Early Historical Atlas Depictions of Agriculture in Kansas: 1880s-Early 1900s

by

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Spring, 2012

My research project is over early historical depictions of agriculture in Kansas 1887. I am trying to figure out if farms in the historical atlas of Kansas truly represented agriculture; did the farmsteads, livestock, and crops really look like the pictures? This study is includes a focus on Pottawatomie County, Kansas, pictures from the 1887 historical atlas, actual photographs of Kansas agriculture, a brief historical background on agriculture in general, and information from the First Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture Kansas.

John Burroughs said, "To treat your facts with imagination is one thing, but to imagine your facts is another."[i] Think about it: photo shop, air brushing, cosmetic surgery. Is what you see really what you get? Is this "false reality" state of mind a new trend? I believe we can trace it all the way back to depictions of 1880s agriculture. Agriculture has had a huge impact on our world today. Without agriculture we wouldn't have clothes on our back or food on our table. What were the perceptions of agriculture in the past? We know agriculture impacts the whole world, but how about the great state we live in, Kansas?

I am very passionate about agriculture, so I was really interested in doing research on this subject. When I started my research, I first looked at the 1887 *Official Atlas of Kansas* and picked a county in Kansas that looked very prosperous, hoping I could gain a lot of information through research. This county is Pottawatomie County, located in northeast Kansas. I suddenly realized after looking through a few drawings in the atlas that whoever drew these pictures was just promoting the wealth of Kansas. The images didn't represent realistic agriculture in Pottawatomie County. All these pictures make Kansas look like a rich place to live because the livestock look over conditioned or overfed, there is an over-abundance of trees, and the farmsteads are very well groomed and developed. Just from my personal experience of being born and raised on a farm and hearing stories from my grandparents and family, I know that agriculture did have very good times but also very bad times. I can see where a person with no agriculture background would get the idea that these atlas drawings are realistic just because they are issued in an official atlas. The whole idea or point of making the pictures like this was to get people to come to Kansas because they would get an abundance of land, fertile soil, and be well off for the rest of their lives. The maps and images are a way of giving information that could be

considered a form of an advertised dream to American farmers and ranchers of a better way of living.

The maps and images from the 1887 official *Atlas of Kansas* are called lithographs. Lithography is a print process and how the images are created. The company that produced these was the Union Atlas Company. This company trained map drawers and artists in its own school, and all the young men were trained to produce exactly the same kind of stylized formal images of farms and animals. The Union Atlas Company operated in the last three decades of the nineteenth century only because soon after, photography replaced lithographs.[ii]

Lithography is said to be very significant to the development of cartography. Before this development, maps and atlases were produced by engraving. Engraving required much skill and labor and was rare and expensive. Lithography made map and atlas making a lot cheaper and quicker to produce. The lithographic process was discovered in 1796 by Alois Senefelder in Munich.[iii] The following is a description of the lithographic process:

> The lithographic process is started by the image being drawn or traced on a stone with a crayon or pen and ink. The stone is then etched with a solution of nitric acid. The etch increases the contrast between the inked and uninked areas on the surface by increasing the penetrability and water absorbency of the uninked areas. A wash with gum arabic following the etch protects the uninked areas from ink penetration, and thus prolongs the life of the stone. When an inked roller is passed over the moistened surface, the ink is accepted by the drawn image, and repelled by the moistened areas… but this planographic process of lithography was not used exclusively in the early years of the new art. An engraved manner of lithography is [called] an intaglio, not planographic process. Almost all European maps printed from stone prior to 1820 were produced by this intaglio method."[iv]

All this information might seem very confusing, but the point to take away is that this is how the maps and images in the Kansas 1887 atlas were created.

Creating maps and atlases in this way has given a rise to neglected source material to be re-discovered. "Historians are beginning to turn in information to county and township

landownership maps and atlases as a valuable source for basic locational and property identification…elaborately illustrated maps exist in quantity for the 1850-1880 periods, and simplified cadastral maps continued well into the 1920s."[v]

By now you're probably still wondering how all this information relates to agriculture in Kansas, focusing on Pottawatomie County? Pictured below is a plat map of Pottawatomie County showing towns and townships in the county in 1887.

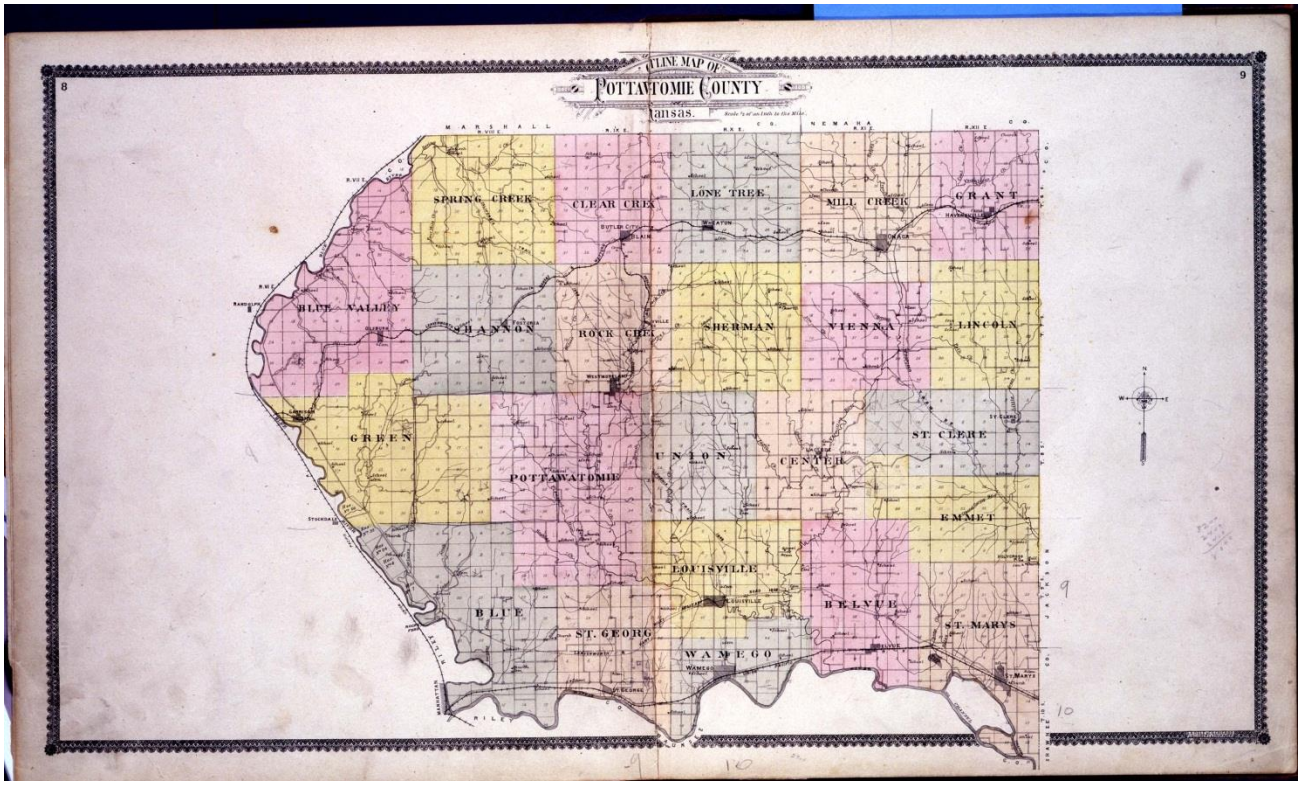

Figure 1: A Plat Map of Pottawatomie County showing the sections or subdivisions which indicate the location and boundaries of individual properties. (library.mcmaster.ca/maps/mapcite.htm)

Pottawatomie County is comprised of the following sections: Belvue, Blue, Blue Valley, Center, Clear Creek, Emmet, Green, Lincoln, Louisville, Mill Creek, Pottawatomie, Rock Creek, Shannon, St. George, St. Mary's, Vienna, and Wamego. According to the *First Biennial Report*

of The State Board of Agriculture Kansas, the years 1877 to 1878 seemed to be very prosperous for agriculture. Native timber listed included burr oak, black walnut, elm (white and slippery), white hickory, sycamore, cottonwood, honey locust, and a few willow. But many farms and homesteads planted trees. Pictured below is an image from the 1887 atlas of a residence of Pottawatomie County, showing the abundance of trees in regulated rows, meaning planting.

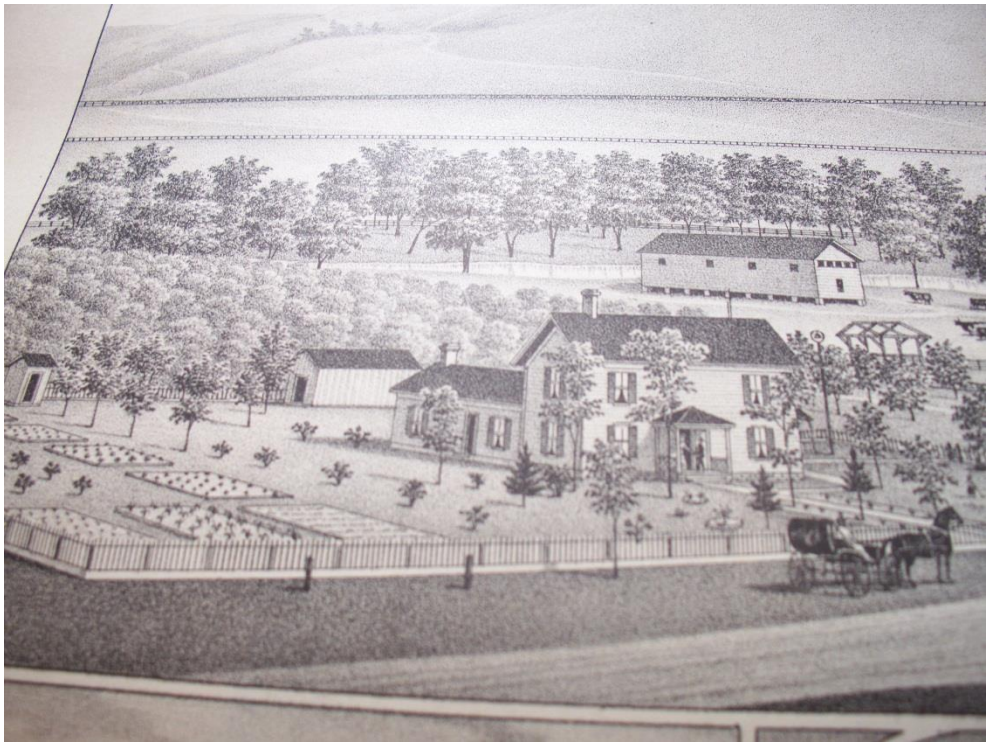

Figure 2: Atlas image of local farmer's homestead. Note many feet of wooden fence.

The trees look very healthy and mature on this farm that may have been begun only 15 or 20 years earlier. It is stated by *Agricultural Statistics* that in 1878, there were a total of 542,720 acres in the county. The value of garden produce was estimated at $917.35, poultry and eggs were $9,833.50, and the value of Agricultural Implements was $58,436. Fences around homes or to keep livestock in were made of *stone, rail, wire, and hedge* (living Osage orange trees). Fences were not wooden. The major crops for this year were wheat, corn, oats, and prairie

meadow, the pasture grass used by cattle and horses. Pottawatomie County also included many orchards of apple, pear, peach, plum, and cherry. Livestock included horses, mules, milk cows, longhorn cattle, shorthorn cattle, and Hereford cattle, sheep, and swine.[vi] Yet despite the 1878 report on the wealth of Pottawatomie County, it is still clear that livestock images from the atlas are not realistic. Pictured below are atlas lithographs that show

how the Union Atlas Company produced images that were the ideal thought of what a farmer would want his horses and cattle to look like.

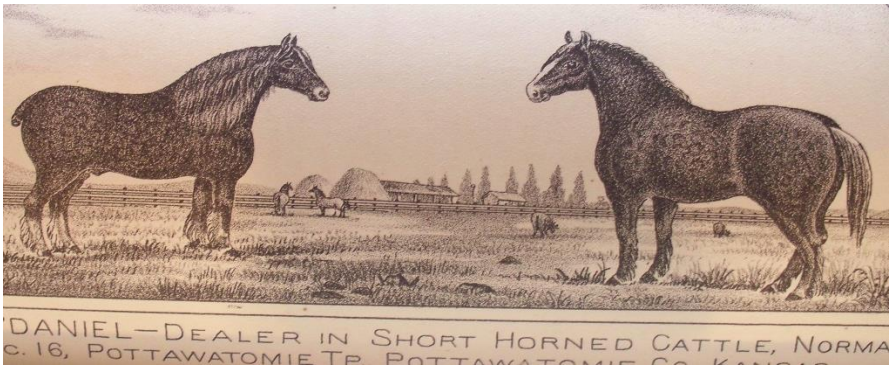

Figure 3: Image of two plow horses used by farmers to till their land to plant future crops.

Figure 4: Image of a cow, probably a Shorthorn used for beef, milk, or producing offspring.

My main research question was to find out if all these images were really what agriculture looked like back in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The homestead images are too groomed, and the domestic animals are oversized. Then I found photographs of actual farming and ranching operations in eastern Kansas around the same period of time as the official State Atlas of Kansas. Pictured on the following page are photos of farmers working in the fields or Kansas livestock.

Figure 5: An image of a Reeves steam tractor turning virgin sod. Creator: Steele, F.M. (Francis Marion), 1866-1936. Date: Between 1891 and 1912. Source: kansasmemory.org.

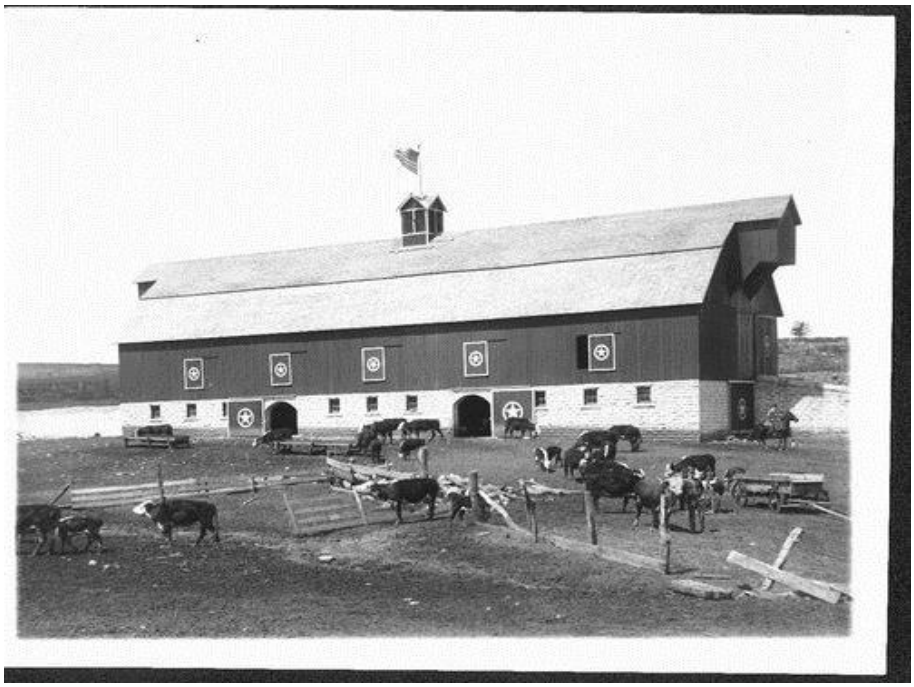

Figure 6: This is an image of the barn of J.F. Terrass farm, Wabaunsee County. It is located on K-99 highway, Wabaunsee County, Kansas, a border county to Pottawatomie. Date: Between 1900 and 1910. Source: kansasmemory.org. Note the leaning fences, mud, and the single tree.

Between 1880 and 1910, people saw atlas images of farms of Kansas and thought what a wonderful place Kansas must be to live in and farm. Yet these images were idealized lithographs that showed animal and farm qualities that weren't real. With lots of research I found what farms and ranches were really like. Writing this paper and doing all this research showed me you cannot always believe what you see about the past. You need factual information to indicate the true meaning of what you see.

End Notes

[i] John Burroughs, "Think Exist," http://thinkexist.com/quotation/to_treat_your_facts_with_imagination_is_one_thing/148039.html (accessed 30 April 2012.)

[ii] Personal communication from M.J. Morgan to author April 29, 2012, courtesy of Prairie Archives, Antiquarian Booksellers, Springfield, Illinois

[iii] Maria S. Holden, "The Development of Lithographic Cartography and the Conservation Treatment of a Large Varnished Map," The Book and Paper Group Annual Volume 3 1984, The American Institute for Conservation, http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v03/bp03-08.html, (accessed 30 April 2012.)

[iv] Maria S. Holden, "The Development of Lithographic Cartography and the Conservation Treatment of a Large Varnished Map," The Book and Paper Group Annual Volume 3 1984, The American Institute for Conservation, http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v03/bp03-08.html, (accessed 30 April 2012.)

[v] Michael P. Conzen, "Landownership Maps and County Atlases," Agricultural History, Volume 58, No. 2, (April 1984), pp. 118, http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/3742988?uid=3739672&uid=2129&uid=2134&uid=373864607&uid=2&uid=70&uid=3&uid=373864597&uid=3739256&uid=60&sid=47698947848737, (accessed 30 April 2012.)

[vi] Rand, McNally and CO, Cornell University Library, Office of The State Board of Agriculture Capitol Building, Topeka, 31 Dec. 1878, "First Biennial Report of The State Board of Agriculture Kansas," Vol. VI. 9319, 1877-1878.

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Holden, Maria S., "The Development of Lithographic Cartography and the Conservation Treatment of a Large Varnished Map," The Book and Paper Group Annual Volume 3 1984, The American Institute for Conservation, http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v03/bp03-08.html, (accessed 30 April 2012.)

McNally, Rand and Co. Cornell University Library, Office of The State Board of Agriculture Capitol Building, Topeka, 31 Dec. 1878, "First Biennial Report of The State Board of Agriculture Kansas," Vol. VI. 9319, 1877-1878.

Morgan, M.J. Personal communication to author, April 29, 2012, courtesy of Prairie Archives, Antiquarian Booksellers, Springfield, Illinois.