

**William B. Dickinson**  
1617 Alvamar Drive  
Lawrence, Kansas 66047  
785-832-1899; [wdicki2@LSU.edu](mailto:wdicki2@LSU.edu)

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*When Dorothy stood in the doorway and looked around, she could see nothing but the great gray prairie on every side. Not a tree nor a house broke the broad sweep of flat country that reached the edge of the sky in all directions. The sun had baked the plowed land in a great mass, with little cracks running through it. Even the grass was not green for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same gray color to be seen everywhere.* – The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, a children’s novel by Frank L. Baum, 1900.

**Lawrence, Kansas** – Our growing season started off so fine in this small part of America’s vast farm country. A mild winter moved up the harvest of hard red winter wheat into May, and Kansas farmers were emboldened to turn around and plant soybeans – “double cropping,” as it is called. Encouraged by high grain prices, U.S. farmers also planted the most corn since 1937. Prices for farmland were booming, up 25 percent in 2011 from a year earlier in this area. In Iowa, land that averaged \$2,083 an acre in 2002 was selling last year for \$6,708.

Then came Mother Nature’s comeuppance. Drought and searing temperatures spread across the Midwest in June and July, damaging crops and confirming the old-timers’ warning that no harvest is sure until the grain is in the bin. William Inge, a native Kansan, captured that uncertainty in a 1968 essay: “A person lives in this mid-country with an inherent consciousness of the sky....Life and prosperity depend upon that sky, which can destroy a season’s crops in a few hours, by hail or blizzards or tornadoes or a relentlessly burning sun that can desiccate the land like an Old Testament curse.” Now the fraught farm scene has caught public attention. Rising commodity prices can translate into higher food prices at the supermarket. The inconvenience for Americans pales in comparison to the impact of grain shortages and higher food costs in poor nations.

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For many Midwesterners like myself whose forebears settled the land in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, this summer’s weather drama caused us to revisit family legends. In the mid-1850s, my great-great grandfather, John Dickinson, his wife Lavinia and several children (there would be 11) decided to move from Virginia to Kansas, where newly opened land was being offered for \$1 an acre. They settled into a sod house in Brown County in northeast Kansas, and taught school to help pay for their 1,000-acre spread. Over eight years, they constructed a large stone barn with walls two feet thick that still stands and has become an historic site that draws buses of schoolchildren.

Although one daughter remained on the land until 1979, most of the family had departed decades earlier, drawn to education in state universities that offered a way out of a harsh life. Farm wives grew prematurely old from incessant child-bearing and heavy household chores. In the *Oz* story, Dorothy contemplates the fate of her beloved Aunt Em: “When Aunt Em came there to live she was a young pretty wife. The sun and wind had changed her, too. They had

taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also. She was thin and gaunt and never smiled now.” In a harrowing account of life on the Kansas frontier, Joanna L. Stratton (*Pioneer Women*, 1981) wrote that the isolation of frontier living seemed particularly alarming during times of unforeseen crisis: “Sudden accidents, illness, or death often became terrifying ordeals when the nearest neighbor or town lay many miles away. Pregnancy and childbirth involved particular apprehension....”

Modern conveniences – electricity to power washers and heat stoves, and the motor car – helped free farm wives from unremitting isolation and drudgery. Today, vegetable gardens are a rarity, and husbands must lunch in small-town restaurants because the wives have taken jobs in “call centers” where their Midwestern diction is highly prized. Kansans have become inveterate world travelers, no longer content with the vicarious thrill of romantic poems by Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. There are fewer of us in rural areas, too. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 77 of 105 Kansas counties had lost population since the 2000 count.

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The “family farm,” if not an oxymoron, requires new definition. Families are much smaller because mechanization changed the economics of farming. In “The Triumph of the Family Farm” (*The Atlantic*, July/August 2012), Chrystia Freeland describes the prosperity of the farm settled in 1913 by her great-grandparents in northern Alberta, Canada. Her father farms 3,200 acres of his own and rents another 2,400 – all told, a territory seven times the size of Central Park. The farm has revenue of \$2 million a year from wheat, canola and barley. “The farm has just three workers, my dad and his two hired men, who farm with him nine months of the year,” she writes. “...Large-scale farmers today are sophisticated businesspeople who use GPS equipment to guide their combines, biotechnology to boost their yields, and futures contracts to hedge their risk. They are also pretty rich.”

Big seed companies are busy gathering data to figure out which crops work best in certain soil and weather conditions so that they can provide farmers with customized planting plans. A whole field can be planted or fertilized without touching the steering wheels of modern tractors. An Illinois farmer who runs a company called Precision Planting told *The Wall Street Journal* (June 14, 2012) that, “We’ve come to the stage where the planter is actually thinking for itself.” In an era when data in business is king, agriculture is said to be just on the cusp of its next revolution.

No wonder that so many memoirs from farm country are filled with bittersweet nostalgia for a way of life that is long lost. In *Time’s Shadow: Remembering a Family Farm in Kansas* (2012), Arnold J. Bauer says that the first settlers must have believed they were building a community that would last as long as the villages they left behind in Europe. In fact, social changes and technological advances meant that the small farm would span only a century or less. Each time a generation passes in these parts, we are reminded of a way of life that has disappeared. We can only guess at the changes still to come. First, we will be looking to this summer’s unsparing sky to see if the weather turns in our favor.

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