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**PLAINS TRUTHS: HOW A CULTURE OF PERSEVERANCE HAS SHAPED
THE COMMUNITY VALUES OF EASTERN COLORADO**

**A thesis submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors**

by

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May 2016

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“Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

Romans 5:3-4, NIV

INTRODUCTION

As the sun begins to set over the pasture in the distance, the Arickaree/Woodlin Indians take the field. In their second game of the year, the defending 6-man Football State Champions are looking to extend their winning streak to fourteen games after an undefeated previous season and a win the week before. As the team waits for the warm-up clock to wind down, their fathers and other men in the community gather near the sidelines, ready to follow the first-down marker up and down the field. The women secure seats in the bleachers, set up camp chairs, and lay blankets in the grass, prepared to alternate between fretting over possible injuries and serving as fill-in cheerleaders for a school whose attendance is too small to provide their own. The ever-present eyes of the younger children follow the team from beyond the end zone, where they will spend the next four quarters imitating their heroes in a game of touch football, complete with downs and penalties. The buzzer goes off and everyone stands as the announcer alerts the crowd of the starting lineup. It's Friday night in Eastern Colorado, and everyone has a front-row seat to the action under the lights.

In many ways, the scene emulates everything that is to be desired in rural life. The entire community has turned out to support their team, from the teachers to the local businessmen and farmers to the babies who will no doubt sleep through the entire game. The same individuals that spent the day planting

wheat, fixing cars, and carrying out crop-dusting contracts will end their day early to find the best parking spot and reminisce about their time in the green and gold uniforms. They sponsor the elementary school Spirit Squad, provide the popcorn for the concession stand, and run the summer weight lifting program. The boys on the field will spend tomorrow driving truck for their fans, or recapping the game with them over coffee at the Anton Co-op. The fans are often the beneficiary of community service and Ag shop projects and calls for assistance, and in turn they give their full support every Friday night.

This symbiotic relationship is expected in the small community, and the web of personal connections is dense, integrating everyone in some way. It is this connectedness, this comradery, which drives the crowds to the game and forces them their feet as they cheer for their team at the game's conclusion: "We. Are. Proud of You, Say, We are Proud of You *clap clap clap*". Their faces beam as their boys shake hands with their opponents after a hard-fought game, the scoreboard flashing 26-31—a losing score. But that's not what matters. What matters is that the boys showed heart and provided a good example for the kids beyond the end zone. That next week is a new week and the same ritual will be repeated no matter the outcome. And, most importantly, that the comradery extends beyond the bounds of the community to include the opponents, as the winning team invites the defeated into their post-game prayer circle, a moving gesture the Indians will carry forward with them throughout the rest of the season.

From the inside, it is sometimes difficult to notice the cracks in the picturesque scene. But exposure to life on the outside often reveals what is left to be desired. A population crisis of sorts has led to the cooperation between the sports programs of two long-time rivals, Arickaree and Woodlin, a tough pill to swallow for many alumni on both sides. In other parts of the world, the state even, schools struggle with deciding who to cut from the numerous teams that make up their 11-man football programs. For the past few years, both schools have had to admit that to get even six boys on the field would be a challenge, and even then if one player would get injured, the season would end immediately. And so began the cooperative effort between the two schools.

The crisis extends far beyond the realm of school population and high school athletics, however. Both schools are situated in the center of several small communities, many of which are without amenities such as a grocery store, restaurant, or gas station. The lack of basic necessities certainly isn't drawing new people to the area, and the shortage of post-high school opportunities makes it difficult for many children to conceive staying in the area or returning after college. The farms are getting larger, the equipment more efficient, and the chances of starting up are decreasing as the cost of capital rises and land is acquired by established agriculturists.

But is the future of Eastern Colorado as desperate as it currently appears to outsiders? It is easy to look at the situation from the outside and point out the flaws, but those who live in the area, while they have fears for the future of their

home region, seem to possess hopes that greatly outweigh any challenges they may face. The population may shrink, businesses may close, and the athletic team names may continue to add backslashes and hyphens as they combine. The deeply intertwined relationships and the loyalty to their communities, the cooperation and duty to fellow residents, and the work ethic, however, do not require a minimum number in order to be sustainable. Throughout the history of the area, Eastern Colorado has defined itself as a land of conflict, remedied by a well-established culture of perseverance. These cornerstones of Eastern Colorado may very well aid in the adjustment to, if not overcome, rural depopulation.¹

1. For the purpose of this research, Eastern Colorado is considered to be the counties of Baca, Bent, Cheyenne, Crowley, Kiowa, Kit Carson, Lincoln, Logan, Morgan, Otero, Phillips, Prowers, Sedgwick, Washington, and Yuma. Elbert County will also be considered to a limited extent, as it is on the urban fringe and becoming urbanized at a rapid pace. Maps for all locations mentioned are included in the Appendix to the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In *Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests*, Richard Wood uses census data alongside the stories of rural communities across Kansas to frame the problems currently faced in rural America. Wood does not mince words when it comes to describing these issues, as he explains that life in these areas is “a numbers game. If populations continue to decline, more schools and stores will close, and more communities will wither and die. It’s as simple as that”.² The numbers certainly support this, as farmers make up a smaller percentage of the workforce than ever before, shrinking from 40 percent in 1900 to 1.9 percent in 2000.³

As the population decreases, those who remain find themselves farming more acres in order to stay competitive, and long gone is the agriculture of the 1950s, when, according to Rubin, “every quarter section [160 acres] in the area had a different family living on it and off it.”⁴ Communities struggle to stay alive as local businesses are unable to compete with chains in larger cities, and schools are forced to consolidate, leaving ghosts of the formerly thriving towns and taking away the “one key to a town’s prospects for survival, or perhaps even

2. Richard E. Wood, *Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 187.

3. *Ibid.*, 3.

4. Kimberly Hendrickson, “Bush and the Cities,” *Policy Review*, August-September 2004, <http://policyreview.org/aug04/hendrickson.html>, quoted in Wood, *Survival of Rural America*, 28.

growth”.⁵ This vicious cycle of depopulation, closings, and further depopulation limits the opportunities of those who wish to remain in the area.

Many of the communities Wood explored for his research have sought out alternative solutions to draw in a new population or make their towns more widely known. Wood also looks at the possibility of government policies benefitting and revitalizing rural American towns. However, he does not seem to think that the communities will be able to survive without these “purple cows”—spectacular, unexpected features that can only be found in a specific community—or without policy intervention.⁶ The residents of Eastern Colorado, on the other hand, remain largely confident that their community bonds will be able to sustain the values and ways of life they most appreciate. They’ve persevered through numerous trials in their history; this pattern of endurance is deeply engrained in their culture.

After immersing themselves in the culture of a rural Iowa town and interviewing everyone from the school guidance counselor to individuals who have barely returned to their hometown since high school, Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas discovered that the lack of opportunities for recent high school and college graduates is contributing to the rural crisis. In an endeavor they call the “Heartland Project”, Carr and Kefalas look at the exodus of young people from rural areas, what this means for the future of these towns, and what could be

5. Wood, *Survival of Rural America*, 28-31.

6. *Ibid.*, 34-35.

done to save the small-town way of life.⁷ The “brain drain” referenced in the title of their book, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What it Means for America*, occurs during this departure, when the “achievers”, or students with the highest skills sets and most academic success, leave for prestigious colleges and slowly integrate themselves into a new lifestyle, one that does not correspond with their rural roots.⁸

This trend leaves rural areas populated with “stayers”, described as those who value manual labor over school, even from a young age, and are thus plagued with low achievement in school, self-esteem, and sense of control.⁹ They are joined by the “returners”, who seek more in life and venture out of their hometowns after high school, but “boomerang” back when their experience does not match their expectations.¹⁰ It seems, then, that rural America’s problems increase as these areas attract those who feel as though they are unable to flourish in another setting and those who have failed to thrive in the “outside” world, while the best students take their skills and knowledge to more urban areas to take advantage of the opportunities they can find there.

Many who live in rural America, however, would disagree with the idea that their towns are filled only with the underachievers of their local high schools. In Eastern Colorado alone, numerous individuals who earned high grades,

7. Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), xiv.

8. *Ibid.*, 29.

9. *Ibid.*, 60.

10. *Ibid.*, 107.

attended large universities, and were exposed to various other opportunities have chosen to return to their homes to start their own farming operations, continue those with well-established traditions of success, or take advantage of other opportunities simply because they enjoy the experience of living in a small town and community that surrounds them.

While some other opportunities do exist, agriculture remains the dominant industry in rural areas, and as their population changes, it's no surprise that agriculture changes simultaneously. In *The Economics of American Agriculture: Evolution and Global Development*, Dr. Steven Blank, economist in the Agricultural and Resource Economics Department at the University of California-Davis, conducted a complete economic analysis of both the American and international agriculture industries. His research brought about two major conclusions: the rest of the world would be able to provide enough food for the global population without America's contribution, and less-developed countries would prosper without increased competition from the United States in the agriculture industry.¹¹ In fact, America might be able to compete at a higher level on the global scale if the resources dedicated to agriculture were instead allocated to those industries in which a comparative advantage exists, or those areas for which the country's assets are more suitable.¹²

11. Steven C. Blank, *The Economics of American Agriculture: Evolution and Global Development*. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2008), 201.

12. *Ibid.*, 13.

If the future of American agriculture is questionable, the problems that rural America faces might be further complicated. Like rural America as a whole, however, it seems more likely that perseverance will prevail. Those who have spent any portion of their lives in agriculture are deeply bound to the work, the land, and the values, and it will take a drastic event to change their minds. The people of agriculture have as much to say about the industry as the economics of agriculture.

One chapter of Blank's analysis, "Is Agriculture a "Way of Life" or a Business?" begins to approach the human aspect of agriculture. Here, Blank analyzes different sizes of farms in terms of maximizing profits and quality of life.¹³ While large commercial farms and "intermediate" farms earn enough profits to support a typical family to varying degrees, small farms do not make a profit and their proprietors are therefore considered to be "leisure" farmers who supplement any farm income they may earn with off-farm wages.¹⁴ Looking at agriculture from this strictly economic standpoint takes away from the perspectives of those individuals who are actually involved in the industry. Many farmers and ranchers, in Eastern Colorado especially, now hold some sort of "in-town" or extra job, no matter the size of their operation, but consider themselves first and foremost to be agriculturists. While sustaining their families and their farms financially are still prominent goals, profit is not the only factor driving their work—the long-standing traditions must also be considered. As the lifestyle and

13. *Ibid.*, 421.

14. *Ibid.*, 421-22.

farming processes change, these individuals are learning to adapt and overcome, while still holding on to these traditions.

Modern lifestyle changes aren't specific to rural areas, however. In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam defines social capital as "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them."¹⁵ Social capital is at the center of community life, and it is slowly declining in America, especially where informal social connections such as eating dinner and visiting coffee shops together are concerned.¹⁶ Overall, individuals feel their current situation is one with little honesty and trust where the outside world is concerned. These aspects of community are considered to "lubricate the inevitable frictions of social life."¹⁷ To live without them would mean a complete shift in our social interactions.

One area contrary to this trend is small groups, where members feel closely connected and more willing to help one another out in times of need.¹⁸ Putnam references small religious gatherings, self-help groups, and hobby clubs as the most prominent examples of such small groups.¹⁹ The characteristics of these groups, however, seem to reflect life in rural America as a whole more than the common disconnect described above. Individuals genuinely care about

15. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 19.

16. *Ibid.*, 93.

17. *Ibid.*, 135.

18. *Ibid.*, 149.

19. *Ibid.*

those around them and are willing and expected to provide assistance in times of crisis. Perhaps this is where Eastern Colorado's advantages lie—in the ability to form close connections with those around you, building social capital.

These connections give rural America another advantage when it comes to empowering the next generation for success. As young adults search for a form of security in their changing worlds, Sharon Parks notes in *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* that they long for “a place of belonging, integrity, and contribution that can anchor meaningful hope in themselves and our shared future.”²⁰ One way this can be accomplished is through mentoring communities, where older individuals provide inspiration, guidance, and confirmation.²¹ Mentors create an environment of dialogue, helping those in their care answer the “big” life questions about finding a place in the world.²²

Parks focuses on the positive impact mentoring communities can have on young adults currently completing higher education degrees and recent post-graduates.²³ Meanwhile, the impact of mentors in rural areas extends past these boundaries to include students high-school-aged and younger. Through established community bonds and school organizations including athletics, the Agriculture Education program, and career-focused clubs, teenagers and young

20. Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 2000), 3.

21. *Ibid.*, 128.

22. *Ibid.*, 137-40

23. *Ibid.*, 158, 180.

adults are exposed to older members of their community and receive this mentoring at an earlier age than most. Across Eastern Colorado and the rest of rural America, parents, teachers, and community members provide a sense of community and belonging for the young adults they encounter, instilling in them skills for success in a variety of situations and further strengthening the bonds of their communities.

My research will add depth to the human experience aspect of these established works, as well as explore the largely ignored population of Eastern Colorado. The previous research on rural depopulation and the changes in agriculture draws on clear patterns of life in rural America. It tends, however, to use the experiences of those who live in specific areas to fit rural residents into general categories and focuses on radical solutions. Using a selection of Eastern Colorado residents as a case study, I will show how community ties can withstand a rapidly-changing society, keeping the long-standing values of those who live in the area at the core of its existence. After surviving the Dust Bowl, Filthy Fifties, and the Farm Crisis, as well as numerous smaller struggles, perseverance has become more than just an idea in Eastern Colorado—it is the base of the culture. This tenacity has been passed on through generations, creating a work ethic, set of community values, and mindset that is specific to the area. Current and former residents all agree that Eastern Colorado provides an environment favorable for living, working, and raising a family, and it seems as though nothing will change this.

CHAPTER ONE: SETTLING THE DESERT

In 1988, the Future Farmers of America changed their name to the National FFA Organization in order to “reflect the growing diversity in the industry of agriculture”, aligning themselves with their long-held values of engagement with the greater community, whether that community be local agriculturists or foreign policymakers.²⁴ No matter what name they’re operating under, however, the organization has associated traits such as character, citizenship, volunteerism, patriotism, cooperation, and cooperative attitudes among all people with the accomplishment of their mission.²⁵ The National FFA Organization strives to engage its youth in something that extends beyond their local high school or county fair, finding common bonds between young and old, past and present. Tradition—realizing where you come from—plays a large role in the organization, just as it does in the larger community of Eastern Colorado. The values guiding today’s FFA members are those that have shaped students since the organization was established in 1928. While the name may change in stride with the outside world, the core of FFA perseveres.

These values guide members in all their FFA endeavors, and they were on full display near Eads, Colorado on April 28, 2007. On this day, as Lance

23. “FFA History,” *National FFA Organization*. Accessed February 3, 2016. <https://www.ffa.org/about/what-is-ffa/ffa-history>.

24. “FFA Mission and Motto,” *National FFA Organization*. Accessed February 3, 2016. <https://www.ffa.org/about/who-we-are/mission-motto>.

Jagers recalls, the students and their advisor had been asked to set up chairs, direct individuals to the specified location, and assist them in finding parking spots. While the tasks may have seemed underwhelming considering the enormity of the event, the FFA members were given an opportunity to participate in something bigger than themselves—something that spanned cultures and decades, giving Eads exposure to various dignitaries, as well as the National Park Service. Jagers, experienced in the application of the organization’s mission, notes that “FFA instills those qualities of giving back to the people that give to you.”²⁶ And as the students and their community watched the dedication of the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, they gave back to the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes that gave their hometown a history.

Over the past one hundred years or so, the creek has dried up. Trees and grasses now thrive in the bed where water previously flowed in abundance, the entire area transformed into a serene pasture. The Native Americans are gone, but their memory is still present on the land. Changes in organization names, landscapes, and populations are inevitable. Some defining aspects will always remain, however, as long as individuals take it upon themselves to carry them forward.

The Great American Desert

Perhaps Eastern Colorado wasn’t meant to be settled. The rolling High Plains are home few trees and have little access to water, especially in the

26. Lance Jagers, interview by author, August 8, 2015.

central swath of the area. The vast emptiness is prone to extreme temperature shifts, with snowy winters, hot, dry summers, and unpredictable amounts of precipitation. Early explorers of the region certainly found little that impressed them. During his investigation of the area in 1806, Zebulon Pike repeatedly noted the land's "deserts, aridity, and lack of vegetation."²⁷ Influenced by the descriptions of Pike and other early explorers, Stephen Long set out on a military expedition to the area in 1820. His group concluded that the plains were "almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence." They also produced a map that labelled the area the "Great American Desert."²⁸ The land, it seemed, wanted nothing to do with the lifestyle to which the Americans were accustomed; and for a period of time after their acquisition, Americans were more than happy to comply with this request.

The Native Americans in the area recognized its inhospitable nature as well. Life for the Plains tribes required constant movement ruled by the buffalo they sought to hunt and trade.²⁹ The Arapaho and Cheyenne fell into a routine of

27. Kevin Z. Sweeney, "Wither the Fruited Plain: The Long Expedition and the Description of the "Great American Desert", " *Great Plains Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2005): 106,

<http://web.b.ebscohost.com.dml.regis.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=1&sid=58a1afc-b-e0c9-4b95-ab33-f4edad46a983%40sessionmgr111&hid=130&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#db=eric&AN=EJ752311>.

28. *Ibid.*, 106-114.

29. J. Donald Hughes, *American Indians in Colorado*. (Denver: University of Denver, 1977), 75. By the 1800s, the nomadic Arapaho, Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Comanche, were the dominant tribes in the area, with the allied Cheyenne

hunting the bison herds on the Eastern Plains during the summer, then hunkering down near the Front Range during the cold winter months.³⁰ This was a relatively new development for the Cheyenne, who were drawn away from their settled, agrarian lifestyle in present-day North Dakota by the opportunity to become major players in the developing trade relationships with the Americans. The Americans craved buffalo robes, and the Cheyenne, with their large herds of horses, were willing and able to fill the demand quickly and efficiently.³¹ They overhauled their lifestyle and soon called the large swath of land their own.

This situation was ideal until a huge push West occurred in the mid-1800s. At first, the High Plains were only a means to an end, miles that had to be crossed before the final destination was reached. The 1849 discovery of gold in California resulted in the migration of tens of thousands over the plains to the West Coast.³² The initial flood of Americans travelling through the area sought riches greater than Eastern Colorado had to offer. The components of the typical lifestyle were missing on the plains, as noted by the explorers, and now the lack of gold would deem the land even more unsuitable for anyone looking to make a profit. To these gold-seekers, the area was a temporary resting spot, not a place to call home.

and Arapaho staking claim on the land between the South Platte and Arkansas Rivers and becoming the dominant tribes in the area, and the latter living in the southeast, below the Arkansas River.

30. Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 192.

31. *Ibid.*, 69-70.

32. *Ibid.*, 98.

It appeared these negative sentiments of the land would be carried forward even as gold was found closer to home. The first official discovery of gold in Colorado was made near Cherry Creek on July 6, 1858.³³ The change brought on by the Pike's Peak Gold Rush was rapid and drastic. The emigrants created new trails, built towns along the Front Range to support their efforts, and drove away the bison and other wildlife.³⁴ Prospecting was difficult, but families and individuals reeling from the financial panic of 1857 and subsequent economic depression were tempted by the "get rich quick" scheme that gold mining offered.³⁵ Emigrants flooded the Plains on their way to the creek, leaving their former way of life to make good on a promise, just as the Cheyenne had done earlier in the century.

Finding lasting value in the land was not at the forefront of many minds during the first half of the 1800s. The unknowns of the Plains were vastly different from the more comfortable areas that had the proven ability to provide for years to come. The first Americans in the area were drawn further West by plentiful resources and the promise of fortune to be gained through gold mining. Gold, however, was a limited resource, and the period of mining would soon come to a close.³⁶ The Native Americans made great use of the buffalo herds, but those were diminishing and their future became more uncertain as individuals

33. *Ibid.*, 105.

34. Hughes, *American Indians in Colorado*, 56.

35. West, *Contested Plains*, 115.

36. The Colorado gold rush ended in 1861, around the time Colorado became an official territory.

flocked through, and eventually to, the area and settled their winter grounds. Those who interacted with the land learned they could not ask much from it. As the buffalo disappeared and mining slowed, change was imminent. Another use would be found for the land, or it would continue to remain a portal to the successes to be found on either side.

Putting Down Roots

Eastern Colorado was an area unlike any the early explorers and settlers had witnessed. From the soil sprouted a sod formed from buffalo and blue grama grasses. Both plants grow close to the ground and can withstand dry heat, low-nutrient soil, and extensive grazing.³⁷ The people that would call the area home permanently would be like the grasses: persistent, with extensive roots tying them to the land. They would make use of the resources available to them at any given point, no matter how plentiful or scarce. They would celebrate the good times and learn to make do when the rains didn't come or the winters were too cold for their cattle herds. These individuals would be different, just like the land they settled on.

The idea of land to call one's own drew an increased number of emigrants to the Eastern Plains in the latter half of the 1800s. The Homestead Act, signed

37. USDA NRCS Plant Materials Program, "Plant Guide for Blue Grama (*Bouteloua gracilis* (Willd. ex Kunth.) Lag. ex Griffiths)," *United States Department of Agriculture*, last modified May 31 2006, http://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_boqr2.pdf.

Brackie, Melinda, "Plant Guide for Buffalograss (*Bouteloua dactyloides* (Nutt.) J.T. Columbus), *United States Department of Agriculture*, September 2013, http://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg_boda2.pdf.

by President Lincoln on May 20, 1862, gave 160 acres to any individual willing to try their chance at farming in the Western territories. In exchange for a filing fee, those who utilized their program would have their own farm—if they could survive five years on the plains, or afford the \$1.25 per acre buy-out after six months.³⁸ By 1864, 15,000 individuals had settled the land that would soon become Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana, and Colorado.³⁹ The unique opportunity attracted those with a willingness to work hard and the courage to face the unknown.

Before the homesteaders would stake their claim on Eastern Colorado, the cattle kings would make their mark. The use of the High Plains as a pastureland was a remnant of the Pike's Peak gold rush, when emigrants realized their herds of oxen and cattle could thrive on the sod, even during the harsh winter months.⁴⁰ From the 1860s to the 1880s, Eastern Colorado was an open range, with the typical day containing some mixture of roundups, stampedes, and cattle rustling.⁴¹ Demand for cattle increased, and the cattlemen responded, bringing in herds from Texas and increasing the number of cattle

38. "Homestead Act," *The Library of Congress*, March 19, 2015, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/Homestead.html>.

39. "Lincoln Signs the Homestead Act," *A+E Networks*, 2009, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/lincoln-signs-homestead-act>.

40. William Wyckoff, *Creating Colorado: The Making of a Western American Landscape, 1860-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 157.

41. Jean Gray, *Homesteading Haxtun and the High Plains: Northeastern Colorado History* (Charleston: The History Press, 2013), 23-24.

from 40,000 in the 1870 census to 315,000 by 1880.⁴² For a period, the cattle kings owned the land. Soon, however, they would find that their actions did not stake a permanent claim on Eastern Colorado, but instead opened the door for others to settle the land for different purposes.

Aiding in the transportation of the cattle to and from plains was the addition of the railroad. The first tracks built in Colorado territory appeared in 1869, with an additional five lines constructed during the next fifteen years. The railroads played a crucial role in the expansion of the cattle industry, as they linked Eastern Colorado to larger markets to the east.⁴³ The construction also added to the economy, as it provided work for those unwilling to try their luck at the cattle game. Akron, in present-day Washington County, became a central stop, as it contained a roundhouse.⁴⁴ The men building the railroad also needed to be fed, and that's where Richard Parker's grandfather came in. He would leave the family home in Elba during the week to serve as the railroad cook, then

42. Wyckoff, *Creating Colorado*, 158-9. The cattle kings of the time included John Iliff (Northeast) and John Prowers and James Jones (Southeast). In his prime, Iliff controlled around 650,000 acres of Northeastern Colorado through land purchases and leases. While operations to the south were smaller, all the men are still remembered for their contributions to the Colorado cattle industry. U.S. Census Bureau, "Productions of Agriculture," Statistics of Agriculture Table 3, 1870, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1870/1870c-02.pdf>; U.S. Census Bureau, "Livestock and Its Production, By States and Territories: 1880," Statistics of Agriculture Table 8, 1880, http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1880/1880a_v3-04.pdf.

43. Gray, *Settling Haxtun*, 27; Wyckoff, *Creating Colorado*, 158.

44. A roundhouse is a device used to turn a train back towards the direction from which it came.

return home on the weekends.⁴⁵ Opportunities sometimes came from surprising places, but they were there to grasp for those willing to take them.

The railroad also enabled an increased flow of emigrants. By 1900, the Homestead Act had distributed 80 million acres to aspiring farmers and ranchers.⁴⁶ “Homesteaders,” according to a *Greeley Tribune* memoir, “lured by the promise of land promoters, would load all their worldly goods into emigrant cars and the railroad would take them wherever they wanted to go.”⁴⁷ The Baker family, along with their son-in-law Fred Schinkel, fit this description.⁴⁸ Colorado’s drier climate and the promise of better health lured the two families from their home in Worthington, Minnesota. In November 1908, they loaded their belongings, including their eleven head of cattle, into the boxcar that would also serve as their own means of transportation.⁴⁹

The group got off the train at the Akron stop. By this time, land was going quickly. The closet available section George V. Baker and his son, George A. Baker, could find was located fifteen miles south of Otis, which was fifteen miles east of Akron. Although they were forced to make the journey by foot, they were confident in the prospects of their new homestead, especially because of its access to a creek. They drove their cattle across the plains, only to be caught in a blizzard shortly into their journey. Frantic, they managed to find a barn, where

45. Richard Parker, interview by author, July 3, 2015.

46. The Library of Congress, “Homestead Act”.

47. Gray, *Homesteading Haxtun*, 27.

48. Chuck Baker, interview by author, January 16, 2016.

49. *Washington County History*, ed. Jane Brown (Dallas: Curtis Media Corporation, 1989), 111.

they and their cattle stayed the night. They continued the journey in the morning, never discovering the identity of the barn's owner.⁵⁰

The first addition to the Baker homestead was corrals for the cattle. After ensuring their herd was adequately provided for, the father and son duo began work on their first home: a dugout.⁵¹ In a land with few trees, the settlers had to make do with what was available to them. Dugouts appeared throughout the countryside, including the one that housed Glen R. Durrell and his family.⁵² The Durrells were also drawn to the area by the promise of better health and settled seventeen miles from Arriba, in Lincoln County, in 1908. The homesteaders found themselves with no one to rely on but their families as they arrived. No one helped them find their land; instead, distributed plots of land were marked with dirt mounded over buried objects to identify the corners of the section.⁵³ Once established, the families immediately began the hard work of making the land their own.

Those who eventually settled the land came for a variety of reasons: cattle, the railroad, homesteading. What they all had in common, however, was the opportunity to make a life in the land that was previously deemed unfit for

50. C. Baker, interview, January 16, 2016.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Glen R. Durrell, "Homesteading in Colorado," *The Colorado Magazine* 51, no. 2, (1974): 96, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/dml/regis.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=58a1afc-b-e0c9-4b95-ab33-f4edad46a983%40sessionmgr111&hid=130&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGI2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=45900499&db=ahl>.

53. *Ibid.*, 93-96.

permanent residence. Living in uncharted territory came with challenges and perseverance quickly became a key aspect of life on the plains. But as the Americans established their roots and began to flourish, another group of individuals with deep ties to the land was displaced. Conflict was as prevalent as perseverance in the early years of American inhabitation of the Eastern Plains.

Broken Promises

The Native Americans watched control of their land slip through their fingers. The nomadic tribes had taken cautious care of the land, making sure their horses did not overgraze the grasses of the plains. The sudden changes to the landscape caused by increased emigration quickly negated this care. The plains ecosystem was severely disturbed by gold seekers who trekked across the great expanse, cutting down whatever trees they could find, allowing their draft animals to overgraze the grass, and scaring off wildlife.⁵⁴ The invasion of the cattle kings also spelled disaster for the grasslands, as a sustained pattern of overgrazing emerged.⁵⁵ Once the permanence of American settlement became apparent, however, the Native Americans accepted that they would need to attempt coexistence.

54. James E. Sherow, "Storms on the Grasslands: Indian People and the Colorado Gold Rush of 1859," *Journal of the West* 49, no. 2 (2010): 15, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.dml.regis.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=6&sid=58a1afc-b-e0c9-4b95-ab33-f4edad46a983%40sessionmgr111&hid=130&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=57716671&db=ahl>.

55. Wyckoff, *Creating Colorado*, 160.

These changes to the land had put the Indians in a vulnerable position. With a large portion of the buffalo either driven off or killed, they would need to find a new source of food and supplies. The Americans seemed to be their best chance, and they soon began to rely on annuities of food and trade goods, an arrangement that was solidified as part of the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie.⁵⁶ The treaty attempted to create peace between the parties by establishing tribal boundaries and guidelines for resolving the conflicts that were bound to occur. The Americans, realizing the negative effects their presence had on the land, also agreed to provide additional annuities for any further damage they caused. The provisions of the treaty were carried out with varying degrees of success on both sides until the start of the gold rush. During this time however, conflicts within the tribes and with the white agents who were to act as intermediaries for the Indians diminished its effectiveness.⁵⁷ The tribes were divided geographically to accommodate their large numbers and reaching a consensus was difficult.⁵⁸ Adding to the confusion was their relationship with the white agents. The position had a high turnover rate, and the Indians quickly became skeptical of

56. Loretta Fowler, "Arapaho and Cheyenne Perspectives: From the 1851 Treaty to the Sand Creek Massacre," *American Indian Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2015): 364-6, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.dml.regis.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=11&sid=58a1afcb-e0c9-4b95-ab33-f4edad46a983%40sessionmgr111&hid=130&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGI2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=110117907&db=aph>.

57. *Ibid.*, 368-71.

58. West, *Contested Plains*, 194.

anyone in the role.⁵⁹ Those parties wanting peace and coexistence between the two groups were soon outnumbered by those who believed that only one group could call Eastern Colorado home. Tensions were mounting.

The skepticism surrounding the 1851 treaty, along with the disregard for its provisions, culminated in a conflict on the Sand Creek, near present-day Eads, in November 1864. At the suggestion of Major Anthony, the Cheyenne and a band of the Arapaho were camping and hunting in the area, under the impression that they would be protected from the American troops in the area.⁶⁰ The Americans had no intentions of making peace with the Indians, however, and on November 29, Colonel John M. Chivington approached the camp with 725 members of the Colorado Calvary. Cheyenne chief Black Kettle displayed American and white flags to convey the bands' peace, but had to abandon his post when the troops showed no signs of stopping their attack. What followed was a brutal, unprovoked slaughtering of mainly women, children, and elderly Native Americans. The Calvary had set the tribes' horses free, leaving them with no escape route. The massacre was well-planned and showed little mercy towards the tribes. After they finished scalping their victims, the troops returned to a hero's welcome in Denver.⁶¹

59. Fowler, "Arapaho and Cheyenne Perspectives", 371-84.

60. *Ibid.*, 384-5. Major Anthony was the commander of Fort Lyon beginning in November 1864. The fort was located about 40 miles from the site of the Sand Creek Massacre.

61. Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Sand Creek," *Mother Jones* 25, no. 6 (2000): 60, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.dml.regis.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=21&sid=58a1afb-e0c9-4b95-ab33->

As word of the massacre spread through the tribes, the Indians were understandably angered. Peace, it seemed, would not be accomplished. Hostilities intensified as the Americans attempted to contain the Indians on reservations in Kansas and Oklahoma. The tribes fought back, attacking the Americans for nine days in the Battle of Beecher Island, near present-day Wray, Colorado. A year later, in 1869, they were defeated in what would be the last major conflict between whites and Native Americans in Colorado territory. The Battle of Summit Springs resulted in the removal of virtually all Indians from the Eastern Plains.⁶² As the Americans realized the importance of the buffalo to the tribes, the removal of the herds had also become an important aspect of achieving their goal of conquering the land. The last known unprotected buffalo—a cow, calf, and two bulls—were killed near Lost Park, Colorado in 1897.⁶³ With few signs of the previous inhabitants remaining, the settlers were free to do with the land as they pleased.

New Beginnings

Homesteading was difficult; there was no question about that. Even after the conflicts with the Native Americans ended, the settlers remained in conflict with their land. The 1890s were especially dry years, and those counties that did not have adequate access to irrigation saw their populations drop by over 30%

[f4edad46a983%40sessionmgr111&hid=130&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=3768547&db=aph.](https://www.encyclopedia.com/american-american-history/encyclopedias/american-american-history/american-indians-in-colorado)

62. Hughes, *American Indians in Colorado*, 61.

63. *Ibid.*, 62. Lost Park is south of present-day Bailey, southwest of Denver in the Rocky Mountains.

due to out-migration.⁶⁴ The dryland farmers that remained adapted their techniques to slow evaporation and work whatever moisture they received into the ground. The government jumped on board with these ideas, promoting dryland farm research and further homesteading.⁶⁵ With this encouragement, Colorado saw an 48% increase in population in the first decade of the 1900s, with subsequent increases in the number of farms (36%) and acres of land in farms (42.8%).⁶⁶ The area was flooded with a fresh crop of farmers during this time, including the Durrells and Bakers, who were ready to try their hand at dryland farming. It was the perseverance of those who stayed in the hard years, however, that allowed this boom to occur. Without the advancements in dryland farming techniques, prospective settlers would have been discouraged, slowing emigration and growth.

Like all other aspects of life, dryland farming on the high plains was vastly different from how the practice was implemented further east. The Durrells quickly discovered that the crops and farming methods to which they were

64. Wyckoff, *Creating Colorado*, 176. These counties included Washington, Yuma, Phillips, Kit Carson, Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Baca. While some of these counties, such as Washington, remain predominately dryland farms today, others, like Yuma, have been able to access underground water to irrigate their crops.

65. *Ibid.*, 176-177. Dryland farming is a technique that relies on precipitation to adequately water crops. Irrigation, on the other side of the spectrum, makes use of bodies of water or ground water to water crops through the use of ditches or sprinklers.

66. U.S. Census Bureau, "Colorado: Number, Area, and Value of Farms," *Statistics of Agriculture, 1910*, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1910/06/01/1833/41033898v6ch2.pdf>.

accustomed would not translate to the Eastern Colorado climate. Their first corn crop produced ears so low to the ground they had to be harvested by hand. After a few of these harvests, they shifted their attention to wheat and sorghum, which proved to be more fruitful.⁶⁷ Further north, the Bakers determined that their best chance at making a living would come from a wheat-based enterprise, with income supplemented by their cattle herd and flock of chickens.⁶⁸ The settlers were making their way, but the more they pushed the land, the more the land pushed back. It told them that while they could change some realities of the plains, the plains would also force them to change in a similar manner. This reciprocal change and understanding was the beginning of a tradition that would keep generations to come tied to the ground.

Today, the Sand Creek shows little resemblance to the place where the Cheyenne and Arapaho camped more than one hundred and fifty years ago. In the same way, the landscape of Eastern Colorado has drastically changed during this time period, and the alterations show few signs of stopping. This change should not be feared, however. Traditions arise from new developments, and the strongest individuals and values will persist in the face of challenge. Residents are forced to adapt to circumstances beyond their control, but reliance on their connection to the land, work ethic, and each other helps them to persevere. Once the roots of these tenacious individuals are planted, it is almost impossible to draw them up from the land—they are there to stay.

67. Durrell, "Homesteading in Colorado," 98.

68. C. Baker, interview, January 16, 2016.

CHAPTER TWO: BOOM AND BUST

As Clarence Wright built the Flagler Theatre, he had a vision. In the Spring of 1930, the town already had at least two other theaters, but Wright's theatre would outshine both. He planned on giving the town their first consistent exposure to "talkies"—movies with sound—instead of the silent films the others showed. This attracted locals to the theatre in droves on the weekends, despite the economic downturn that was developing after the previous year's stock market crash. The films were not the theatre's only appeal, however. Cheryl Witt, current manager of the theatre, describes Wright as a "business-minded individual", who knew that "for it to go in the 30s and 40s, it had to be a multi-purpose building." By placing the theatre's 200 seats on runners instead of bolting them to the hardwood floor, Wright created a flexible space that could be used for numerous events in a town that lacked a town hall.⁶⁹ This added to the attractiveness of the new theatre, garnering support for the building and laying the base for the memories that would be made in the theatre over the next eighty-plus years.

Three years after completion, the theatre building had already been used for the Lions Club Inaugural Dinner and numerous school events. An evening in 1933 found the local Women's Club hosting a carnival night, with the seats replaced by countless booths and the screen rolled up so the stage could be

69. Cheryl Witt, interview by author, September 7, 2015.

used as a cantina.⁷⁰ It was four years after the stock market crash and the Dust Bowl had already been moving the dry, fertile topsoil from the fields in large quantities for two years. Nevertheless, Wright and the locals had found a way to not only construct the theatre, but make it a viable entity in the face of disaster. On this specific night, four hundred individuals attended the carnival to raise money for hot school lunches. The evening was a success, with the club raising \$180 for their goal.⁷¹

What the Women's Club left with was more than money, however. They held \$180 of proof that no matter how difficult the current situation, the rural community provides a safety net of members who are willing to invest in the collective future. Residents had established themselves as permanent fixtures of well-connected communities. They had proved their ability when they greatly increased their production during World War I in an act of patriotism. Now, their work ethic and community ties would carry them through the Depression and Dust Bowl, allowing them to once again persevere in the face of seemingly insurmountable trial.

“Just Being Able to be Together”

70. *Ibid.*

71. *Ibid.*

The enlargement of the Homestead Act in 1909 provided the opportunity for more individuals to stake their claim on the plains.⁷² As the populations grew through the second decade of the 1900s, the role of the surrounding community in everyday life solidified itself. Families found that they could rely on more than just each other when it came to their income-producing activities, education, and socialization. Towns quickly became the center of most activity, but churches and schoolhouses also served as social centers in the more remote areas. Eastern Colorado was beginning to resemble the more established areas from which the settlers had originated.

Having access to a town was crucial for agriculturists looking to market their products. While the railroads made it easier for farmers and ranchers to ship their goods and fill demand in other parts of the country, going to town meant the opportunity to supplement revenues from their main enterprises and gain access to necessities. The Baker family, relying on their cattle and chickens, was able to provide their family with an ample supply of milk and eggs. On Fridays, they would load their wagon with any extra goods they had accumulated throughout the week and make the fifteen-mile trek to Otis. These days revolved around trading, and the Bakers were able to obtain other

72. Wyckoff, *Creating Colorado*, 177. The expansion of the Homestead Act increased the acres given to settlers from 160 to 320. A 1912 modification reduced the number of years required required to “prove up” from five to three.

essentials in exchange for their goods.⁷³ Survival soon became a community effort, as individuals were no longer required to rely solely on their own production to support their families.

Fridays were for more than just bargaining, however. Throughout the day, families flooded Main Street—the business center of rural towns—looking for the best deals. As the day wore on, the purpose of the gathering evolved. By nightfall, bands appeared on the hotel balconies, and the long day of activity ended with a community dance.⁷⁴ The families returned from these trips with more than just full wagons. Days spent in Otis broke up the week of farm work, where one might not travel across the boundaries of their homestead and would interact only with members of their families. These Fridays built up a comradery, showing the settlers they had more in common than their desire to make a living on the High Plains.

In the areas that did not have easy access to a town, the schoolhouse became a prominent gathering place for families in the surrounding area. The Homestead Act provided ample opportunity for schools, setting aside section sixteen of each township for a schoolhouse.⁷⁵ Communities held to this

73. C. Baker, interview, January 16, 2016.

74. *Ibid.*

75. Durrell, “Homesteading in Colorado,” 101. In the United States, land is divided into townships, each containing thirty-six sections, which are one square mile, or 640 acres.

provision; by 1916 Washington County had 99 schools for 2,060 students.⁷⁶ At the peak of one-room schoolhouses, this number grew to approximately 110 schools. Richard Parker attributes the growth to a proclamation by the state legislature, which deemed a student-teacher ratio of fifteen to one adequate. Well-meaning citizens assumed this meant they could create a school as long as there were fifteen students in the area to attend it, and schools soon dotted the landscape.⁷⁷ Education became a core value, and during the weekdays the schoolhouses served this purpose. Like everything else in Eastern Colorado, however, the buildings needed to be adaptable. Evenings and weekends found families attending social events in the rooms where their children spent their days reciting poems and solving arithmetic problems.

South of the Baker homestead, in Glen Durrell's one-room schoolhouse, the Emerson Literary Society was the curator of such social events. The gatherings would attract entire families and always included refreshments provided by one of the members. Favorite activities included debates and discussions, with topics ranging from the benefits of homesteading in Colorado over tenant farming in Iowa, prohibition, and whether or not the United States should become involved in World War I. Glen's father was often chosen for the

76. Lee C. Zion, "Washington County, Colorado School Listings," COGenWeb, 2008, <http://www.cogenweb.com/washington/schools/schools.htm>.

77. Parker, interview.

debates, and would spend hours gathering information and preparing for his arguments with his debate partner for the week.⁷⁸

While the plains were more sparsely populated than the areas from which the settlers had originated, the opportunity to earn an education, keep up with current events, and voice one's opinion was still present. The community was strengthened through these gatherings, which brought individuals together several times a week. Although the settlers might not have known at the time, having this well-established community would be an essential aspect of perseverance during World War I. Residents would come together to ensure their farms would not only survive the war, but prosper in ways that had only been imagined previously.

The Great War and the Great Plains

The Emerson Literary Society would have about three years to debate whether or not the United States should enter World War I. While some of the members wanted to engage in the conflict and end it as quickly as possible, others saw no place for the United States in the war.⁷⁹ The former party got their way when Congress declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. This caused an immediate reaction, and 125,000 Colorado men entered the draft by the next

78. Durrell, "Homesteading in Colorado," 106-7.

79. *Ibid.*, 106.

year.⁸⁰ While the participation of the United States brought a swift end to the war, with Germany surrendering on November 11, 1918, the eighteen-month involvement caused a disturbance for those back home.⁸¹

During this time, Lois Newland was attending Burr Oak High School in Burr Oak, Kansas. As a 1919 graduate, many of her high school days were spent in classes made up mostly of girls, as the boys were serving their country overseas.⁸² Rural lifestyles have long emphasized youth engagement, as the work to be done on a farm or ranch requires the input of every individual, no matter their age. A reduction in population of this size, especially a reduction in the number of young men, would disrupt the entire lifestyle. Patriotism and community togetherness wove their way even more into daily life. Those who remained banded together to negate the effects of the interruption to normalcy caused by the war. They would make sure their men had a life to which they could return at the end of their service.

Activity quickly became split between supporting the war effort and making sure life was going on as usual back home. Coloradoans bought millions of

80. State of Colorado, "Colorado History Chronology," *Colorado Official State Web Portal*. Accessed January 20, 2016.
<https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/Chronology%20of%20Colorado%20History.pdf>.

81. *Ibid.*

82. Roberta Helling, interview by author, February 24, 2016.

dollars worth of Liberty Bonds in 1918 to send whatever they could overseas.⁸³ Americans proudly and visibly displayed their patriotism in any way possible. In the Durrell family, the boys had long honored their Spanish-American War veteran father by putting up their American Flag every day. The task was held with such high regard that the sons were soon competing over the privilege of hanging the flag—often waking up before sunrise to complete the task and going back to bed before the others would notice.⁸⁴ Such displays of patriotism reminded individuals of reason for their sacrifices. The war required adaptation in order to persevere, but the cause was worthy.

Making sure life continued on back home was not without complications, though. Rural life was still difficult, and did not provide the same opportunities as life in more populated areas. By 1916, the Durrell family's three sons were ready to enter high school. Arriba, eighteen miles away, had the closest secondary school. It was unreasonable to expect the boys to travel round-trip every day, but their father needed help on the farm and couldn't afford to lose them during the week if they stayed in town. The family sold out, travelling around until they found a new home near relatives in Ames, Iowa.⁸⁵ The Durrells were one of many homesteading families who discovered that, at least for them, the costs associated with the free land outweighed the benefits. Once again, it was the

83. State of Colorado, "Colorado History Chronology."

84. Durrell, "Homesteading in Colorado", 107.

85. *Ibid.*, 112-114.

task of those that could find a viable way to remain on the land to further develop Eastern Colorado. The job was especially critical during the war, and unforeseen circumstances would soon complicate the situation at home.

While an ocean separated the troops from most of the problems their families faced, one common issue would connect them all. The first report of multiple cases of influenza came out of Haskell County, Kansas, where 18 instances were reported in March 1918. The virus quickly spread, infecting soldiers in Europe by May.⁸⁶ The first reports of influenza in Colorado came from military recruiters at the University of Colorado in September of this year. Within a month, the entire state was affected.⁸⁷ The virus was extremely contagious, making rounds throughout the world in waves.⁸⁸ It seemed there was no defense to the illness.

Complicating the situation in the United States was the lack of medical personnel at home, as many doctors and nurses were overseas.⁸⁹ In Burr Oak, Lois Newland's mother volunteered to assist the local doctor, despite his protests that she would surely catch the virus as well. Mrs. Newland was positive she had

86. "Influenza Strikes," *United States Department of Health and Human Services*. Accessed March 1, 2016.
http://www.flu.gov/pandemic/history/1918/the_pandemic/influenza/index.html.

87. "Colorado," *United States Department of Health and Human Services*. Accessed March 1, 2016.
http://www.flu.gov/pandemic/history/1918/your_state/northwest/colorado/index.html.

88. "Influenza Strikes."

89. *Ibid.*

contracted some form of the flu earlier in life, and spent several months with the overwhelmed doctor until the virus began to clear up. Although the efforts of those such as Mrs. Newland and the overwhelmed Burr Oak doctor were valiant, the death tolls were still high. Among the victims was Lois' best friend. Adding to the pain of losing a good friend at a young age was the omission of funeral services. Lois and others were unable to say goodbye to the girl, as the pervasiveness of the disease after death was unknown.⁹⁰ By the end of the year-long epidemic, the American death toll sat at an estimated 675,000. The flu had claimed more American lives than World War I.⁹¹

Battles were fought both in Europe and on American soil. The persistence of the High Plains homesteaders was on full display during the First World War. Throughout this period, the role of the community and that of the agriculturist were solidified. Communities had come to learn they could rely on each other in troubling times, through any catastrophe or illness.⁹² The trials their families had gone through to establish themselves on the land would not be forgotten, and would push the next generation to secure themselves even more tightly to the place they called their own. The American farmers and ranchers would see their

90. Helling, interview.

91. "The Legacy of the Pandemic," *United States Department of Health and Human Services*. Accessed March 1, 2016.
http://www.flu.gov/pandemic/history/1918/the_pandemic/legacypandemic/index.html.

92. Helling, interview.

importance amplified, placing additional emphasis on those who remained at home. Rural support of the war effort would quickly become more than buying bonds and displaying the flag. An increase in agriculture production was called for, and the homesteaders responded enthusiastically.

Breaking the Ground

As Europe entered World War I, focus shifted to the Great American Desert and those who had somehow managed to tame it. Europe had long depended on Russia for its wheat imports. Its access to trade with Russia was blocked during the conflict, subsequently limiting their supply of grain. The United States, looking to help their ally, encouraged those living in the plains to increase their production. The thought that their efforts could help win the war, along with the guaranteed price of two dollars a bushel, pushed those in the dryland wheat belt to produce more wheat than ever before.⁹³

To accommodate the requested increase in production, more sod had to be broken for farm use. Coloradoans responded enthusiastically, putting around eleven million new acres into production between 1910 and 1920.⁹⁴ This 80.8% rise in productive acres put the state fourth in the nation—behind only Arizona,

93. Timothy Egan, *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2006), 42-43.

94. U.S. Census Bureau, "All Land in Farms, Improved Land, Woodland, and Other Unimproved," Statistics of Agriculture Table 6, 1920, http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1920//Farms_and_Property.pdf.

Montana, and New Mexico—in terms of percentage increase in farm acreage.⁹⁵ Close to one million of these new acres were dedicated to wheat, a 289.9% increase from the previous decade.⁹⁶ Those who didn't go to war were left with the enormous responsibility of maintaining the expanded farms during the absence of the young men. They proved ready for the task, and agriculture production increased rapidly during 1918 in support of the war effort.⁹⁷

Soon, farmers possessed more money than any of them had ever seen. Profits rose to as much as ten times the cost of production, and men such as Carlie Lucas, who homesteaded near the Oklahoma panhandle town of Boise City, were bringing in close to \$8,000 a year on the 320 acres allotted by the expanded Homestead Act.⁹⁸ Fortune-seekers arrived in masses via the railroad, hoping to earn a similar profit of their own. Rural Colorado's population saw a spike of 23.4%, corresponding to the 29.8% increase in the number of farms

95. U.S. Census Bureau, "States Showing and Increase and States Showing a Decrease in Farm Acreage Between 1910 and 1920," Statistics of Agriculture Table 2, 1920, http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1920//Farms_and_Property.pdf.

96. U.S. Census Bureau, "Wheat-Farms Reporting, Acreage, Production, and Value, By Divisions and States: 1919 and 1909," Statistics of Agriculture, Table 17, 1920, http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1920/Individual_Crops.pdf.

97. State of Colorado, "Colorado History Chronology."

98. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 42-43.

during the 1910s.⁹⁹ The area that was once passed over in search of greater wealth was suddenly the source of this sought-after income.

The expansive production did not end with the war, as Colorado farmers produced eighteen million bushels of wheat during 1919, increasing their output by eleven million bushels from 1909. The added acreage, along with post-war inflated prices, resulted in production of a wheat crop worth over \$37 million in this year, up close to \$30 million from the last census.¹⁰⁰ The period of inflated prices would be short-lived, however. There was no longer a need to use guaranteed prices to encourage additional production, and as deflation set in, worldwide demand for American agriculture exports fell.¹⁰¹ As prices decreased throughout the 20s, farmers were soon unable to pay off the loans they had taken out the increase their production during the boom years. To them, the response to the mere forty cents per bushel they were earning by 1930 was to plow more land to earn back some of their investment.¹⁰²

Additional farm ground had to be financed somehow. In 1900, 25.8% of the farms in Colorado were mortgaged. This number would increase sharply in

99. U.S. Census Bureau, "Population, Number of Farms, and Farm Acreage, By Divisions and States: 1920 and 1910," *Statistics of Agriculture*, Table 5 1920, [http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1920//Farms and Property.pdf](http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1920//Farms_and_Property.pdf).

100. U.S. Census Bureau, "Wheat: 1919 and 1909."

101. The Gale Group, Inc., "Agricultural Mobilization," *Encyclopedia.com*, 2005, http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Agricultural_revolution.aspx.

102. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 77.

1920, and double by 1930, hitting 52.1%.¹⁰³ Desperate farmers broke ground at a rapid pace to pay off their operating costs and mortgages, and the ground provided. Parts of Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, and Nebraska saw record harvests in 1930.¹⁰⁴ But there was no one to buy the grain. While individuals stung by the stock market crash of 1929 begged for food, excess grain rotted at train stations, blew away at elevators, and was burned for heat in the winter.¹⁰⁵

Baca County, in the southeastern corner of Colorado, had been aided by abnormally wet years in the late 20s on its way to becoming the largest wheat-producing county in the state by 1930.¹⁰⁶ The large-scale integration of the tractor into everyday farm life during the late 1910s had contributed to the increase in production, providing a more efficient way to rip up the sod.¹⁰⁷ In Baca County, Ike and Oscar Osteen charged neighbors a dollar per acre to convert grassland to farm ground with their family's tractor.¹⁰⁸ While business was good for the brothers, it spelled trouble for the future of Baca County.

103. U.S. Census Bureau, "Tenancy, Value of Farm Property, Farm Mortgage Debt, and Specified Kinds of Livestock: 1930, 1925, 1920, 1910, and 1900," Statistics of Agriculture, Colorado State Table 3, 1930, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1930/02/03/1828/03337983v2p3ch5.pdf>.

104. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 87.

105. *Ibid.*, 77-78.

106. *Ibid.*, 82.

107. Gray, *Settling Haxtun*, 80.

108. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 81.

Already faced with a large surplus, the county would soon discover what would happen when the rains stopped.

On average, this corner of the state saw sixteen inches of moisture per year, which was unsustainable for dryland farming of this scale. The cattle kings who once ruled the land knew removing the sod would result in disaster. The grasses held the ground in place; without the roots, there would be nothing to stop the soil from blowing away.¹⁰⁹ The homesteaders, however, thought they had conquered the land. For a period, the plains had forced them to do what it wanted, and they had complied. They had adapted their ways to avoid conflict, and when opportunity struck in the form of high prices, new technology, and increased precipitation, the settlers had taken advantage of it. When times were good, they rejoiced. When times were bad, they did what they had been taught to do: they looked to next year. Everything, it seemed, had come together, and the homesteaders were not going to let go. Their perseverance had paid off; now it was time to enjoy the rewards.

“Just as Dark as Midnight”

Roberta (Collins) Helling clearly remembers her first duster. Her family had been moving around Western Kansas as her dad, Irvine, worked for various farmers. By the time she was five years old, they had landed at the Foster Ranch in Western Kansas, where they lived in a smaller house in the yard of the

109. *Ibid*, 82.

farm's owner. On this particular day in 1933, the sky darkened until her mother, Lois (Newland) was forced to light their lantern midday. As the storm rolled through, they waited anxiously for her father to return from the fields. When he finally arrived, he ushered his family to the main house to endure the dust. The next morning, the house required a top-to-bottom cleaning before breakfast could be prepared.¹¹⁰ Citizens were confused as the dust storms hit—the central United States had never seen anything like this before. As the decade wore on, however, they would become closely acquainted with the phenomena.

Eastern Colorado and other areas in the plains region had witnessed the optimistic outcome of the sod breaking that had occurred in the 1920s. While growth had slowed during the decade, the number of acres put into production had still increased by more than four million, or 18.0%.¹¹¹ Although prices had dropped, the ground had produced record amounts with the help of higher-than-average rainfall. Now, the pessimistic side was showing its face. As the rains slowed, so did production. Farmers began to flee.

Among the first to leave were the “suitcase farmers” who had been lured by the large profits earned by the settlers. They departed as quickly as they

110. Helling, interview.

111. U.S. Census Bureau, “Farms and Farm Property: 1930, 1925, 1920, 1910, and 1900,” Statistics of Agriculture, Colorado State Table 1, 1930, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1930/02/03/1828/03337983v2p3ch5.pdf>.

arrived, leaving millions of bare, newly plowed acres in their wake.¹¹² In 1934, Colorado's agriculturists reported 1.6 million acres of their crop land sat idle or fallow, and over three million acres of crops had failed.¹¹³ These failures were due mainly to the persistent drought. The unplanted acres, however, were the cause of another problem. Gone were the grasses, specially adapted to the plains, which had anchored the soil to the ground. As the winds blew through, they lifted and carried away the topsoil, creating the dusts Helling and her family witnessed. The dust filled the air and homes, as well as the lungs of every living being. A condition known as "dust pneumonia", contracted by simply breathing in the dust-laden air, became a common ailment and cause of death during the period.¹¹⁴

While the northeastern corner of the state was outside the area most severely impacted by the Dust Bowl, residents witnessed their share of dust storms. The dust never stopped blowing, not even during blizzards, which were

112. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 80.

113. U.S. Census Bureau, "Farms, Farm Acreage and Value, and Principal Classes of Livestock on Farms and Ranches with Value, 1935, 1930, 1925, 1920, and 1910; and Farm Land According to Use, and Acreage, Quantity, and Value of Specified Crops Harvested, 1934, 1929, 1924, 1919, and 1909," Statistics of Agriculture, Colorado State Table 1, 1935, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1935/01/41/1513/Table-01.pdf>.

114. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 7-8.

turned into a “fog of dust.”¹¹⁵ The dry air and harsh winds came not only in summer, but also accompanied the harsh winters the Native Americans had avoided during their time on the plains. Finally, the winters became unbearable enough that the Baker family had to let their cattle go. They had established their herd in Washington County when they arrived almost thirty years earlier. By the mid-30s, they were forced to admit that keeping cattle was unreasonable.¹¹⁶ Many others came to the same conclusion, causing a reduction in business at Claire Muller’s sale barn in Wray.¹¹⁷ The effects of the Dust Bowl were far-reaching, affecting everyone and everything in its path.

Farther south, Baca County and the rest of the Southeastern corner of the state were among the hardest hit. In Baca alone, it was estimated that 1.1 million acres were eroded beyond repair.¹¹⁸ It seemed the warnings of the cattle kings were correct. During the decade, 10.6% of Colorado’s rural population accepted their losses and looked for work elsewhere.¹¹⁹ They were encouraged by President Roosevelt’s Resettlement Administration, which gave loans to families

115. Gray, *Homesteading Haxtun*, 85-86. The “official” Dust Bowl area included Southeaster Colorado, Western Kansas, and the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles.

116. C. Baker, interview, January 16, 2016.

117. Marla Baker, interview by author, January 16, 2016.

118. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 237.

119. U.S. Census Bureau, “Farm Population, By Divisions and States: 1940, 1935, and 1930,” Statistics of Agriculture Table 8, 1940, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1940/03/01/1273/Table-08.pdf>.

to assist in their efforts to find a fresh start. This was paired with Executive Order 7028, which gave the government permission to buy back any land it had given away in previous years.¹²⁰ Thousands fled towards California, the Collins family included. But California was struggling too, and held little hope for a better life than what had been left behind. After a short time out west, Roberta's family returned.¹²¹

The economic Depression brought on by the stock market crash of 1929 created an unfavorable situation world-wide. For Eastern Colorado and the rest of the Dust Bowl, however, the desperate situation was compounded by the conflict with the land. Wayne Scott, whose family homesteaded near Haxtun, predicts the Depression would have been much easier for those in rural areas to bear if it had not been coupled with the drought, as most could provide for themselves if needed under normal circumstances.¹²² This combination of drought and depression proved to be too much for some to handle. But almost 90% of Colorado's rural population persevered. They had arrived on the promise of a better life, and they "stayed behind, for lack of money or lack of sense, the people who hunkered down out of loyalty or stubbornness, who believed in

120. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 229.

121. Helling, interview.

122. Gray, *Homesteading Haxtun*, 86.

tomorrow because it was all they had in the bank.”¹²³ These individuals refused to let their present situation diminish their hope for the future.

The Indomitable American Farmers and Stockmen

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt visited the Dust Bowl region in 1936. He returned to Washington troubled by what he saw and formulating a plan for how to move forward.¹²⁴ As he addressed the nation in one of his famed fireside chats, however, he knew that the situation, while pervasive, was not a lost cause, informing his listeners:

Yet I would not have you think for a single minute that there is permanent disaster in these drought regions, or that the picture I saw meant depopulating these areas. No cracked earth, no blistering sun, no burning wind, no grasshoppers, are a permanent match for the indomitable American farmers and stockmen and their wives and children who have carried on through desperate days, and inspire us with their self-reliance, their tenacity and their courage. It was their fathers' task to make homes; it is their task to keep those homes; it is our task to help them with their fight.¹²⁵

123. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 9-10.

124. Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Fireside Chat 8: On Farmers and Laborers” (speech, Washington, D.C., September 6, 1936), Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, <http://millercenter.org/president/fdroosevelt/speeches/speech-3306>.

125. *Ibid.*

The farmers and stockmen would need help; there was no doubt about that. But those who remained had already seen horrors beyond belief. No matter how hard the wind blew or long the drought lasted, their roots were planted. For these tenacious individuals, there was only one option: they weren't going anywhere.

These families were exactly what *Dalhart Texan* editor John McCarty imagined when he formed his "Last Man Club". These were the individuals that would do whatever they could to stay on their land "till hell freezes over". They were a small group—the "defiant band of nesters", an "elite group of citizens".¹²⁶ The land was shaping them, just as it had shaped their predecessors. To stay required continuous adaptation, as the future during the Dust Bowl was more unpredictable than it had been since the area was settled. No one knew when the rains would come, the wind would stop, or the land would become hospitable again. But they would wait.

Perseverance meant adopting a "do what you can" mentality. While most would rather be farming and ranching, they would have to look to other sources of income until they could return to the lifestyle they loved. George A. Baker, a "jack-of-all-trades", supplemented whatever farming he could do with electrical and construction work. He would carry these skills forward, even as his farm

126. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 229-30.

went back into production in later years.¹²⁷ Another who turned from working the land to working with machines was Irvine Collins. After spending the bulk of Roberta's childhood working for different farmers, Irvine eventually settled on mechanic work to keep his family afloat during this period. Like Baker, he would rely on this knowledge for the rest of his life, eventually transitioning to working for construction companies full-time, which would bring the family to Colorado in 1950.¹²⁸

As the Dust Bowl continued, no source of income was disregarded. Families constantly diversified their work, expanding into new endeavors as opportunities arose. Members of the Scott family hauled corn to Greeley, found work in the sugar factory, and raised chickens to generate income.¹²⁹ Farther south, Robert Ferris had planted his homestead in Cheyenne County, near Kit Carson. With his ability to farm diminished by the lack of rain and harsh winds, he turned to collecting scrap iron for recycling.¹³⁰ To the east, John Henry Rueb, living in Dodge City, Kansas at the time, found work on the Santa Fe railroad, leaving his family for the week after mass every Sunday. His son, John, remained on the farm to do whatever work could be done, while completing odd

127. C. Baker, interview.

128. Helling, interview.

129. Gray, *Homesteading Haxtun*, 86.

130. Conagher Jones, interview by author, January 16, 2016.

jobs in his spare time. His other sons also found work hauling commodities; this time it as sugar beets to Garden City with one of their cousins.¹³¹

While the work wasn't necessarily conventional and certainly less prosperous than their respective farming operations, each of these families was able to maintain their presence on the land during one of the most difficult decades in history as they dreamed of and hoped for a better tomorrow. Families and neighbors leaned on each other as they had in the past. For a period, their communal self-reliance and work ethic did not allow the farmers and ranchers to accept government aid. A telegram signed by 1,500 Dalhart, Texas residents asked for work in lieu of direct aid.¹³² Newly-inaugurated President Franklin Roosevelt responded by creating the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1933.¹³³ The CCC addressed two major issues in the Dust Bowl area: giving work to more than three million young, unemployed men and planting trees and

131. John Rueb, e-mail message to Sam Rueb, January 8, 2016.

132. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 141.

133. The creation of the CCC, as well as the Resettlement Administration and Soil Erosion Service (mentioned later), was part of a broader set of acts called the New Deal. Selected other New Deal agricultural programs were the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (1933-36), whose purpose was to decrease the supply of agricultural products, thereby increasing demand and price. This was accomplished by paying farmers to take their land out of production. The Farm Credit Association (established in 1933) created a system of agricultural banks with the purpose of saving farmers from defaulting on their loans. The FCA system is still in place today. "Franklin D. Roosevelt's Periodic Table of New Deal Programs," *Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum*, accessed March 28, 2016, <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/education/resources/pdfs/periodictablenewdeal.pdf>.

implementing other soil conservation practices.¹³⁴ In Eastern Colorado, these projects included constructing dams, terraces, and contour furrows, and planting range vegetation and trees.¹³⁵ Just as those who endured the drought of 1890s had to reevaluate their farming practices, the individuals who endured the Dust Bowl needed to learn to make peace with the land in order to remain on it.

Success on the High Plains would mean treating the soil with respect. For this task, President Roosevelt turned to Hugh Bennett, “the father of soil conservation” to head the government’s Soil Erosion Service in 1933 (changed to the Soil Conservation Service in 1935).¹³⁶ Bennett urged agriculturists to look past their individual squares of land and see the plains as a whole. Restoration, like everything else on the plains, would need to be a communal effort in order to be effective.¹³⁷ More new methods were introduced, including contour plowing, crop rotation, and reseeding the ground with native grasses. Farmers were also encouraged to enter into contracts with soil conservation districts to give their land a rest.¹³⁸ They were realizing that their previous practices were unsustainable. Towards the end of the decade, those who wanted to continue on

134. Corporation for Public Broadcasting, “Introduction: The Civilian Conservation Corps,” *Rocky Mountain PBS*, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/introduction/coc-introduction/>

135. Gray, *Homesteading Haxtun*, 87.

136. *Ibid.*, 89.

137. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 159.

138. *Ibid.*, 266.

the land were willing to ease into these conservation methods. Persisting on the plains required a healthy respect for the land and its needs. Those who complied would become the most successful in the upcoming years.

“Rally around the New Thing”

Bearing the hardships of the Dust Bowl meant coming together. It meant that sometimes you had to forget what you didn't have, and focus instead on what was around you. Even during the hardest time these individuals faced, the Collins family discovered there was still time to be a kid, a family member, and a part of a community. And surviving meant forging ahead with big ideas, even if the future was uncertain. The Flagler community rallied around Clarence Wright and his theatre and the Women's Club because that is the way of life in a rural area. Having the steady guidance of the larger community meant they emerged from the Dust Bowl shaken, but not broken.

Despite the dark days and howling winds, the Collins siblings still found time to be kids. No matter where their father's work took the family, they managed to find entertainment. When other children were around, they had the opportunity to play in a larger group. They were just as content, however, challenging each other to Chinese checkers or dominos when they lived in the country. Creativity became key, as most towns offered little in the way of

entertainment for children during this time.¹³⁹ This began to change, however, with the increasing popularity of movie theatres.

In Flagler, Clarence Wright sought to remedy the public entertainment issue he saw in his own town. He wanted a way for the community to come together that was more exciting than the typical silent movie theaters of the day. In the Spring of 1930, despite the recent stock market crash, he began construction on his theatre. The building was grand, a mixture of a Spanish-Mercantile themed exterior with an Art Deco interior. Awnings decorated the outside, while hand-painted murals lined the walls of the theatre itself. Progress came to a halt only when a state statute forbid theaters from showing movies on Sundays. Wright petitioned for an exemption, and construction soon resumed.¹⁴⁰

The Grand Theatre opened for business in September of that year with the Joan Crawford and Johnny Mack Brown film *Montana Moon*. The theatre was an instant success, as individuals were excited to see what the “new thing” had to offer. The community was so pleased they continued to come—even during the worst periods of the Depression and Dust Bowl. Like the Emerson Literary Society meetings of Durrell’s days, the theatre was a way to get everyone out of their homes and into one central location. The times to see your

139. Helling, interview.

140. Witt, interview, September 7, 2015.

neighbors, current manager Cheryl Witt explains, soon became church and at the movies.¹⁴¹

The theatre became a source of entertainment and social activity for the community, as well as another “unconventional” way to make money. Wright ran a trucking business and signed two-year leases with individuals who ran the theatre while he focused on this other endeavor. This arrangement continued until Wright’s untimely death in 1936. At this time, management of the theatre switched over to Clarence’s wife, Nora Wright. Clarence’s business-oriented mind provided for his widow long after his death and kept the family afloat during the Depression.¹⁴² It helped the community persevere, too. The theatre gave them something to rally around, a place to meet with their friends and forget their circumstances, even if it was just for the length of a movie. If the theatre could keep going, so could they.

Stay Here, “Stay Together”

History has proven that droughts don’t last forever. For those in the Dust Bowl, a period that seemed like forever finally came to an end when the rain arrived. The rains brought better crops, and the crops set a slow recovery into motion.¹⁴³ John Rueb explains that “any time in history when the farms prospered, eventually everyone else did as well, and so it went with the

141. *Ibid.*

142. *Ibid.*

143. C. Baker, interview.

Thirties.”¹⁴⁴ Eastern Colorado, the plains, and eventually the entire nation emerged from Dust Bowl and Depression as changed people. Although the events had driven them to the brink of complete devastation, they also served a teaching purpose.

For the Bakers, the drought reinforced the value of working hard.¹⁴⁵ Rueb seconds this idea, attributing the family’s work ethic to the hardships they endured.¹⁴⁶ An anomaly to the typical reaction, the Jagers and Findley families moved to the area (Lamar and Campo, respectively) during this time, proving that it is possible to create a prosperous new life in the face of disaster.¹⁴⁷ Families learned to appreciate what they had, to put each other first, and to provide for one another. Looking back, Helling states “it really did not affect us that much as far as not being happy and not caring for one another. You just stayed together as a family.”¹⁴⁸ Together, they remembered the value of perseverance, and to enjoy themselves when they could.

Reliving the horrors of the Dust Bowl takes an emotional toll, and it is difficult to find individuals from Eastern Colorado who are willing to speak openly of the challenges they faced during this time. Some visible indicators remain, however, if one is willing to look hard enough. George A. Baker’s grandson

144. Rueb, e-mail message, January 8, 2016.

145. C. Baker, interview.

146. Rueb, e-mail message, January 8, 2016.

147. Lance Jagers, e-mail message to author, February 4, 2016.

148. Helling, interview.

Chuck noticed one day that some of the family's fence rows were a good four feet higher than most. His father explained to him that once the dust covered the original fences, the only solution was to rebuild on top on the mounds.¹⁴⁹ Other signals are so deeply integrated into daily life on the plains that they are hardly attributed to this conflict with the land the previous inhabitants endured.

World War I and the Dust Bowl brought their shares of trials, but there was joy to be found in spending time together and doing what you loved. Values were strengthened as individuals relied on them to make it through to the more enjoyable times. Residents leaned on their patriotism and the idea that they could be part of a cause greater than themselves during the Great War. It took tenacity to survive both the conflict overseas and the one with their land, but Eastern Colorado emerged victorious. They would prosper, then falter again in the next twenty years. But they had made it through before, and they would do it again. The farmers and ranchers could be slowed, but never stopped.

149. C. Baker, interview.

CHAPTER THREE: RECOVERY

In 1943, the United States was well into World War II. The government rationed many common goods to ensure there were enough supplies to send to allied troops overseas. The system also served to dissuade consumers from stocking up on limited products, creating a further shortage, which would raise the price of household necessities. Goods affected by the limitations on purchases included many common products such as sugar, coffee, meat, butter, tires, and gasoline. To access these coveted goods, families received ration books containing stamps for various items. When it came time to buy a rationed product, the purchaser handed over stamps with the money to show they were entitled to their purchase.¹⁵⁰

There was nothing high school freshmen Roberta Collins wanted more this year than a pair of wooden clogs. Her father's mechanic work had taken the family to Oregon, where rain dominated the weather forecast. Owning a pair of these shoes would be practical, as well as fashionable, as they would eliminate the need for overshoes. There was only one problem: she did not have enough shoe stamps to buy a pair. It took a great deal of convincing, but Roberta finally used her shoe stamps, along with those of three of her siblings, to purchase the

150. "U.S. Rationing During World War II," *Smithsonian Institution*, 2013. <http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/idealabs/wwii/>

clogs. She admits her siblings weren't pleased at first, but eventually they received more stamps, the conflict was forgotten, and all was well.¹⁵¹

Making sacrifices is never easy, whether it is rationing consumable products for the greater good of the nation or giving up shoe stamps to make a sixteen-year old sister happy. These gestures don't go unnoticed, however, and are often repaid with gratitude. As Eastern Colorado faced yet another conflict, they would go without some of the factors that made life on the plains easier. They would find their way, as they always had before. What would come were some of the most flourishing times in the area's history.

“Food Will Win the War”

The day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Americans were reeling. President Roosevelt's reaction was swift: a declaration of war with Japan was issued and passed unanimously on December 8, 1941. Three days later, after Germany declared war on the United States, Congress voted 88-0 to reciprocate the declaration and 90-0 to engage in conflict with Italy as well.¹⁵² The reaction of Coloradoans was as rapid as the President's. By the end of December, two thousand had travelled to the recruiting offices in Denver to volunteer their

151. Helling, interview.

152. “Official Declarations of War by Congress,” *United States Senate*. Accessed March 2, 2016.

http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/history/h_multi_sections_and_teasers/WarDeclarationsbyCongress.htm

services.¹⁵³ Their nation had called them to fight, and once again they were more than ready to answer.

This eagerness to enter the war was a complete turnaround from what farmers and ranchers were feeling few years earlier. The World War I boom-bust cycle was still fresh in their minds. It was through the labor of their young people that agriculture in Eastern Colorado and the rest of the plains was able to thrive; another war meant another diminished labor force. And while participating in the war might mean higher prices and a government-supported increase in output, it had taken only a few years for prices to fall and a surplus to form after the end of World War I.¹⁵⁴ Plus the last time the area had tried mass production, the excessive plowing and drought had resulted in the Dust Bowl. Eastern Colorado was still sweeping dust from their memory and paying off their debts from the 20s and 30s. Farmers, especially in the Southeastern corner of the state, were tentatively recovering from the last decade.¹⁵⁵

Secretary of Agriculture Claude R. Wickard noticed the reluctance and provided the encouragement needed to increase production. Prices and exports were not yet increasing, and these elements were needed to convince the agriculturists to increase their production. This began to change when the Lend-Lease Act was passed in March 1941. The legislation allowed President

153. State of Colorado, "Colorado History Chronology."

154. R. Douglas Hurt, "Agriculture," *University of Nebraska-Lincoln Center for Great Plains Studies*, 2008,
<http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/homefront/agriculture.html>

155. Jagers, e-mail message.

Roosevelt to distribute aid to struggling allied nations, including Britain, China, and Russia, as he saw fit.¹⁵⁶ As they had in World War I, America would first support their allies by sending food. This time, however, Britain was getting most of the wheat they needed from Canada. Americans were instead asked to provide animal proteins to supplement the diets of British troops and citizens. Wickard, with his chants of “Food Will Win the War!” set out to fill this need.¹⁵⁷

To implement Wickard’s plan of increased production, county Agriculture Adjustment Administration supervisors visited farmers in their area during the latter part of 1941. The visits put supervisors face-to-face with producers as they inquired how much their output could be increased during the following year.¹⁵⁸ The most significant increase in products to be exported would be pork, a compromise that would keep more beef at home for Americans.¹⁵⁹ In Colorado alone, agriculturists would be asked to provide 30% more pork, 10% more eggs, and 4% more milk to fulfill the overseas requests for “animal proteins”. Other requested increases included meat from cattle and sheep, potatoes, oats, barley,

156. “FDR and the Lend-Lease Act,” *National Endowment for the Humanities*. Accessed March 3, 2016. <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/fdr-and-lend-lease-act#sect-thelesson>

157. Claude R. Wickard, “Food Will Win the War: Importance of Lend-Lease Policy,” *Vital Speeches of The Day* 9, no. 11 (1943): 350, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.dml.regis.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=5&sid=3911a511-62e5-4231-89ae-2db6a244c9df%40sessionmgr120&hid=110>.

158. “U.S. Will Ask Bigger Crops in Colorado,” *Denver Post* (Denver, CO), October 12, 1940. The AAA was established in 1936 to control production of certain commodities and improve supply and demand forces. By World War II, the focus of the administration was on how to most effectively produce the products needed for troops, allies, and use at home.

159. Wickard, “Food Will Win the War,” 352.

and corn.¹⁶⁰ Farmers still worried about surpluses, especially when the length of the war was unknown. After Pearl Harbor, however, the military began to purchase large quantities of wheat flour and beef and commodity prices shot up 42%.¹⁶¹ The country's involvement in the war became personal; everyone had a role to fill. Agricultural outputs rose dramatically.

Finding a Way

The year following Wickard's request, 1942, was considered a good year for American agriculture. Expansion could be seen everywhere, from grazing lands to the use of machinery, irrigation, and fertilizers.¹⁶² The fear of surplus and decreasing prices was forgotten. It was hard to ignore labor shortages, however, as the other early concern became a reality. With many young men called to fight, farmers and ranchers wondered how they would accommodate this influx in demand. Agriculture had long utilized every labor resource available, including their youth. But there was a difference between simply completing tasks on a farm and totally managing a family's enterprises. Many who were too young to enter the draft were called to fill this role, however, as they replaced their fathers, brothers, and other male family members. For this population of young men, the main contribution to the war effort would be on the farm.

160. "Bigger Crops in Colorado."

161. Hurt, "Agriculture."

162. "Agricultural Mobilization."

Glenn Baker, the younger George's son, fit into this category. By World War II, he was in his late teens—old enough to be a valuable asset of the family's farm but still too young to fight. Additionally, he fell under a provision that stated the last son a farm could not be drafted. This combination placed him firmly on the farm with his aging father. Having two able-bodied men available meant the Baker's situation was not as desperate as others. Glenn's help was still required, but the entire burden did not fall on him, as it might have in other families. After completing his own tasks, he would travel to a neighboring farm and assist a family more affected by the labor shortage than his. The arrangement worked well for both parties. The neighbors were able to participate in the period of expansive production and high prices and contribute to the war effort, and Glenn was paid five dollars a day for his contributions.¹⁶³ As a young man that grew up learning the value of working hard and assisting others during hard times, however, it's safe to assume that Glenn would have contributed to the neighbors' efforts, wages or no wages.

While individuals such as Glenn played an integral role in keeping Eastern Colorado running during the war, they were not enough to eliminate the labor shortage. Farmers would have to reach farther to find willing individuals. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) first encouraged the hiring of men and boys from urban areas. When the local search was met with little success, the government agreed to a temporary migrant worker program with

163. C. Baker, interview, January 16, 2016.

Mexico. Twenty thousand Braceros flooded the Great Plains between August 1943 and 1945, helping farmers fill military demands and earn a profit. The labor of the braceros was critical to the effort of Great Plains farmers, but it could not fill the demand completely.¹⁶⁴

Meanwhile, women in urban areas were proving their value to the war effort and workforce in general. Many women found employment in traditionally masculine roles, including welding and riveting on military planes and equipment.¹⁶⁵ The rural areas began to take notice, and the Women's Land Army (WLA) was launched in April 1943. Recruiting began in the cities, focusing on "nonfarm" college students and faculty and women who had vacation time available.¹⁶⁶ Later in the year, the requirements were extended to allow farm women a position in the WLA, and two hundred and fifty thousand women were placed nation-wide during the first year alone.¹⁶⁷ While most sources agree that accurate records of the program were difficult to keep, it is estimated that 4,075 women were placed on Colorado farms in 1943. This number decreased during the next two years—the final years of the WLA. However, all agree that the farm

164. Hurt, "Agriculture." The Bracero program allowed farmers who could provide adequate housing and wages and comply with working regulations to hire temporary workers from Mexico. The braceros often came from a rural background and were able to perform the tasks involved with the production of a variety of commodities. While they were praised for their skills, work ethic, and ability to learn new tasks quickly, they often faced discrimination during their time on the Great Plains.

165. C. Baker, interview, January 16, 2016.

166. "Agricultural Mobilization."

167. Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, "'To Rescue the Crops': The Women's Land Army During World War II," *Prologue* 24, no. 4 (1993), <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1993/winter/landarmy.html>.

work would not have been completed without the efforts of the many women who agreed to take on additional work to keep troops and citizens fed.¹⁶⁸

Agricultural growth was restricted by the limiting of another vital resource: machinery. Farm equipment was rationed by Wickard beginning in September 1942. While farmers and ranchers enjoyed increased purchasing power, the iron, steel, and rubber needed to produce new equipment was directed towards the building of tanks and other wartime essentials.¹⁶⁹ Agriculturists coped by sharing equipment. Near Wray, Colorado, Edmond Helling and one of his cousins would pool their resources to buy used machinery, or a rationed piece of equipment if the opportunity arose. Edmond then used his mechanic skills to keep the implements up and running for as long as possible.¹⁷⁰ This approach, implemented by many, allowed production to continue on as close to normally as possible during the shortage.

Even with the employment of alternative labor and machinery sources and techniques, Colorado agriculturists had the most productive years in history during the war.¹⁷¹ According to the 1945 agriculture census, hog producers in twelve Eastern Colorado counties enthusiastically responded to the requests of Wickard and the AAA by each selling an additional five thousand hogs compared their 1940 census totals. Weld County lead the state with almost forty thousand head, while the Eastern Colorado counties of Kit Carson, Logan, Washington,

168. Hurt, "Agriculture."

169. *Ibid.*

170. Helling, interview.

171. State of Colorado, "Colorado History Chronology."

and Yuma Counties each produced over twenty thousand pigs for sale. These drastic increases resulted in 75.4% more hogs being sold from 1940 to 1945.¹⁷² Coloradoans also produced 37.9% more dozens of eggs and saw an increase of 27.7% in gallons of whole milk sold.¹⁷³ Farmers and ranchers had not only addressed the three main needs laid out by Wickard for production in 1942, but had gone above and beyond for the entirety of the war.

The government's purchases of wheat flour incentivized farmers to ease back into the enterprise that had struggled most during the Dust Bowl. The state's winter wheat output increased 68.1% during the duration of the war. While a general increase was seen in Eastern Colorado throughout this time, two of the counties that benefited the most from wartime production were Baca and Prowers. Baca County, stripped clean during the 30s, was able to produce 1,317.3% more bushels of wheat in the first half of the next decade. Directly to the north, Prowers County's bushels increased 202.7%.¹⁷⁴ Other areas saw

172. U. S. Census Bureau, "Livestock and Livestock Products: Censuses of 1920 to 1945," Statistics of Agriculture, Colorado State Table 3, 1945, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1945/01/41/1171/Table-03.pdf>. The twelve counties increasing production by at least 5,000 head of swine were Baca, Bent, Crowley, Kit Carson, Lincoln, Logan, Morgan, Otero, Phillips, Prowers, Washington, and Yuma.

173. *Ibid.* Weld County also produced the most eggs, with almost three million dozen, and sold close to eleven million gallons of milk to lead the state. Four Eastern Colorado counties (Lincoln, Prowers, Washington, and Yuma) produced over one million dozen eggs during this year. The bulk of the most productive dairy farms were along the front range, although Morgan County produced over one million gallons of milk.

174. U.S. Census Bureau, "Specified Crops Harvested: Censuses of 1945 and 1940," Statistics of Agriculture, Colorado State Table 2, 1945,

surges of similar proportions, but the two southernmost counties saw a complete turnaround in less than a decade. They took advantage of an opportunity, even when the means to turn soil and seeds into a finished product were increasingly hard to come by. It took perseverance to survive the Dust Bowl; an extra dose of tenacity was needed to find a way to thrive in the coming years.

Sights Set on Victory

No matter where you lived during the war, you likely had one thing in mind during the conflict. Victory, Roberta Collins remembers, was the main focus during this time. Citizens were fully dedicated to helping win the war and would do whatever they could from home to accomplish their goal.¹⁷⁵ While patriotism had been a core value in Eastern Colorado and the rest of the United States during the First World War, people felt intimately connected to the conflict during the Second. This time, they were told that *they* would play a part in the success of their troops and allies. Individual actions would add up to triumph.

The farmers and ranchers were able to do their part through their chosen career path, but everyone in Eastern Colorado made sacrifices and extra efforts to ensure victory. Additional metal for tanks and equipment was available from the reduced production of farm machinery, but every extra piece that could be donated contributed to the cause. Each tank required four thousand nine hundred pounds of iron and steel, and the metal situation was declared urgent by

<http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1945/01/41/1171/Table-02.pdf>.

175. Helling, interview.

1942. Children were asked to scour their houses and neighborhoods for scrap metal, while adults focused on outdated appliances and vehicles.¹⁷⁶ Robert Ferris gave the iron he had collected during the Dust Bowl to the cause. His contributions were later recognized when he was awarded accommodation by President Truman for his efforts.¹⁷⁷

The younger generation was also called on to purchase and sell war bond stamps.¹⁷⁸ The stamps cost ten cents each and were then put into a book that added up to five or ten dollars. Roberta Collins played an important role in this sense, as she was in charge of collecting the stamps for her high school. The opportunity to participate gave her the chance to help servicemen and women, a cause to which she was personally connected. Her older brother Eugene was serving in the Army-Air Force as a welder during this time.¹⁷⁹ As the number of enlisted individuals grew, so did the number of these connections. Citizens felt they could contribute to the struggle of their own relative, neighbor, or friend, and were more inclined to help.

Improved media also gave the public greater access to the war, as it strengthened the connection between the allies and those back home. The

176. Robert Wm. Kirk, "Getting in the Scrap: The Mobilization of American Children in World War II," *Journal of Popular Culture* 29, no. 1 (1995): 226. <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.dml.regis.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=28&sid=58a1afcb-e0c9-4b95-ab33-f4edad46a983%40sessionmgr111&hid=109&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=9604114702&db=aph>.

177. Jones, interview.

178. Kirk, "Getting in the Scrap."

179. Helling, interview.

Collins family purchased their first radio in 1939. The device caused a great amount of excitement in the home, giving Roberta and her siblings and parents access to the larger world. This became especially important during the war, when they could listen to news reports.¹⁸⁰ In Flagler, the Grand Theatre still showed movies, especially the popular Westerns films. The screen served double duty, however, as the theatre turned into a daily gathering place for those who wanted to watch the news reels.¹⁸¹ Citizens were able to directly see and hear portions of the war and keep up with what was happening in Europe, which increased their willingness to make sacrifices for the cause.

Roberta Collins also remembers giving up more than just easy access to shoes. The rationing system eliminated a large portion of sugar from the family's diet. To compensate for this reduced access, Lois used honey to sweeten many of their foods. The family also missed coffee and cheese, among other major products.¹⁸² Near Elba, the Richard Parker, his siblings, and other children longed for chocolate. Clyde Ross, owner of the Elba Community Store, would hide his limited supply of chocolate candy under the counter, bringing it out only when families with children entered his store.¹⁸³ In his address to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Wickard admitted the diets during this time would "be quite a different thing than what many citizens would like to eat", but nutritious

180. *Ibid.*

181. Witt, interview, January 17, 2016.

182. Helling, interview.

183. Brown, *Washington County History*, 239.

nonetheless. Rationing would bring victory faster, saving the lives of American troops. The sacrifice would be worth it.¹⁸⁴

All could agree that consuming less sugar and chocolate paled in comparison to the sacrifices their families and neighbors fighting overseas would face. By the end of the war, 745 Coloradoans serving in the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard had lost their lives. 36 were declared missing, another 764 were wounded, and 56 returned home after being held prisoner.¹⁸⁵ Eastern Colorado accounted for 358 of the state's Army and Army Air Force casualties, 13.3% of the state's total.¹⁸⁶ The losses were mourned, and those who returned to the plains were treated with a great deal of respect. Many aging families with no children to take over their farms rented their ground to veterans at little to no cost. The entire country was grateful for the victory the servicemen and women were able to bring, and those on the plains seemed to admire them especially.¹⁸⁷ These men and women had not only survived the unthinkable conditions of the war, but they had also been through one of the most difficult periods in the area only a decade before. The perseverance that defined life in Eastern Colorado

184. Wickard, "Food Will Win the War," 352.

185. U.S. Department of the Navy, "State Summary of War Casualties from World War II for Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard Personnel from: Colorado," *National Archives*, 1946, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/navy-casualties/colorado.html#describe>.

186. U.S. War Department, "World War II Honor List of Dead and Missing Army and Army Air Force Personnel from: Colorado," *National Archives*, 1946, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/army-casualties/colorado.html>.

187. C. Baker, interview, January 16, 2016.

was emulated in the veterans. It made sense, then, that they were the ones to help the family farms continue on past the lives of the original owners.

Post-War Prosperity

The two decades after World War II became some of the most prosperous in Eastern Colorado history. Citizens rejoiced as their soldiers returned home. Agricultural production was at an all-time high. Businesses and towns were booming. More individuals moved to the area to take advantage of the great opportunities they saw there. For a while at least, life was more than good in Eastern Colorado.

Akron became the gathering place in Washington County, just like Otis had been earlier in the century. Richard Parker remembers his family leaving their home near Rago at sunrise every Saturday to get a parking spot on Main Street in Akron. The town provided more than enough entertainment for individuals of all ages. Families would spend their day visiting neighbors, buying groceries, and exploring the stores. No category of business was lacking—at this time, Akron was home to three grocery stores, including a Gambles, several gas stations, a dealership for every American-made car, an ice house, and a creamery, among several others. Akron's location on Highway 34 also proved beneficial to the town's growth and prosperity, as travelers on their way to the mountains would often stop in the town for rest and supplies.¹⁸⁸

188. Parker, interview.

These diverse options were not limited to Akron, either. Farther south, Flagler was also home to multiple car dealerships, at least two implement dealers, Chevrolet and Ford garages, a thriving Main Street retail district, and a hospital.¹⁸⁹ An American Legion building came to town in 1948, taking some of the community events away from the theatre. This did not stop the theatre's success however, as families who came to town to shop on Saturdays would often stay for the movie, selling out all two hundred seats on a regular basis.¹⁹⁰ Cheryl Witt attributes the town's economic flourishing to the fact that cars didn't travel as far or as quickly during this period. This encouraged the support of local industry and development of new business ventures.¹⁹¹

The limited capacity of cars didn't stop Glenn Baker and his friends from having a good time. Like the Parkers, Glenn enjoyed days spent in Akron, where he could take his future wife, Virginia, to supper and the movies with \$5, which also paid for his gas. Cars became a symbol of the overall economic condition. Those considered classics today were popular during the 50s, and their prevalence indicated that the area was flourishing.¹⁹² Individuals were willing to invest in items that were considered a luxury in the recent past. As businesses multiplied and towns grew, money was funneled into the local governments, who became more willing to devote their budget to capital expenditures and improvements.

189. Witt, interview, September 7, 2015.

190. Witt, interview, January 17, 2016.

191. Witt, interview, September 7, 2015.

192. C. Baker, interview, January 16, 2016.

The Republican River in Yuma County brought the Collins family to Colorado in 1950. The Utah Construction Company relocated Irvine and his family to the area, where he worked on the Bonny Dam. As a certified welder, Irvine's job was to rebuild the earth-moving equipment. The family settled in Wray, where Roberta would remain for the rest of her life.¹⁹³ Later in the decade, construction also began on Interstate 80S in the northeastern corner of the state. The eastern portion of the highway took eight years to complete. Once the final stretch was finished, it linked Eastern Colorado to Denver and beyond.¹⁹⁴ Changes to the landscape shaped Eastern Colorado as a whole. The war was over and prosperity was the now the main focus. In the past, however, rapid changes had resulted in turmoil. The 50s would be no different.

The Filthy Fifties

The numerous opportunities stemming from positive economic conditions resulted in a population increase after the end of the war. As a steady stream of emigrants entered the area, the population of rural Colorado increased 6.1% from 1940 to 1950.¹⁹⁵ The Maranvilles settled near Matheson in 1945,

193. Helling, interview.

194. "Interstate 76" *Colorado Department of Transportation*. Accessed March 5, 2016. <https://www.codot.gov/about/CDOTHistory/50th-anniversary/interstate-76.html>. Construction in Eastern Colorado lasted from August 1958 to July 1966, and the road was slowly opened to public traffic beginning in 1970.

195. U.S. Census Bureau, "Population of Colorado, Urban and Rural: 1860 to 1950," Colorado Number of Inhabitants Table 1, 1950, <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

establishing a family farm still in existence today.¹⁹⁶ Veteran Toy McMillan married schoolteacher Raymonda Oxandaburu after the war, and the couple established their cattle operation near Branson.¹⁹⁷ John Rueb and his family moved to Vona in 1949 after his father, John Henry, purchased and farmed ground in the area the previous year.¹⁹⁸ The farm ground abandoned during the Dust Bowl soon became home to families looking to take advantage of good production and high prices.¹⁹⁹ The only problem was these newcomers did not remember the result of the last wartime surge in production, and caution was the last thing on their minds. Trouble was brewing, but few, if any, saw it coming.

These new residents of Eastern Colorado and other areas affected by the Dust Bowl plowed an additional five million acres through 1950. Three million of these acres had previously been declared “submarginal and unfit for cultivation”.²⁰⁰ Once again, the breaking of the land for crops, paired with past overgrazing, left the land uncovered when the rains stopped and the wind began.²⁰¹ For those who had endured the Dust Bowl, including Roberta Collins and her new husband, local farmer Edmond Helling, this brought back difficult

196. Chad Maranville, interview by author, August 13, 2015.

197. Gisele Jefferson, interview by author, October 31, 2015.

198. John Rueb, e-mail message to Sam Rueb, January 6, 2016.

199. R. Douglas Hurt, “Return of the Dust Bowl: The Filthy Fifties,” *Journal of the West* 18, no. 4 (1979): 85, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.dml.regis.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=30&sid=58a1afcb-e0c9-4b95-ab33-f4edad46a983%40sessionmgr111&hid=109&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGI2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=36447708&db=ahl>.

200. *Ibid.*, 85.

201. *Ibid.*, 86.

memories of the dust and droughts from their younger days. The dust storms affected the ability to raise crops and cattle on the plains, as they had in the past.²⁰² As the rains evaded the plains, farmers accepted that they would not be able to produce as they had been.

Few crops grew in 1954 due to the lack of moisture. The wheat that did sprout was almost immediately destroyed as harsh winds swept it away. In this year, the worst one of the drought, memories of the Dust Bowl were close by at all times.²⁰³ The Ruebs had planted what would be their last crop during the drought period in the previous year. The John Deere self-propelled combine they had purchased was stored in a Quonset, where it stayed put until 1957. Dust left the fields, piling in ditches and covering fences.²⁰⁴ The suitcase farmers, who had come in hopes of earning large amounts of money in short periods of time, left as quickly as they had arrived. By 1955, the winds had damaged 3,096,000 acres in Eastern Colorado, two-thirds of the total land area affected by the dust storms.²⁰⁵ As the parallels to the 1930s drought became more apparent, those who had endured the first struggle became more fearful. They had survived once before, but could they do it again just twenty years later?

Easing the impact of the Filthy Fifties would become a task of endurance. The Soil Conservation Service suggested that those who remain reseed the persistent blue gramma and buffalo grasses that had held the soil down before

202. Helling, interview.

203. Hurt, "The Filthy Fifties," 86.

204. Rueb, e-mail, January 7, 2016.

205. Hurt, "The Filthy Fifties," 89-90.

the arrival of the settlers.²⁰⁶ As dust swirled around them, the equally tenacious residents who remained refused to be swept away. If they had learned anything from the Dust Bowl, it was the importance of caring for the land that provided for them. This time around, they had the knowledge and they also had the economic resources. Production had been so good during the war that many had been able to pay off their farm mortgages. Between 1940 and 1945, the number of mortgaged farms dropped 10%. By 1950, the number had increased due to the arrival of the new farmers, but was still below the levels from ten years earlier.²⁰⁷ Lower debts were combined with higher farm incomes in the years immediately preceding and during the drought than farmers had seen in the 30s. The agriculturists had also learned that relying on government assistance was not indicative of their worth. The Department of Agriculture compensated farmers for their attempts to cover the land and raise crops and cattle in a sustainable manner.²⁰⁸ This combination of information and means allowed farmers and ranchers to negate some of the effects of the drought and begin striving towards normalcy.

With the government resources and the encouragement of the Soil Conservation Services, agriculturists in Eastern Colorado found they could help themselves. They shifted land out of production to allow the reestablishment of

206. *Ibid.*, 90.

207. U.S. Census Bureau, "All Mortgaged Farms, By Divisions and States: 1930 to 1950," Statistics of Agriculture Farm-Mortgage Debt Table 4, 1950, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1950/05/08/1822/34122265v5p8ch1.pdf>.

208. Hurt, "The Filthy Fifties," 90-92.

cover crops. Contour plowing, strip cropping, and grazing management, relatively new practices in the 30s, became standard twenty years later.²⁰⁹ John Rueb's father spent three winters during the drought years listing his fields to hold the topsoil in place. The Ruebs and others who refused to leave "never lost faith in the land. They were good managers and hard workers. They learned these habits because they grew up in the Dirty Thirties and were survivors. They knew that the rains would come back and that as long as they took good care of the land it would become bountiful once more."²¹⁰ By the late 50s, those who adhered to this way of thinking were blessed with the return of the rain and crops.²¹¹ As the Great Plains eased back into production once again, relationships with the land evolved. Farmers and ranchers surrendered their own wants and needs to those of the soil. They could put their faith in the ground only if they respected it, and those who were willing to buy into this idea stayed. Because of those who refused to give up, Eastern Colorado emerged from another trial stronger, more knowledgeable, and ready to take on whatever challenges would come next.

Peace and Love, or Perseverance and Loyalty?

The 60s saw more of the prosperity that defined the late 40s and early 50s. Many towns in Eastern Colorado were at their peak. Farm acreage held

209. *Ibid.*, 90.

210. Rueb, e-mail, January 6, 2016.

211. *Ibid.*

steady at just over thirty-eight million acres from 1954 to 1964.²¹² Rural populations across Colorado continued to increase, although growth in these areas was slowing, rising only 2.8% during the decade.²¹³ The number of children per family peaked at around 2.5 in 1965, which increased the labor supply as well as school attendance.²¹⁴ Eastern Colorado was renewed, finding a momentum that would carry them through the decade.

No matter how the population grew, however, the values of perseverance, patriotism, loyalty to the land and the region, and helping your neighbor remained at the core of life in Eastern Colorado. These values had helped residents in the toughest of times, and they would cling to them even as life got easier. The 60s became a decade of solidifying these values. As the Hippie Movement gained a following throughout the nation, Eastern Coloradoans stood their ground. They had established themselves as a traditional, conservative population. Because this worked for them in the past, they refused to compromise when the rest of the nation told them another opinion was more popular. Glenn and Virginia Baker's

212. U.S. Census Bureau, "Farms, Acreage, and Value: 1930 to 1964," Statistics of Agriculture, Colorado State Table 1, 1964, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1964/01/41/799/Table-01.pdf>.

213. U.S. Census Bureau, "Population of the State: Earliest Census to 1970," Colorado Number of Inhabitants Table 1, 1970, <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

214. U.S. Census Bureau, "Average Number of Children Per Family (for Families with Children Under 18)," Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1955, 1960, 1965 and 1970 to 2015 fig. FM-3, 2015, <https://www.census.gov/hhes/families/files/graphics/FM-3.pdf>.

son, Chuck, remembers wearing long hair during the period, but that was about as far as the influence of the Hippies would reach.²¹⁵

Patriotism also remained strong as the United States entered the Vietnam War. The country was full of protests and cries for peace. This was partially attributable to the increased following of the Civil Rights movement, but the chaos was also a result of confusion. Citizens did not understand why the United States was engaged in the war and felt that the sacrifice of young lives was not worth it. In Eastern Colorado, however, the general sentiment remained that an individual would do what was asked of them when it came to the requests of their nation.²¹⁶ They had served in World War II, and they had found ways to increase their production when asked. When duty called during the Vietnam War, individuals put what they felt they were supposed to do above the cries of the protestors. Like the Hippie Movement, the rallies against the war effort failed to gain much momentum in Eastern Colorado.²¹⁷

The World War II era and the following decade left Eastern Colorado fractured, but not broken. While the period closely resembled the World War I to Dust Bowl boom-bust cycle, residents were learning. They knew that they could not plow the land in large amounts, or depend on a steady rainfall from year to year to water their crops. They were learning the importance of soil conservation practices in the aftermath of another period of large dust storms. Working the

215. C. Baker, interview, January 16, 2016.

216. *Ibid.*

217. Witt, interview, January 17, 2016.

land was never steady, but required constant adjustments and improvements. The tenacious people of the High Plains would adapt and continue on, as had become standard for them. The Dust Bowl had shaped them; this period had refined them. They would move forward into the next unknown with the ever-present hope that everything would be good, but the knowledge that they would make it through if it was not.

CHAPTER FOUR: A CRISIS AVERTED

The 1969 Census of Agriculture states that 88.9% of the Prowers County's acres were dedicated to agriculture at the time of the survey.²¹⁸ Marla Muller grew up in Lamar, the county seat of the Southeastern Colorado county. The family settled in the 11.1% of the county not dedicated to farming and ranching when they arrived in 1967. Duane, Marla's father and the family patriarch, had taken a job as resident engineer for the State Highway Department.²¹⁹ Living in town meant a more limited exposure to agriculture for the first part of Marla's life. While attending college in Sterling, however, she met Washington County farm boy Chuck Baker. The two were married in 1985, and thus began Marla's life on the farm.²²⁰

At the time of the Bakers' marriage, rural areas were recovering from an agricultural loan crisis. Marla admits that as a newlywed living on a farm for the first time, she didn't realize her experience was any more difficult than anyone else's. "I thought it was what was supposed to happen when you get married—you struggle for a while, try to get your feet under you," she remembers.²²¹ What she was experiencing was the perseverance in the face of trying times that is present in all of Eastern Colorado, but is especially prevalent on farms.

218. U.S. Census Bureau, "Farms, Land in Farms, and Land Use: 1969 and 1964," Statistics of Agriculture, Prowers County Table 1, 1969, http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1969/01/41/counties/Colorado_countyData_1969_Prowers.pdf.

219. Marla Baker, interview by author, January 16, 2015.

220. Marla Baker, interview by author, September 12, 2015.

221. *Ibid.*

Residents have been tested by trials stemming from various events mostly out of their control. They admit that some periods are more difficult than others, but that's life in a rural area—full of risk and reward, it is a good life that is subject to tough times, just like any other. The Bakers made it through those first years of marriage and were rewarded with a prosperous operation, three children, and a union that has lasted more than thirty years. And it all began with a crisis.

Fencerow to Fencerow

The 70s threw agriculture into turmoil, especially compared to the relative stability of the 60s. The industry received conflicting cues as to how it should approach the decade. On one hand, the economy was changing rapidly. While the Federal Reserve kept interest rates steady, inflation and unemployment were on the rise.²²² By 1975, inflation had reached 12%, an 11% increase from ten years earlier. This figure would rise another 2.5% in the next five years. During this time, unemployment jumped from 5% to 7%, finally resting at 7.5% in 1980. This was paired with and partially caused by oil embargos that led to energy crises in 1973 and 1979.²²³ The restricted access to oil slowed down

222. This phenomenon is known as stagflation. Marked by a period of both high inflation and high unemployment but slow economic growth, the occurrence goes against traditional economic theory.

223. Michael Bryan, "The Great Inflation: 1965 to 1982," *Federal Reserve History*, November 22, 2013, <http://www.federalreservehistory.org/Period/Essay/13>.

manufacturing and total productivity.²²⁴ The nation was struggling, but an opportunity existed for farmers and ranchers.

During this time, globalization was becoming a major factor in American agriculture. Exports increased steadily during the first third of the decade, then jumped 65% in 1974 alone. By 1978, the value of agricultural exports was \$27.3 billion as commodities, especially wheat and soybeans, flowed to the European Economic Community (EEC), Japan, Russia, and China.²²⁵ Agriculturists had once again responded to a call for increased production, this one from Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz in 1973. The cry was to plant “fencerow to fencerow”; the response was enthusiastic.²²⁶ From 1969 to 1974, Colorado farmers planted an additional million acres of wheat, resulting in an 81.9% increase in bushels harvested. Soybean production increased so significantly that the 1974 census became the first to collect data about the crop.²²⁷ Butz’ request was

224. Bruce L. Gardner, *American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How It Flourished and What It Cost*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 266.

225. Richard K. Abrams and C. Edward Harshbarger, “U.S. Agricultural Trade in the 1970s: Progress and Problems,” *Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City*, May 1979. <https://www.kansascityfed.org/PUBLICAT/ECONREV/econrevarchive/1979/2q79abra.pdf>. The EEC was created by the Treaty of Rome in 1957. By the 1970s, members included Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, West Germany, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Ireland. Matthew J. Gabel, “European Community (EC),” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified August 25, 2015. <http://www.britannica.com/topic/European-Community-European-economic-association>.

226. Robert Emmet Long, “Preface,” in *The Farm Crisis*, ed. Robert Emmet Long (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1987), 5.

227. U.S. Census Bureau, “Crops Harvested and Value of Production: 1974, 1969, and 1964,” *Statistics of Agriculture, Colorado State Table 8, 1974*,

accompanied by high commodity prices, a combination that spurred on farmers.²²⁸

Increased production required acquisition of additional capital. The low interest rates encouraged the purchase of new equipment and more land—investments that would seemingly be paid off by the increase in production.²²⁹

Near Lamar, the Jagers family took advantage of the prices by diversifying their operation. They built an alfalfa processing facility near Kornman, acquired tub grinders to make cattle feed, and bought a fleet of trucks to deliver the ground alfalfa to feed yards.²³⁰ Many others also saw value in expansion, and most turned to debt to finance their endeavors. During the first half of the 70s, average farm debt in Colorado increased 45.7%. Farmers went from owning 56% of their real estate to 28.3%—a 97.9% reduction in owners' equity.²³¹

Borrowing was made easier with the introduction of the Farm Credit Act of 1971, which expanded the Farm Credit System (FCS). An extension of the 1933 Farm Credit Act passed by President Roosevelt, the new act gave farm credit banks

<http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1974/01/06/304/Table-08.pdf>.

228. Gregg Easterbrook, "Making Sense of Agriculture," in *The Farm Crisis*, ed. Robert Emmet Long (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1987), 14.

229. Robert Emmet Long, "Preface," 5.

230. Jagers, e-mail, February 4, 2016.

231. U.S. Census Bureau, "Total Operator Debt by Kind of Class 1-5 Farms With Operator Debt," Statistics of Agriculture Table 114, 1969, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1969/05/11/671/Table-114.pdf>; U.S. Census Bureau, "Farm Operator Debt by Kind: 1974," Statistics of Agriculture Table 19, 1974, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1974/02/02/351/Table-19.pdf>.

more flexibility in their lending. Everyone from traditional production agriculturists to commercial fisherman and rural homeowners was now able to finance their expenditures through the FCS.²³² There was an opportunity for everyone who chose to be in agriculture the 70s, and most took advantage of them.

While these large expansions covered by debt were commonplace, more conservative approaches were taken as well. Those who survived the Dust Bowl especially remembered how difficult it was to pay off debts when the period of increased production came to an end. These individuals expanded to remain competitive and because the timing was right, but theirs was at a slower rate with less reliance on debt. Roberta Helling, who had been working at the Yuma County Assessor's Office since 1952, watched the landscape of her county change as many farmers implemented sprinkler irrigation, her husband included. The Hellings switched from a purely dryland operation with the addition of five irrigation wells. From 1969 to 1974, the number of irrigated acres in Yuma County alone increased 36.2%, compared to a 0.6% increase in the state as a whole.²³³ The use of irrigation gave farmers a tool to combat dry seasons and increased production overall.

Another, even more conservative, approach to expansion was renting ground from others. As a whole, Colorado's approach to agriculture in the 1970s was less than moderate, and as more land was purchased, 2.1% less ground

232. "History of the FCA and FCS," *Farm Credit Administration*, last modified September 22, 2014.

https://www.fca.gov/about/history/historyFCA_FCS.html.

233. Helling, interview.

was rented during the first half of the decade.²³⁴ But Chuck Baker had worked to build a relationship with his aging neighbors, and he wasn't going to let the opportunity to rent ground pass by. Plus, he was only a high school freshman, so purchasing ground may have been above his means, even with a loan. And so he rented his first acres in 1978 at the age of fourteen. Chuck was able to use his dad's equipment and operated on a one-third:two-thirds crop share agreement.²³⁵ He was able to make some money and enhance his work ethic, but, most importantly, he was doing what he loved and had always wanted to do.²³⁶

The 70s proved beneficial to all agriculturists, from those seeking to expand their enterprise to the dryland farmer with access to water to the farm kid looking for a way to start their operation. Farmers had faith that their land would produce to their high expectations, and it did. While they enjoyed this period, previous experiences with expansion based on high commodity prices had not been sustainable. These years would be no different. Those who remembered

234. U.S. Census Bureau, "Summary by Age of Operator: 1969," Statistics of Agriculture, Colorado State Table 25, 1969, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1969/01/41/482/Table-25.pdf>; U.S. Census Bureau, "Summary by Occupation and Age: 1974," Statistics of Agriculture, Colorado State Table 9, 1974, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1974/01/06/304/Table-09.pdf>.

235. A one-third:two-thirds agreement is common between renters and owners of agricultural land. The renter provides the labor, and usually the equipment as well, needed for producing a crop. The landowner receives one-third of the profits from the crop grown on their land, while the renter keeps the remaining two-thirds.

236. C. Baker, interview, January 16, 2016; C Baker, interview, September 12, 2015.

the 30s and 50s knew that they could not go overboard just because their current condition was favorable. Their continued presence on the Eastern Plains would require moving forward with everyone else, but with more considerably more caution. Midwesterners were generally more enthusiastic to follow Butz and take on large amounts of debt, perhaps because they were outside the area immediately affected by the Dust Bowl and Filthy Fifties and could not rely on the same experiences as those on the Great Plains. This would be the difference between perseverance and failure in the next decade.

The Farm Crisis

Price increases had led to the massive plow-up and surpluses that preceded the Dust Bowl. High prices were also the predecessor of the Filthy Fifties. Memories of these times began to emerge as some farmers planted without much regard to the conservation practices that had been implemented after the 50s.²³⁷ It was difficult to keep the possibility of drought and constant winds in mind when the land was producing in such high quantities. Similarities to previous hard times were beginning to develop. While trade was increasing, foreign nations were reluctant to allow completely free trade, often citing national security, unreliable foreign suppliers, the standard of living of domestic farmers, and employment opportunities as reasons to rely on commodities from their own countries. Trading partners imposed tariffs, variable levies, quotas, health regulations, extensive bureaucratic rules, and labeling requirements on U.S.

237. Bob McBride, "Broken Heartland," in *The Farm Crisis*, ed. Robert Emmet Long, (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1987), 50.

agriculture products.²³⁸ Restrictions led to surpluses, which appeared as early as 1972 and grown exponentially during the rest of the decade. As demand dropped, this excess accumulated, pushing prices back down.²³⁹ By the early 80s, the United States was sitting on unsold commodities, but some of the nations that still wanted to import American products had surpassed their borrowing credit and were forced to decrease their trade activity.²⁴⁰ Farmers were producing in abundance to feed a population that didn't necessarily want what they had to offer.

The ability to pay off debt decreased as commodities sat unsold. This was paired with an increase in interest rates that helped the broader economy recover but drove land prices down. Much of the agricultural debt incurred in the 70s was secured by the land the loans were used to purchase. As the value of this collateral dropped, banks panicked.²⁴¹ Delinquent payments reached all-time highs and foreclosures ensued.²⁴² Near Campo, the Findley family lost the farm they had settled during the Dust Bowl.²⁴³ In Yuma County, many farmers were forced to admit they had been too optimistic and sold their farms. Corporations

238. Abrams and Harshbarger, "U.S. Agricultural Trade." Variable levies are minimum price restrictions on imported products that keep prices above those of comparable domestically-produced items.

239. Easterbrook, "Making Sense of Agriculture," 14.

240. Long, "Preface," 5.

241. Cynthia Nickerson, Mitchell Morehart, Todd Kueth, Jayson Beckman, Jennifer Ifft, and Ryan Williams, "Trends in U.S. Farmland Values and Ownership," *Economic Research Service*, February 2012.

[http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/377487/eib92_2 .pdf](http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/377487/eib92_2.pdf).

242. Easterbrook, "Making Sense of Agriculture," 9.

243. Jagers, e-mail.

saw the land as an investment and jumped on the opportunity. Gates Rubber purchased farmland around Kirk and Joes, while Siri's Land Company bought abandoned farms further north, near Wray.²⁴⁴ Rural areas went from booming productivity to complete failure in some cases.

But while the impact was disastrous for some families, most managed to make it through. In Eastern Colorado, caution paid off. The individuals that made careful decisions concerning their enterprises were not crippled by debt when prices fell. To them, staying in the area—on their land and surrounded by their community—was more important than doing what was popular at the time. The ability to persist came from striking a careful balance between taking advantage of the favorable conditions and falling too far into debt. Those families who had been in this situation before looked to previous generations to maintain their presence on the land.

Hope for a Turnaround

Persevering through the farm crisis required financial conservatism, respect of the land and its ability to produce without pushing it too far, and a focus on the main goal of maintaining the family farm. For some, the memories of the 30s and 50s stung enough to deter from massive investment in the 70s. Glenn Baker had purchased additional irrigated and dryland ground during the period, but not enough to incur a devastating amount of debt. As the crisis hit its worst years, the family refrained from purchasing additional equipment and

244. Helling, interview.

cattle. Instead, they relied on the base of land they had been building upon since Glenn's grandfather had arrived on the homestead, their tendency to "put their head down and work hard," their faith, and each other.²⁴⁵ Again, sticking to values trumped what was more popular, and made life easier when those popular options backfired.

While the 80s is typically remembered as one of the most difficult recent periods in agriculture, many in Eastern Colorado employed the same strategy as the Bakers and were therefore able to keep their farms intact. The most excessive spenders in the 70s faced the biggest failures. These insolvent farmers, however, totaled only 6.5 percent of the total population involved in agriculture. Over half of farmers and ranchers were considered "in the clear", with less 10 percent or less of their assets financed with debt.²⁴⁶ Those who chose to stay were in a good place and able to look ahead to the better times that would eventually come with higher prices.

Those who remained were already becoming fewer, however. Pastor Bob McBride, reflecting on the impact the Farm Crisis had on rural communities in South Dakota, noted:

Small towns are hard hit. High schools are closing as young families move to the city; those who remain are reluctant to have children in these

245. C. Baker, interview, January 16, 2016.

246. Easterbrook, "Making Sense of Agriculture," 11.

uncertain times. Rural and small-town churches are rapidly losing members and are largely supported by the elderly.²⁴⁷

These sentiments were reflected in rural areas across the nation. While Colorado's total and rural populations increased during the 80s, all but four of the counties in Eastern Colorado saw a drop in population.²⁴⁸ Additionally, fewer individuals were visiting Eastern Colorado and soliciting the small businesses there. The Eisenhower Tunnel was built in 1973, increasing access to the mountains and the popularity of skiing.²⁴⁹ In Northeastern Colorado, Highway 34 had traditionally been the link to the mountains, and the towns along the way thrived from traveler patronage. The completion of Interstate 80s, which was renumbered to 76 in 1976, changed not only the routes of skiers and vacationers, but their tendency to stop in towns along the way as well.²⁵⁰ As the population declined and businesses faced lower revenues, it seemed Eastern Colorado had reached its peak and was now on the decline.

All hope was not lost, however. McBride was quick to remind his readers that life goes on in rural communities, no matter the hardship:

247. McBride, "Broken Heartland," 51.

248. U.S. Census Bureau, "Population of the State: Earliest Census to 1980," Number of Inhabitants Colorado State Table 1, 1980, <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>; U.S. Census Bureau, "Summary of General Characteristics of Persons," General Population Characteristics Colorado State Table 1, 1990, <http://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1990/cp-1/cp-1-7.pdf>. The four counties showing increases in population during this decade were Cheyenne, Crowley, Lincoln, and Prowers.

249. State of Colorado, "Colorado History Chronology."

250. Parker, interview.

Meanwhile, the people of rural South Dakota, the Corn Belt and the High Plains, go valiantly ahead with life as usual as best they can. The high-school basketball games and tournaments are the main action in towns still fortunate enough still to have high schools. People still go to church, pray for the sick and troubled, try to help their neighbors when they can, and hope for a turnaround.²⁵¹

Life did not come to a halt as families moved away. The Bakers started their marriage during this period of decline. Gisele McMillan, the eighth of Toy and Raymonda's nine children, moved to Akron in 1981 to take advantage of a job opportunity. Two years later she married Kurt Jefferson, a boy she met playing pool. The couple started their family soon after and have remained in the area since.²⁵² Cheryl Witt was married in the same year, becoming part of the family that had purchased the Grand Theatre in 1974. "Eastern Colorado is home," the Burlington native turned Flagler resident states plainly.²⁵³ Many echo her words, no further explanation needed for those who have experienced this life.

Why do so many feel this way? Life has changed rapidly since this period, and not necessarily for the better. But McBride and the trio of couples mentioned above seem to get it: Eastern Colorado, at its core, is still the same. The main components of life—agriculture, family ties, caring for your neighbor, perseverance, and even high school sports—remain. Residents have struggled

251. McBride, "Broken Heartland," 51.

252. Jefferson, interview.

253. Witt, interview, September 7, 2015.

to find out just how much faith they can put in the land, commodity prices, and other circumstances out of their control, and now they've learned to be at peace with it all. While staying may seem impossible to some, the deeply-rooted families find leaving even more unbearable. They've made it this far—why should they quit now?

CHAPTER FIVE: HOPE FOR TOMORROW

Conagher Jones knew it was his last game when he stepped on the field. Win or lose, he would never play high school football again. After a nearly perfect season, with only one blemish on the team's record, it was all going to come down to a state championship game. The team was nervous, but happy to have made it to this point. Most of all, though, they were focused and prepared to fight for the chance to hoist that coveted gold trophy above their heads. They knew what they needed to do; now it just came down to execution.²⁵⁴

Life is full of surprises. When Conagher stepped onto the field, his thoughts likely rested on the plays the team would run and defensive formations. If the possibility of getting injured during the last game of his career entered his head, it probably wasn't at the forefront of mind. And any thoughts of injury would have concerned those that typically occur during football games. So he was undoubtedly surprised to find himself sidelined in the first half of the game, unable to move because the down marker was clipped to his knee by a carabineer. After the successful removal of the clip, an assistant coach taped the gouges closed and he re-entered the game one play later. While he admits his running ability was impaired by the injury, he finished the game. When asked if he ever questioned his return, his reply was swift: "No, not for a second. I was

254. Jones, interview.

not going out.”²⁵⁵ His family has been practicing perseverance since his great-grandfather collected scrap iron for extra income during the Dust Bowl. Since then, the family and community had taught Conagher lessons about seeing his obligations through and the importance of contributing to the communal good. And so he returned to the game, ignoring the pain and never looking back.

Broken Dreams, Broken Towns

Scattered across the plains are the few towns that still exist. The larger ones are few and far between, while the smaller ones are typically only known to locals. Gone are the days of leaving before sunrise to get a parking spot on Akron’s Main Street. The street that once bustled with shoppers is now home to a few miscellaneous businesses, including three banks, a hardware store, a lawyer, some restaurants, and the stores that come and go as entrepreneurs lose steam, funds, and customers. Parking is hardly an issue as many of the buildings now stand empty. Like the individuals who remain, the businesses that still populate Main Street are the ones that possess the tenacity to make it on the High Plains.

Farther south, Flagler is also a remnant of years past. Gone are the hospital and the car dealerships. The town can no longer support multiple implement dealerships and garages. Clarence Wright’s brainchild—the theatre that had been cemented into various aspects of everyday life since its construction in 1930—closed for a period in the late 80s due to lack of demand.

255. *Ibid.*

Like Akron, Flagler's Main Street is still home to a few retail stores, but it cannot be compared to years past, when the town flourished.²⁵⁶ The empty buildings reflect the dreams broken by the harsh life on the plains. They stand as a reminder of the farm crisis, when many who had lived through the 50s and 60s saw the harsh contrast to prosperity and decided they had had enough.

Eastern Colorado recovered from the financial crisis of the 80s, but the period would leave the area changed. The unease reported in South Dakota remained, even as farming conditions improved. Only the strongest stayed, as it had been after the trials of the past. These persevering individuals, however, have been selected from a diminishing pool of residents. Colorado's rural population decreased 3.8% from 1990 to 2010. Seventeen counties reported a population loss in the second half of this period; nine of those are in Eastern Colorado. Those that have managed to increase their population tend to be on the urban fringe, growing only as suburbs continue their eastward expansion.²⁵⁷ Rural residents are forced to decide if they would rather cope with decreasing numbers or the invasion of a new group that may not understand their way of life.

One of these slowly urbanizing areas is Simla. As Colorado Springs and Denver have pushed east, Elbert County has seen explosive growth of 139.3% in

256. Witt, interview, September 7, 2015.

257. U.S. Census Bureau, "Summary of General Characteristics.": U.S. Census Bureau, "Population: Earliest Census to 2010; and Housing Units: 1950 to 2010," Census of Population and Housing Colorado State Table 1, <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/cph-2-7.pdf>. The nine counties with population loss from 2000-2010 are Baca, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Lincoln, Otero, Phillips, Prowers, Sedgwick, and Washington. The percentage decrease ranges from -0.8 (Phillips) to -17.7 (Cheyenne).

the past 20 years.²⁵⁸ Chad Maranville grew up in the area and still lives near the farm his grandfather started after World War II. Throughout this time, he has watched the characteristics of the population shift. “We’re on the edge of rural,” he admits. After spending eight years on the Simla school board, he’s noticed that “the kind of kids that go there are not the same as they used to be.” Only a small percentage of the kids that go to college are returning after completing their degrees, and it’s not the kids whose parents utilize Simla as a bedroom community.²⁵⁹ While the “home-grown” students tend to have strong feelings about the area surrounding their school, those who have moved in do not feel this connection.²⁶⁰ The population is holding steady and schools are able to stay open in these towns, but at what cost?

As one moves towards Kansas, it seems the problems only increase. Six of the nine Eastern Colorado counties whose populations fell during the 2000s are located along the Colorado-Kansas border.²⁶¹ Their access to urban areas is greatly diminished on either side of the state line, driving away potential occupants. These larger towns mean greater potential for opportunity. Lance Jagers has witnessed both sides of the scenario after teaching in both Eads and McClave during his career.²⁶² Both towns are located in counties close to the

258. *Ibid.*

259. Bedroom communities are small, rural towns close to a larger city. Individuals who crave the lifestyle and values of the community but want the career opportunities offered in the

260. Maranville, interview.

261. U.S. Census Bureau, “Population: Earliest Census to 2010.”

262. Jagers, interview.

eastern border that have faced population decline in recent years. Eads, with its population of 890, is the largest town in Kiowa County.²⁶³ Placed almost directly in the center of the sparsely-populated county, it is largely secluded from bigger towns, which means it is also secluded from the industry and business that comes with higher populations. McClave, on the other hand, is located just down the road from opportunity, as Lamar is a short trip east. Lance admits that he typically sees students show more interest in returning to the McClave area. In Eads, the positive feelings towards returning vary from year to year. Even in the good years, however, the percentage is never as high as he would like to see.²⁶⁴ Some leave because an agricultural pursuit just isn't for them; others find themselves pushed off the land as their ability to farm and ranch is reduced by a number of factors.

Only So Much to Grow

The change in population is interwoven with the changes in agricultural practices. While it is arguably harder for a farmer or rancher to sell off all their assets than it is for a “townie”, farmers fleeing the area is not a new trend. Homesteaders craving more than this land had to offer, those individuals who witnessed one too many dusts, and the families drowning in debt during the financial crisis have all been forced to admit that life on the plains is not for them. The number of farms with 500 or more acres—the typical farm in Eastern

263. U.S. Census Bureau, “Population: Earliest Census to 2010.”

264. Jagers, interview.

Colorado—is declining and has been since the mid- to late-80s.²⁶⁵ The towns on the Eastern plains aren't the only places with shrinking populations. For the past thirty years, farmers have been seeking opportunities elsewhere, leaving behind empty houses and more consolidated farms.

What's missing from this picture, however, is a drop in acres farmed. Since 1987, this figure has fallen 6.3%, compared to the 12.9% drop in the number of farms during the same period.²⁶⁶ Farms may be fewer, but those that remain are larger. As Lance Jagers puts it, “agriculture only has so much room to grow, and it's probably not gonna grow in people, it's gonna grow in acres, and we're gonna have less people working those acres.”²⁶⁷ The benefit to those already in agriculture is obvious, but this development leaves little room for those looking to get their start in farming. As farms consolidate, it becomes more difficult for beginning farmers to find their place in the agricultural landscape of Eastern Colorado.

Lance also points out that “the opportunity to start new, with fresh ground that's never been used before, that opportunity has gone a long time ago.”²⁶⁸ Those seeking opportunities to farm in Eastern Colorado are limited to purchasing or renting ground from established farmers. For the most part,

265. U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Highlights: 2012 and Earlier Census Years,” Statistics of Agriculture, Colorado State Table 1, http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Colorado/st08_1_001_001.pdf.

266. *Ibid.*

267. Jagers, interview.

268. *Ibid.*

however, the farmers already in the area seem there to stay, and need to retain their ground to remain competitive. Some farm kids, such as Chuck and Marla Baker's son, Colt, have had the chance to come back and work alongside their parents, which reduces or eliminates their need to purchase land and equipment. Chuck confesses that it took some time to adjust to having his son as a partner, but Colt has quickly become an invaluable asset to the operation. While Colt is able to enjoy the lifestyle and career of his choice, Chuck has been able to forgo finding an outside hired man to complete some of the labor.²⁶⁹ And so the setup benefits all involved.

To the south, another farming family finds themselves facing a different scenario. Sam Rueb, great-grandson of John Henry Rueb, wants to return to Eastern Colorado because he values the interconnectedness found within the communities there. Although his plans were far from finalized, he was surprised when his older brother, Kendal, decided to return to their family's farm after graduating from college. His brother's decision has left Sam with choices of his own to make, as the farm is not large enough to support both brothers and their father, Justin. So while Sam would like to settle in the area and begin farming, he's putting off that goal until his dad retires or another opportunity arises.²⁷⁰

Available land is hard to come by, and even if one can find and afford it, the cost of machinery is also on the rise. In 2012, the average value of equipment per Colorado farm was \$110,134, an increase of 4.2% since 1987,

269. C. Baker, interview, September 12, 2015.

270. Sam Rueb, interview by author, September 10, 2015.

when adjusted for inflation.²⁷¹ Farmers have increased their production and are able to work more acres than ever before thanks to improved technology. This combats the shortage of labor, but new advances in technology mean higher equipment prices.²⁷² Agriculture remains a balancing game as farmers walk the thin line between maximizing production and purchasing beyond their means in an attempt to get to their most productive state.

The modern Eastern Colorado agriculturist often has to balance another aspect of their life: multiple careers. Earning off-farm income is another trend that has been around for some time but has started to gain more momentum recently. Ed Jagers, Lance's grandfather, sold Pioneer/Garst seed, in addition to farming, beginning in the World War II era. This was one of the Arkansas Valley's first introductions to hybrid corn seed, and it allowed Ed to supplement his income using knowledge gained from his farming career.²⁷³ Since then, the practice has become more common, with Chuck and Colt Baker both acting as Pioneer sales representatives in the Northeastern portion of the state.²⁷⁴ Acting in this role allows the individuals to dedicate the time needed to their own operations while adding to their cash flow, a win-win.

This balance, however, is not available to everyone. More farmers are discovering that their passion for the land requires them to spend the bulk of their time away from it to finance their activity. When asked if he returned to the area

271. U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Highlights."

272. Jagers, interview.

273. Jagers, e-mail.

274. C. Baker, interview.

to be near his family's farm, Chad Maranville replied that he "wanted to come back for that but needed this to make it work."²⁷⁵ "This" is Pro Ag Solutions LLC, the fertilizer and chemical company Chad and his wife started in Limon in 2002. The intention was to use revenues from the business to support the farm, but running the business has evolved into a full-time job. Chad now farms when he can fit it in, "for mental health."²⁷⁶ While he finds the farm a more pleasurable pursuit, he must do what he can to keep both aspects of his career running smoothly.

Lance Jagers finds himself in a similar situation. The Agriculture Education teacher, like most with the same title, is on an eleven-month contract, which keeps him busy for the majority of the year. When he's not in the classroom, he's visiting students to check on their projects, coordinating the FFA banquet and other events, leading community service projects, taking the chapter to contests and conferences, or watching animal shows at the county fair. An active member of FFA growing up, Lance had long aspired to teach ag and pursued this endeavor after high school. But the call of the farm remains strong. He and his wife recently purchased eighty acres to give their children the experience of growing up on a family farm. The best way to learn about agriculture, Lance believes, is through hands-on experience, something that can be found on the farm and through the FFA program. His off-farm career meshes well with the community connectedness and work ethic that come with the rural

275. Maranville, interview.

276. *Ibid.*

lifestyle he enjoys, and his family's experiences are broadened by their exposure to both.²⁷⁷

Both Chad and Lance have chosen jobs that take them off the farm more than the seed sales representatives, but all are guided by the same values and display the same tenacity as their Dust Bowl predecessors. In the 30s, agriculturists turned to whatever source of income they could find to make ends meet. Today, farmers and ranchers are becoming more likely to turn to off-farm income than in the recent past. The 2012 Colorado Census of Agriculture reported that 13,722 of the individuals surveyed stated they spend two hundred or more days per year working somewhere besides the farm. This number has risen 65.1% from 8,311 in 1987. In this time, 21.3% more farmers report that they spend no days working off their farm, while the number that spent any time at all away from their farm has also increased significantly, jumping 58.1%. In total, those whose spend every working day on their land make up just 12.5% of Colorado's agriculturists.²⁷⁸ The main factors supporting this dual-career lifestyle are technology, which results in faster completion of farm tasks, and the availability of off-farm jobs.

277. Jagers, interview.

278. U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Highlights: 1987 and Earlier Census Years," Statistics of Agriculture, Colorado State Table 1, 1987, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1987/01/06/3/Table-01.pdf>; U.S. Census Bureau, "Selected Operator Characteristics for Principal, Second, and Third Operator: 2012," Statistics of Agriculture, Colorado State Table 55, 2012, http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Colorado/st08_1_055_055.pdf.

Technology, while expensive, is more widely available than potential jobs. Some, like Chad and Lance, live close enough to a town to take advantage of both opportunities, but others have been forced to make a choice. Shawn Osthoff is one of these individuals. Shawn's parents, Karl and Pat, settled three miles south of Anton in 1956. They raised nine children there while farming around four thousand acres at the peak of their operation. Shawn first attended the University of Northern Colorado, then completed his Master's in Finance at Colorado State University in 1991. He was active on the farm throughout his childhood and college years, and his passion for the farm brought him back to Eastern Colorado after graduation. The Federal Land Bank in Yuma, part of the Farm Credit system, hired him after he completed his degree. He settled into a routine of working for the bank and helping Karl on the farm when he could. The possibility of eventually taking over the farm was on his mind, so the arrangement worked well.²⁷⁹

Before Shawn could fully take advantage of his Finance degree, however, Karl passed away in May 1992. Shortly thereafter, it was discovered that Pat had cancer; her death followed her husband's by just eight months. Shawn had planned on becoming a weekend farmer to help his mother after his father's death, but he soon found himself buying the family's equipment and completely taking over the operation. Somehow, he managed to advance his finance career while working the fields until one or two o'clock in the morning on most days.

279. Shawn Osthoff, interview by author, August 19, 2015.

Transfers in his banking job took him farther away from the farm—first to Akron, then to Brush. He continued to travel between his two endeavors throughout this time, but it was an opportunity to work for the Bank of Colorado’s holding company in Central City, Nebraska, that made him realize he would have to choose one or the other. Commuting to the farm was becoming too time-consuming, and it would become impossible if he took this job.²⁸⁰

After much consideration, the family made the move to Central City. This was followed by a transfer to Durango, Colorado, and eventually Fort Collins, where Shawn became the President of the Bank of Colorado in 2011. Out of nine children, he had been the only one to show an interest in staying on the farm, so the land was put into the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) when he left.²⁸¹ Letting go was difficult, but the best choice for his family at the time. Some roots are unbreakable though, and some of Shawn’s strongest ones remain in farming and his home in Eastern Colorado, no matter where his career takes him.²⁸² Those who spend their days working another job know that while they may be away from their land physically, the values of the plains are always close at hand, influencing their every decision.

“Don’t Get Too Carried Away”

280. *Ibid.*

281. CRP is a government conservation program created by Ronald Reagan in 1985 that pays farmers for allowing a portion of their land go back to its natural state for the duration of a ten- to fifteen-year contract.

282. *Ibid.*

Edmond and Roberta Helling taught their sons, Richard and Kenny, the importance of saving their money and that purchases should only be made when you have the monetary means.²⁸³ This lesson is good business sense, but it is also more than that. As each of the preceding generations faced a new struggle, they learned how to make the best of their situation. The Hellings, with their first-hand experience of the Dust Bowl, knew that perseverance did not come naturally; instead, it had to be experienced and then passed on to future generations. Their generation carried forward and passed on the lessons that come as one inches towards doom, but never quite reaches it. Conserving resources during these times became imperative, and it has since become a tradition deeply engrained in rural life. Those who experienced the worst of the Filthy Fifties and Farm Crisis soon learned that proceeding with caution, as their Dust Bowl predecessors did, is preferable to ruthless plowing and borrowing. This influence has spread to more than just young boys who might have a habit of spending their money as soon as it is received. Everyone, from farmers to businessmen to community leaders, knows or quickly discovers the value of thoughtful, guided expansion. Lessons learned the hard way are best if they are only learned once, and so they carry forward the Dust Bowl ideals of preserving resources and using only what is available to you.

Former Simla school board member Chad Maranville is a strong believer that keeping a school open is “the difference between keeping a town and not,”

283. Helling, interview.

and his tenure on the board reflects this.²⁸⁴ Schools are not exempt from the conservative spending policies that rule Eastern Colorado, and this has helped some of them survive the more difficult periods. During the early 2000s, other schools spent money when they had it, then were forced to make large cuts when funds were scarce. The easiest way for these schools to remedy their situation was to eliminate the more experienced teachers and replace them with newer, less expensive options. Trading experience for money, Chad states, is never the best option for achieving academic success. And so the Simla board made sure to run a reserve when possible, which gave them flexibility when times got tough. Keeping the school open is good for not only the town of Simla as a whole, but also for the students of Ramah and Matheson, who commute to Simla for their schooling. The board's conservative nature ensured they could continue to provide the best education possible for the communities they serve.²⁸⁵

Roxann Hall also adheres to the idea that schools are what hold small towns together. She began her school administration career as the principal of Washington Primary School in Rocky Ford. Consolidation with neighboring schools has always been a talking point in the district, as Fowler and Swink are both very close to Rocky Ford. Taking a school from a community, however, usually triggers the closing of more businesses until the town dries up. The thought of consolidation encouraged the staff at Rocky Ford to strike the delicate

284. Maranville, interview.

285. *Ibid.*

balance between giving employees and students everything they desired and spending what they could afford. Roxann admits that as an educator, you always feel as though you can use more funds, but she feels that her superintendent did a good job of giving her the resources needed.²⁸⁶ Carefully considering the best use of funds helps schools on the Eastern Plains endure the trials of a declining population.

While conserving available funds certainly helps these schools persevere, sometimes it is not enough. Many of the schools on the Eastern Plains are housed in older buildings, and needed repairs are beginning to exceed what the individual district can provide. Competitive grants awarded through the Colorado Department of Education's BEST Grant Program have enabled many schools in the area to make the changes necessary to ensure continued local education for their children. Since 2008, the program has awarded money for everything from telephone systems and fire alarms to new roofs and entire school buildings. If a grant is awarded, individuals living inside district boundaries must be willing to contribute partial funds through an increase in their taxes.²⁸⁷ Many interviewees have watched schools in their area benefit from the BEST Grant, including Chad Maranville (Simla), Richard Parker (Akron and Otis), and Sam Rueb (Hi Plains).²⁸⁸ The program improves the condition of the schools, allowing them to stay open while keeping the district in a good financial position going forward.

286. Roxann Hall, interview by author, July 17, 2015.

287. "BEST Grant Program," *Colorado Department of Education*. Accessed March 25, 2016. <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdefinance/capconstbest>.

288. Maranville, interview. Parker, interview. Rueb, interview.

The willingness of the communities to accept the grants reflects the largely-held idea that a school is needed to bring prosperity to the towns they call home. As the center of the community, a school that is able to persevere despite a declining attendance symbolizes the tenacity of the residents.

Businesses are also receptive to the idea of improvements financed by grants. After the Flagler Theatre reopened in 1989, Cheryl Witt continued to use equipment from the 1940s and 50s to show movies. As the motors began to wear down over the next twenty years, the theatre was once again faced with the prospect of closing—possibly permanently. The opportunity to apply for a grant to convert to digital equipment arose in 2013, when the Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIC) offered rural theatres around Colorado \$20,000 to convert their projectors and perform other upgrades. Cheryl applied, knowing that the community would have to step up to raise partial matching funds if they were selected. Faced with the option of finding the money or losing their theatre, residents quickly responded to the call to action.²⁸⁹

The opportunity to receive a grant melded again the ideas of persevering and using available financial resources. Eastern Colorado residents have found ways to strike the balance between conserving and saving those aspects of life that are important to them. To them, schools represent their ability to continue existing as a town, while saving a long-standing business like the theatre reminds them that surviving numerous trials is possible if the community is willing to band

289. Witt, interview, September 7, 2015.

together. These buildings remind them of the culture that has shaped them and the values and perseverance that have brought them this far.

Perhaps the most obvious form of conservation doesn't stem from that of financial resources, however. Since the Dust Bowl and Filthy Fifties, agriculturists have increasingly learned the value of preserving their most valuable asset: their land. After the massive production of the 70s, the USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) began to implement the Conservation Reserve Program under the direction of President Ronald Reagan. Similar to the Agriculture Adjustment Act of the Dust Bowl era, the program encourages farmers to take land out of production for the length of a ten- to fifteen-year contract. The voluntary participation by farmers and ranchers helps "re-establish valuable land cover to help improve water quality, prevent soil erosion, and reduce loss of wildlife habitat."²⁹⁰ The land entered into the program "rests" as natural vegetation has a chance to regenerate and nutrients stripped away by farming return.²⁹¹

In addition to the environmental benefits, the program provides a consistent flow of income, as opposed to the unpredictable amounts that can be earned through farming the ground. As the Osthoff siblings moved away and

290. "Conservation Reserve Program," *United States Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency*. Accessed March 25, 2016. <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-program/index>.

291. The CRP program has been largely implemented, despite arising during a period when farmers would typically be using all of their land to revitalize their operations. It represents a policy effort implemented at the grassroots level to keep America's heartland and its culture alive.

farming became increasingly difficult for Karl, Pat, and Shawn, putting some of their land into CRP provided a feasible way for the family to keep the land they had worked so hard to accumulate. All of the Oshtoff land is currently in CRP contracts, which has allowed each sibling to pursue their own endeavors, while still returning on occasion to the area that created them.²⁹² The program results in a dual-purpose survival, as the land is replenished and able to continue production going forward and families are able to hold on to a piece of their history, even if they aren't in the area. The ground perseveres, carrying along the values and lessons attached to it as well. These intangible factors are transmitted through the relationships that are formed in the close-knit communities of the plains.

“Everyone Waves”

“What is the single best part about life in Eastern Colorado?” When asked this, interviewees often pause for a moment—not because they lack reasons, but because they are too numerous to condense into one. Some are able to land on their response quickly: “everyone waves when you’re on the highway” and “you don’t have to have bars on your windows.”²⁹³ For others, the process may be a bit longer, but the response does not change. The community—the people that show up for every sporting event, do everything they can to support a worthy cause, and display the tenacity that comes from persevering through trials too numerous to count and too horrible for some to imagine—is always cited as the

292. Osthoff, interview.

293. Parker, interview.

reason residents are able to enjoy their lives on the Eastern Plains as much as they do.

The Flagler Theatre has stood at the center of the community for almost ninety years. During this time, it has brought community members out of their homes for the communal purpose of seeing the latest films. Nearly everyone who grew up in Flagler worked at the theatre at some point, whether they were running the projectors or ushering. But it has also been more than just a theatre. From the carnival fundraiser in the 30s to the proms and plays of the 40s and Cheryl Witt's daughter's wedding in 2015, the building has been a symbol of coming together and spending time with your neighbors, no matter what else is happening in the rest of the world at the time. So when closure threatened in 2013, it made sense that everyone would be involved to ensure the possibility did not come to fruition.²⁹⁴

The OEDIT grant provided some of the funds, but to complete the equipment updates and additional restorations, Cheryl turned to more traditional fundraisers. Residents purchased cinnamon rolls every month, in addition to patronizing monthly bake sales. School clubs held dinners and auctions. Former residents and school alumni sent in donations when they learned of the situation. Everyone involved pushed the project closer to success, no matter their contribution. "You like seeing those \$5,000 checks and those \$1,000 checks," Cheryl recalls, "but those \$20 bills, they all add up." The donations brought a

294. Witt, interview, September 7, 2015.

new projector to the theatre by February 2014, just six months after the fundraising efforts started.²⁹⁵

The theatre updates still continue more than two years later, and the community support has been just as steady. After the projector, wiring, and sound were updated, the stage was repaired and the screen was fixed so it could be rolled up and the stage used for other productions, just like Clarence Wright imagined. As the project entered its second year, the seats were reupholstered and made moveable again after being bolted down in the late 60s. It was during this phase that support became more than monetary. Students sanded the chairs and local businesses painted and upholstered them. Once the seats were completed, the walls were painted and the floor refinished. A local artist was called in to repair a water-damaged mural. Cheryl enjoys looking back on how far the theatre has come, but also sees the projects that remain. The Spanish tiles on the exterior awnings need replaced, the original sign waits to be put back up, and the theatre needs a new heating system. “Basically, it’s just like remodeling a house—you always have something to do,” she states. But she is confident that her goals will be achieved with the help of her community. Businesses that remain in the towns on the High Plains are rare, and residents will not let them go down without a fight.²⁹⁶

These efforts are the ones that receive the most attention, as they should. The amount of funds and labor that have been poured into the theatre are

295. *Ibid.*

296. *Ibid.*

incredible for any town, no matter the population. Community involvement extends past these enormous displays, however. Through the good times and the bad, individuals find themselves so deeply intertwined with their communities that participation in something greater their own lives and jobs is simply the way of life. Neighbors are active participants in the lives of others, constantly watching out for and supporting each other. Chuck and Marla Baker have to call their neighbors when they burn their trash, or else the fire department will show up to douse the flames.²⁹⁷ The McClave FFA banquet drew in a crowd of over two hundred last year. Most of the individuals had no children in the program; instead, they wanted to celebrate the accomplishments of the kids that have grown up under their communal care and guidance.²⁹⁸

At the core, these individuals all adhere to the same ideals. As Cheryl Witt puts it, “It’s not just Flagler, and it’s not just Anton, it’s not just Cope—we all feel this commonness, this community about all of us. We’re all from Eastern Colorado; we’re not just these little dots on a map. We’re all the same.”²⁹⁹

These individuals are personal witnesses to the numerous trials that come with living on the plains, and the great joys as well. They have all made it this far and they will go forward together, because they understand what it means to persevere, conserve, and respect the land and each other.

“Talk About It”

297. C. Baker, interview, September 12, 2015.

298. Jagers, interview.

299. Witt, interview, January 17, 2016.

After spending the better part of eighty-nine years in Eastern Colorado and Western Kansas, Roberta Helling is well-versed in the values of the area. As she and the rest of her generation grow older, however, it is time to consider those that are preparing to take over the land. Living in a rural area has always meant that young people will be involved in every aspect of life. Before the rise in agricultural technology, children were needed to complete all the tasks on their family's farm or ranch. Today, many continue this tradition as they absorb the values of the region from an early age. As the individuals who endured the Dust Bowl age, the direct connection to the trials of the era is fading. How does Eastern Colorado ensure the same mistakes will not be made, and the lessons never forgotten? "Talk about it," Roberta says. She continues:

As long as our younger children don't know, they'll never learn; they'll never know to talk about it and show it. Show the concern. Let them grow up seeing that it's beneficial to help other people and to share the sadness along with the gladness. And I think that this will build the character and pass it on to future generations. If they don't know, they'll never know what it was like, or if they have hard times, [they could think] oh well Grandma, she went through that also. But if they don't know it, they don't know how to apply it.³⁰⁰

The next generation to start lives in Eastern Colorado did not live through the Farm Crisis. They don't know of the times when their towns and schools were

300. Helling, interview.

most prospering, or before the population began its rapid decline. What they do know, however, is how to persevere. They have heard the stories and watched their parents and grandparents struggle through drought and hailstorms and low prices. They have learned that in the face of trials, the only thing to do is move forward. And perhaps most importantly, they know that they have the ability to carry on the values of the area that shaped their identity.

From an early age, children in Eastern Colorado are involved not only in their own family's operations and endeavors, but the community as a whole. Gisele Jefferson has spent her entire tenure in Akron as a Washington County Extension Agent, which places her in charge of various aspects of the 4-H program.³⁰¹ She and FFA Advisor Lance Jagers note how the two youth organizations help members cultivate skills that will be beneficial to them, no matter what their futures hold. While they are in Eastern Colorado, however, they also learn the importance of the larger community, and how these individuals impact their lives while they are in school and beyond.

These community ties are important, and 4-H and FFA teaches members to give back through service projects. Various residents judge contests, pass on their skills, and coordinate events. In return, the kids plant trees, host county fair events, and deliver Christmas cookies. These interactions teach the kids the

301. 4-H is a national youth organization that emphasizes the development of skills that might not be taught in the traditional classroom setting, including livestock husbandry, sewing, cooking, shooting sports, and leathercraft, among others. The program also emphasizes record-keeping and the development of communication skills through project demonstrations and interviews with the judges of their projects.

value of contributing to the larger community from a young age, because these individuals want to see them succeed.³⁰² As these members grow, they will pass the lessons on to their children, keeping the values of community involvement and youth engagement alive. The way of life in Eastern Colorado will persevere because of these interactions between young and old.

“No”

As each interview winds down, subjects are asked if they fear for the future of Eastern Colorado. The majority answer yes, listing off several possibilities relating to population decline and rapid advancements in technology that squeeze out the family farm. Two individuals, however, responded with a simple “No.” Sam Rueb and Conagher Jones both belong to this next generation. They strive to return to the area after taking advantage of educational opportunities in bigger cities. They will detract from the population problem as they make a decision that is largely unpopular amongst their peers. And, most importantly, they believe that there will be something to which they can return.³⁰³ “I don’t fear,” Sam states. “As long as there’s land out there, there’s still gonna be farmers to cultivate and whatnot, so there’s always gonna be a school.”³⁰⁴ It may not be the life that was there in the past, but it will have the most important elements—the values, the community, the optimism that things are good or will get better.

302. Jefferson, interview. Jagers, interview.

303. Rueb, interview. Jones, interview.

304. Rueb, interview.

These boys possess what Jonathan Lear refers to as “radical hope”. Hope that is radical looks to the future knowing that changes beyond one’s control are on the horizon. The established way of life is at risk, but the core of this life will survive. Possessing radical hope means they will be able to adjust their reality to this core, maintaining the part that they can control in the face of that which they cannot.³⁰⁵ It is unlikely that anyone will be able to solve Eastern Colorado’s population crisis. The trials will not stop here, either. But the tradition of perseverance will continue on, because that is how trials on the High Plains are endured. Conagher ends with this idea:

People here, the way of life that they carry on, I don’t think that can just disappear. I think that’s a way of life that you just can’t really get rid of. I think that rural values that are instilled into everyone here, I just think that’s something that, I don’t think that’s something you can break.³⁰⁶

Eastern Coloradoans might not know what they face, but they know how they will face it: with the perseverance their families have shown over the years. Those who survived the Dust Bowl, the Filthy Fifties, and the Farm Crisis, along with every other “minor” struggle have already instilled this idea into the next generation; now it is their turn to implement it.

Ike Osteen, the Baca County boy who plowed his neighbors’ land with his brother during the 1920s, has lived a life that “spans the flu epidemic of 1918, the

305. Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 103-4.

306. Jones, interview.

worst depression in American history, and a world war that ripped apart the globe. Nothing compares to the black dusters of the 1930s, he says, when the simplest thing in life—taking a breath—was a threat.”³⁰⁷ Like Ike, Eastern Colorado has seen the best and worst of the last one hundred and fifty years. The region has been challenged and refined and has survived, and is likely to do so, even as it faces declining populations, consolidating schools, and closing businesses. The tale of Ike and the other tenacious individuals who persisted through the Dust Bowl ends with a statement true of Ike and everyone who has been tested by Eastern Colorado, yet still remains firmly planted there: “He loves it still.”³⁰⁸

307. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 6.

308. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 312.

EPILOGUE

Two and a half months after the streak-ending defeat, the mass of Indian fans follows their team two hours south to Eads. Decked out in various combinations of green, yellow, and purple, they bring with them their pom-poms, signs made from feed pallets, and lawn chairs. This morning, they rose early enough to feed the boys breakfast before they boarded the bus, then formed a crowd at the intersection of Highways 36 and 59, cheering as the fully-decorated vehicle headed south. Now, they are ready to brave the below-freezing temperatures and biting wind, all for a good cause. The boys have done what many considered to be impossible: remaining undefeated after their loss to Pawnee, they entered playoffs as the fourth seed, and in the previous week managed to knock the top seed in the state out of the running. This rematch of last year's state game is all that stands in the way of bringing another championship trophy home.

The Indians receive the first kickoff and score within the first fifteen seconds of the game, stunning the Eads defense and effectively silencing their crowd. Even the injury to Conagher Jones can't stop the Indians, as he proves his dedication to the team by returning to the game as soon as his wounds are bandaged, and the team resumes normal play. The first half switches between Indian leads and ties, and both teams jog to the locker room with twelve points to their name. The second half, however, is a different story. Unable to defend the

long passes of the Eads quarterback, the Indians watch themselves fall farther behind. After what seems to be the longest fourth quarter in football history, the scoreboard flashes a tally very similar to last year's matchup, but with opposite results. The Eads fans wait to storm the field and surround their victorious team; but first, it's handshakes all around. The boys in green and gold hold their heads high as they invite their opponents into their circle for one last prayer, because some things will always be more important than winning or losing.

Was it difficult to ask the Eads boys to pray? "To a point, yeah," Conagher says. "But we realized who were we to pray only when we won? So we humbled ourselves and we decided to pray with them. You could tell they were impressed by that, and if there's one thing that I take away from that game, it's that win or lose there's something that you can always focus on, and that's being a good believer and giving back to God."³⁰⁹ In small towns, athletics are often seen as the thing that holds the community together. Schools may help retain some of the population and keep the businesses open, but everyone comes together at the games, and life-long loyalties are created at a young age. The values that rule Eastern Colorado shine in these moments.

I stood on the sidelines for both of these games, witnessing the final attempt to score against Pawnee and frantically waving my green and gold pom-pom at Eads. It was not long ago that I was one of the high school volleyball girls who proudly wore my best friend's jersey to every game. As an Arickaree alum,

309. Jones, interview.

it's been tough to watch my high school struggle to field a team, and eventually combine with our long-time rivals. But I have adjusted, just like everyone else. High school sports are an important part of our culture, and preserving our school's team is more important than the rivalry that once divided Arickaree and Woodlin. Plus, we always like to say, things could be worse: it could be Otis—a team we've come to loathe, with reciprocated feelings.

I do not know if I would say that I started my thesis pessimistically, but I was definitely worried. My feelings resonated more with the authors of the texts in my literature review than with the people who actually live in and have experienced Eastern Colorado firsthand. My interview questions thus centered around problems, challenges, and fears—school funding issues, fewer resources, and population decline especially. As I went home for the summer and explained my thesis to those around me, they responded with surprise. “Do you really think things are *that* bad out here?” Well, yes—at least at the time I did. I wanted to move back after graduation, but would I be able to find a job and start a family? Would there even be a school for my future kids to attend?

This is where I should thank my interviewees. They refused to rest on the negatives, always going back to how things were and are ok in Eastern Colorado, and how they will continue to be, even in the face of population decline. I struggled to work on my thesis after the first few interviews because I could not figure out how these individuals and their ideas would fit into my proposed topic. It took a lot of work to come to the conclusion that maybe things

are not as bad as they seem. There is something underlying daily life in Eastern Colorado that makes residents more resilient than most. These values of perseverance, community, and loyalty to the land hold the area together, shaping every individual who spends time there. And as I found my thesis changing in response to these individuals, I found myself changing as well.

After coming to Regis, I often struggled to verbalize to my peers why I think this sparsely-populated, stuck-in-their-ways community is the best place to be. One of my school friends recently commented on my loyalty to my high school sports program, which extends past the fact that my brother is currently a member of the football, basketball, and track and field teams. Professors have looked at me skeptically when I tell them I'm forgoing interviewing at the large accounting firms to find a job a teaching or banking job back home. Why would I ever want to return to an area where the opportunities are scarce and weekends revolve around prep sports?

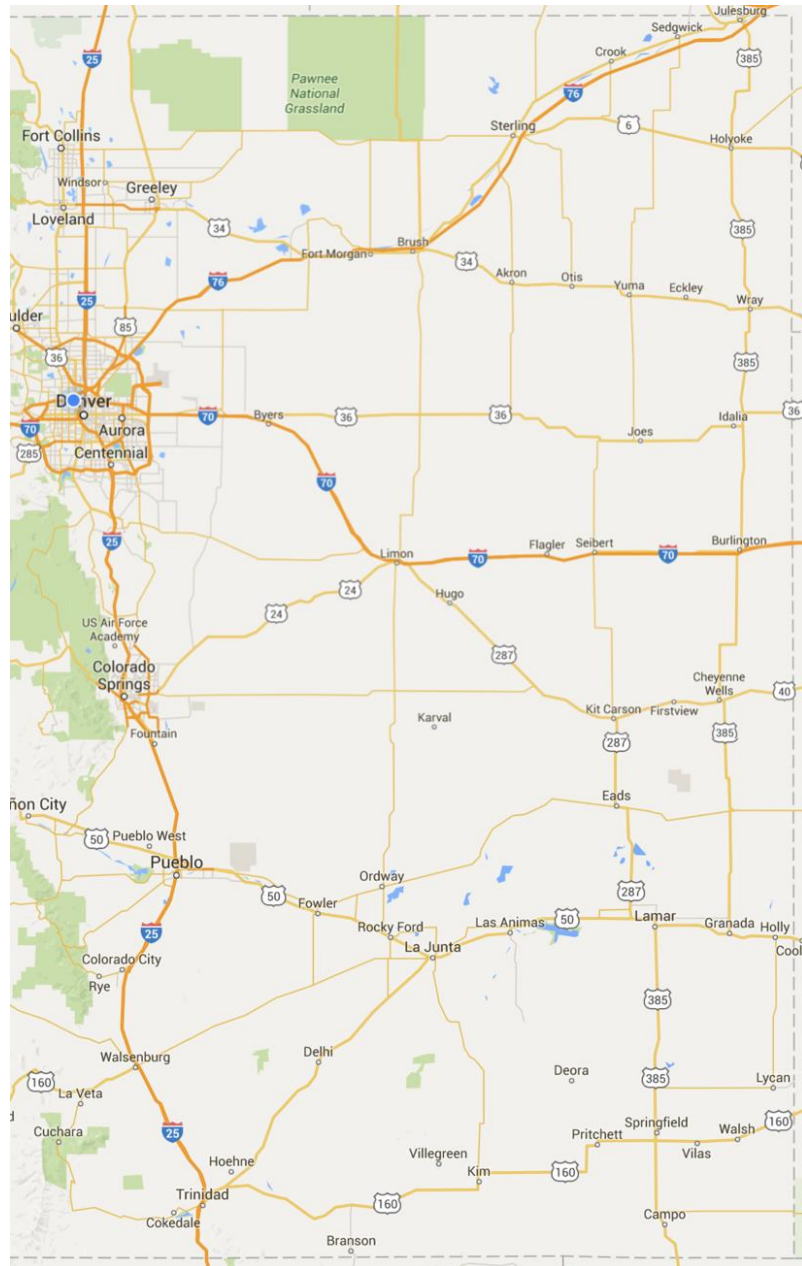
The reason is the people. Of the twelve individuals I interviewed, I had met only four before I started the thesis process. The remainder answered cold contact messages and requests from mutual acquaintances. None were hesitant to offer their help, insight, and wisdom. The Bank of Colorado President made time in his schedule based on the fact that we graduated from the same high school. Cheryl Witt responded to numerous interview requests and allowed me to wander the theatre taking pictures when she could have been at home watching a Broncos game. Being around these people reminded me that no

matter how discouraging the current state of the area may seem, they will always be there. I am willing to sacrifice higher paying jobs and entertainment options to be with them, because they are the best part of Eastern Colorado.

And so I end my thesis and prepare to go home—for good this time. I may have a rough start, but so did Chuck and Marla Baker, and they are still around. I will live amongst the likes of Sam Rueb and Conagher Jones, individuals who believe that the values and traditions of the area will overcome and that give me hope for the future of the place I call home. I will be able to face any challenges that come my way because growing up in Eastern Colorado has taught me to work hard, advocate for the things in which I believe, and that I can rely on my community along the way. Most of all, though, life on the Great Plains has taught me that I will persevere because so many have before me. Because I am one of them, it will be no different for me. The values I've embraced will keep me rooted to the ground and tenacity will allow me to stand in the midst of struggle. Others may look in and wonder how we do it, but persevering is just the way of life in Eastern Colorado.

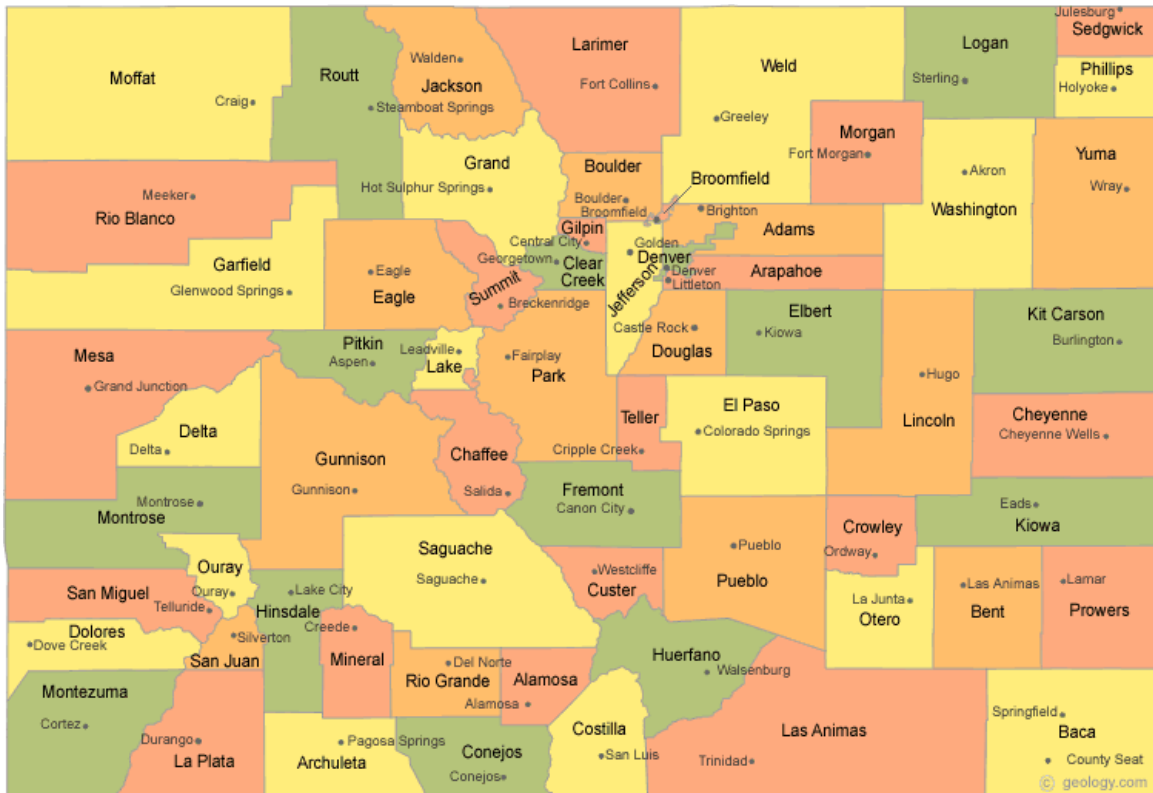
APPENDIX

Eastern Colorado Area with Highways³¹⁰



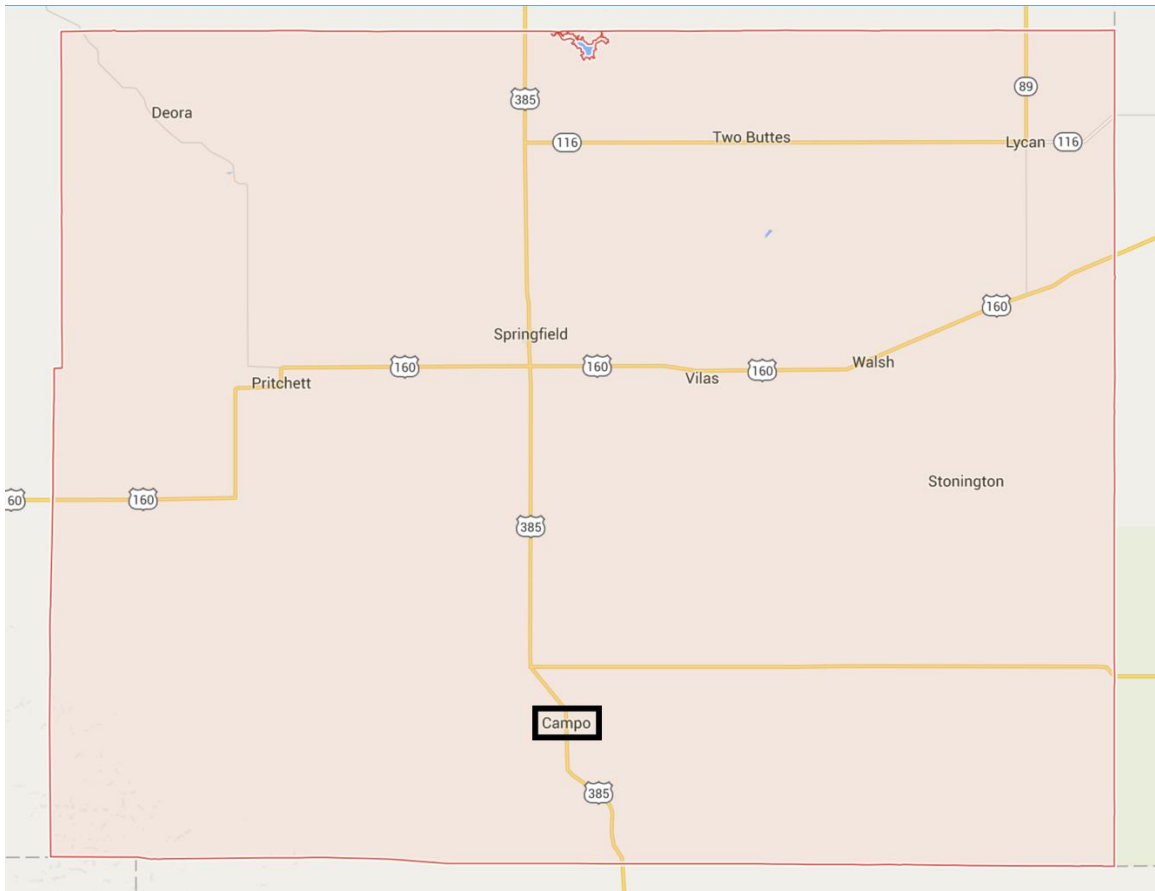
310. "Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed March 31, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Colorado/@38.9807277,-107.7938072,7z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x874014749b1856b7:0xc75483314990a7ff>.

Map of Colorado Counties³¹¹



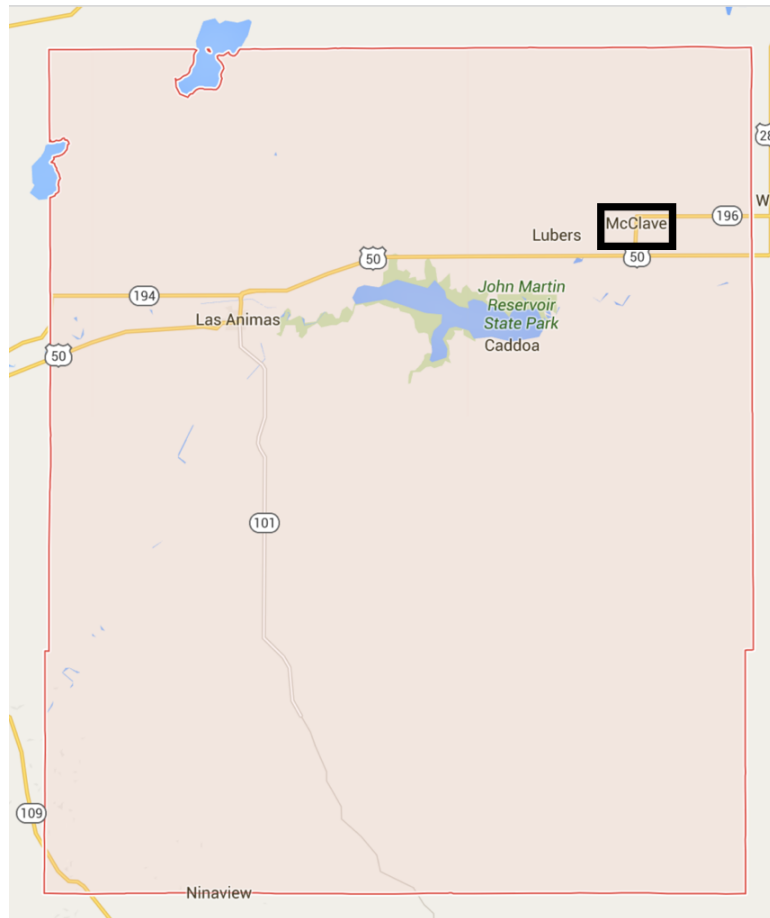
311. "Colorado County Map with County Seat Cities," *Geology.com*, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://geology.com/county-map/colorado.shtml>.

Baca County, Colorado³¹²



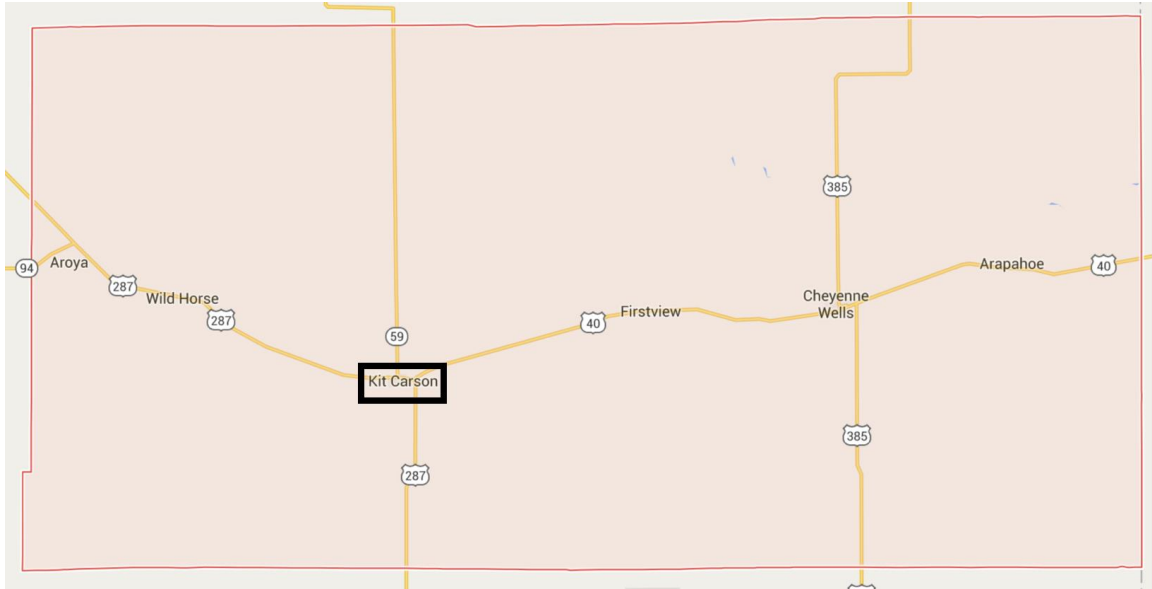
312. "Baca County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 21, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Baca+County,+CO/@37.3189358,-102.8442627,10z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x870e45a35d748c13:0x2f8c468a25dd5dd9>. The places outlined in black are those directly mentioned in the thesis.

Bent County, Colorado³¹³



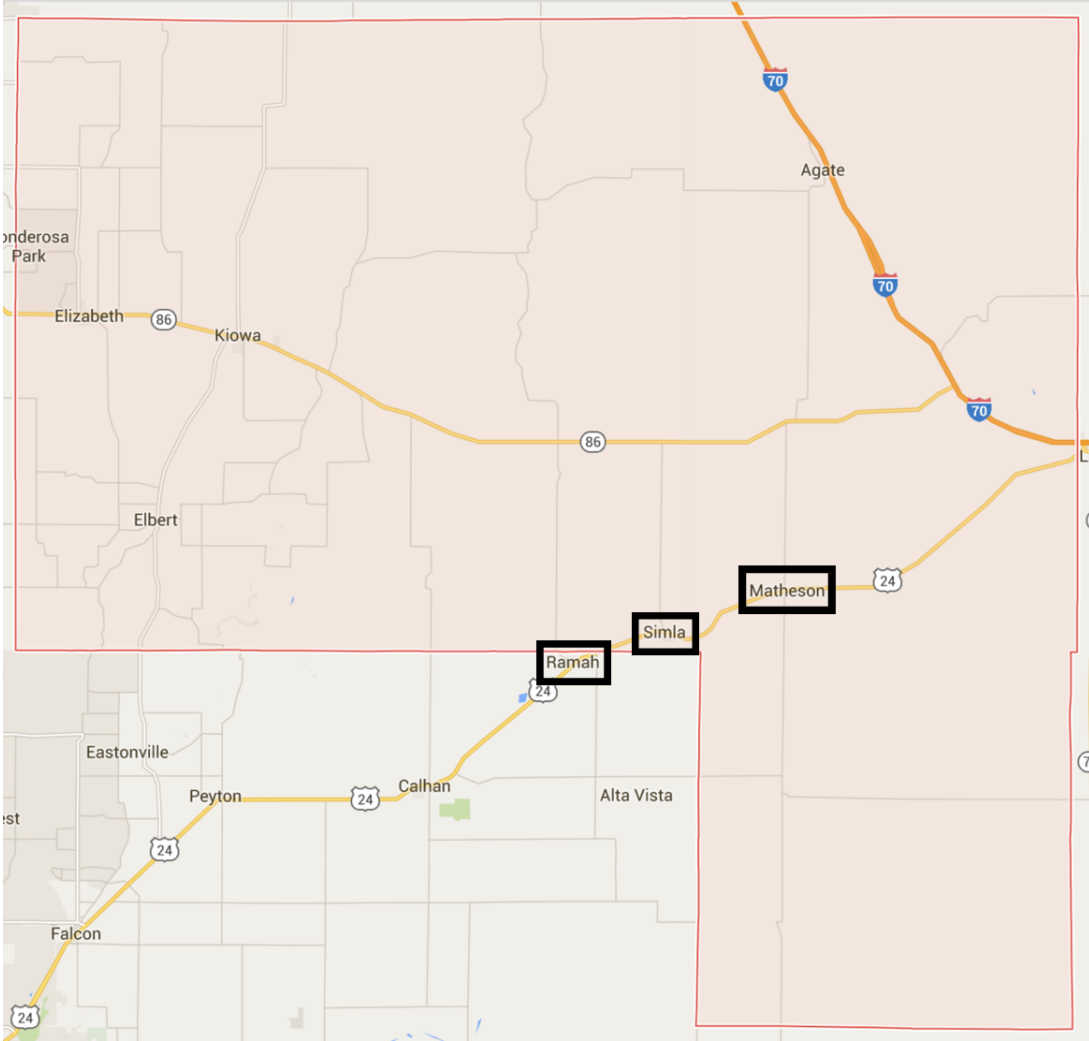
313. "Bent County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 21, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Bent+County,+CO/@37.9557567,-103.352571,10z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x870e14c7cd46c221:0x78c8025e7b7f5686>.

Cheyenne County, Colorado³¹⁴



314. "Cheyenne County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 21, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Cheyenne+County,+CO/@38.8314968,-102.8856109,9.99z/data=!4m2!3m1!1s0x870ceff1fd22a3d3:0xd66c72e758b9450c>.

Elbert County, Colorado³¹⁵



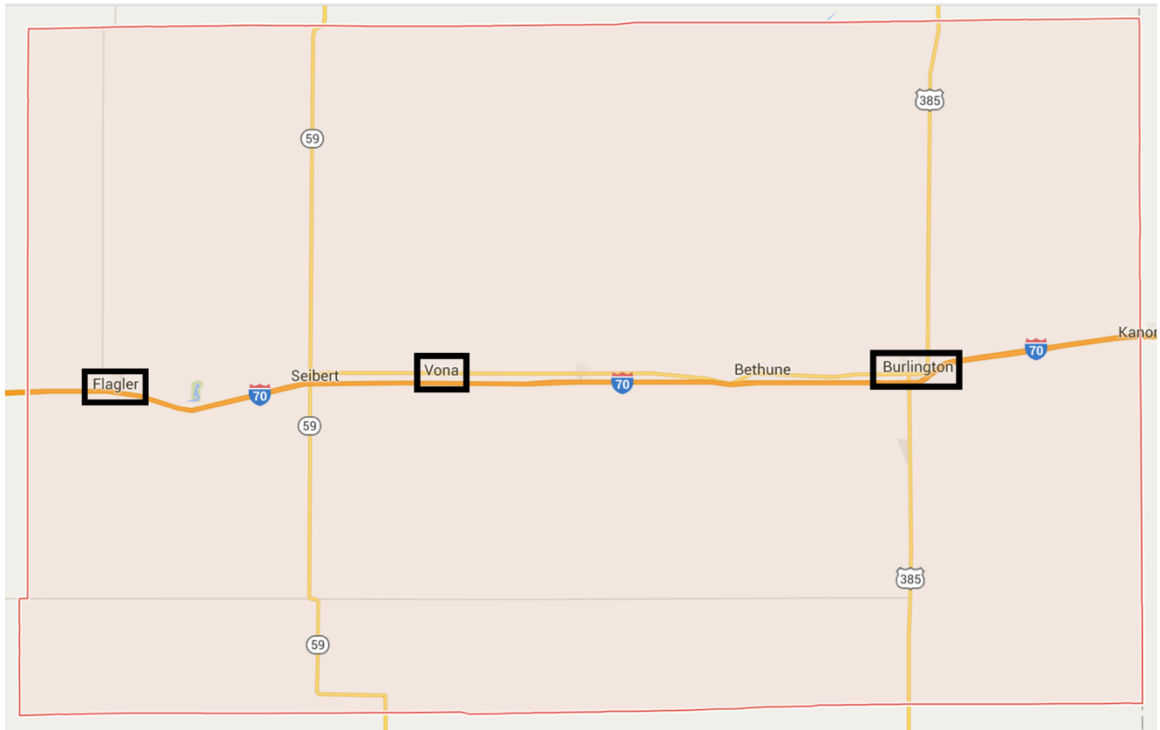
315. "Elbert County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 21, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Elbert+County,+CO/@39.2161922,-104.4696202,10z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x876d2322bbfdaf3b:0x7e5966caf4fe9b77>.

Kiowa County, Colorado³¹⁶



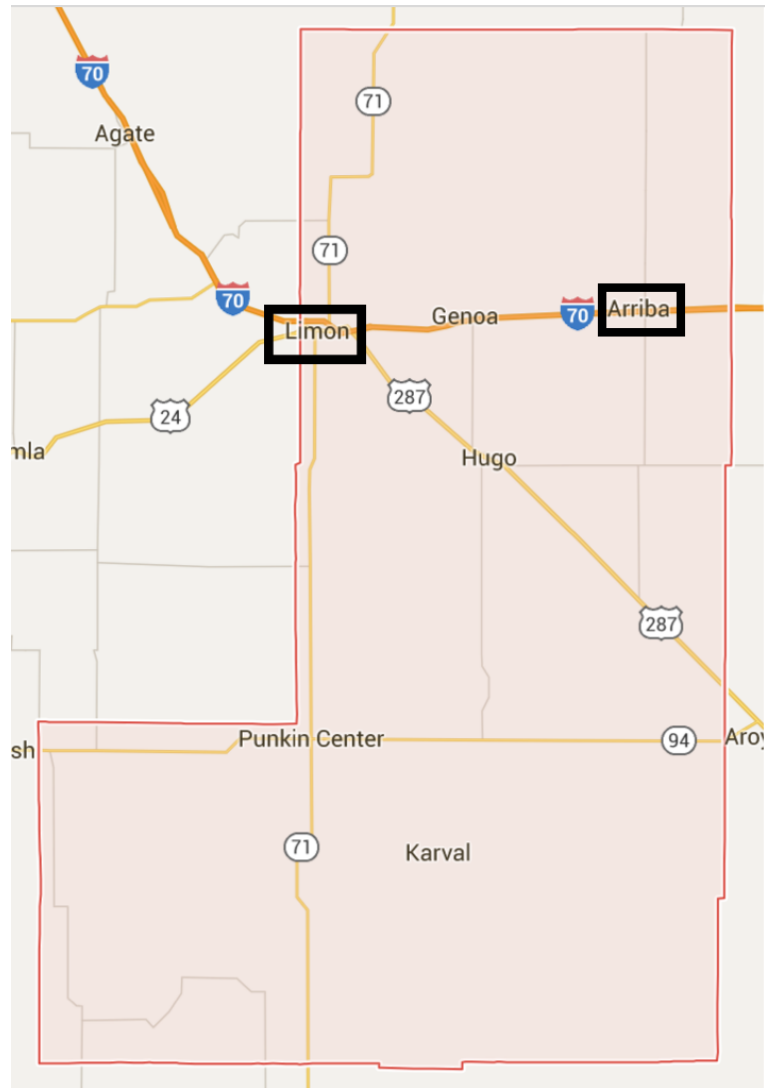
316. "Kiowa County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 21, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Kiowa+County,+CO/@38.4401067,-103.3361284,9z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x870c5310d104ca2d:0x5848d1103e0c307b>.

Kit Carson County, Colorado³¹⁷



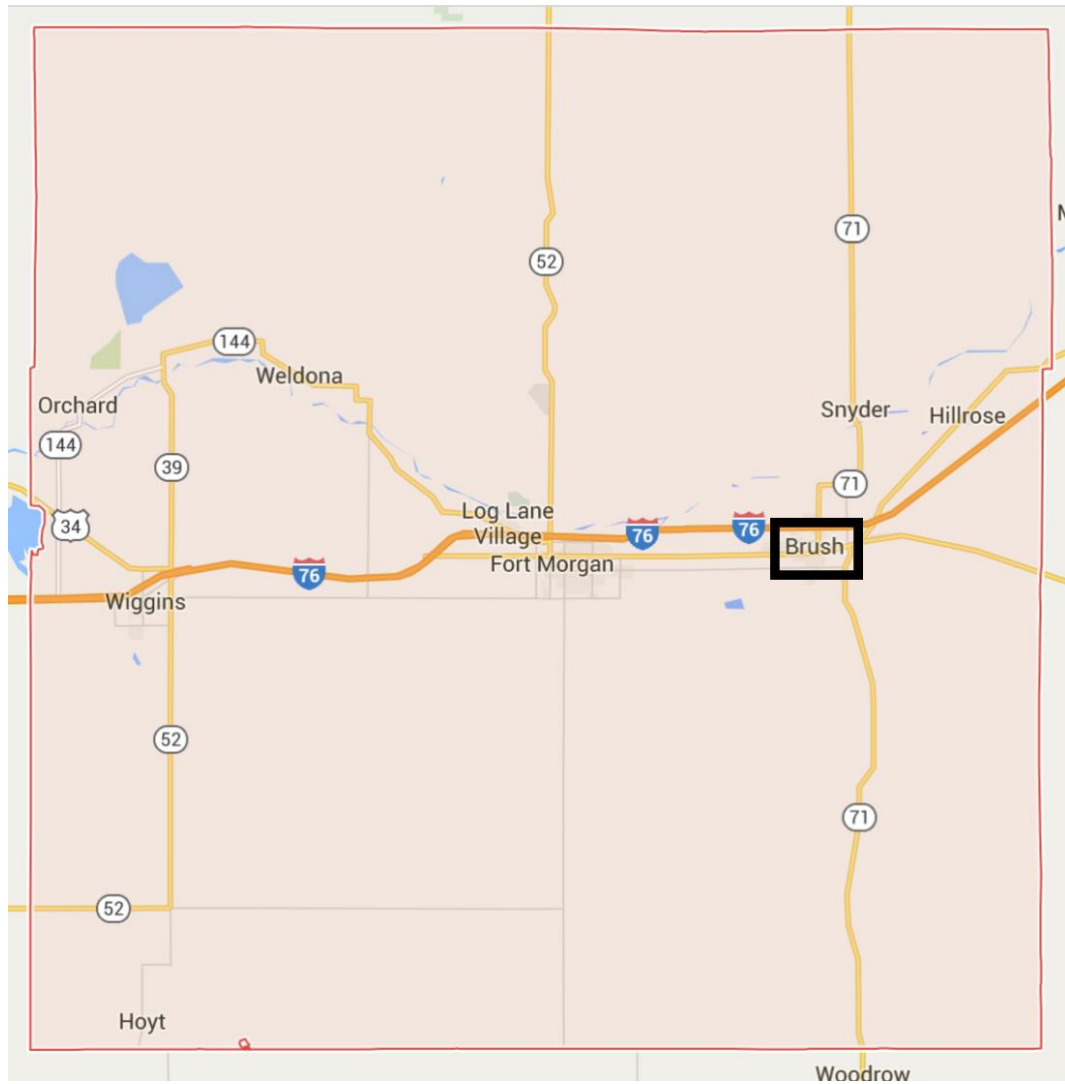
317. "Kit Carson County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 21, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Kit+Carson+County,+CO/@39.3060296,-102.8850743,10z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x87732d669ed41b6d:0x4f12ecb98687fcea>.

Lincoln County, Colorado³¹⁸



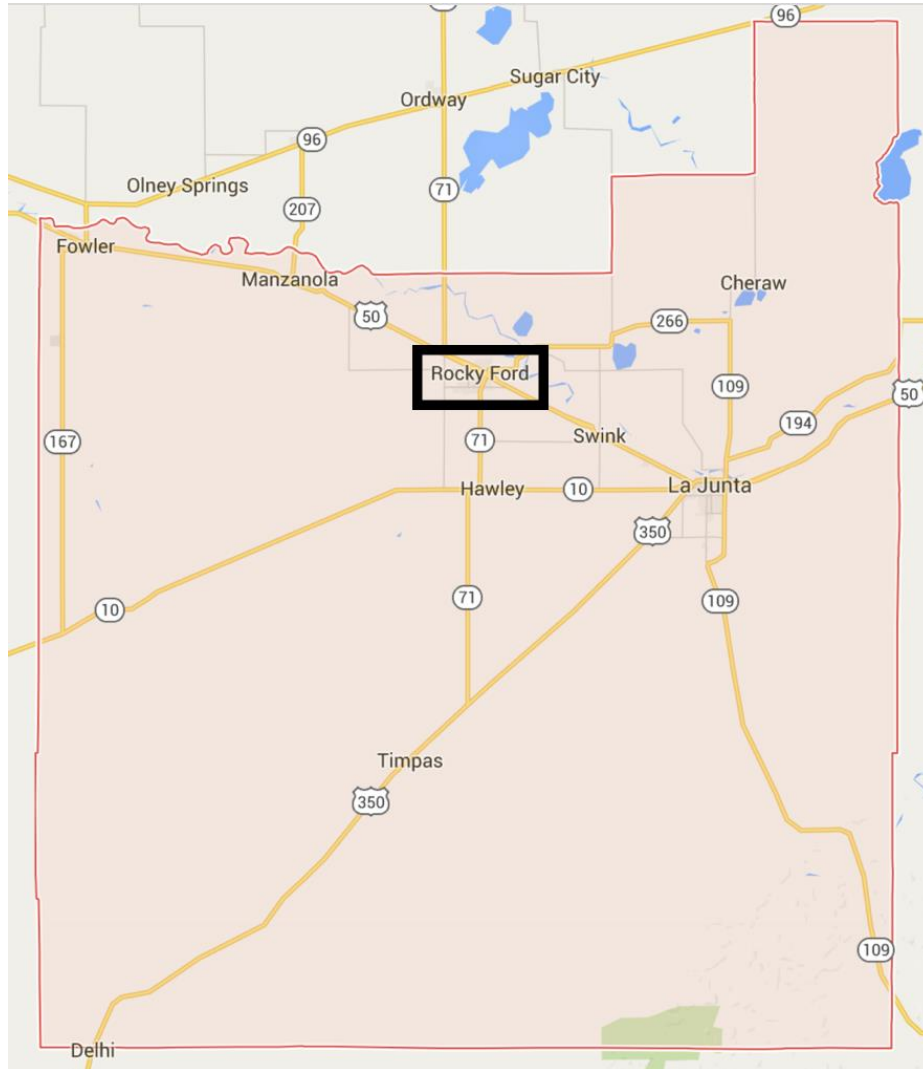
318. "Lincoln County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 21, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Lincoln+County,+CO/@39.0412153,-104.1653919,9z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x8712ab850d076347:0x4fb47c03f00ecce5>.

Morgan County, Colorado³¹⁹



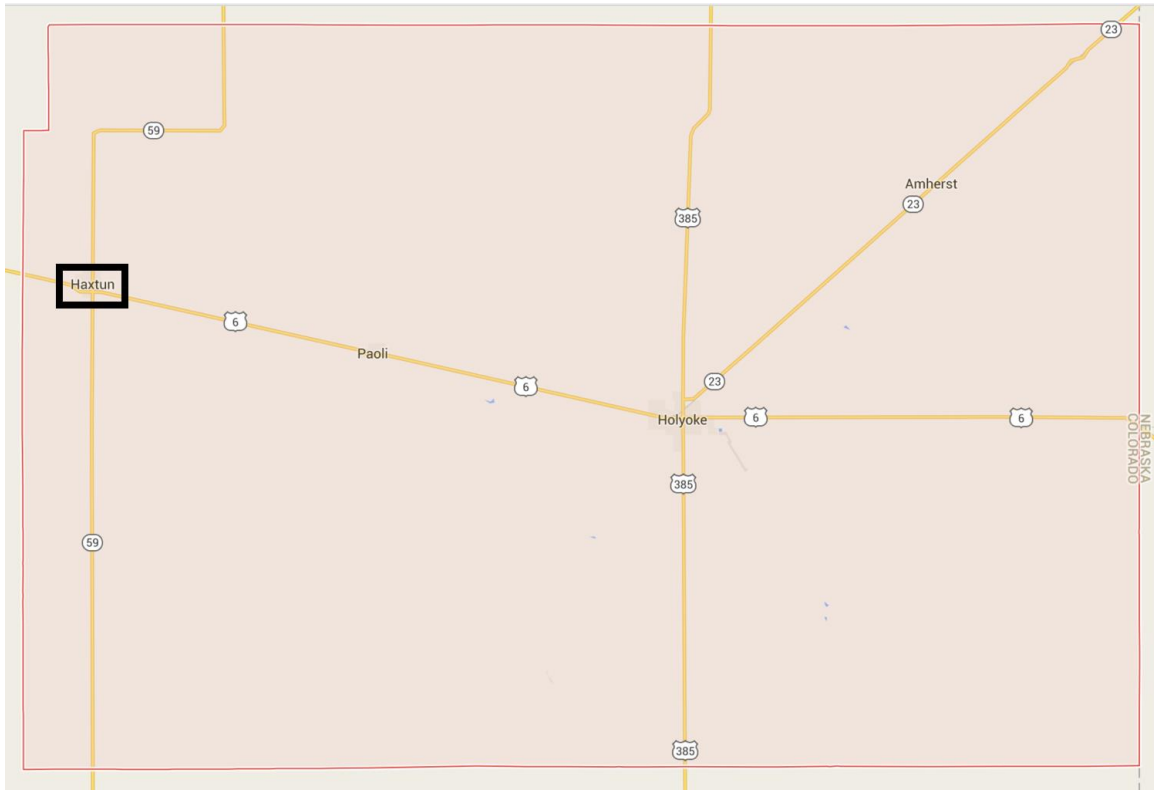
319. "Morgan County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 21, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Morgan+County,+CO/@40.262274,-104.0883657,10z/data=!3m1!4m2!3m1!1s0x876df6cd3216d153:0x95ec4fc493d21d36>.

Otero County, Colorado³²⁰



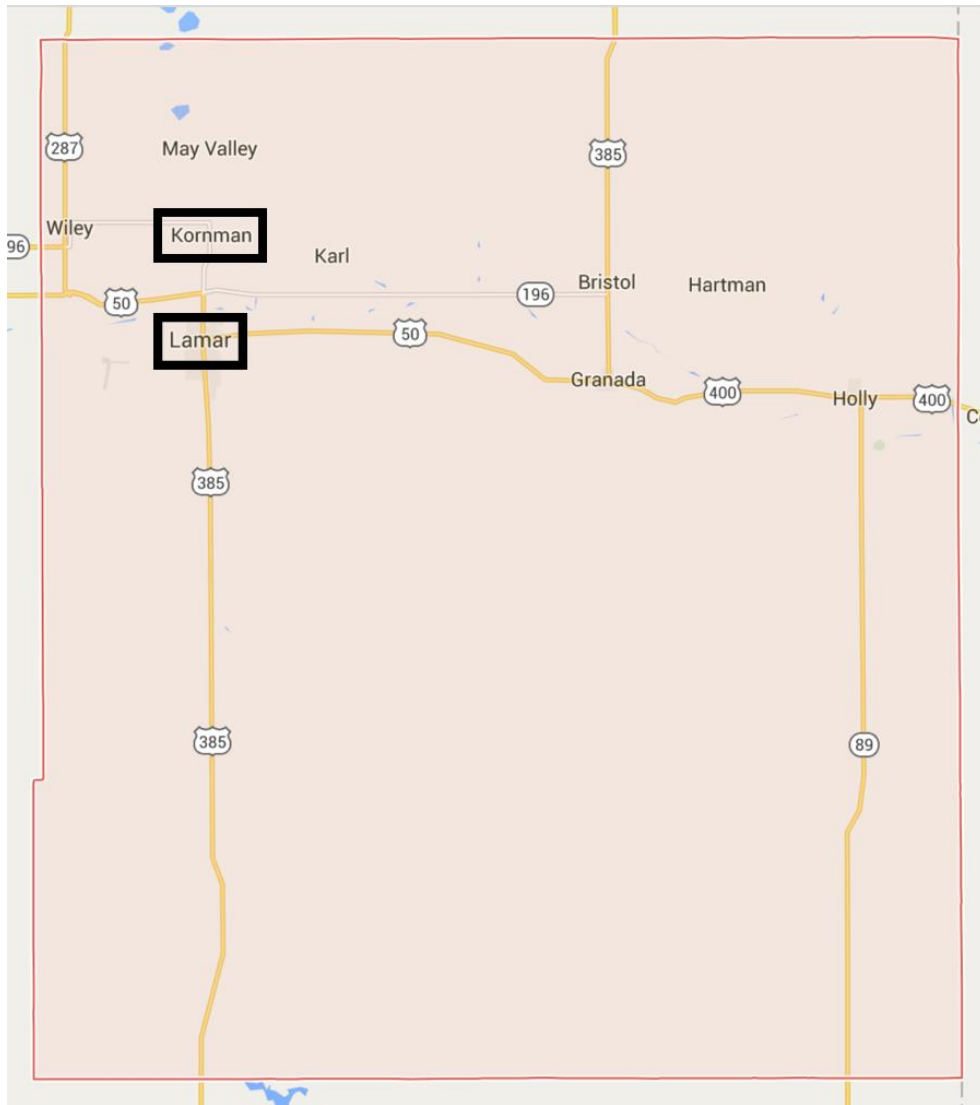
320. "Otero County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 21, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Otero+County,+CO/@37.9544313,-104.0102754,10z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x870e198ca6f0db75:0x15294bd641b666a1>.

Phillips County, Colorado³²¹



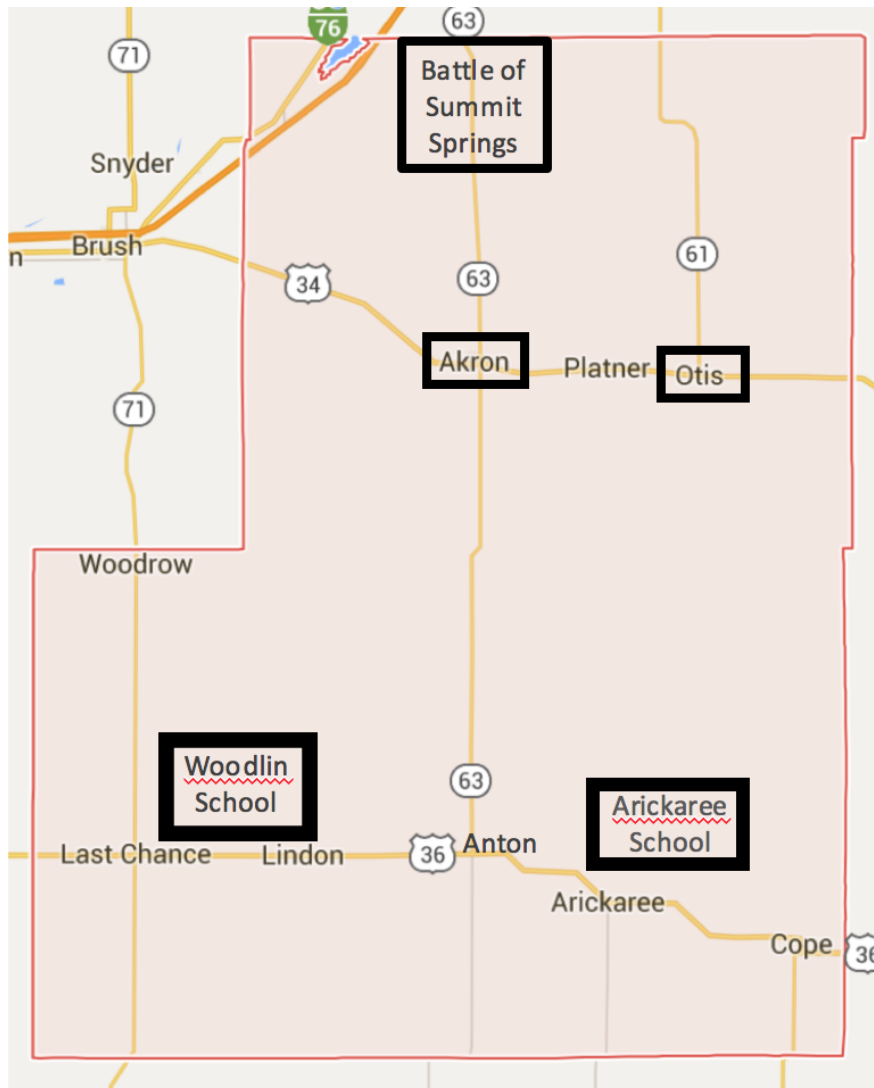
321. "Phillips County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 21, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Phillips+County,+CO/@40.5892334,-102.4880109,10.86z/data=!4m2!3m1!1s0x8773d50b8632c891:0xddf3896029dc51d2>.

Prowers County, Colorado³²²



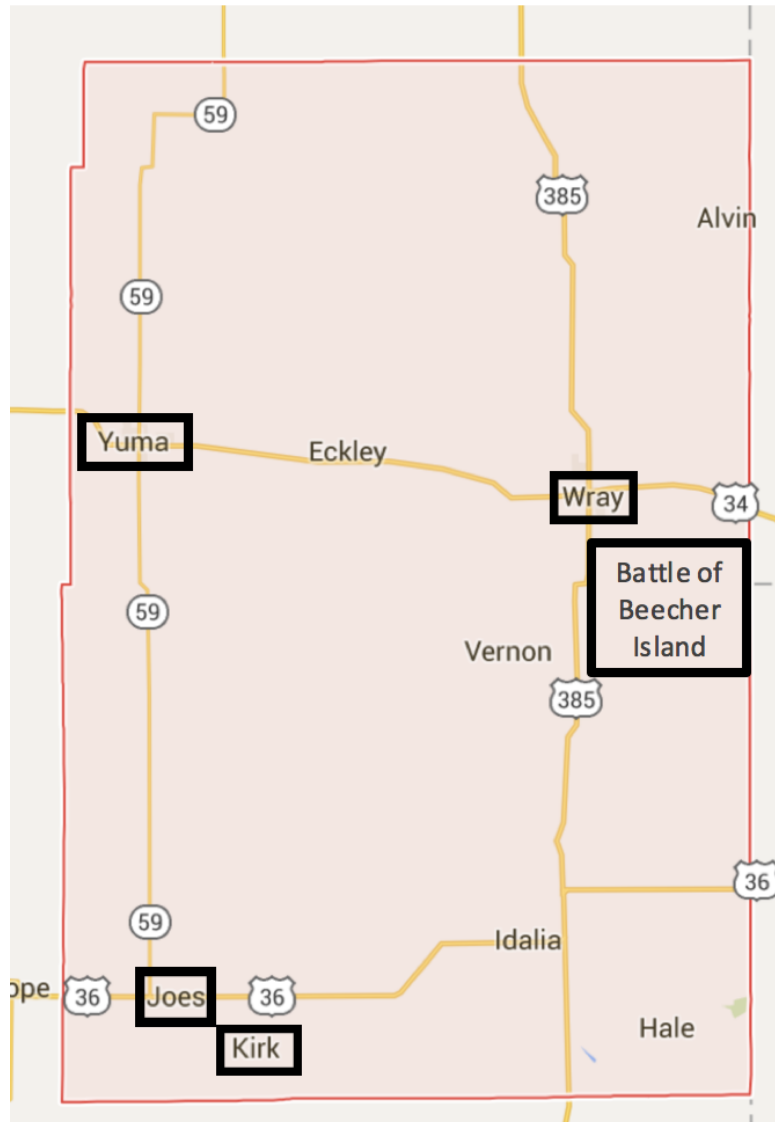
322. "Prowers County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 22, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Prowers+County,+CO/@37.9563392,-102.6749714,10z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x870e9f82a3e28f31:0x1934f6289fb20f3>.

Washington County, Colorado³²³



323. "Washington County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 22, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/search/washington,+co/@40.0017836,-103.8039398,9z/>.

Yuma County, Colorado³²⁴



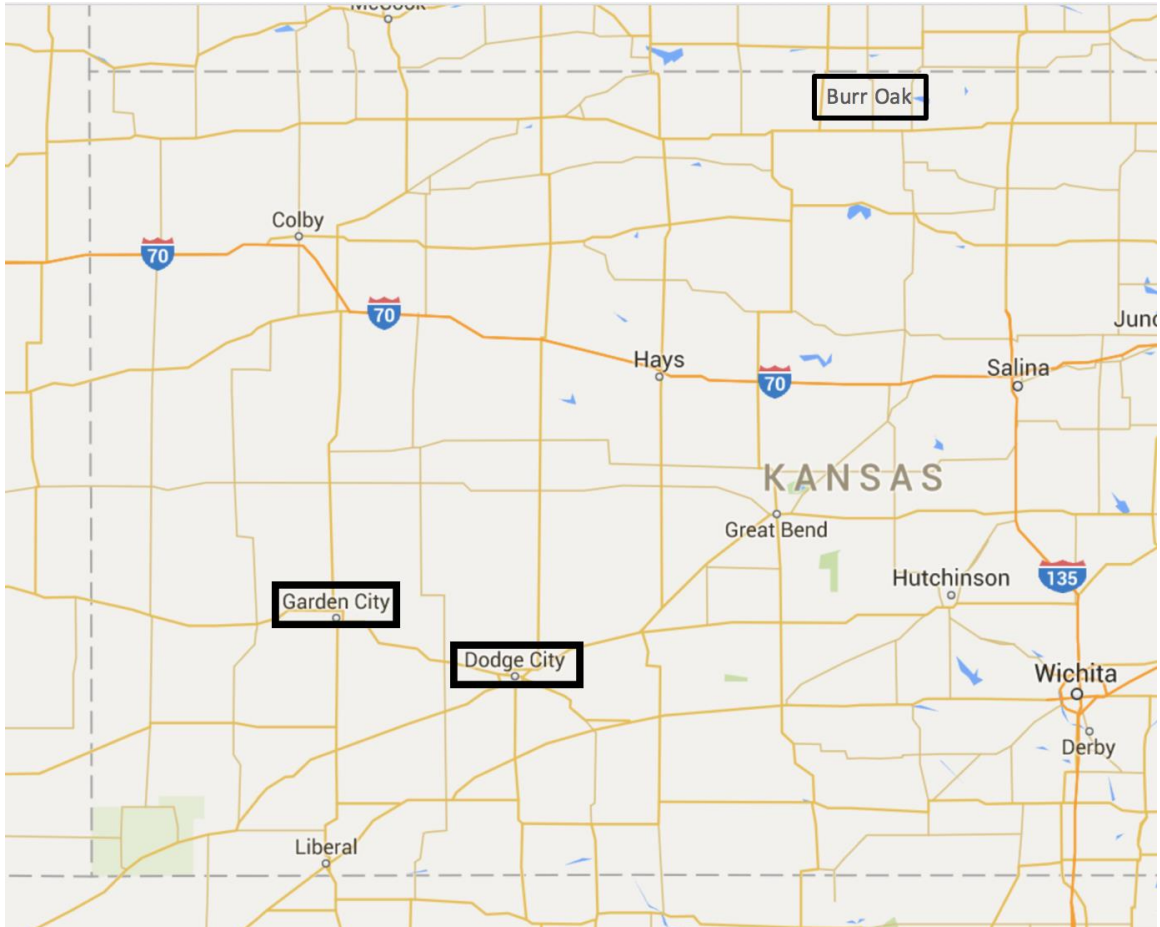
324. "Yuma County, Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 22, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Yuma+County,+CO/@40.0025217,-102.9885866,9z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x877398b5c3bc9d51:0xf2a41bc3001b83b2>.

Southeastern Colorado and Oklahoma & Texas Panhandles³²⁵



325. "Colorado," *Google Maps*, accessed April 21, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/@36.5759198,-103.1657156,8.93z>.

Western and Central Kansas³²⁶



326. "Kansas," *Google Maps*, accessed April 21, 2016, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Burr+Oak,+KS+66936/@38.5073999,-100.9969028,8z/data=!4m2!3m1!1s0x87986f8aae8d539d:0x35b7016ac366040e>.

Dust Bowl Area³²⁷



327. "The Dust Bowl," *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*, accessed April 21, 2016, <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/depression/dustbowl.htm>.

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