



Scene in the Flint Hills Area.
(Courtesy of the Kansas Industrial Development Commission.)

Facts and Fiction

By P. J. Wyatt

It is possible to study a place and learn all the facts and figures about it, and all sorts of scientific explanations and philosophical theories—and still have no real knowledge of it. It is possible to study Kansas, and read histories and geographies and documents and essays—and still not know the real Kansas. In fact, it's quite possible to live here a whole lifetime and never be consciously aware of the heritage of Kansas. Understanding, real knowledge, comes from meeting the people, from hearing the people, from learning to know the people.

What is history? A record of events in relationship to people. What is sociology? A study of groups of people. What is geography? A study of physical environment and people. What is folklore? A study of the unwritten traditions of people—and it is in this field where we at last come to understand the importance of all other phases of study. What is a study of Kansas, then, without the people?

But “study” is not the right word. Our aim is more than “studying;” the importance lies in becoming personally acquainted with “everyday” people by knowing their hopes and fears, their laughs and tears, their jokes and sad tales, their loves, hates, beliefs, customs. Only in this way—by knowing the people in addition to knowing the scientific facts—can we learn to appreciate, to sympathize with, to *know* Kansas and our heritage.

Dixon Smith gave a lecture a couple of summers ago at a Heritage workshop on “The Physical Geography of Kansas.” It is reprinted on the following pages. He gives a fine explanation of the physical why, how, and what of the state for those of us who are non-experts in the geography field. He even gives us some information about the weather and why we get those extremes of climate. --And we certainly get those, all right.

Why, there was a man up in McFarland a few years ago who told me about this fellow in the early days who had the following experience with the Kansas weather. In George Evans' own words,

It was related that in the early days, we had some very hot weather, which we have most every year in Kansas. A farmer was driving a yoke of cattle, and they became wearied on account of the heat, and he found that he would have to do something for them like give them some water. (This story represents the sudden changes that take place in Kansas, occasionally.)

He rushed over to the well to get a bucket of water for his oxen, and by the time he got back to the wagon, one ox had died with the heat, and he looked around to his bucket, and the weather had changed—the wind had changed to the north—and his bucket was solid ice!

Mr. Evans didn't know the man personally, but he'd been told about this incident by some other men. And after all, there's little reason to doubt it, as any native Kansan knows.

In fact there is a common saying in Kansas about how ideal the weather is. If you're not satisfied with it, just wait a few minutes and it will change.

Of course, it isn't always so much the *change* as it is the *extreme* change. For example, there was the traveler who was caught on a side road in a Kansas down-pour. His car got stuck in a mudhole, and he was unable to move. Seeing that it was useless to try any longer, he walked to the nearest farm house to get help. Returning a few minutes later, he found that the car was buried in a heap of dust which had blown in.

A kind of reverse on this story was told to Frosty, an insurance man from Dodge City, when he was a child back in the early part of this century. The way Frosty tells it, the story goes this way:

There was a cowpoke that was riding fence on a very hot, dry day. Man! It was hot and dry! He came upon a nice looking pool of water in a rock bottom creek, and he thought he'd take a swim and cool off. He got ready for the swim, and dived off the high bank—but it was so hot and dry that the water had all evaporated after he dived. Just as he was sure to bash his brains out on the rocks, it came up one of those quick Western Kansas showers. It filled the hole with water, and he had a nice cool swim after all.

Now, some people might feel that *this* one is stretching the truth a little bit. It is a pretty tall tale, all right. The informant himself said that it may or may not have been true, but at any rate, that's the way it was told

to him. The same way with this next story: it may or may not really have happened, but it's the way Frosty heard it—and it *is* possible in this state, isn't it?

One time there was a cowboy out on the prairie on a very hot day. The time of the year was no doubt late fall. He saw a storm coming, and he could tell it was going to be a whale of a blizzard. He turned his horse and started for home as fast as the horse could run. But the storm was coming so fast that by the time he had gotten turned around, the storm was right behind him. There he was, about to melt down in the heat, and this fast blizzard was right on his heels.

Well, he finally made it home and ran his horse right into the barn, which, of course, had the door open. He dismounted and started to walk around his horse. He bumped into its tail, which was sticking straight out, and it was frozen so hard that it broke clear off.

These stories told by Kansas people certainly bear out Dixon Smith's statement that the climate of Kansas is changeable. However, there were plenty of times in the past when the weather didn't seem very funny. There have been droughts and rains and blizzards which resulted in great loss and tragedy. The section following Mr. Smith's lecture gives some eyewitness accounts of some of the weather that has affected Kansans in past years.

These serious accounts, along with the tall stories and the scientific viewpoint, should help us to understand and appreciate a small segment of Kansas study.

But now, let's meet Dixon Smith.

He is a personable young man in his thirties who is by training a geographer, and by present occupation, Registrar of Kansas State Teachers College in Emporia. Ten years ago, Mr. Smith came from Minnesota to Kansas to teach geography at Emporia State. After teaching for some eight years, he took on the job of registrar, and so gave up his classwork except for one course in geography.

He received both his B.S. and M.A. degrees from the University of Minnesota. In 1956-1957 he studied under the Danforth Teacher Grant, and in 1952 he had a Carnegie Grant for two months of study with the State Department. At present, he spends his spare time helping his wife raise their four youngsters, serving as a lieutenant in the Naval Reserve, and working on his doctorate in geography from the University of Minnesota.

And with this brief introduction to Mr. Smith, let's turn to what he has to say about Kansas geography.