A CRY FOR HELP: KANSASFREELAND.COM

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On 9 February 2005 the cover story in *USA TODAY* profiled several Kansas towns in which new settlers could receive free building lots (Ritter 2005). Officials in some of these communities are sweetening the offer with rebates on local taxes. People in Crosby, North Dakota are going farther still: They add complimentary memberships in the local country club, fitness center, and curling association (Crosby 2005). Recruiting advertisements of this type, which are increasingly common in the central and northern Great Plains, are an obvious response to population loss. However, because such losses have been a fact of rural life in Kansas for more than a century and for nearly as long in Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Montana, it is curious that the free-land movement should arise now. The timing of these land programs, in fact, is more interesting than their degrees of success.

Since the days of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s, scholars and local residents alike have agreed that the Plains were settled too intensively during the pioneer period. The region's climate simply could not support the corn-based, 160-acre agricultural system imposed on it by people from Ohio, Illinois, and other eastern states (Kollmorgen 1969; Emmons 1971; Worster 1979; Raban 1996). People still debate whether primary blame for this oversettlement should be placed on rainmaking and other "scientific" schemes for dry farming, on railroad promotional excess, or on simple settler greed. Looking at a specific north Kansas example, however, all would concede that the 14,442 people who lived in Phillips County in 1900 were too many for the land to sustain. Therefore, as that number declined to 10,435 in 1940 and to 9,273 in 1950, the consensus view held that a necessary accommodation was being made (Helyar 2001, 2: 16). Farms were larger, and a few ill-conceived hamlets had disappeared, but people thought that the county as a whole was poised to begin a period of lasting prosperity. A similar view predominated in the seats of several hundred other counties throughout the region.

Although the optimism of local residents seems foolish in retrospect, it was an easy belief for them to sustain through at least 1970. Not only did logic support the idea that a single population adjustment would stabilize the rural economy, but people also noticed that nearly all county-seat communities actually thrived amid the change. In Phillips County, for example, Phillipsburg grew from 1,008 residents in 1900 to 2,589 in 1950 (Morgan 1953, 111), a circumstance that allowed its merchants to increase sales even as the county population fell by more than 30 percent. Local grocers and hardware sellers naturally attributed such gains to their marketing prowess. They used the profits to erect stately houses, modern hospitals, and public bandstands.

As their town's population expanded further to 3,241 in 1970 (Helyar 2001, 2: 68), Phillipsburg people maintained an air of unreflective self-satisfaction. Life was

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