

AGRICULTURE
ON THE
PLAINS



Gwen Turner

SUITCASE FARMERS

Visitors to cafes and poolrooms in small towns on the high plains may wonder what local residents are talking about when they speak of "suitcase farmers." A suitcase farmer is one who lives in one place and farms in another. A suitcase farmer might live in Wichita, for example, but operate a farm in Greeley County, on the Colorado line. Several times a year he packs his suitcase and drives out to plow, plant, or harvest his crops. Resident farmers often cite suitcase farmers for poor soil management, but such criticism may obscure their true role. Suitcase farming might best be viewed as a device by which capital for mechanized farming may be imported into a region unable to support a concentrated population of resident farmers.



TREES

From the Timber Culture Act of 1874 to the Shelterbelt Project of 1934 to present day distribution of seedlings by the Agricultural Extension Service, the United States government has attempted to establish trees on the Great Plains. Many of the trees introduced came from lands far from the American plains. For instance, the Chinese elm tree was brought here by a Dutch-born plant explorer named Frank Meyer. From 1902 to 1918 Meyer explored the Far East for plants of possible use to American farmers. His Chinese elm proved an ideal shelterbelt plant, hardy and fast growing. Plagued by loneliness and despondent over the outbreak of World War I, Meyer finally drowned himself in the Yangtze River, but his leafy memorial still stands around thousands of farmsteads on the Great Plains.

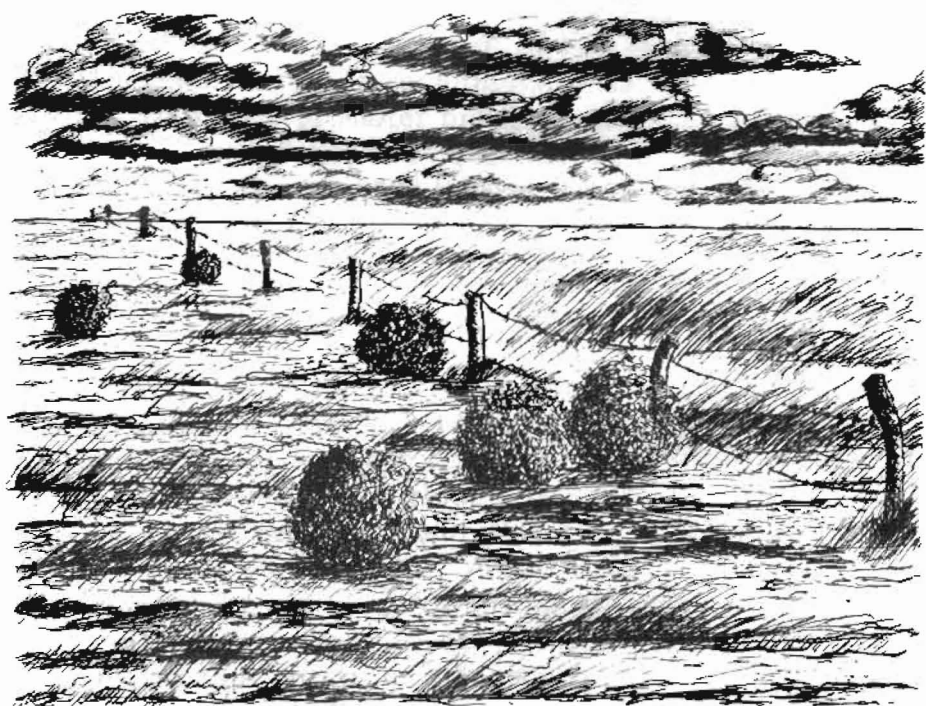
Stacy Hall

FARM CROPS

When most people think of farming on the Great Plains, they think of wheat--huge, full fields in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska; alternating sections of grain and summer fallow in the dryland farming regions of Wyoming and Montana; winter wheat in the Dakotas and Canada. Actually crops on the plains are much more diverse nowadays, thanks to irrigation. Milo and corn are raised in abundance in the central plains. On the southern plains wheat, corn and milo give way to soybeans and especially to cotton, while flax and sunflowers are major crops in the northern plains. Wheat is still king, but the Great Plains is no longer a one crop region.

RUSSIAN THISTLE

German-Russian immigrants to South Dakota during the 1870s brought with them a stowaway--the Russian thistle, its seeds mixed with their flax seeds. This annual weed native to Europe and Asia quickly escaped from the German Russians' fields, because when it reaches maturity, it breaks free from its roots and rolls with the wind as a tumbleweed. Although regarded as a noxious weed because of its infestation of croplands, the Russian thistle has assumed a constructive role in the Great Plains environment. It is one of the first annual weeds to appear on soil disturbed by dust blowouts or other calamities and thus helps to re-stabilize the ground, making possible its future reclamation for agriculture or its eventual succession back to grassland.



Stacy Hall



photo courtesy Special Collections, KSU

MARK A. CARLETON

The abundance of our annual wheat harvest we owe partly to Mark A. Carleton, a restless dreamer of a botanist who grew up near Concordia, Kansas. In 1898 and again in 1900 he journeyed to Czarist Russia as a plant explorer for the Department of Agriculture. Traveling by ship, rail, and ox-cart, struggling to apply his bookish Russian to local dialects, Carleton ranged the Russian steppes in search of grains that would grow on the American plains. He found them--Kubanka durum, a spring macaroni wheat that flourished in the Dakotas, and Kharkov, a drought resistant winter wheat that thrived on the high southern plains. Kharkov provided the genetic traits that make modern wheats abundant producers.

THEODORE C. HENRY

Theodore C. Henry was a New Yorker who never plowed or planted a single acre of Kansas soil with his own hands. He wouldn't seem a likely candidate for the title "Wheat King of Kansas." Yet within ten years of his arrival in Dickinson County in 1867, he had earned that title. Henry ruled over vast acreages of wheat farmed by contract labor using the most modern farm machinery and techniques available. And his skill as a promoter brought national attention to Kansas agriculture. Quite an accomplishment for a man who boasted, "I farmed in kid gloves, without horses or hoe."



photo courtesy Kansas State Historical Society

THE BEST COMBINE

There was plenty of excitement without any fireworks on July 4, 1901, when F. Neeland Thomas demonstrated a sixteen-foot, horse-drawn combined harvester, or combine, in Barton County, Kansas. Thomas's combine, manufactured by the Best Combine Company of California, was probably the first one used in Kansas. A field-to-mouth demonstration began in the morning, as the machine clattered into a field of wheat west of Great Bend. The first load of grain went to Great Bend's Moses Mill to be ground; the flour went from there to George Moore's bakery to be baked into bread; and the fresh loaves went on sale at the demonstration site that very evening. Local farmers remained skeptical and few purchased combines until after World War I.



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