

Crawford County: From Coal to Soy Beans, 1900-1941

by
Robert K. Ratzlaff and Thomas R. Walther

It seems inevitable: every state has a unique section within its boundaries that has a very different and special heritage. For the Sunflower State, this section is the nine southeastern-most counties that have commonly been called the "Balkans of Kansas." This term, often pejorative, refers to the large number of southern and eastern European immigrants who settled in that area and gave it a very unique cultural-ethnic mix. While northeastern Kansas concentrated on an increased yield for their corn crops in the 1870's, southeastern Kansas contemplated the profit in coal mining. As winter wheat became the state's pre-eminent cash crop in the 1880's, zinc smelters began to make their appearance in Crawford and Cherokee Counties. As Kansas entered the twentieth century it was well on the way establishing itself as the bread basket of the nation, but the southeastern part of the state was in the midst of an industrial boom based on mining and manufacturing. The great promise of industrialization, however, burst in the 1920's and the region returned to an agriculture-based economy. Crawford County history, as a microcosm of southeast Kansas, reflects the boom and bust of industrialization as it moved from coal and "low-value" mineral production to soy beans in the first four decades of the twentieth century.

The very early history of Crawford County was not much different from that of the rest of the state of Kansas. It was Indian territory in the 1840's and the only white population in the area was the garrison at Fort Scott (located in present-day Bourbon County to the north) and missionaries at St. Paul (located in present-day Neosho County to the west). A few settlements were planted during the territorial period such as Cato and Arcadia. The former, planted in 1856, was the first settlement in Crawford County and the latter was a stopping point on the military road which ran from Fort Snelling, Minnesota, through Fort Leavenworth, Fort Scott, and Fort Gibson in the Indian territory (Oklahoma).¹ County



Broadway Street, Pittsburg, Kansas. (Courtesy Pittsburg State University Library).

organization came in 1867 when Girard was selected as the County seat and towns and villages like Mulberry Grove, Crawfordville, Iowa City, Opolis, Farlington, and Stevenstown were established.² The County remained, however, a sparsely populated agricultural area throughout the 1860's and early 1870's.

The population growth of Crawford County was not stimulated by agriculture; rather it was a part of the industrial boom which swept across southwest Missouri and southeast Kansas during the last two decades of the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth centuries. The industrialization was inspired by several factors including: 1) an adequate transportation system, 2) a cheap fuel (coal), 3) a steady supply of laborers from southern and eastern Europe and 4) the region's bountiful supply of "low-value" minerals.³

In the nineteenth century, railroads were the pre-eminent big business in America. They were much sought after by communities with celebrations acknowledging the arrival of the first train in town. Crawford County was then being served by number of railroads including: St. Louis and San Francisco (Frisco); Missouri, Kansas, and Texas (Katy); Missouri-Pacific (Mop); Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe (Santa Fe); and the Kansas City Southern. These five railroads, plus several inter-urbans, criss-crossed the

County and provided excellent north-south and east-west transportation facilities.⁴

Railroads were, in fact, responsible for the beginnings of the largest city in Crawford County. Ed H. Brown laid out a townsite in the Spring of 1876, along the prospective route of the Girard and Joplin Railroad and Franklin Playter named the city after Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, because of the coal deposits nearby. The Girard and Joplin Railroad ultimately became a part of the St. Louis and San Francisco Railroad and the new city became the hub of the coal mining operations.⁵ It was, however, the last railroad built in Crawford County, the Kansas City Southern, that had the greatest impact on Pittsburg. Franklin Playter encouraged his friend and promoter, Arthur Stilwell, to build his railroad through Pittsburg and to make it a division point on the system. It was known as the Kansas City, Pittsburg, and Gulf Railroad until 1900, when the name was changed. The Kansas City Southern has maintained major shops in Pittsburg since about the turn of the century. Moreover, Arthur Stilwell financed construction of a hotel in 1889 that was considered one of the finest between St. Louis and Wichita.⁶ One guest of the Stilwell, John Young Taylor, wrote in his diary in 1898, "This is a bang up hotel - Room and bath \$2.50 a day. Was built for a \$4.00 a day house."⁷

Each of the aforementioned factors of population growth are



Kansas City Southern Railway Passenger Station, Pittsburg, Kansas. (Courtesy Pittsburg State University Library).



Kansas City Southern yard scene showing repair facilities in the background. (Courtesy Pittsburg State University Library).



Miner in an underground passage transporting high grade bituminous coal near Pittsburg, Kansas. (Courtesy Pittsburg State University Library).



Animal powered strip mining in Crawford County, Kansas. (Courtesy Pittsburg State University Library).

interrelated, but without coal it is doubtful whether the area would have industrialized. Coal was the inexpensive fossil-fuel that would fire the furnaces of the area's industries until the discovery of natural gas. In 1874, an underground shaft-mine was constructed and opened at Scammon, Kansas, and in rapid order other mines were opened in Cherokee and Crawford Counties. This remained, until 1931, the dominant mode of mining in the area. Vertical shafts of 100 to 300 feet were sunk downward to the seams of coal and then tunnels—sometimes a mile long—were constructed along the seams in a horizontal direction. During the mining era, there were approximately 290 important mines and, of course, many, many smaller mines called "dinkies."⁸

Prior to the completion of the first deep-shaft mine in 1874, there were two means of mining coal in the area: drift-mining and strip-mining by animal power. In the early days, surface or strip-mining was carried out by teams of guided mules and horses pulling scrapes and plows over coal seams just beneath the shallow overburden. After 1931, this process was mechanized and heavy machinery replaced deep-shaft mining as a means of removing coal.⁹ The arrival of Big Brutus in the 1960's represented the ultimate in mechanized strip-mining in the area.

One of the most interesting developments in Crawford County was the coal mining communities. They began to appear in the 1870's, were most numerous from 1890 to 1920, and then rapidly became defunct in the 1920's and 1930's. The identifying features of all these communities were the houses or shacks and the company store. Two types of houses predominated: one was square with a hipped roof and the other was an elongated crackerbox. These two basic varieties might be formed into T-shaped, L-shaped, or U-shaped structures and some are still in evidence today. The company store was often the focal point of the community because credit was easily obtained and the miners were paid, in part, by scrip that could be redeemed at only place.¹⁰ Many residents of coal field mining communities could honestly say, "I owe my soul to the company store."

The names of these communities originated from many sources. Some were named for the original owners of the land—Capaldo and Ringo, for example. Some after prominent individuals—Fleming, Scammon, and Kirkwood. Some because of geographic position—Midway was so-named because it was midway between Fort Scott and Baxter on the stage line. Natural features produced a few names—Mulberry, Lone Oak, Breezy Hill, and Mineral City,



Steam shovels used in mining Crawford County coal. (Courtesy Pittsburg State University Library).

and some communities simply had numbers—Camp 13, 50 Camp, and Sheridan 12. There were some humorous names—4½ Camp, Dogtown, Red Onion, Pumpkin City, Blue Goose, and Scabpatch for one community that refused to join in one of the strikes. The camps ranged in size from fewer than 50 to over a thousand.¹¹ Several of the mining communities survived the decline of underground mining and because the hamlets, villages, towns, and cities of the county. These communities survived for a variety of reasons, but hundreds that have disappeared are safely locked away in someone's memory.

The vast deposits of coal were of little import without laborers willing to submit themselves to the menial and hazardous task of underground mining. Those most frequently recruited to the mine fields were recently-arrived immigrants from Italy, Austria Yugoslavia, Germany, France, Belgium, and Great Britain. In 1930, for example, Crawford County townships of Sheridan, Baker, and Washington ranged from 30 to 43 percent foreign born.¹² These percentages were not necessarily unusual for Kansas; rather it was the variety of cultural-ethnic groups that was unique. By 1916, the coal fields had become a polyglottal area of different nationalities and at least 30 languages were spoken in Crawford County in that year.¹³ Many of the miners enjoyed their home-made spirits, but the state's prohibitory laws meant that it had to be distilled in secret. An abandoned "dinky" mine was the perfect place and the name "deep-shaft" whiskey became synonymous with the region.

Between 1909 and 1913, the troublesome and unruly reputation of the coal fields became so acute that the then governor of Kansas, Walter Stubbs, compared it to the troubled Balkans of southeastern Europe. This hostile appellation stuck and the region became known as "The Balkans of Kansas."¹⁴ Antagonism toward the region was particularly noticeable during the coal strike of 1919. In that year, 10,000 Kansas miners, led by United Mine Workers district president Alexander Howat, went on strike. President Woodrow Wilson had ordered the miners not to strike and the U.M.W. had agreed, but Kansas coal miners would not acquiesce. Therefore, Governor Henry Allen took control of the mines, recruited amateur miners (mostly college students from all over Kansas), and operated the mines until the strike was settled.¹⁵ Subsequent legislation, particularly the creation of the Court of Industrial Relations, was viewed by the miners as anti-labor legislation, and had much to do with the region's attempt to insulate itself from the rest of the state.¹⁶ The term, "Balkans" may be slightly exaggerated, but no area of Kansas can claim greater variety in its cultural and ethnic heritage or a more ardent pro-labor orientation within a considerable portion of its population.

A typical Kansas community would start with a flour or grist mill, blacksmith shop, a newspaper and print shop, a lumber yard, and a little later would add other small manufacturing concerns. The village would then grow as it became the County seat, railroad



Hotel Stilwell, Pittsburg, Kansas. (Courtesy Pittsburg State University Library).



Zinc Smelters, Pittsburg, Kansas, 1898. (Courtesy Pittsburg State University Library).

center, or preferred market place of the area. Southeast Kansas had its share of these farm hamlets, but they were a typical in the pre-World War I period. A prosperous city in Southeast Kansas would most likely brag about its zinc smelters and its brick, glass, and cement factories. To demonstrate the importance of these industries some statistics are in order. In 1910, for example, Kansas ranked first in the United States in zinc smelting, 3rd in Portland cement, 9th in glassmaking, and 12th in clay products.¹⁷

Industrialization in Southeast Kansas went through two interrelated phases. As long as coal was the chief fuel, the activity was confined to Crawford and Cherokee Counties with concentration on zinc smelting and brickmaking. With the



Pittsburg Boiler Works later became McNalley - Pittsburg Manufacturing Corporation. (Courtesy Pittsburg State University Library).

discovery and exploitation of natural gas (a much cheaper fuel than coal) the factories moved westward to Allen, Wilson, and Montgomery Counties and glass and cement were added to the list of manufactured items.¹⁸ This paper is primarily concerned with the first of these two stages.

In all four "low-value" mineral industries the raw materials utilized were heavy and bulky and required high temperatures for baking for firing to create a finished product with sufficient value to justify manufacture and shipment. The initial development of the "low-value" mineral industries was in the Joplin-Galena-Pittsburg area. The international demand for zinc mined in the area (sphalerite) in proximity with the best deposits of coal were a perfect combination.¹⁹

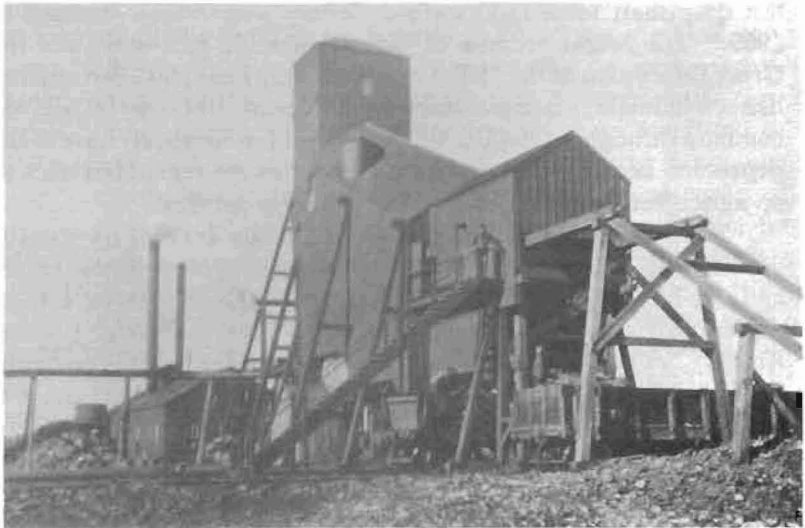
The establishment of Pittsburg as a zinc smelting city was, by and large, a Lanyon family affair. The first smelter in the Kansas coal fields was erected at Weir City in 1873, where the coal and ore had to be hauled in by wagons.²⁰ Five years later, and two years after Pittsburg had been laid out as a town site, Robert and S. H. Lanyon constructed a factory at Second and Smelter Streets. Since it took two to three tons of coal to smelt one ton of zinc ore, the ore was always carried to the source of fuel and this made Pittsburg a logical site. In 1880, part of the Lanyon family of smeltermen withdrew from the original company, organized the firm of S. H. Lanyon & Brother and opened a smelter southeast of the first plant. In 1882, two more smelters were built in Pittsburg, the first by W & J Lanyon, cousins of Robert and S. H., and the second by the Granby Mining & Smelting Co. Later, the Weir City Zinc Company and the Pittsburg, St. Louis Zinc & Land Co., located plants in the city. In fact, by 1891, just fifteen years after the city began, a million dollars had invested in zinc smelters, 1,000 men were employed, six factories had a total of 42 furnaces in operation, and Pittsburg led the nation in the smelting of zinc.²¹ It was during the last decade of the nineteenth century that Pittsburg's smelting industry was dealt a severe, and ultimately fatal, blow when natural gas was discovered in Neosho County. As already mentioned, there is one rule in zinc smelting; the ore is always carried to the source of fuel. Therefore, the industry most responsible for the early beginnings of Pittsburg moved westward to the natural gas fields during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The history of the second "low-value" mineral industry in Pittsburg has a much happier ending. In the fall of 1890, John Moore and Robert Nesch founded a brick plant in the area that is

today the northern part of Lincoln park. They built their plant in Pittsburg with an agreement that the city would pave Broadway Street from Second to Eleventh Street with their bricks. Laying of this pavement attracted the attention of other towns and a strong demand for vitrified brick from Pittsburg kept the local plant busy. The plant, in its heyday, had a capacity of 100,000 bricks per day, and it continued to operate until 1925.²² Robert Neseh was also involved in the development of the W. S. Dickey Clay Company. He purchased the plant from the original owners and then resold it to Walter Dickey of Kansas City who converted the plant into one capable of producing sewer pipe in great quantities. From 1899 to the present, it has been a major producer of sewer pipe.²³ The clay products industry was responsible for filling the void left when the smelting industry moved westward and helped Pittsburg get past a very rough spot in its history.

Another industry which began in the boom years and has remained a stellar part of the Pittsburg economy was the McNally Pittsburg Manufacturing Corporation. It started in 1889, when a boiler maker named Thomas J. McNally established a shop in a 40 x 60 building on West Third Street. McNally initially concentrated on day-to-day repair work, but in 1921 his son, Thomas J. McNally, Jr., designed and erected the first all steel tippie in the Pittsburg coal field. In simple terms, the tippie crushed the larger sizes of mine-run coal and then screened it to commercially salable sizes. From that point, the company expanded to include the construction of a complete plant designed and constructed and fully equipped with McNally machinery. This was followed by a modern coal washer and more recently by highly specialized coal cleaning equipment.²⁴ Zinc smelting, brick and tile, and coal machinery were not the only manufacturing concerns in Pittsburg. There were, however, the large employers which stimulated the growth of the city and permitted it to become the largest and most important city in the County.

The Pittsburg, Kansas, Commercial Club in its 1909 Yearbook advertised itself as, "The largest industrial city in Kansas." The city claimed as its chief industries, "coal mining, zinc smelting, packing, brick and sewer pipe factories, foundaries, railroad and electric car shops, planning mills, and small factories."²⁵ The booster magazine continued, "Surrounded by a first-class farming community, Pittsburg has the advantages which accrue to few cities in the west, developed resources, through both manufactures and agriculture."²⁶ The leading employers for the city of 18,767, included: Kansas City



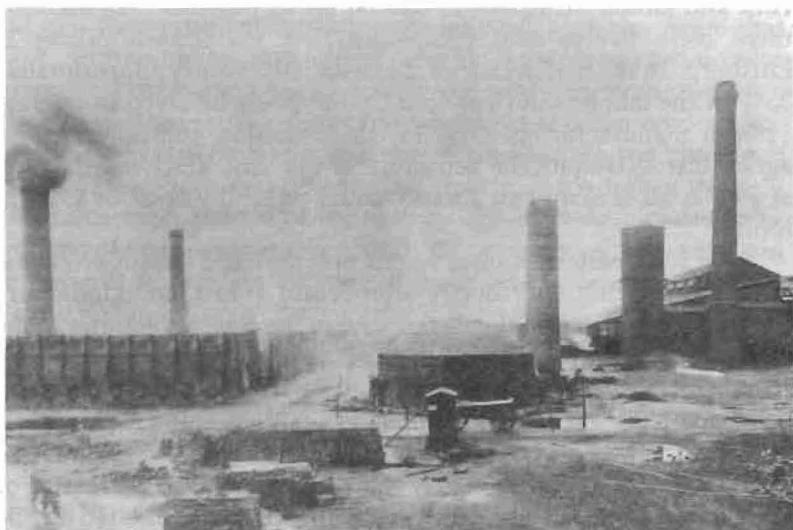
Coal Tipple, Pittsburg Midway Coal and Mining Company. (Courtesy Pittsburg State University Library).

Southern Railroad Repair Shops with 586 employees; Pittsburg Sewer Pipe and Conduit Co. (Dickey Clay) counted 100 employees; Pittsburg Vitrified Paving and Building Brick Company and Pittsburg Boiler Works (McNallys) both claimed 100 workers and Hull and Dillon Meatpackers had 50 on its payrolls.²⁷ In addition there were twelve coal companies that maintained offices in Pittsburg. In the first decade of the twentieth century approximately 33% of the laborers in Crawford County were involved in mining, 11% in manufacturing, 16% in transportation and only 21% in agriculture.²⁸ Despite the departure of the zinc smelters, the city, as well as all of Southeast Kansas, could rightfully boast of a bright future.

But southeastern Kansas began to experience serious economic difficulties during and shortly after World War I. Discriminatory freight rates magnified the distance from the Kansas factories to the market places. Depletion of natural gas in Neosho, Allen, and Montgomery Counties meant the end of free or inexpensive fuel. Unfortunately most of these companies could not stand the financial burden of conversion to coal as a source of fuel. Overproduction forced the manufacturers to rely increasingly on local markets. For Crawford County the industrial boom effectively terminated during the Roaring Twenties. The Pittsburg Vitrified Paving and Building Company, for example, closed its doors in 1925, and the

last deep-shaft mine in Crawford County went out of business in 1960.²⁹ The bright promise of industrialization had burst and the Great Depression of the 1930's reared its ugly head. Swollen welfare lists, wholesale unemployment, and bread lines were all too common throughout the United States, but for Southeast Kansas the depression began earlier and lasted longer as the region fell back to an agricultural orientation and struggled for survival.

The great innovation in Crawford County agriculture was the introduction of soy beans. The crop was first grown in the 1920's and, in fact, an article appeared in the 1930 Report on Kansas Agriculture entitled, "Soy Beans as a Cash Crop in Eastern Kansas."³⁰ The advice of the author evidently went unheeded until 1941, when the increased demand stimulated something of a revolution in the farming habits of southeast Kansas. In 1941, there were 3,450 acres planted, the next year—11,535 and by 1952 soy beans had become the major crop of the County both in acres in production (51,700) and cash value (\$1,535,000). At present, approximately one-third of the County's agricultural production is devoted to soy beans and the 1975 crop was worth \$5,000,000 to the County.³¹ This paper was not to be the story of agriculture, however, and 1941 was deliberately selected as the terminal date because it was in that year that soy beans became important and the economy of Southeast Kansas began to diversify and prosper.



Pittsburg Paving Brick Company, 1914 or 1915. (Courtesy Pittsburg State University Library).



The Carey Lombard Lumber Company - E. F. Porter, Mgr., Pittsburg, Kansas.
(Courtesy Pittsburg State University Library).

The primary purpose of the paper was an examination of the first four decades of Crawford County history as a microcosm of southeast Kansas. Too often this region is given only token coverage or is totally ignored when the story of the Sunflower State is recited. This means that a unique and important dimension of the state's history is missing. The fault, however, is not entirely with those who write Kansas history. The region has suffered a kind of "losers' syndrome" because the promise of industrialization was never fulfilled. They have, therefore, been unjustifiably reticent in recounting their past. In Crawford County, for example, the story of deep-shaft coal mining, zinc smelting, brick making, and the rich diversity of the many cultural-ethnic groups deserves further research and explanation. Then the unique and special heritage of southeast Kansas can be told. We hope that, by word and picture, a necessary corrective to Kansas history has been partially added.

Pittsburg State University

NOTES

¹Home Authors, *Twentieth Century History and Biographical Record of Crawford County, Kansas*, (Chicago, 1905) p.52; Alfred Theodore Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas*, (Chicago, 1883) p.1139; also see Michael G. Christensen, "Cato: First Settlement in Crawford County," *Papers in History*, (Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas, vol. VII, #1, Spring, 1976) pp. 21-29.

¹Andreas, pp. 1120, 1131, & 1140; also see Carolyn Crotheer [Robinson], "Stoverstown: A Case Study of a Lost Kansas Community," *Papers in History*, (Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas, vol. V, #1, Spring, 1974) pp. 37-45.

²John G. Clark, *Towns and Minerals in Southeastern Kansas: A Study in Regional Industrialization, 1890-1830*, Special Distribution Publication 52, State Geological Survey of Kansas (Lawrence, Kansas, 1970), pp. 2, 37 & 82.

³Andreas, p. 1120.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 1128.

⁵Keith L. Bryant, Jr., *Arthur E. Sillwell: Promoter with a Hunch*. (Nashville, 1971) p. 45.

⁶"Dairy of John Young Taylor," March 1, 1898, Department of History Archives, Pittsburg State University.

⁷The best study of coal mining and coal towns is William E. Powell, "Former Coal Mining Communities of the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 38, #2, Summer, 1972, p. 162.

⁸William E. Powell, "Communities Sprang Up Around Area Coal Mines," *Pittsburg Morning Sun* [Pittsburg Centennial Edition], May 20, 1976.

⁹Powell, "Coal Mining," pp. 189 & 191.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 191-193.

¹¹J. Neal Carman, *Foreign Language Units of Kansas, I., Historical Atlas and Statistics* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1902), p. 110.

¹²"Once Greeted Senator Capper in 30 Different Tongues," *Pittsburg Daily Headlight* [Kansas Centennial Edition], May 13, 1961.

¹³Kenneth L. Simons, "And So We Became 'The Balkans of Kansas,'" *Pittsburg Headlight-Sun*, September 17, 1970.

¹⁴Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts* (St. Charles, Missouri, 1974), pp. 218-17.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Clark, *Towns and Minerals in Southeastern Kansas*, Chapter 2, *passim*.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Richard L. Douglas, "A History of Manufactures in the Kansas District," *Kansas Historical Collections*, vol. 11 (1909-1910), p. 166.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 173. Gladys Mundt, "Lanyons Active In Smelting, Banking Industries," *Pittsburg Morning Sun* [Pittsburg Centennial Edition], May 20, 1976.

²¹"Pittsburg Brick Paves Kansas City Streets," *Pittsburg Morning Sun* [Pittsburg Centennial Edition], May 20, 1976.

²²"Clay Soil Lead to Manufacturing," *Pittsburg Morning Sun* [Pittsburg Centennial Edition], May 20, 1976.

²³The best study on McNally-Pittsburg Corporation is Ernest Mahan, *The History of McNally-Pittsburg* (Wichita, Kansas, 1972).

²⁴Pittsburg Kansas, *Yearbook 1908*. "A Twentieth Century City" (Pittsburg Commercial Club, 1908), p. 2.

²⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹"Clay Soil Lead to Manufacturing," *Pittsburg Morning Sun* [Pittsburg Centennial Edition], May 20, 1976.

²⁰I. K. Lanoon, "Soy Beans as a Cash Crop in Eastern Kansas," *Twenty-Seventh Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture* (Topeka, 1930), pp. 250-54.

²¹*Kansas Agriculture, Fifty-Ninth Annual Report* (Topeka, 1976), p. 55F.