

“A Very Dear Spot”: The Development of Fort Scott, Kansas, 1890-1920

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HIST 533: Lost Kansas Communities

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This paper examines the development of Fort Scott, Kansas from 1890 to 1920 and compares this small city with other towns in southeastern Kansas at the time. The diversification of industry brought by the railroad, combined with a stabilized population level, transformed Fort Scott into a small industrial city unique in southeastern Kansas for its strong sense of community of a smaller town and the industrial diversity of a larger city.

## Introduction

In 1916, insurance agent and amateur poet J.S. Penney wrote of his beloved home town of Fort Scott: “We love her because her streets are clean; her beautiful lawns are clothed in green, Because her street-cars are so slow, and never in haste, when we want to go.”<sup>1</sup> Fort Scott, county seat of Bourbon County in southeastern Kansas, lay between the timbered banks of the Marmaton River and Mill Creek.

Fort Scott began as a military outpost. It was established in 1842 as part of a governmental attempt to protect settlers and Indians from one another by creating a frontier of forts and roads that was policed by the militia. The fort itself did not see military action until the Civil War, but the area surrounding the post began to draw more and more settlers, who were attracted to the abundant natural resources and pleasant climate of southeastern Kansas. In April of 1858, David E. Cobb was travelling along the Marmaton and looking for a spot to claim for his own. Writing home to his brother Judd, David described a spot “on the north side of the river, on a beautiful site-the prairie sloping in every direction, good timber in close proximity and surrounded by a very fertile country and is well located and will be a town of some importance if nothing should happen to prevent.”<sup>2</sup> Cobb, like many other travelers, was charmed by the southeast region of Kansas, a mosaic of bluestem prairie and oak-hickory forest which was very

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<sup>1</sup> John Scott Penny, “The Town We Love,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours* (Fort Scott, KS: J.S. Penny, 1917).

<sup>2</sup> Letters of David R. Cobb April 25, 1858 to brother Judd. “Letters of David R. Cobb, 1858-1864, Pioneer of Bourbon County.” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* (1942) 11:1, 66.

rich in natural resources.<sup>3</sup> The banks of the Marmaton, the primary water source through Bourbon County, were inviting to settlers looking for a spot with plenty of wood and fresh water.

Although military operations at the fort were abandoned in 1853 and troops were moved westward to the more practical location at Fort Riley, settlers impressed with the natural abundance of the area near the Marmaton continued to settle around the original fort.<sup>4</sup> The town of Fort Scott was incorporated in 1857. It remained a relatively small, self-sufficient, and rural town for less than a decade; Fort Scott was an early example of the many towns across Kansas which were transformed by the railroad in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In December of 1869 the Missouri River, Fort Scott, and Gulf Railroad (later known as the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis Railroad) was extended through the town. The arrival of the railroad was a transformative moment in Fort Scott history. More people and goods were shipped through the small city, local industries boomed and the population had doubled to 10,000 people by 1890.<sup>5</sup>

Yet competition with other budding towns would ultimately limit Fort Scott's population growth. While other towns prospered by becoming railroad centers which profited from railroad company support, Fort Scott never became headquarters for any of the three main lines which ran through it.<sup>6</sup> Although Fort Scott was an important stop and industry continued to benefit from easy transportation of goods, people flocked to larger urban centers. By 1890, Fort Scott's population leveled off. This rapid boom in industry, combined with a stable population,

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<sup>3</sup> Huber Self and Homer Socolofsky, "Native Flora of Kansas", in *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Leo Oliva, *Fort Scott: Courage and Conflict on the Border* (Topeka, Kansas: Kansas State Historical Society, 1984), 34.

<sup>5</sup> James Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 210.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

transformed Fort Scott into a small industrial city unique in southeastern Kansas. Despite remaining a small city of around 10,000 people through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fort Scott maintained the strong sense of community of a smaller town and the industrial diversity of a larger city.

### **The Arrival of the Railroad in Fort Scott**

*“I have here a wond’rous steed,/ Noted for her strength and speed;/With her massive nerves of steel/ And her legs an iron wheel.”*<sup>7</sup>

Historian Daniel Walker Howe writes that in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “railroads had an enormous impact on Americans’ lives. They allowed the cities to keep growing by bringing them ever greater quantities of food. The efficiency with which railroads could transport freight meant that inventories and storage costs could be reduced in many parts of the economy.”<sup>8</sup> In the 1850s, Kansas towns vied for railroad lines to connect them to wider markets. However, as historian Craig Miner has noted, “there would be no direct state investment in Kansas railroads, as there had been in Missouri, largely because the disastrous results in that neighboring state had led Kansas to prohibit state aid to internal improvements in its Wyandotte Constitution.”<sup>9</sup> Railroad companies, and not the state government, would run railroad development in Kansas.

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<sup>7</sup> Penny, “The Engineer’s Steed,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 565.

<sup>9</sup> Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 100.

Towns such as Fort Scott strove to build strong economic relationships with railroad companies and bid against other towns to have a railroad line. Fort Scott was successful; in December of 1869 the Missouri River, Fort Scott, and Gulf Railroad was extended through the town. Over the next half-century, railroad companies bought and sold railway lines in southeastern Kansas while continually expanding their lines. For instance, “the Fort Scott [the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis Railroad] was leased to the St. Louis & San Francisco RR in 1901 and thereby became a part of the much enlarged Frisco system.”<sup>10</sup> By 1918, three separate railroad lines ran through Fort Scott (all operated by the St. Louis & San Francisco): the Missouri Pacific, the Missouri-Kansas-Texas, and the St. Louis-San Francisco lines.<sup>11</sup>

Fort Scott citizens knew the importance of gaining a railroad line through the town, and celebrated accordingly. As local poet, J.S. Penny wrote of the train: “There’s no horse that ever strode/ That can pull as big a load/ And I never use a whip/ On her side or on her hip.”<sup>12</sup> As seen as Figure 1, by 1887 the Gulf railroad depot already served as a dining hall and was a central meeting place in the town. The railroad was a huge boon to the town, and railroads were celebrated frequently. The Fort Scott Daily Monitor noted in 1870 that railroad celebrations and events “are coming to be of almost weekly occurrence in Kansas. Towns in the interior are being connected with the balance of the world with such rapidity that we can scarcely keep tract of them.”<sup>13</sup> The arrival of the railroad led to the doubling of Fort Scott’s population by 1890.

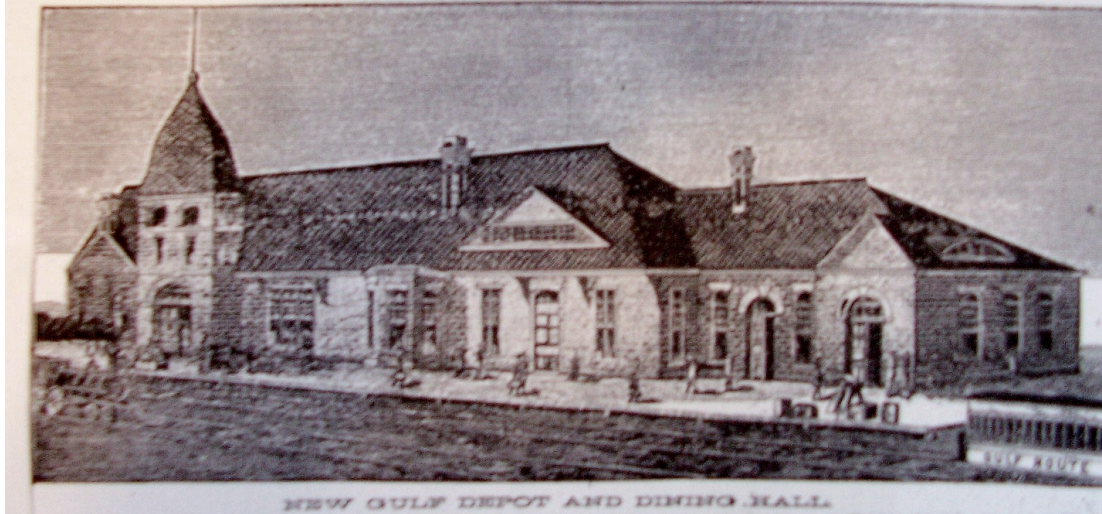
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<sup>10</sup> Henry County Library, “Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis Railroad: a Brief History,” last updated June 2, 2008, <http://tacnet.missouri.org/history/railroads/kcfsm.html#MRFSG>.

<sup>11</sup> Self and Socolofsky, “Kansas Railroads, 1918”, in *Historical Atlas of Kansas*.

<sup>12</sup> Penny, “The Engineer’s Steed,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, March 3, 1870. Quoted in James C. Malin, “Early Theatre at Fort Scott,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly Spring 1958 (Vol. 24, No. 1)*.



**Figure 1:** A sketch of the Gulf Railroad Depot and Dining Hall in Fort Scott. SOURCE: Fort Scott Tribune Business Directory, January 1, 1887. Available at Kansas State Historical Society.

### **1890-1920: The Development of Fort Scott Industry**

*“For the richly laden trains/ Rolling in from off the plains/ Keep the gates of commerce wide/ To the ever-moving tide.”<sup>14</sup>*

The arrival of the railroad in 1869 radically transformed the city of Fort Scott. With access to more resources, labor, and wider markets, the city’s industry and manufacturing businesses soared. Writing in 1886, less than twenty years after the railroad reached the city, historian William Cutler noted that “Fort Scott has been styled... the "Pittsburgh of Kansas," on account of its present and prospective importance as a manufacturing center.” That Fort Scott had so quickly become known as a manufacturing center comparable to Pittsburgh demonstrates the rapid transformation that the city underwent during this period. Cutler went on to write that Fort Scott’s “natural advantages are both numerous and great. There is an abundance of building stone, lime, cement, coal, water and natural gas, the latter, however, has not as yet been utilized.”

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<sup>14</sup> Penny, “Kansas Wheat Fields,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 98.

<sup>15</sup> Cutler’s history reflected popular attitudes that the plentiful natural resources of Fort Scott would continue to provide growth for the town, as they had done throughout its history.

The government actively supported the development of agriculture and industry in Fort Scott. In the 1850s, industrial tests revealed that sorghum cane, an exotic plant, thrived in eastern Kansas. The government funded experiments in Fort Scott to test new methods of diffusing sugar from the plant. In a report, Magnus Swenson, who ran some of experiments, concluded “without hesitancy that sugar can be produced fully as cheaply in Kansas as in Louisiana.”<sup>16</sup> The Parkinson Sugar works at Fort Scott were the only sugar factory in operation in the state in the late 1880s. Figures 2 and 3, of the Parkinson Sugar Works Factory in 1887 and then again in 1912, demonstrate the transformation of the factory over that time span. In 1887, the sorghum cane plants are being loaded onto horse-drawn carts. By 1912, the front of the building has been paved as the automobile has become more and more a central part of industry and daily life.



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<sup>15</sup> William G. Cutler, “Bourbon County: Railroad History,” in Cutler’s *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago:A. T. Andreas, 1883), accessed May 7, 2011 at <http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/bourbon/bourbon-co-p5.html>.

<sup>16</sup> U.S.D.A.: Division of Chemistry.“Record of Experiments Conducted by the Commissioner of Agriculture in the Manufacture of Sugar from Sorghum and Sugar Canes at Fort Scott, Kansas, Rio Grande, New Jersey, and Lawrence, Louisiana. 1887-1888,” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1888), 15.

**Figure 2:** A sketch of the Parkinson Sugar Works in Fort Scott. SOURCE: Fort Scott Daily Tribune Business Directory, January 1, 1887. Copy available at Kansas State Historical Society.



**Figure 3:** The Fort Scott Syrup Manufacturing Company in 1912 had expanded since 1887 and had paved its front area to allow automobiles to carry goods to and from the factory. SOURCE: Special Collections and University Archives, Wichita State University Libraries.

Many industries, like the manufacture of sugar, found a productive home in Fort Scott. The manufacture of cement was another prosperous industry that was bolstered by the railroad. The cement factory in town was established in 1867, and in 1918 was still boasting of the success of the industry and the rich deposits of lime and stone in the immediate area.<sup>17</sup> In a history of Kansas published in 1912, it was noted that “a good quality of cement is manufactured from the stone found in the vicinity of Fort Scott. Mineral paint and clay for brick are also plentiful. Natural gas was found in Bourbon County in 1867 and has been utilized for lighting

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<sup>17</sup> “Cement Factory,” in the 1887 Fort Scott Business Directory. (Fort Scott, Kansas: Fort Scott Daily Tribune, January 1, 1887), 127.



and heating. There are numerous manufacturing plants, principally at Fort Scott.”<sup>18</sup> Natural gas and coal were both successful industrial endeavors by entrepreneurs at Fort Scott.

Transportation, hospitality, and entertainment businesses were transformed by the growing industry that the railroad had kindled; “the year 1870, the first under the railroad regime, introduced intense competition among hotels, saloons, billiard halls, and associated amusement facilities for entertaining the influx of traveling population as well as residents.”<sup>19</sup> Kansas City, also undergoing a massive period of transformation, was the third city in the entire United States to have cable cars.<sup>20</sup> As seen in Figure 4, cable cars were also utilized in Fort Scott. This modern technology would not have found its way into a smaller city so quickly if Fort Scott didn’t have access to ideas and goods to Kansas City via the railroad.

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<sup>18</sup> Blackmar, *Kansas: a cyclopedia of state history, embracing events, institutions, industries, counties, cities, towns, prominent persons, etc.*, 1912. NP.

<sup>19</sup> James C. Malin, “Early Theatre at Fort Scott,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly Spring 1958 (Vol. 24, No. 1)*, accessed December 5, 2010 at <http://www.kshs.org/p/kansas-historical-quarterly-early-theatre-at-fort-scott/13144>.

<sup>20</sup> Jason Roe, “Decline of the Incline,” Kansas City Public Library: Missouri Valley Special Collections, accessed December 1, 2010 at <http://www.kclibrary.org/blog/week-kansas-city-history/decline-incline>.

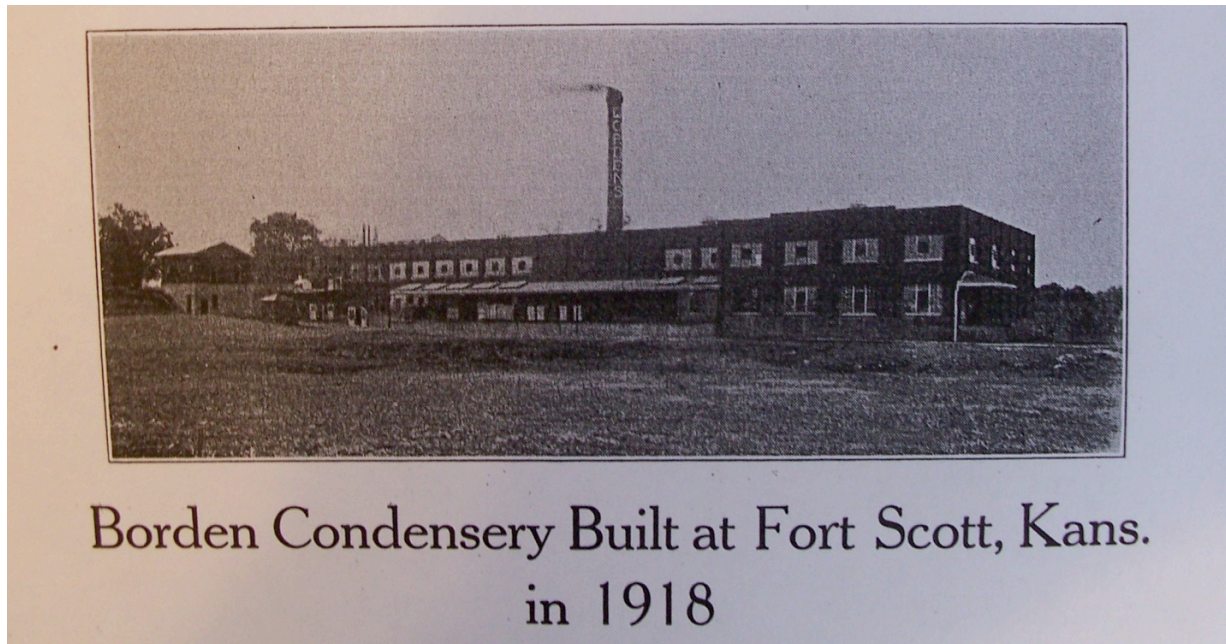


**Figure 4.** A photo of Fort Scott cable cars circa 1880-1900. With a direct connection to Kansas City via the railroad, Fort Scott had access to this modern, urban technology. SOURCE: Special Collections and University Archives, Wichita State University Libraries. Available at [http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/kw/images.asp?xfile\\_name=kw\\_fort\\_scott\\_bourbon\\_ks2.jpg](http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/kw/images.asp?xfile_name=kw_fort_scott_bourbon_ks2.jpg)

Even after the population had leveled off at the end of the twentieth century, new industries continued to come to Fort Scott. In 1912 the Borden Condensery, seen in Figure 5, was built. “This condenser was one of the first to be built this far south. Most of the milk condenseries have been located in Wisconsin and other northern states. Since this, one was built at Mt. Vernon, [Missouri] and one at Iola, Kansas. Dairying is becoming an established part of our agricultural program. During the six years that the Borden plant has been in operation the dairy farmers in Bourbon County, Kansas, have increased from about 300 to 1,000.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Good Roads Association of Greater Kansas City, “Dairying in Wisconsin and its Possibilities in Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma.” (Kansas City, Missouri: Good Roads Association of Greater Kansas City, Coates House, 1918).



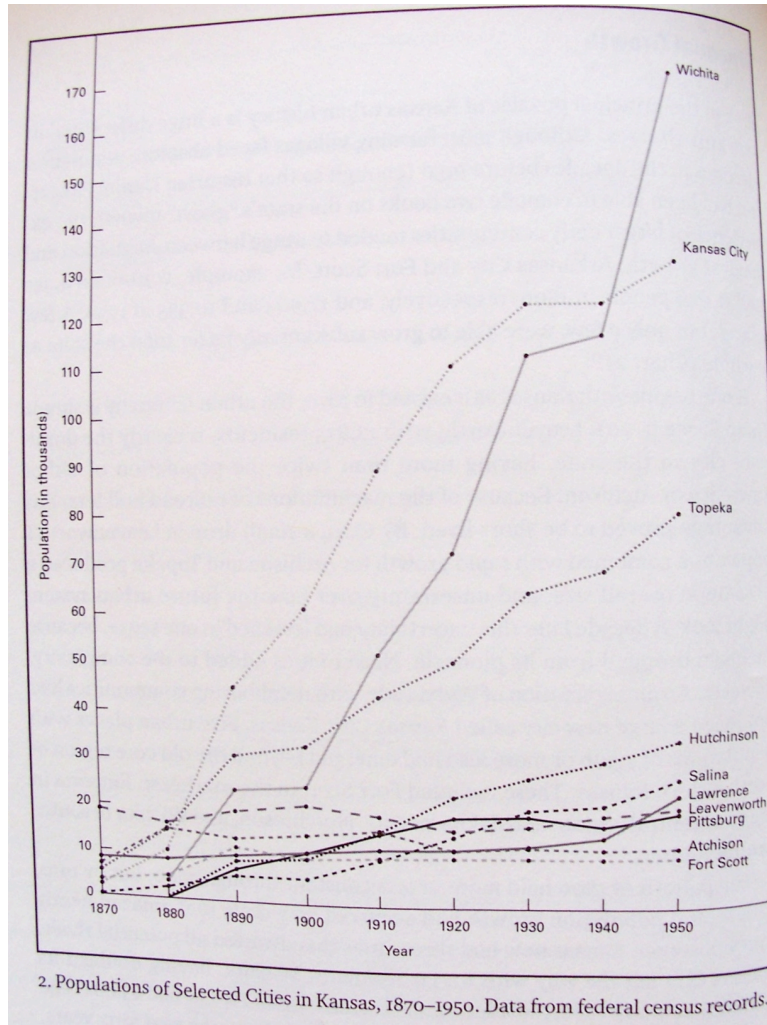
**Figure 5:** Borden Condensery in 1918. SOURCE: Dairying in Wisconsin and its Possibilities in Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma by the Good Roads Association of Greater Kansas City, 1918.

There was a limit to Fort Scott's growth, however. Competition with other towns' resources and railroad access would determine the fate of the town. James Shortridge notes that "efforts to diversify further by the addition of manufacturing industries proved difficult, however, because companies could obtain cheaper fuel either one county to the east (coal) or a similar distance to the north or west (natural gas)."<sup>22</sup> By the 1920s, it seems, Fort Scott's industry had reached a plateau. The productivity and diversity of Fort Scott's industry would fluctuate throughout the twentieth century, but the town's economy remained relatively stable and productive in the upcoming decades.

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<sup>22</sup> Shortridge, *Cities on the Plain*, 275.

Industry continued to bloom into the 1920s, but its population had stabilized much earlier. As shown in Figure 6, Fort Scott's population hit a plateau in 1890.



**Figure 6:** A graph of population trends of Kansas cities from 1870-1950. Fort Scott's population levels off after 1890. SOURCE: James R. Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains Kansas*, 210.

Why did the population level off at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Fort Scott was not the headquarters of any of the railroad lines, and so most railroad workers and employees lived in cities like nearby Parsons where railroad companies ran their businesses. Fort Scott's economy was diverse, but none of the local factories or industries hired large numbers of people: there

were not thousands of employees at the sugar factory or the condenser. The mining communities of southeast Kansas began to die off between 1910 and 1920. Former miners would move to larger nearby towns, such as Pittsburg.<sup>23</sup> Why didn't these miners move to Fort Scott? It was too far north, and "with the demise of underground mining, some miners remained in former camps and worked, if they were able, in other economic pursuits, usually in or near the coal field."<sup>24</sup>

Fort Scott entered the twentieth century as it would leave it: a small city of 10,000 with an economy based on several industries. What kind of character did the city of Fort Scott have, and how did it compare with other southeastern Kansas cities?

### **Industrial Center or Small Town? The Character of Fort Scott**

*"We love her because her streets are clean; Her beautiful lawns are clothed in green,/ Because her street-cars are so slow,/ And never in haste, when we want to go."*<sup>25</sup>

Fort Scott had become a small industrial city with the strong sense of community typically found in a much smaller and more rural town. The industry had been diversified by the abundant natural resources surrounding Fort Scott which made so many different endeavors possible and profitable. These natural resources had attracted settlers in the earliest days of Fort Scott, and were also an enormous part of the strong sense of community that defined the city. Residents of Fort Scott felt united by a long history of being deeply connected to the bountiful

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<sup>23</sup> Dr. MJ Morgan, lecture notes, October 25, 2011, Kansas State University.

<sup>24</sup> William E. Powell, "Former Mining Communities of the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* (Summer, 1972), 198.

<sup>25</sup> Penny, "The Town We Love," in *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 57.

land in Bourbon County, especially along the banks of the Marmaton. J.S. Penny wrote often of the Marmaton, and sometimes addressed it directly as a fellow resident of eastern Kansas. In “Marmaton River,” he implores the Marmaton to tell the sea, when she reaches it, that “you came from Kansas,/ a State of wroth and note/... Don’t say you’re from Missouri./ The ‘Puke’ you must disown,/ But say, ‘I am a Jayhawk,’/ And don’t have to ‘be shown’.”<sup>26</sup> The Marmaton was the pride of Penny and of Fort Scott, a town who had developed with a strong dependence on and love for the surrounding land.

How was southeast Kansas, as a region, developing in the second half of the nineteenth century? Eastern Kansas had been quickly settled after the opening of Kansas Territory for white settlement in 1854. In the years between the opening of the territory and the Civil War, pro-and anti-slavery forces rushed into the Kansas territory to promote their political and economic interests. The migration patterns and their resultant culture regions in eastern territorial Kansas were heavily shaped by the politics of the Bleeding Kansas era. Some regional cultures intermingled with one another as they moved into eastern Kansas. Others remained relatively isolated.<sup>27</sup>

Southeastern Kansas became an especially diverse area because of the vast employment opportunities offered by mining companies. Immigrants comprised most of the mining work force, and “by the turn of the century, southeastern Kansas was a polyglot area peopled by Italians, Germans, French, Belgians and a variety of ethnic groups from the British Isles and the

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<sup>26</sup> Penny, “Marmaton River,” in *Short Poems at Odd Hours*, 36

<sup>27</sup> James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 37-38.

Austro-Hungarian Empire.”<sup>28</sup> The first southeast coal fields opened in 1874. Immigrant workers began to settle in “company towns,” communities formed around the mine which were characterized by cheap housing and a strong sense of community. Mining towns didn’t start to die off until around 1910, when the southeastern coal fields were outcompeted by other coal-producing regions.<sup>29</sup> Other factors leading to the continued demise of the coal fields were “ the economic impact of the depression, the rise of mechanized surface mining, competition from oil and gas, labor problems in the coal field (strikes), and competition from Eastern coals.”<sup>30</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, southeast Kansas was connected to the northeast corner of the state by railroads and therefore connected to the rest of the nation through Kansas City. In the most southeastern corner of the state was the Cherokee-Crawford coal field, which became dotted with transient mining communities. There were not many cities in this region; Pittsburg and Parsons were under 6,000 people each while Fort Scott hovered around 10,000. Yet both Pittsburg and Parsons would grow to over 10,000 in the upcoming decades, while Fort Scott’s population stood still.

Pittsburg, which would become the largest city in southeast Kansas, was founded atop the Cherokee-Crawford deposits. It became an industrial center known for its mining, but also had a diversified economy which supported its population growth.<sup>31</sup> Pittsburg became a larger, more urbanized, and more industrial city than Fort Scott would ever become, and never had the strong

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<sup>28</sup> Ann Schofield, “‘An Army of Amazons’: The Language of Protest in a Kansas Mining Community, 1921-1922,” in *Kansas and the West: New Perspectives*, ed. Rita Napier (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 304.

<sup>29</sup> Dr. MJ Morgan, lecture notes, October 25, 2011, Kansas State University.

<sup>30</sup> Powell, “Former Mining Communities of the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas,” 197.

<sup>31</sup> Shortridge, 275.

sense of community found in Fort Scott. Parsons, named after Levi Parsons, the president of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad, was Fort Scott's primary competition for railroad deals in its early days. Yet Parsons was a one-company town; it was founded by the MKT railroad to become a headquarters for their operations.<sup>32</sup> As mentioned above, company towns are characterized by their high sense of community.<sup>33</sup> Yet Parsons was completely different than Fort Scott. Although both were small cities with a strong and united sense of community, a one-company town such as Parsons could never have the industrial diversity enjoyed by Fort Scott residents. The different industries brought an assorted population to Fort Scott, where the sense of community was based on a historic connection to the land that had first inspired settlers to stay there, and not based on loyalty to a railroad company.

## **Conclusion**

The arrival of the railroad in the 1870s completely transformed and invigorated Fort Scott. However, population leveled off because competition with other towns limited the amount of growth which Fort Scott would undergo. The diversification of industry and the stabilized population transformed Fort Scott into a small industrial city unique in southeastern Kansas. Fort Scott maintained the strong sense of community of a smaller town, founded on a strong connection to the land, while developing the industrial diversity of a larger city based on the diverse and plentiful natural resources available.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>33</sup> Dr. MJ Morgan, lecture notes, October 25, 2011, Kansas State University.



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