

Parish on the Plains: St. Mary's Aleppo, Sedgwick County, Kansas, 1890 to Present



*Figure 1. Historic photograph of Aleppo, taken before demolition of the school building in 1986.
SOURCE: Aleppo Community Building.*

By James Copeland

Chapman Center for Rural Studies, Spring 2015

This study overviews the German-Catholic hamlet of St. Mary's Aleppo, a church community located in western Sedgwick County, Garden Plain Township. Maps, photographs and personal accounts are included.

Parish on the Plains: St. Mary's Aleppo, Sedgwick County, Kansas, 1890-Present

Religion has always been an important settlement factor in the development of any nation, state, city, or small town. If it weren't for the devout German-Catholics who moved into western Sedgwick County, the parish of St. Mary's Aleppo certainly would not exist today. Located in Garden Plain Township, the steeple of St. Mary's can be seen from a great distance across this flat, fertile land. It is easy to imagine the native bluestem-grass prairie that covered this flat expanse that was once the Osage Indian reservation before the first settlers began pushing their plows.¹ Many factors went into turning this land into what it is today, and this study will look at several, starting from 1890 when the community was founded, up through what is occurring today. This church community has always been just that, a church community. Aleppo never grew because it didn't want to, and it is still alive today because it doesn't want to die.

The Beginning

The period after the Civil War brought a massive influx of settlers to the prairies of Kansas.² There were three main factors that brought about this settlement. The first was the availability of land to foreigners. Sedgwick County was organized and available for settlement in 1865.³ A second factor was introduction of hard red winter wheat in the mid-1870s by

¹ Socolofsky and Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, Map 5, 13.

² M.J. Morgan, "Lost Communities of Kansas" (presentation, History 200, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, April 7,, 2015).

³ Socolofsky and Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, Map 39.

Russian Mennonites.⁴ This kind of wheat thrived in Kansas and was an attractive crop for immigrants to grow. Finally, the coming of the railroad enabled farmers to ship goods quickly and cheaply, and these companies recruited heavily in Europe for immigrants to come over and settle in railroad land grants.⁵ These factors brought large numbers of German-Catholics to the state, many of which settled in one of the four major German townships: Attica, Garden Plain, Sherman, and Union. O.H. Bentley favorably describes these people as follows:

“The old-time German farmers of the Big Four have grown rich and prosperous. Their sons have grown to manhood and by the aid of their parents have of ten times gone out into new fields to locate and improve new farms, and each instance they have carried to the new homes the thrift and energy of their ancestors. The German farmers of the Big Four are among the most energetic, reliable and thrifty farmers of Sedgwick County, and for that matter their superiors cannot be found in the entire state of Kansas.”⁶

According to U.S. census data, the 1890s saw a large German population in Sedgwick County, with 1,643 immigrants from the total population of 3,597.⁷ A group of these Germans included some families who wanted to start their own Catholic church, and among these was John Lies, the man who credited with putting St. Mary’s where it is today. (See grave in figure 2.)

Today, a border of trees lines approximately seven acres that belong to the church.⁸ The year was 1890 when the twenty-six pioneering families of St. Mary’s got together and John Leis, a property owner in Garden Plain Township, gave part of his land on the northwest quarter of Section 15 for the purpose of building a Catholic parish. During the construction of the building, mass was held in the home of Leis and Michael Scheer, another founding member.⁹ Prior to the

⁴ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 22.

⁵ Socolofsky and Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, Map 31.

⁶ O.H. Bentley, “The Big Four.” In *History of Wichita and Sedgwick County, KS: Past and present, including an account of cities, towns and villages of the county*, C.F. Cooper & Company, 1910, p.616.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *1890 U.S. Census*, Kansas, Sedgwick County.

⁸ Father Colin Boor (St. Mary’s Pastor) in an informal interview with the author, March 20, 2015.

⁹ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 33.

founding of St. Mary's, churchgoers had to travel several miles to St. Joseph parish at Ost to the west, or St. Mark's Parish to the east of St. Mary's. It was this distance plus the desire of the immigrant families to create something of their own that resulted in the birth of St. Mary's of the Immaculate Conception.¹⁰



Figure 2. A photograph of the tombstone of John Lies, the man who gave part of his land for the founding of a church (in background) in the Garden Plain Township. SOURCE: Author.

Shortly after the church dedication, it was decided that congregants ought to have a name for the area around the church. St. Mary's was already the name of the church as it was temporarily a mission of St. Joseph at Ost. According to legend, Father Loevenich took out an atlas, selected a map of Syria at random, and pointed at Aleppo, the largest city. The name was

¹⁰ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 22.

accepted, especially due to its Biblical origins.¹¹ However, a conflicting story surfaced in a *Wichita Eagle* Story that quotes Angela Schild claiming that one of the settlers spun a globe and a finger landed on Aleppo, Russia.¹² It is very doubtful that this story is true, because even if Aleppo, Russia ever existed (which it doesn't appear to now), it's even more unlikely that it was even on an everyday globe at that time. Aleppo, Syria seems more probable.

The Heritage of Education

As had been the goal all along, plans were drafted for a school to accompany the church. According to the 1882 *Atlas of Sedgwick County*, School No. 67 was located one mile away from the parish.¹³ Regardless, the founders wished to start their own parochial school. In 1891, a one-room school was opened just west of the church building, taught by the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, who were persuaded to come by the efforts of Father Loevenich.¹⁴ (See Figure 3 on the following page.) By 1901, the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother took over the operation of the school.¹⁵ The Aleppo post office, which existed from May 26, 1891 to December 14, 1903, was also housed in the school building for a short time.¹⁶

¹¹ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 33.

¹² Stan, Finger, "Aleppo residents have found peace in shadow of the city," *The Wichita Eagle*, May 9, 1994.

¹³ Edwards, John P, *Historical Atlas of Sedgwick County, Kansas*. 1882.

¹⁴ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 33.

¹⁵ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 35.

¹⁶ Bruntzel, Melvin D. *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths, Vol. 1. "Aleppo."* (Belleville, Kansas: The Print Schop, 2010).



Figure 3. Photograph circa 1940 of the first school, built in 1910. The building is pictured here when it was used as a garage. SOURCE: Aleppo Centennial Book.

In the early 1920s Aleppo became part of public school district No. 67, designating Room 2 for public education and Room 1 for parochial.¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, it became apparent that the school building was inadequate for the eighty-plus students it was serving.¹⁸ In 1923, a brick school building equipped with three classrooms and a basement was completed at a cost of \$20,000.¹⁹ (See Figure 4 on the following page.) The new school started a new era of education and enrichment activities, which included a baseball team, a drama club, plays, and an annual

¹⁷ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 81.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Thanksgiving Day dinner, to name a few.²⁰ St. Mary's school only ever went to eighth grade. High school students would have attended Garden Plain or Andale schools.²¹



Figure 4. A historic photograph of St. Mary's School, circa 1940. Notice the electric lines in the photograph. The first of these lines came to Aleppo in 1939, rendering the Delco plant installed years before obsolete. SOURCE: Aleppo Centennial Book.

A couple of years after the completion of the new school, Father Siebrandt, who took over from Father Manz, persuaded school district authorities to close schools in District 37 and 73 and bring all students to St. Mary's.²² This was an exciting time of growth for both the school and the parish. By the 1950s, the school had a basketball team as well as a hot lunch program.²³

²⁰ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 81.

²¹ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 95.

²² Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 81.

²³ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 129.

However, it wasn't until 1963 that bathrooms were added to the school. By then, enrollment was down to about sixty students.²⁴ By 1965, St. Mary's was incorporated into USD #267, along with Garden Plain, Andale, Colwich, St. Joe, and St. Mark's.²⁵ The end of the decade saw real change as it was obvious that the end of St. Mary's School was on the horizon. By the late sixties, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders were moved to Andale or Garden Plain.²⁶ What really brought the school to an end besides the consolidation was the departure of the Sisters. The Sister-Adorers of the Precious Blood closed out the school year in June of 1972 and did not return ever again. The school was closed by May of 1974.²⁷ The building was then leased to the County Special Education Cooperative until 1982.²⁸ The school closed its final chapter of its life in 1986 when it was torn down.²⁹ Today, the school grounds serve as a gravel parking lot for the church.³⁰ A community building stands to the south and west of where the school was, completed around the time of the demolition of the school.³¹ Thus ended the legacy of formal Catholic education at St. Mary's.

Early Enterprise

²⁴ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 143.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 154.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 162.

³⁰ Author's Field Notes, Aleppo, March 20, 2015.

³¹ Informal Interview, Margret Pracht, Caretaker at Aleppo, March 20, 2015.

Early photographs circa 1890 depict Aleppo's first store to the northwest of the church.³² It was a one-story building with a front porch, false front, and what appears to be an attached residence. (See Figure 5.)



Figure 5. Historic photograph of the first store in St. Mary's, looking north. Notice the small but intentional porch and false front, a symbol of a commercial building at this time. Source: Aleppo Centennial Book.

In addition to the school, the post office was housed in the store for a short time. John Leis was the first and last postmaster.³³ Ownership of the store was passed among several families, including the Eiler, Schwartz, Young, and Simon families.³⁴ In 1937, Anthony Leis built a new store across the street from the church (see Figure 6 on the following page).³⁵

³² Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 36.

³³ Bruntzel, Melvin D. *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths, Vol. 1.* "Aleppo." The Print Schop 1710 M. Street, Belleville, Kansas 66935-3045, 2010.

³⁴ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, pp. 36-37.

³⁵ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 95.

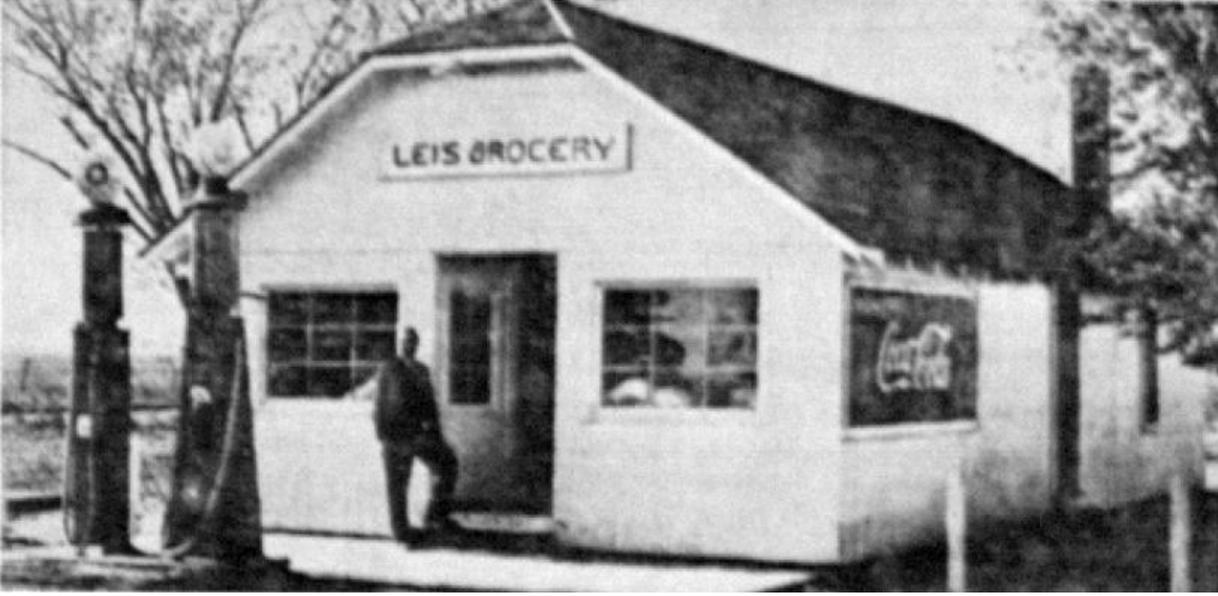


Figure 6. Historic photograph of the St. Mary's Store, still on the same side of the street. The name was changed to Leis Grocery, circa 1940. SOURCE: Aleppo Centennial Book.

In 1941, Leis sold the store to Lou Rau.³⁶ The store soon burned down and was rebuilt by Andy Gegan, who sold it to John and Angela Schild who sold it to Joseph and Laura Cordes in 1947.³⁷ It was now known as “Cordes Trading Post” (see Figure 7 on the following page).³⁸ The Cordes retired in 1961, and in 1966, the store was closed for good.³⁹

³⁶ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, p. 110

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, Page 84.

³⁹ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, Page 144.



Figure 7. Historic Photograph of the Cordes Trading post. The store closed for good in 1966. SOURCE: Aleppo Centennial Book.

In addition to the store, a livery stable, blacksmith, and saloon and pool hall existed.⁴⁰ Of these, the store is the only business that was well documented. (See Figure 8 below for town layout and Figure 9 on the following page for a street-level view of the town.)

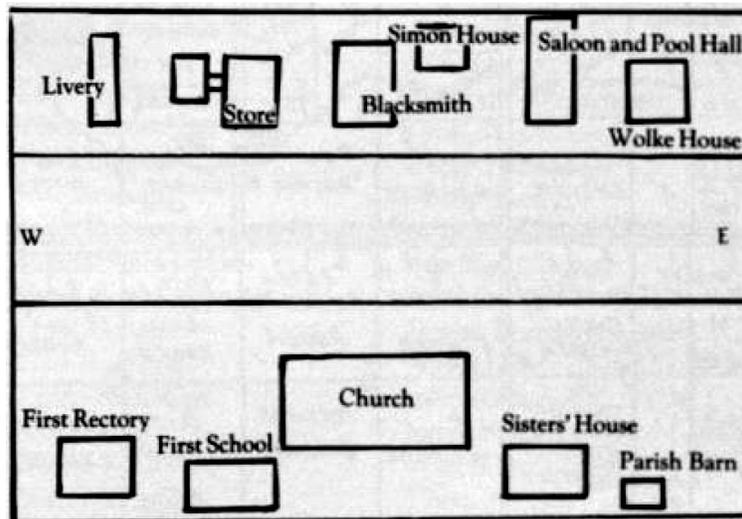


Figure 8. Sketch of the Aleppo Street Scene, circa 1899. The second school was located to the north of the Sisters' House, and the current community building is near where the Sisters' House was. SOURCE: Aleppo Centennial Book.

⁴⁰ Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*, Page 53.



Figure 9. Historic Photograph of Aleppo, mid 1890s. Buildings from left to right: Church, edge of the blacksmith shop, Simon home, Store/Saloon, Wolke Home, and Sisters' Residence.
SOURCE: Aleppo Centennial Book.

The Church and Its Service Area

From the time that St. Mary's was established until World War I, automobiles did not exist for the area, so there was a real limit to the service area of the church.⁴¹ St. Mary's is located near several communities, so it mainly served the Garden Plain Township. The author plotted the names from church records on the 1905 map of the township, revealing that most of the parishioners came from the Garden Plain Township, with a trend more to the northwest (see Figure 10 on the following page). Few names existed outside the township.

⁴¹ M.J. Morgan, "Lost Communities of Kansas" (presentation, History 200, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, April 7, 2015).

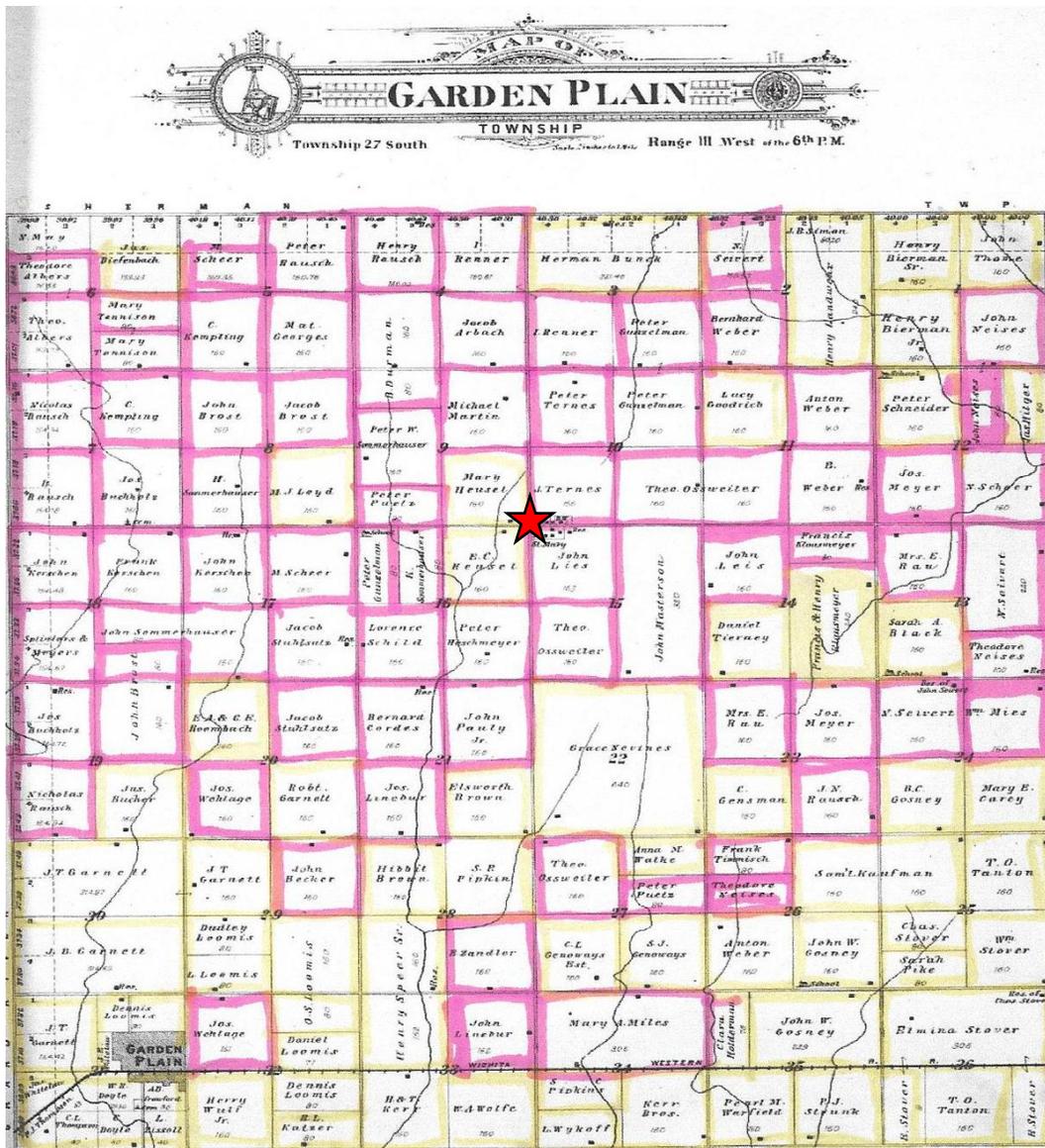


Figure 10. Plat map of Garden Plain Township, circa 1905. Pink outlined properties represent parish-affiliated families. Yellow outlines represent those not associated with St. Mary's. The star is St. Mary's. Source: Edward's Historical Atlas.

Aleppo Today

When one makes the journey to Aleppo, not much has changed. There is no longer any commotion from the school, but the area is still very rural.⁴² Farm families are still

⁴² Author's Field Notes, Aleppo, March 20, 2015.

predominately Catholic, and the area still has a rich German heritage, according to Kim Kerschen, a descendent of John and Clara Kerschen, who had eleven children and eventually, sixty-nine grandchildren!⁴³ Kerschen and her immediate family are Lutherans, but Kerschen has fond memories of attending turkey shoots (a yearly church fundraising carnival) at Aleppo.⁴⁴ Weekday Mass still draws fifteen to twenty people, and Sunday Mass routinely brings more than 100.⁴⁵ The Leis family still owns the property around the church, and they own a large house near the parish, now a vacation home for one of the Leis sons, who is a concert pianist.⁴⁶ A couple of other houses sit across the street, and the cemetery is not going anywhere soon.⁴⁷ The fact that Aleppo will likely keep going seems almost as strong as the Catholic faith itself. There is a general attitude that the church will always continue, because it has been used for over 125 years, and it's still being used today. People want it there, and for that community, Aleppo is home. As Stan Finger said in a *Wichita Eagle* article about St. Mary's, "Aleppo has never been much different from what it is today."⁴⁸ That was written in 1994, and it's still true now.

⁴³ Interview, Kim Kerschen, Manhattan, Kansas, 5/6/15.

⁴⁴ Interview, Kim Kerschen, Manhattan, Kansas, 5/6/15.

⁴⁵ Informal Interview, Father Colin Boor, Aleppo, Kansas, 3/20/15.

⁴⁶ Informal Interview, Father Colin Boor, Aleppo, Kansas, 3/20/15.

⁴⁷ Author's Field Notes, Aleppo, March 20, 2015.

⁴⁸ Stan Finger, "Aleppo residents have found peace in shadow of the city," *The Wichita Eagle*, May 9, 1994.

Bibliography

- Bentley, O.H. "The Big Four." In *History of Wichita and Sedgwick County, KS: Past and present, including an account of cities, towns and villages of the county*, C.F. Cooper & Company, 1910.
- Boor, Father Colin. Interview by author at Aleppo, Kansas, 3/20/15.
- Bruntzel, Melvin D. *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths, Vol. 1. "Aleppo."* Belleville, Kansas: The Print Schop, 2010.
- Centennial Book Committee, *St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Aleppo, Kansas*.
- Edwards, John P, *Historical Atlas of Sedgwick County, Kansas*. 1882.
- Finger, Stan. "Aleppo residents have found peace in shadow of the city," *The Wichita Eagle*, May 9, 1994.
- Kerschen, Kim. Interview by author, Manhattan, Kansas, 5/6/15.
- Morgan, M.J. "Lost Communities of Kansas." Presentation, History 200, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, April 7, 2015.
- Pracht, Margret. Caretaker at Aleppo, Interview by author, March 20, 2015.
- Socolofsky, Homer and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.
- U.S. Census Bureau, *1890 U.S. Census*, Kansas, Sedgwick County.