and Brewster. The only other railroad to enter Thomas County was another Union Pacific branch which was known as the Lincoln and Colorado Railroad. Like the C. K. & N. the L. & C. laid track into the county to Colby in 1888, and it established Zillah and Verner (now known as Menlo and Halford) between Colby and the Thomas-Sheridan County line. Towns that were bypassed by the railroads eventually ceased to exist. They included Otterbourne, Cumberland, Quickville, and Hastings. Mingo was the last town to be formed in Thomas County, and this mid-way point between Oakley and Colby was platted in 1907.

Agricultural pursuits have been the economic backbone of Thomas County's people since the beginning of settlement. Climatic conditions have always determined the economic well-being of the county's people. The first adverse agricultural conditions led the agriculturally-dependent people of Thomas

County to support Populism for a number of years in hopes of securing benefits that would solve their problems. Improved weather conditions in the late 1890's caused a population increase after the county's high-water mark of 1888 was just about reduced by one-half.

During the early years as sod was broken out and farm acreage was small, since the only power for plowing was animal power, different crops were planted with corn and occasionally sorghum the leading crop. But after the drought of the early 1890's wheat became "king" and has been the big crop ever since except the times that the climate patterns have reduced its yield. Even on such occasions, wheat is still "the" crop. The 1900's brought wheat into even greater prominence as first steam tractors and then gasoline tractors made wheat-farming a big enterprise. James N. Fike was the first "wheat king" but another dry period in the period from 1911 to 1914 ruined him.

The early 1900's found a good deal of building activity in Colby as many new businesses erected new structures. Thomas County voters approved a new court house, and a new high school was built at this time, the only four-year school in the county.

The "freak of nature" that gained Thomas County great notoriety occurred in the area east of Colby causing a loss of over a thousand people as they moved out of the "Blown Area." Conditions were so bad that huge piles of dirt could be seen throughout that region, and drought was prevalent over the entire county as no wheat was planted at all in 1911. With the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, the county was fortunate in having its first million-bushel wheat crop. Continued favorable conditions led to a 1916 crop of two million bushels and a three million bushel harvest in 1920. Increased demands and high prices brought prosperity to the county. Mechanization practices were developing throughout the region, and it appeared that Thomas County was on the threshold of greater things. However, the over-extension of too-eager farmers, coupled with a drop in wheat prices and higher costs, plagued Thomas County farmers during the 1920's. The early 1920's was the era of school district reorganization in Thomas County as it was throughout Kansas. Every town along the Rock Island built a new school building and Menlo did so as well. Despite the unfavorable conditions of high costs and low prices, the county's population increased. The county and Colby gained national fame in the late 1920's as the result of Marion Talley's purchase of land near Levant and Colby's "taxless town" status as a result of its municipally-owned power plant. Two Thomas County events that became famous in the whole Northwest Kansas region were the Colby Tractor Show and the Thomas County Free Fair. These, too, got their start in the late 1920's.

Thomas County, like all Western Kansas, suffered through the notorious "Dirty Thirties." Unable to find solutions to the problems that confronted them, farmers of the county wholeheartedly enrolled in the various plans of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs. Thomas County was the site for two experimental

farm programs during this time. One gave the county's farmers the privilege of drawing up their own farm program, and the other established a soil conservation demonstration plot in the south central part of the county.

Improved weather conditions and the outbreak of war in Europe resulted in unparalleled prosperity for the county during the 1940's. Wheat farming on an ever-bigger scale became the pattern that was followed by those willing to risk everything for a chance at great success which often ended in disastrous failure. In 1942, the county produced a six million bushel wheat crop as America found itself involved in a second great war. As it had in the First World War, Thomas County supported the war effort wholeheartedly; and thirty-three men of the county made the supreme sacrifice. Postwar Thomas County experienced great wheat crops with 1947 a seven million dollar crop. Plans for postwar development of Colby were begun while the war was still in existence. Thus, when peace came, development was quickly effected. A trend begun prior to the war continued to be evident in the postwar period: the movement from the farm to Colby. The smaller towns of the county found their populations fluctuating during the postwar years although the county's population increased to 7,513 by 1960. Significantly, Colby had over half this total with 4,292 people; and this can be mainly accounted for by the present-day farm-to-city movement.

A boom in the construction of commercial grain storage facilities has affected the entire county, but most of the other types of building projects—residential and business—have been confined to Colby. The "public" buildings constructed over the entire county were mainly churches.

II. Conclusions

The story of Thomas County is the story of agriculture in general and of wheat in particular. The success of crops in the county is dependent upon climatic factors, primarily sufficient rainfall amounts at critical times of crop development. The prosperity of the county's people is determined by the farmers' well-being. Milo has become a most important crop especially since the mid-1950's. Feeder-type cattle operations are carried on by some stock raisers at the present time although livestock operations have always been carried on from the time of the county's beginning.

Colby has always been the focal point of Thomas County. The city's location near the geographical center of the county and its head-start as a town gave Colby an unchallenged position that has existed throughout the county's history. Perhaps that is because, being the first town in the county, Colby was able to create an impression of permanence which the other towns recognized as they developed. Strong supporting evidence of this lack of jealousy was the lack of "county seat wars" like those which engulfed neighboring counties. The foresight of the Colby Townsite Company in diverting J. R. Colby's town-establishing intentions was significant.

Adversity plagued Thomas County throughout its history. Population fluctuations were traceable to depressions, drought, dust storms, and low prices; but, despite such problems, the people who remained exemplified a determination that has marked the lives of all the residents of the county at whatever period one might study. Unity among the people was evident at all times, and in times of trouble the finest attributes of character could be found. This was especially true in the cooperative spirit of the county's businessmen and farmers. The recent nationwide shift of population from farm to city can be seen in Thomas County.

Religion and education have played prominent roles in the lives of the county's people. The many fine church buildings to be found today in Thomas County are an indication of the value attached to this aspect of human existence. The heritage of faith that sustained the early pioneers is perhaps best seen in the beautiful Gem Baptist Church which was made a reality by a mere handful of devout members. The schools of Thomas County have done an outstanding job of educating its young people. Colby, in particular, has done a fine job in providing facilities and teachers for students attending its schools. The present hope for a junior college is the most recent example of Thomas County citizens' long-held belief in the importance of education. School bond elections in the county have proven successful over the years, and Colby patrons have never rejected any such proposition.

Thomas County has had many outstanding citizens and "pioneers" in many different fields. A great agricultural country, many of its most famous men have been successful in this area of endeavor. Indeed, some have been "giants" in certain aspects of the county's number one business, and their renown has become significant beyond the confines of Thomas County. Great wheat harvests in the period following World War II and the prominence of Colby helped to dispel the notoriety gained as a result of the "Dust Bowl" days of the 1930's. Both the county and Colby gained notoriety in a similar fashion, though on a smaller scale, as the result of the "Blown Area" of 1911-1913. This adverse publicity was offset in the 1920's when Colby gained nationwide fame as a "taxless town," and then later Marion Talley's purchase of land in the county increased this fame.

A prominent factor in the development of the region was the existence of stable banks in the county, especially the two Colby banking institutions, the Thomas County National Bank and the Farmers and Merchants State Bank. The banking prowess of both August G. Lauterbach and W. S. Ferguson from the earliest days of Thomas County was carried on by their sons, and the stability of both institutions can perhaps be traced to the fact that they are "still in business at the same old stand" after over seventy-five years of continuous banking service.

Thomas County has been fortunate in having had several outstanding newspapermen who provided leadership through their media which helped to mold public opinion in Colby and much of the county. Some, like Nat Turner of the *Colby Tribune* and J. R. Connelly of the *Colby Free Press*, have gained fame in

other fields. Turner became State Auditor after his Colby stay, while Connelly was a three-term United States Congressman from the Sixth District. The merger of these two newspapers under the banner of the *Colby Free Press-Tribune* under J. P. Phillips's direction continued the fine newspaper tradition of the Colby papers. Papers in Rexford, Brewster, Menlo, and Gem were not as significant though they served a need at the time of their existence. All newspapers of the county reported the news, but the abilities of the Colby editors often "pointed the way" to their readers as these men were fearless in their views on the vital issues during the times in which each man lived.

Medical services of Colby are the best in all Northwest Kansas, and such a condition is a tribute to the dedicated pioneer doctors and Thomas County's progressive citizens. All the people of the county share in the credit for the material exemplification of this medical supremacy, St. Thomas Hospital. With the excellent operation of this facility in the hands of the Sisters of St. Agnes, coupled with the many practicing physicians in Colby, few better hospitals of its size could be found anywhere.

Finally, this study has shown that throughout its history Thomas County has always had citizens who were progressive, optimistic, and confident that this land where they lived, despite its hardships, was the greatest land in the world. Never did the people stand still. The best example of this was the building plans decided upon by the people of Colby during the years of World War II. The present effort to secure a junior college in Colby which would be used not just by Colby, not just for Thomas County, but by all the region of Northwest Kansas, is merely another example of the spirit that has been shown by these citizens down through the years. The qualities that have made the county a leader in its own backyard and, indeed, a potent county in the state, are still present.

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APPENDIX

Table I Wheat Production in Thomas County

Year	Bushels	Acres	Crop Value
1886	5,940	396	\$ 2,970.00*
1887	17,028	1,419	10,216.80*
1888	32,868	1,826	16,434.00*
1889	93,249	7,173	43,827.03*
1890	23,097	7,699	18,940.00*
1891	584,212	30,748	397,264.16
1892	525,820	48,140	312,910.00
1893	8,676	72,313	3,904.20*
1894	2,371	79,047	1,114.37*
1895	159,153	35,363	70,027.32*
1896	133,908	44,636	60,258.60
1897	615,032	55,912	418,221.76
1898	694,818	77,202	375,201.72
1899	369,990	73,998	181,295.10
1900	553,689	61,521	276,844.50
1901	514,308	85,718	262,297.08
1902	504,042	84,007	272,182.68
1903	951,102	50,058	542,128.14
1904	178,917	21,539	128,820.24*
1905	940,882	55,346	639,799.76
1906	777,264	64,772	485,585.76
1907	464,348	116,087	362,191.44
1908	471,489	157,163	372,476.31
1909	969,612	138,516	872,650.80
1910	584,010	116,802	455,527.80
1911	0	0	0.00*

Table I (continued)

Year	Bushels	Acres	Crop Value
1912	325,865	65,173	231,364.15
1913	547,080	68,385	426,722.40
1914	1,703,352	121,668	1,430,815.68
1915	1,644,253	126,481	1,430,500.11
1916	2,529,344	158,084	3,490,494.72
1917	159,176	39,794	315,168.48*
1918	642,288	107,048	1,252,461.60
1919	2,835,420	202,530	5,472,360.60
1920	3,223,616	201,476	5,802,508.80
1921	1,546,069	220,867	1,499,686.93
1922	2,457,576	223,416	2,457,576.00
1923	1,496,691	213,813	1,152,452.07
1924	1,962,010	196,201	1,962,010.00
1925	2,092,383	223,487	2,866,564.71
1926	1,065,590	213,118	1,246,740.30
1927	438,288	146,096	482,116.80*
1928	1,990,576	124,411	1,791,518.40
1929	4,663,304	274,312	2,751,349.36
1930	2,606,989	236,999	2,502,709.44
1931	3,611,790	277,830	1,155,772.80
1932	1,503,350	150,335	451,005.00
1933	687,895	137,579	584,710.75*
1934	247,800	35,400	161,070.00
1935	144,800	36,200	133,216.00
1936	811,535	162,307	762,842.90
1937	966,400	241,600	1,005,100.00
1938	1,817,600	227,200	981,500.00
1939	966,000	151,000	637,000.00
1940	1,200,000	121,000	732,000.00
1941	2,566,000	190,100	2,360,700.00
1942	6,344,000	260,000	6,534,300.00
1943	4,819,000	272,000	5,613,000.00
1944	2,145,000	150,000	3,024,000.00
1945	5,620,000	252,000	8,318,000.00
1946	5,043,000	256,000	9,077,000.00
1947	7,803,000	306,000	17,421,000.00
1948	3,552,000	192,000	7,033,000.00
1949	2,289,000	210,000	4,166,000.00
1950	5,067,000	239,000	9,982,000.00

Table I (continued)

Year	Bushels	Acres	Crop Value
1951	1,110,000	101,000	2,355,300.00
1952	6,446,000	293,000	13,343,200.00
1953	2,812,000	178,000	5,736,500.00
1954	2,846,000	199,000	6,318,100.00
1955	4,376,000	187,000	8,970,800.00
1956	1,307,000	152,000	2,587,900.00
1957	940,000	47,000	1,786,000.00*
1958	7,744,000	242,000	12,710,000.00
1959	4,378,000	199,000	7,630,000.00
1960	7,920,000	198,000	13,701,000.00

Source: Compiled from the *Biennial Reports of the State Board of Agriculture, 1885-1960*.

*A crop other than wheat was the most valuable in these years.

Table II

Crop Valuation Leaders Other Than Wheat

Year	Crop	Yield	Crop Value
1886	Corn	409,700 bu.	\$ 143,395.00
1887	Millet	11,248 tons	56,240.00
1888	Corn	95,496 bu.	42,973.20
1889	Sorghum	8,139 tons	126,160.00
1890	Sorghum	5,919 tons	82,848.00
1893	Broom Corn	2,721,600 lbs.	81,648.00
1894	Sorghum	4,095 tons	21,075.00
1895	Corn	591,824 bu.	153,874.24
1904	Barley	560,014 bu.	151,203.78
1911	Sorghum	18,461 tons	92,305.00
1917	Corn	411,312 bu.	514,140.00
1927	Corn	2,033,304 bu.	1,118,317.20
1933	Corn	939,288 bu.	263,000.64
1957	Sorghum	2,798,900 bu.	2,127,200.00

Source: Compiled from the *Biennial Reports of the State Board of Agriculture*. 1885-1957.

Table III

Annual Valuation Of Farm Products In Thomas County

Year	Valuation	Year	Valuation
1886	\$ 484,854.00	1919	\$7,811,340.76
1887	472,571.00	1920	7,754,273.88
1888	337,783.10	1921	2,272,473.46
1889	565,808.49	1922	3,643,076.64
1890	377,117.26	1923	3,877,482.11
1891	918,509.55	1924	3,425,094.41
1892	878,443.49	1925	4,103,737.34
1893	363,106.26	1926	1,866,489.57
1894	153,224.42	1927	2,787,915.11
1895	436,110.27	1928	5,166,111.36
1896	201,917.33	1929	4,791,241.14
1897	680,795.44	1930	5,340,495.73
1898	699,925.67	1931	2,592,242.68
1899	550,261.33	1932	1,542,620.00
1900	619,605.00	1933	1,477,013.36
1901	692,476.29	1934	1,554,909.33
1902	688,592.57	1935	1,555,812.42
1903	709,547.62	1936	1,806,527.76
1904	958,013.00	1937	575,087.00
1905	1,519,502.79	1938	518,050.00
1906	1,313,270.11	1939	647,750.62
1907	1,001,015.20	1940	717,760.00
1908	875,926.10	1941	1,116,260.00
1909	941,209.05	1942	2,120,990.00
1910	1,089,541.55	1943	3,081,020.00
1911	402,866.49	1944	1,918,950.00
1912	1,196,605.63	1945	2,319,320.00
1913	1,136,411.99	1946	3,019,990.00
1914	2,318,065.71	1947	2,962,260.00
1915	2,537,699.64	1948	2,977,500.00
1916	4,555,874.31	1949	4,069,710.00
1917	2,046,361.48	1950	4,033,670.00
1918	2,234,835.00	1951	4,981,420.00
		1952	5,904,000.00

Source: Compiled from the *Biennial Reports of the State Board of Agriculture, 1885-1952.*

Table IV

Population Figures For Thomas County and Colby

Year	County	Colby	Year	County	Colby
1885	981		1923	6,123	1,371
1886	3,411		1924	6,522	1,455
1887	5,629		1925	6,860	1,665
1888	6,174		1926	7,559	1,887
1889	5,445		1927	6,655	1,700
1890	5,471		1928	6,795	1,084
1891	4,069		1929	7,115	1,895
1892	4,467		1930	7,129	2,074
1893	5,032	722	1931	7,371	2,292
1894	4,415	557	1932	7,556	2,360
1895	3,512	514	1933	7,748	2,403
1896	3,456	467	1934	7,833	2,554
1897	3,371	448	1935	7,578	2,610
1898	3,616	530	1936	7,319	2,564
1899	3,864	582	1937	6,908	2,457
1900	3,945	619	1938	6,543	2,370
1901	4,064	647	1939	6,503	2,393
1902	4,180	608	1940	6,347	2,382
1903	3,916	643	1941	6,411	2,455
1904	4,229	647	1942	6,317	2,393
1905	4,506	731	1943	6,030	2,225
1906	5,531	1,076	1944	6,028	2,378
1907	5,799	1,105	1945	6,128	2,418
1908	5,638	1,132	1946	6,269	2,736
1909	5,199	1,036	1947	6,687	3,119
1910	5,441	1,180	1948	7,136	3,467
1911	5,026	1,029	1949	7,311	3,677
1912	4,007	826	1950	7,343	3,697
1913	3,704	729	1951	7,319	3,739
1914	3,503	663	1952	7,217	3,660
1915	3,996	767	1953	7,303	3,862
1916	4,584	801	1954	7,458	4,016
1917	5,046	1,039	1955	7,517	4,102
1918	5,008	1,022	1956	7,431	4,059
1919	5,088	988	1957	7,069	3,811
1920	5,382	1,050	1958	7,003	3,866
1921	5,824	1,240	1959	7,402	4,124
1922	6,117	1,370	1960	7,513	4,292

Source: Compiled from the *Biennial Reports of the State Board of Agriculture, 1885-1960.*

Table V

Precipitation Summary (U. S. Weather Bureau)

Colby, Kansas

Year	Rainfall	Year	Rainfall
1888	18.48	1923	27.53
1889	16.97	1924	16.85
1890	12.22	1925	14.49
1891	26.32	1926	11.46
1892	18.68	1927	18.81
1893	9.69	1928	21.38
1894	10.73	1929	19.94
1895	18.96	1930	25.57
1896	22.00	1931	16.08
1897	29.54	1932	15.09
1898	15.08	1933	18.14
1899	14.30	1934	8.60
1900	16.78	1935	13.23
1901	14.86	1936	12.06
1902	22.12	1937	14.92
1903	21.13	1938	18.42
1904	23.78	1939	15.38
1905	16.92	1940	15.61
1906	19.60	1941	30.70
1907	12.99	1942	21.10
1908	14.72	1943	13.85
1909	17.91	1944	28.79
1910	6.62	1945	20.01
1911	10.55	1946	28.12
1912	20.02	1947	15.17
1913	21.49	1948	21.64
1914	16.81	1949	26.32
1915	31.81	1950	15.82
1916	13.11	1951	23.49
1917	20.27	1952	13.35
1918	20.37	1953	17.39
1919	18.65	1954	12.19
1920	27.91	1955	13.42
1921	19.78	1956	9.30
1922	18.94	1957	28.43

Table V (continued)

Year	Rainfall	Year	Rainfall
1958	22.67	1961	18.51
1959	16.94	1962	25.13
1960	21.89	1963	17.84

Source: Compiled from Precipitation records of the Colby Experiment Station.

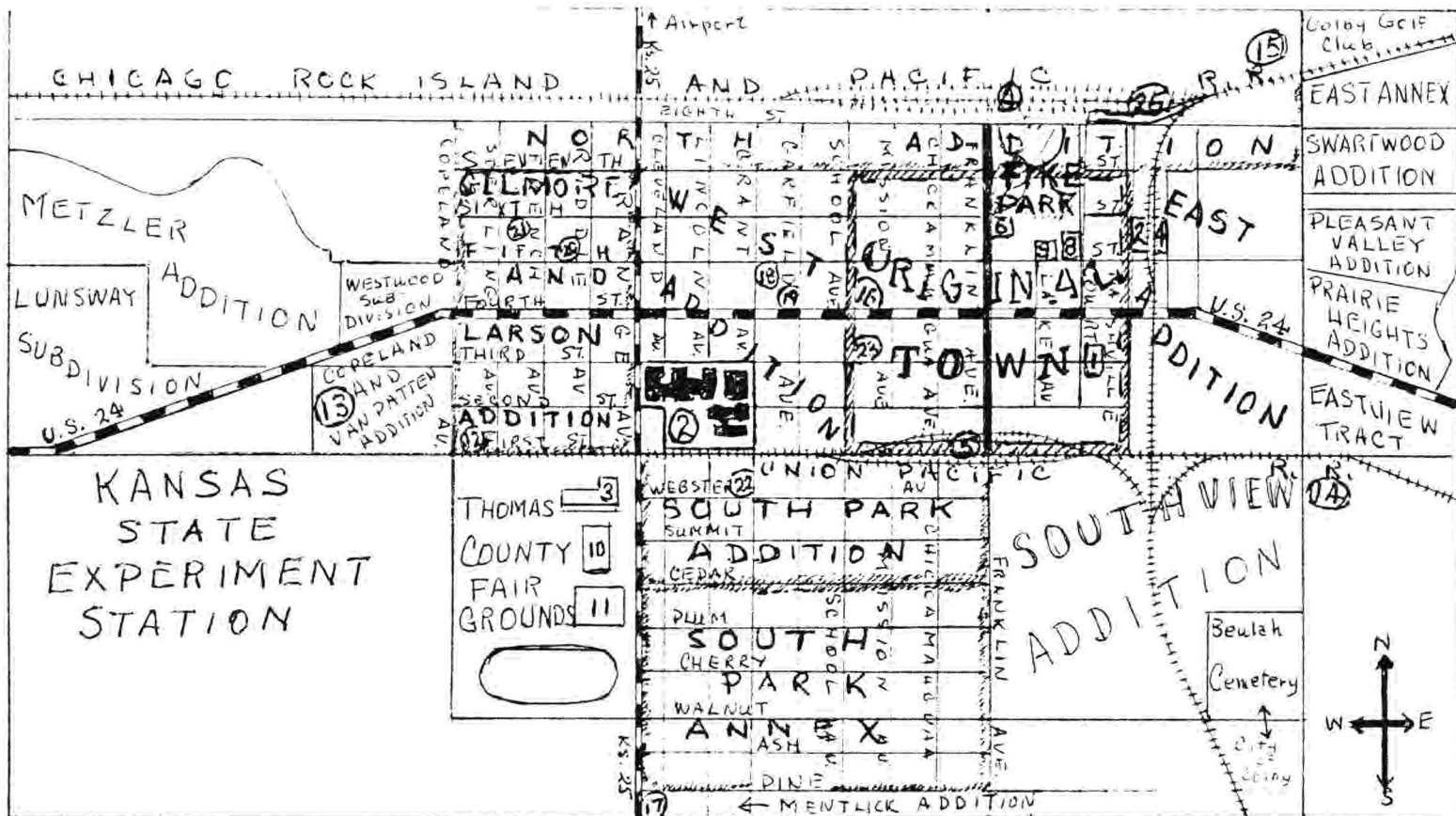


FIGURE 6 — MAP OF COLBY

- 1—Court House
- 2—Public Schools
- 3—Hospital
- 4—R.I. Depot
- 5—U.P. Depot

- 6—City Hall
- 7—Post Office
- 8—Community Bldg.
- 9—Swimming Pool
- 10—Home for Aged

- 11—Armory
- 12—Power Plant
- 13—Athletic Field
- 14—Sale Barn
- 15—C.K.P. Plant

- 16—Museum-Library
- 17—KXXX
- 18—Methodist Church
- 19—Presbyterian Church
- 20—Catholic Church

- 21—Catholic School
- 22—Baptist Church
- 23—Christian Church
- 24—Hi-Plains Co-Op
- 25—Cooper Grain



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