

AMBER WAVES OF CHANGE

Production Script

Music:

“The Plow that Broke the Plains: Prelude” (ESTABLISH FOR 19 SECONDS AND THEN UNDER)

Schafer:

Amber Waves of Change: Hard Times on the High Plains. A production of Kansas Public Radio and the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Kansas. Here’s Associate Professor of Journalism David Guth...

Music:

(FADE)

SFX:

Bombing run (CROSSFADE WITH MUSIC AND UNDER)

Guth:

It is a few minutes after midnight. July 5, 1943. Most of the 12-hundred residents of the Oklahoma panhandle town of Boise City are in their beds. Few...if any...of the residents heard the drone of engines from four B-17 “Flying Fortresses” coming in from the south. At least not until six bombs struck the city...

SFX:

Bombs hit. (SOUND OF BOMBERS FADE)

Guth:

The planes came from the Dalhart Army Air base in Texas. They were on a nighttime training mission. The navigator had mistaken the lights of Boise City’s Courthouse Square for a bombing range in Conlen, Texas, 40 miles to the south. The good news is that no one was hurt – the planes were using practice bombs. Total damage – 25 dollars.

And that’s how Boise City, Oklahoma, became the only community in the continental United States bombed during the Second World War. Today...there is a small memorial in the courthouse square to commemorate the event. The bombing of Boise City briefly returned the community to the national spotlight. It was also a metaphor for an even greater calamity that struck the town just a few years earlier...

SFX:

Wind (UP AND UNDER)

Guth:

...when Boise City was at ground zero for the greatest man-made natural disaster in American history – the Dust Bowl. In fact...it was an Associated Press reporter’s dispatch from Boise City... one following the massive Black Sunday dust storm of April 14, 1935... that gave the region and its misery a name...

Robert Geiger (actor portrayal):

“Three little words achingly familiar on a Western farmer’s tongue rule life in the dust bowl of the continent—if it rains.”

SFX:

Wind (FADE)

Guth:

For most people...the so-called “Dirty Thirties” are a distant memory. But for the people of the Southern High Plains – in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado and Kansas – the Dust Bowl days are very much on their minds. Even with recent rains... a prolonged drought haunts the area... and it’s a dry spell worse than that of the 1930s. The aquifer that serves the area is in decline. So is the region’s population. And many are asking the same question: Are we headed for another Dust Bowl? Morris Alexander is a retired farmer in Boise City, Oklahoma...

Morris Alexander - Dismal:

“We got awful close to it this spring. Yes, I can see that happening. I hope I don’t. I was kind of looking at – a whole bunch of us were here – maybe it’s time to go. But, if you are going to go, who is going to buy your house so you can go. There’s nobody. It’s looking actually pretty dismal.”

Guth:

John Beckman is a Kansas State University Agricultural Extension Agent in Scott City, Kansas...

Beckman (KSU AgEx):

“We’re dealing with some on-going drought that been really tough. Like I said, we are going to have a really minimal wheat crop and, of course, if it doesn’t rain, we’re going to have fall crop to lose. But it continues to build and gets worse and worse because we don’t have any subsoil moisture.”

Guth:

The lack of subsoil moisture is a problem spread out across several state lines. Wendy Buxton-Andrade serves as a County Commissioner in Prowers County, Colorado.

Buxton:

I can tell you right now that the drought is worse than the Dust Bowl I think because of our farmer practices – the practices they put in and stuff. They are not overworking the land like they did during the Dust Bowl. I do not think we will ever see the magnitude. But I can tell you right now that the drought is worse than the Dust Bowl, right now.”

Guth:

Many believe that we have learned from the mistakes of the past. Through improved farming methods, they say there won't be a repeat of the Dirty Thirties. But nearly everyone agrees that the Southern High Plains is in peril. The population of the region has been in steady decline for decades. The region's groundwater reserves are diminishing. Life is hard.

Yet, many in the region remain optimistic. They don't mind living on nature's margins. In fact...there is no place they'd rather be. They are the focus of this report. The people of the Southern High Plains who – in a very real sense – are 21st century pioneers forging their futures in an often-unforgiving frontier. (:45/4:35)

Music:

“The Plow that Broke the Plains: Pastoral Grass.” (ESTABLISH FOR 19 SECONDS , THEN UNDER, THEN FADE]

Guth:

U-S Army Lieutenant Zebulon Pike...who was sent by Thomas Jefferson in 1806 to survey the Southern High Plains... called the region “The Great American Desert.” Ironically...the area during prehistoric times was at the bottom of a great inland sea. It was created 65 million years ago by deposits of ancient Rocky Mountain erosion. It rises from 11-hundred feet above sea level in the east to about 78-hundred feet in the west.

The U-S Geological Survey describes the High Plains as having “a middle-latitude dry continental climate with abundant sunshine... moderate precipitation...frequent winds...low humidity...and a

high rate of evaporation.” It was literally once a home where the buffalo roamed. However most of them were wiped out by the mid-1870s. The indigenous population also was forced out and driven onto reservations by a wave of European immigrants spurred by the Homestead Act. University of Kansas Professor Donald Stull is a cultural anthropologist who has studied the region. He says the initial wave of settlers were lured into a false sense of security...

Stull:

“You know, it was settled in a period of greater rainfall than usual and so it looked like it was going to be a place where people could make a living of farming and ranching. They have...but you can’t do that without irrigation.”

Guth:

First impressions can be deceiving. Dust Bowl historian Donald Worster has written THAT the region soon became overpopulated with cattle and that the land couldn’t support them. Much of the herd died following the winter of 1885-86 – the harshest on record. And then...in 1889...Worster says the region was struck by drought...

Worster-Forgotten:

“They were trying to grow corn, though, in some places in the 1890s and were ending up in desperate conditions. And the out-migration was even higher...much higher. There was no government assistance and people had no choice but simply to leave.”

Guth:

The drought of the 1890s finally eased. What the Homesteaders didn’t know then is what Kansas State University climatologist Mary Knapp knows now – that droughts run in cycles...

Knapp-drought cycle:

“Well, actually, if you do look at the long-term records, there seems to be something like a 22-year cycle on droughts. The intensity can vary and the period between droughts can be shorter or longer. But there definitely appears to be a cyclical pattern.”

Guth:

Spurred by demand created by World War I...wheat production peaked in 1918. In Kansas alone...almost 98-million bushels of

wheat were produced that year. More than 11 million acres of virgin soil were plowed. And while the demand for wheat dropped after the war...enthusiasm for planting the golden grain remained. For one thing...it was a lot cheaper to grow wheat than raise cattle. But as a New Deal era film documentary noted...farmers were plowing their way toward disaster...

Plow-1 (documentary soundtrack):

“High winds and sun. High winds and sun. A country without rivers and with little rain. Settler, plow at your peril.”

Guth:

That documentary...produced in 1936...was “The Plow that Broke the Plains.” It was created by the federal Resettlement Administration which...itself...was created to deal with the greatest natural disaster in American history...

Plow-2 (documentary soundtrack):

“Year in, year out. Uncomplaining, they fought the worst drought in history. Their stock choked to death on the barren land. Their homes were nightmares of swirling dust night and day. Many were ahead of it. But many stayed until stock, machinery, homes, credit, food and even hope were gone.”

Guth:

Wheat production in Kansas fell by 20 million bushels between 1934 and 1935. Farmers...who once yielded more than 18 bushels of wheat per acre...were harvesting less than half that amount. The worst of the dust storms came on April 14, 1935...a day that has been remembered as Black Sunday...

Ellsaesser:

When that old thing rolled over – by God! I took my family – I had two girls, my wife and two daughters – down in that cave with a lantern. And when that hit, you couldn’t see nothing.

Guth:

That’s how Raymond Ellsaesser (ell-SAYS-ser) of Haskell County, Kansas, remembered Black Sunday. Dust Bowl Historian Donald Worster interviewed him in September 1977. Worster also interviewed Ed Phillips of Boise City, Oklahoma...who said the dust cloud that day rolled in so quickly that it soon became a question of survival...

Phillips:

The thing that we thought of – or I did anyhow – I didn't think of being in a tornado or anything like that. But I thought whether or not we wouldn't be smothered in it because the dust was just that black.

Guth:

Farmers battled tumbleweeds...jackrabbits...grasshoppers...and dust pneumonia. According to documentarian Ken Burns...there were only 13 dust-free days in Dodge City, Kansas, in 1935. Many fled the High Plains for greener pastures in California. But many stayed and – literally – rode out the storm. Cultural anthropologist Donald Stull...

Stull:

“There's an old joke that eastern Kansas is an extension of Missouri, central Kansas an extension of Nebraska and western Kansas an extension of hell. “

Music:

“The Plow that Broke the Plains: Devastation.” (UNDER FOR 14 SECONDS)

Stull:

And, you know, there's something to be said for that. Or the old saying: No law west of Wichita and no God west of Dodge. And by the time you get out there – if you stay, you've got to be pretty tough.”

Music:

(ESTABLISH, THEN UNDER, THEN FADE]

Guth:

The Dust Bowl taught the people of the Southern High Plains some hard lessons. Soil conservation was no longer optional. Farmers protected the land through improved methods of plowing and increased ground cover. The federal government pitched in and converted four million acres into permanent grasslands. The return of the rains...the Second World War...and the end of the Depression HELPED the region recover from the largely self-inflicted disaster. And then there was technology that made it possible for farmers to cultivate more land with fewer people. However...one invention more than any other transformed the region.

Music:

“Abridged Donner” (UNDER NARRATION)

Guth:

Center Pivot Irrigation...bringing water to a thirsty land...became the stuff of legend and song...

Music:

(FULL, THEN FADE)

Guth:

“The Center Pivot Irrigation Song” written and performed by Sarah Donner. The independent artist says she posted it on YouTube after being inspired passing through Western Kansas in her tour van. And while it is not the kind of song you’d expect to make it to the top of the charts...one can easily understand her enthusiasm. It was the invention of center pivot irrigation by a Colorado farmer in 1940 that changed the fortunes of the region.

By tapping into the vast underground Ogallala Aquifer...farmers became less vulnerable to the whims of nature. In addition to wheat...they began to grow corn and milo...crops that do not fair well in the region’s dry climate. They are also inexpensive sources of cattle feed. Irrigation and other technological improvements made southwest Kansas the center of the beef-packing industry in North America. Donald Stull and Michael Broadway are the authors of *Slaughterhouse Blues: The Meat and Poultry Industry in North America*. In their 2012 book...Stull and Broadway said that Garden City, Kansas, had become a “modern day boomtown and the fastest growing city in the state.”

However...as Garden City Mayor Roy Cessna notes...progress has come with a price....

Cessna-deeper:

“We do have good water resources, but they won’t last forever. And we know that because we are having to drill deeper to get more the quality water and the water that we need to keep raising crops that we have to irrigate to raise out here

Guth:

William Ashworth, author of *Ogallala Blue*, says the aquifer contains enough water to fill nine Lake Eries. Since the introduction of center-pivot irrigation...farmers have been pumping out Ogallala water at a rate of five trillion gallons a year.

Depending on location...rain recharges the aquifer only one-quarter of an inch to six inches per year. Much of the water goes toward growing very profitable and water-intensive corn. Other industries – oil and gas and livestock ranching – also use a lot of aquifer water. Ashworth says the result is that an equivalent of one Lake Erie has already been drained from the Ogallala.

Kansas State University Civil Engineering Professor David Steward has also sounded an alarm. In a 2013 study...Steward projected that at its current rate of use...the aquifer will be 69 percent depleted by 2060. And the Kansas Geological Survey says parts are already depleted in Greeley, Wichita and Scott counties. Katie Eisenhour of the Scott County Development Committee says her community has closely monitored its water situation. And she says she was surprised to learn where the water was going...

Eisenhour-shocking:

“The shocking thing is that the impact of the livestock industry is about two percent of the total water used in Scott County. Community, three percent. The rest of it is all agriculture.”

Guth:

Rex Buchanan is the interim director the Kansas Geological Survey. The SURVEY is a research arm of the University of Kansas. One of its major jobs is monitoring the state’s groundwater wells. He says IT’S hard to tell corn farmers they should grow something else...

Buchanan-irrigators:

“For the most part, if you go out there and talk to irrigators, they are behaving in ways that – like I said – are in their economic best interests. If you have a conversation with an irrigator and they see a decline, one of the first responses you’ll get from them is ‘well, that Ogallala water is not doing anybody any good under the ground.’”

Guth:

Buchanan adds that it is hard to tell someone that they shouldn’t pump water that they have a right to use. It’s also important to remember that each year, corn adds \$3 billion to the state’s economy and provides vital resources for the state’s livestock and dairy industries.

Farmers seem to understand the problem. Many conserve water through improved tilling and more efficient irrigation. Vance Ehmke is a dry-land farmer. He and his wife Louise run a 10-thousand acre seed farm between Scott City and Dighton. The Ehmke Seed Company provides wheat, rye and hybrid seeds for several hundred customers throughout the Central Plains. In the face of this long-term drought, Ehmke and other dry-land farmers have changed their business and farming practices.

Ehmke-survival:

“Well they say the market is there to weed out the inefficient. You know, it is as ruthless as you can get. But that is the way it is. You know, if you can figure out how to adapt to the situation or innovate your way out of it, you’ll survive.”

Guth:

Some farmers have gone a step farther. Farmers in a 99-square mile section of Sheridan and Thomas counties have formed the state’s first LEMA or Local Enhanced Management Area. In a LEMA...the farmers agree to a voluntary reduction of water use over a five-year period. In the case of the Sheridan-Thomas LEMA, that’s about a 15 percent reduction. Northwest Kansas Groundwater District Manager Katherine Durham says the program allows farmers to meet these goals in the manner in which they choose.

Durham-Flexibility:

“So, if you want to pump the heck out of it and do corn for the first two years because corn is high, fine. You know, then, you need to drop back down. So, it provides a lot of flexibility for how they want to make their own decisions. You know, you have to think really hard into the build of these communities – there is a lot of pride, there is a lot of history and there’s a lot of family heritage. And so to give that flexibility and that power back to them from a sociological perspective is really, really important when you are trying to do any sort of conservation work.”

Guth:

The LEMA idea is relatively new...and many are skeptical. Despite expressions of confidence by elected officials, local water rights holders defeated a proposed five-county LEMA in the Scott City area in 2014. Proponents such as Katherine Durham say they face the challenge of overcoming farmer fears and misinformation....

Durham-bathtub:

“It is faith that farmers will join you in conservation and its faith in science. You know, water, especially groundwater, is one of those things that is really difficult to understand. There’s a large mentality: You know, ‘I don’t want to do it if he’s not doing it’ – especially if you have wells that are across the road from each other. There’s theory that it’s a bathtub down there. And if you are not pumping it, he is. Well, in fact, it’s not. I hear all of the time ‘Topeka is stealing our water’ and stuff like that.”

Guth:

Instead of a bathtub...she says people should think of the Ogallala as they do an egg carton...

Durham-egg carton:

“What it kind of looks like is if you were take an egg carton – not the flat side, but the part that the eggs are actually in – and you have varying depths and all sorts of thing. But then you have rock and gravel and sand and all sorts of different materials”
(:17/20:18)

Guth:

Durham says the Sheridan-Thomas LEMA is a start: A sort of guinea pig from which others can learn and eventually follow. And the Kansas Geological Survey’s Rex Buchanan says much more will need to be done....

Buchanan:

“One LEMA in one county is not going to make a whole whale of a lot of difference on the High Plains Aquifer. But if you were to have those kinds of things blossom all over western Kansas, then I think for maybe the first time seeing a real, an effective response for how to deal with declines out there.”

Music:

“The Plow that Broke the Plains – Warning” (ESTABLISH, UNDER, THEN FADE) (:26)

Guth:

Of the 117 counties in the eight states that comprise the High Plains...75 have experienced population declines since the 2000 Census. Most of those counties are in southern half of the region. One-in-four High Plains counties have experienced population declines for at least five consecutive decades. And almost all of those counties are in the southern half. The population of several

counties...such as Stanton...Stevens and Morton in southwestern Kansas...peaked with the 1930s Census. That was at the beginning of the Dust Bowl.

Finney County, Kansas...the Garden City area...experienced a short-term drop in population during the “Dirty Thirties.” After that...it experienced a steady rise. However...as Kansas University cultural anthropologist Donald Stull notes...there is a fine line between prosperity and hardship...

Stull-ConAgra:

“Garden City and Finney County, Garden City is the county sea, was the fastest growing county in the state of Kansas in the 1980s. It was the second-fastest growing, second-only top Johnson county, in the 90s. Then, on Christmas night 2000, the ConAgra beef plant – there was a fire and destroyed the plant. ConAgra was the second-largest employer. It employed 23-hundred. Over the next couple of years, people moved away. They stayed around for a while so their kids could finish school. They were hoping that ConAgra will rebuild the plant. But it has never done so.”

Guth:

The Finney County population was more than 40-thousand during the 2000 Census. However...because of the ConAgra fire...it had dipped to under 37-thousand in 2010. The good news is that Finney County’s population is rebounding. But Stull...who has extensively researched the meat-packing industry...says the new jobs coming to Garden City are not as good as those that left...

Stull-Plateau:

The meat and poultry industry which fueled economic growth in the rural Midwest and the rural South has quit expanding. And so you are not seeing new plants come on line like the new plant in Lexington, the new plant in Guymon – these other new plants that I studied in the 80’s and 90’s. The growth in Garden City now is in the service sector that are big-box stores. But those are employers that often only hire part-time or most of their employees are part-time and they don’t pay that well.”

Guth:

If there is a silver lining in the population trends of the Southern High Plains...it comes from what many may see as an unexpected source. Most of what population growth there has been has come

from the Hispanic and Latino communities. While the 82 counties of the Southern High Plains lost population during the 2000's...the region's Hispanic and Latino population grew by almost 38 percent. Many are immigrants looking for jobs in agriculture and meatpacking. While these jobs MAY seem undesirable... they are a marked improvement from the situations MANY left behind.

Community leaders in 39 western Kansas counties – specifically journalists...county commissioners...and chamber of commerce executives – were surveyed in 2013. According the *Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies*...everyone who answered the survey said they welcome newcomers to their communities. However...only one in five of the community leaders indicated that they were comfortable in the knowledge that Hispanics and Latinos provided most the region's population growth. And only one in ten said they thought the residents of their community would be comfortable in that knowledge.

Dena Sattler is the managing editor and publisher of the *Garden City Telegram*. She says that the reaction of some of her readers tells her that the survey results ring true...

Sattler-Racism:

“I’ll occasionally address the legal immigration-related issues and there’s a pretty good current of anti-immigrant and racist sentiment out there. We know that. I can guarantee you that there are people who would prefer that we go back many decades to when we were a predominantly white community. And I think there is just an undercurrent of racism here. I think that’s probably true in any diverse community.”

Guth:

A similar sentiment is heard from Wendy Buxton-Andrade...a Prowers County commissioner in eastern Colorado...

Buxton-Andrade:

“You know – and this is something I’ve noticed in going from the Metro area down to here: My husband and I are from two different nationalities. In the Metro area, we didn’t even think about it. My children didn’t think about it. We moved back down here and we are reminded of it. So, yes, I do see – you know, there’s still that wall that’s up down here and I am hoping that

more and more people get to know people's insides that that barrier will be broken."

Guth:

It is undeniable there are some long-time residents of the Southern High Plains who are wary of - and even hostile toward - Hispanic and Latino newcomers. However...it is more common to hear the region's leaders say they embrace diversity. Katie Eisenhower is the executive director of the Scott County Development Committee. She says a recent successful effort to get Scott City designated an All-American City pointed the out the real problem: It wasn't that her community didn't welcome newcomers. She says it didn't know how to reach out to them...

Eisenhour-Politeness

"And we looked at ourselves again and tried to talk about our diversity. At the time we had an 18 percent Hispanic population. Now it is probably closer to 22 to 25. We know it's growing. But we have a divide - but it is unintentional. It's out of complete politeness."

Guth:

Scott County leaders made several cautious attempts to reach out the community's Hispanic/Latino residents. County Commission Chairman James Minnix says they have been only partially successful...

Minnix-Welcome:

"We've had some dinners and exchanges to get things started. It's kind of like bringing a couple of different church groups together. And we had a little participation for a while. And it seems like everybody got busy dealing with economics and drought and everything else. And we haven't done much else over the past several years."

Guth:

Down the road in Garden City...newspaper editor Dena Satler says that when it comes to embracing diversity...there's really little other choice...

Satler-Letters:

"Again, I get the anonymous comments on my website, so I know the sentiment exists. And, frankly, I have had letter writers - you know, you need to use your name when you write a letter to the

editor in print – and suggests as much, that immigrants are dragging down our economy. They seem to forget that the Tyson plant depends on that labor and they need to look at the contributions of that plant, in tax dollars and etcetera. We are a majority-minority community and I don't think you can avoid that."

Guth:

There may be no more diverse community in the Southern High Plains than Garden City, Kansas. According to the latest U-S Census Bureau estimates...Garden City is nearly 49 percent Hispanic/Latino...with only 43 percent of its residents classified as being "white alone." Its population grew by six thousand residents in the 1980s. One-third of the newcomers came from Mexico. Another third were refugees from Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Today...immigrants from Myanmar and Somalia are coming to "Garden." Steve Dyer of the Garden City Chamber of Commerce says one needs only to sample the local cuisine to get a sense of the community's diversity...

Dyer-Restaurants

"Yeah. You can just go around and look for a place to eat lunch and figure out how diverse it is. The growth of those diverse restaurants is because of the diversity of the population. People have come here, whether its immigrants or even locals that have worked up to where they can own their own business. And a lot of them opened restaurants. And you've got authentic – about anything you want to eat."

Guth:

Roy Cessna...the public information coordinator for the Garden City Schools...says that there are more than two-dozen different languages spoken by students in the school district. For half of the student population...English is a second language...

Cessna-opportunity:

"Some people think that diversity is a challenge. We think of it as an opportunity for our community, really. Even with the new immigrants that we are getting in. You know, we work with community leaders. We work with our schools. We work with the community college. So we really find out what our people that come to our community – that migrate to this community – that are new and try to help them to acclimate to our community."

Guth:

Cessna...who is also Garden City's mayor...credits the community's leadership for its foresighted response to a new wave of immigrants following the end of the Vietnam War...

Cessna-welcome:

"The community leaders at the time felt that we needed to welcome these people instead of kind of shun them as other community did and had really bad effects. We did a lot of research into what we needed to do to really welcome the people into the community."

Guth:

Dan Fankhauser is a former Garden City mayor and sits on the city commission...

Fankhauser-Fight it...

"Well, I think, you know, that you can either fight it or, you know, you can try to endorse it and work with people. I think the Cultural Relations Board has done a good job."

Guth:

Garden City's Cultural Relations Board was created in 1991. Its membership represents the diversity of the community. Michele Stegman is the human resources director for Garden City government. She provide staff support to the board...

Stegman-role:

"The role of the Cultural Relations Board is to apprise the city commission on issues that may affect the minority populations in the City of Garden City and to promote cultural diversity."

Guth:

In addition to counseling elected officials...Stegman says the Community Relations Board has sponsored a series of events designed to help the citizens of Garden City to better understand one another. It all boils down to one goal...

Stegman-together:

"So there are many, many community agencies and leaders that got together to try and figure out what can we do to help these new populations be successful in Garden City."

Guth:

While "Garden" is rebounding from the Con-Agra fire that idled thousands of workers 15 years ago...it still faces the challenge of serving the needs of a diverse and economically struggling

population. It's one with a growing service sector that doesn't pay as well or generate as much in tax revenues as before the fire.

A visitor's guide to Garden City says the community was founded in 1878 by James and William Fulton. Their vision was to turn this corner of "the Great American Desert" into a town that would last. It got its name from the beautiful garden of William Fulton's wife...Luticia.

It is that kind of optimism that has helped the community weather drought, dust and economic hardship. Other communities are trying to follow Garden City's example. Some have been successful. Others have not.

Music:

"The Plow that Broke the Plains – Cattle" (ESTABLISH FOR 18 SECONDS, UNDER, THEN FADE)

Guth:

Scott City, Kansas, and Lamar, Colorado are examples of High Plains communities going in opposite directions.

Scott City is the county seat of Scott County. About five thousand people live in the county. The Native American Dismal River Culture existed in this region long before Spanish explorers claimed it in 1706. Agriculture and livestock dominate the local economy.

Two hours west and south is Prowers County, Colorado. The county seat is Lamar. The county population is about 77-hundred. It was established in 1886 at the site of a Santa Fe Railroad depot. While harvesting crops and livestock are big business...so is harvesting the wind. The Colorado Green and Twin Buttes Wind Power Projects are just south of Lamar along both sides of U-S Highway 287.

The two towns are similar in many ways. Demographically, both are predominantly white with a growing Hispanic/Latino population. Both have economies dominated by agriculture and livestock.

However, when one looks closer, it's really a tale of two very different cities. While Scott City is smaller...its median per household income is almost two-thirds higher. According to Nielsen...a consumer research company...the two towns have very different mindsets. Scott City is described as a mix of "Back Country Folks," who value an old-fashioned lifestyle reminiscent of Andy Griffith's Mayberry. Nielsen describes Lamar as an "Old Mill Town" and "Rustic" with older empty nesters and younger parents trying to make due with modest incomes. Most important...Scott City appears to be growing – or at least holding its own – while Lamar's population has been plummeting in recent years.

SFX – Driving car:

(UNDER AND THEN FADE)

Guth:

Driving south from Interstate 70 on U-S 83. The countryside begins to open up into wide vistas of a parched landscape. It is early June...so the wheat fields are green and gold. The crop is only a few inches high...its growth stunted by the lack of rain. When you enter Scott City...the first thing you notice are banners proclaiming it an All-American City. The courthouse and the high school have undergone major renovations. There is a new hospital. The town seems vibrant. Katie Eisenhour of the Scott County Development Committee says it hasn't always been that way...

Eisenhour:

"We were no different than anybody else in the 1980s when farming got really tough and people were telling their kids 'get out of here. Get out of here and go do something else. There's nothing for you here.' We shared that dialogue, too. And I think today we have great regret for having done that."

Guth:

Scott City has taken a number of steps in recent years to secure its future. For example...the community renovated Scott County High School. The reason: If enrollment decline forces the consolidation of some western Kansas school districts, Scott City wanted to be the place where the kids go to school. Editor Rod Haxton of the *Scott City News* says this kind of thinking required a change in the public's traditional mindset...

Haxton:

“We are not going to tax anybody. We are going to keep our taxes down to minimum. We’re not going to do anything. We’re not going to take on additional tax burden, even if it means maybe some future growth. It just seems to be that mindset.”

Guth:

Scott County Commissioner Gary Skibbe says the community’s leadership realized that they had to be thinking about more than just mere survival...

Skibbe:

“The leadership in this county hasn’t focused as much on survival as they have on being progressive. You know, if you just stay in a survival mode, the only way to go is backwards.”

Guth:

Eisenhouer says it was the community’s desire to be the master of its own fate that got it to go along with the issuing of millions of dollars of bonds....

Eisenhour-renno:

“So, in the 90’s, we had an understanding. We unwent a strategic plan to do that. We needed to fix our infrastructure. We needed to start making some repairs. You can’t live in a building that was built in 1931 and not do anything to it. I’m speaking of our high school. So, slowly but surely, we started by doing a “renno” on the courthouse and then the high school. And all of these were bond issues, slow but sure. And the momentum and the morale came back.”

Guth:

Scott City banker and county commissioner Jerry Buxton says it’s all about having a willingness to adapt...

Buxton:

“We adapt to what we need to adapt to. And we do it fairly quickly. It’s not ‘oh, I am going to try that in 10 years because what’s been going on is working fairly good.’ It’s ‘hey, what’s out there? Let’s try it. Let’s get going.’”

Guth:

And Eisenhour says Scott City and Scott County have taken great pride in knowing that when it came to pumping new life into their community...they did it themselves...

Eisenhour-pride:

“You know, we are not big on aid around here. Sometimes there’s a little resistance when you want to implement a government program. There’s a pride. Sometimes people would say, you know, there’s always that sin, that religious connotation of the word ‘pride.’ But, in this case, pride is synonymous with success.”

SFX: Car drive

(UNDER, THEN FADE)

Guth:

Hop in your car. Go west from Scott City on state highway 96 and cross into Colorado. When you get to Sheridan Lake...you start working your way southward. You are now driving through some of the most isolated, featureless terrain in the country. When you follow the Arkansas River westward on U-S 50/400...you eventually reach Lamar...the county seat of Prowers County. To a newcomer...Lamar appears to be a vibrant town. But looks can be deceiving. And there’s something else in the air than dust from parched fields. It’s anger...resentment...and resignation. Part of the problem is water and living downstream from the thirsty Denver metropolitan area. Lamar Mayor Roger Stanger...

Stanger-water:

“We are getting squeezed. And it is hard to set there and watch. If you are a farmer real close to the border, you can look across to Kansas and they are pumping their wells and over here, they are not because we have to allow so much water them. So it is difficult.”

Guth:

Unfortunately...water may be the least of Lamar’s problems. There’s a lot of anger in town about a \$150 million investment in a new power plant that has gone horribly wrong. Lance Maggart is the editor of the *Lamar Ledger*...

Maggart-power:

Back in 2006 or ’07, they decided they were going to build this plant. At the time, coal was very cheap. Fracking hadn’t become a big thing and the cost of natural gas, which it what it was beforehand, was very high. So they decided to do this. And then they didn’t have enough money for it. They didn’t budget enough and it ended up doubling – it became \$150 million instead of \$75 million. And right now, we are experiencing what is, what I

understand, are the most expensive power rates in the entire nation. And it actually can run. It can turn on and it works fine. But it doesn't meet emissions standards. It never has. And with new regulations from the EPA – talking about cutting coal-fired emissions by 30 percent – there's no way it's ever going to work."

Guth:

You might be asking yourself about the windmill farms south of the town? There are more than 150 wind turbines out there. Can't they help bring down Lamar's energy costs? The short answer is no. Because of inadequate transmission lines...that energy goes elsewhere. The town does have its own small wind farm. But it generates only 15 percent of Lamar's electricity. So Lamar is low on water and high on energy costs. And as Mayor Stanger says...the town is also coming up short on jobs...

Stanger-jobs:

"We had a bus plant here at one time. Employed about 650 people. They ended going out of business because they couldn't compete with bus companies out of Canada the main problem. And then we had the prisons. They had a prison in Fort Lyons and they closed it down and actually changed it. Now they are reopening it as a veteran's hospital. But, it isn't going to employ the people that it did. So we are losing jobs for people. A lot of people who are really skilled are moving elsewhere to where they can get a job."

Guth:

Water. Energy. Jobs. All seem to be working against Lamar and Prowers County. As a result, the county has lost 20 percent of its population since 2000. County Commissioner Wendy Buxton-Andrade blames the community's decline...in part...on complacency...

Buxton-Andrade-complacent:

"We've gotten complacent. And in the last 20-25 years you've also seen decline in population because if you are not pushing, you know. I guess the biggest thing is if you are not growing, you are dying. Well, we haven't grown for 25 years. It comes to a point where people need to expect more out of what is happening – all the way across. And people need to step up."

Guth:

Has Lamar reached a tipping point? Can it recover? Only time will tell. But the comparison between Scott City and Lamar suggests that the difference between two has as much to do with community leadership and pride as it does with geography and happenstance.

Music:

“The Plow that Broke the Plains – Drought” (ESTABLISH FOR 29 SECONDS, UNDER, THEN FADE)

Guth:

One of the most visible institutions within any community is the local newspaper. It is the eyes and ears – and sometimes the conscience – of the community. It’s the vehicle through which government often talks with the people...local merchants promote their products and services...and the place where news is defined as much by proximity as it is prominence. There’s no secret that the last decade has been a trying time in the newspaper business. For big city newspapers...the challenge has been a sluggish economy and Internet growth. However...the story is different for small town rural papers. Doug Anstaett is the executive director of the Kansas Press Association. He says the challenge for rural papers isn’t an increase in competition...it’s the loss of population...

Anstaett:

“The thing that makes community newspapers prosper I think is lack of competition. But the flip side of that is that those communities have not only lost people, which means they lost subscribers, but they’ve lost advertisers.”

Guth:

The fact is that even in the best of times...running a small community newspaper is hard work. And these are not the best of times. Approximately one in every three U-S counties lost population since 2000. Some Kansas counties have been in steady decline since 1900. Many people believe that newspapers play an important role in survival of rural communities. One of those is Scott County Commissioner Gary Skibbe...

Skibbe:

“If you don’t have a newspaper, you are really a town on the decline. It may be just a weekly. But, nonetheless, it is a newspaper.”

Guth:

As noted...Scott County is a good example of a western Kansas community moving aggressively to stabilize its population. County Commission Chairman James Minnix said it would have been impossible to issue millions of dollars in bonds to support community improvements without public support...

Minnix:

“The citizens voted on all of those projects because they were comfortable with what had recently happened. I think it is trust and understanding. The newspaper can be a vital component of that, in the transparency that everything we do here. The people on the street kind of understand what we did and why we did it.”

Guth:

Newspapers...especially those in rural communities...play a couple of different roles. First, they serve as an impartial observer – a watchdog – on behalf of their readers. Editor Sharon Friedlander of the *Colby Free Press*...

Friedlander-Watchdog:

“We take all of that very, very seriously. Sometimes we don’t make friends. I get the county commissioners mad at me every now and then because of something we write, but I still get a hug. Someone has to be there and fulfill that need.”

Guth:

However...Friedlander says that her second equally important role is that of a community booster...

Friedlander-Booster:

“We are right up there banging on the drum every chance we get for Colby. That’s also part of our role. We should be a cheerleader.”

Guth:

Those are commonly held opinions among rural editors in western Kansas. Dena Sattler of the *Garden City Telegram* says that when her community succeeds...so does her paper. However...she has an advantage that most small town editors do not share. Sattler has approximately four-dozen full-time and part-time employees. Most rural papers function with just a

handful. One such paper is just 36 miles up U-S 83...the *Scott City News*. Its editor and publisher is Rod Haxton. Sattler says she is amazed at the job Haxton does...

Settler on Haxton:

“I worry about Rod getting out of the business and whose going to be the next person to step in and take on that kind of work load. I mean, a weekly newspaper workload is incredible. We think we have it hard. They are doing everything. He’s covering their city council and walking down the street selling an ad, probably.”

Guth:

As for Rod Haxton...he loves his job and he loves Scott City. But he also wonders who will pick up the mantle when he retires...

Haxton-Future:

“I don’t know. You know, you kind of wonder if J-schools are turning out somebody who will want to come in and take on this kind of an operation. You know, you are somewhat isolated out here in western Kansas. You’ve got to love a community in order to be out here. But that’s true of a lot of things.”

Guth:

To say rural newspapers are dying is an overstatement...and an oversimplification. Garden City Editor Dena Sattler...

Sattler:

“And yet Warren Buffet has bought a fair amount of newspapers. He thinks he makes pretty good business decisions. That’s what I tell my critics who say ‘your business is dying.’ I say ‘Warren Buffet needs to sharpen up his toolkit because he seems to be investing in newspapers.’ And there’s a reason for that.”
(:13/49:33)

Guth:

Many local newspapers continue to thrive against the hard realities of life on the Southern High Plains. But for others...the clock continues to tick toward an uncertain future.

Music:

“The Plow that Broke the Plains – Speculation Blues” (ESTABLISH FOR 18 SECONDS, UNDER, THEN FADE) (:18/50:03)

Guth:

Water: The key to life on the earth. It is the pivotal ingredient when it comes to the future of the Southern High Plains. Its got everyone’s attention...especially politicians, including two men

running for governor. They talked about it during a debate at the Kansas State Fair in September, 2014. Here are Republican Governor Sam Brownback and his unsuccessful challenger, Democrat Paul Davis...

Brownback-Debate:

“This is a topic I’ve been working on since I was in law school and wrote on it. This is a topic that I worked on while I was Agriculture Secretary. We’ve got a 50-year water vision being developed.”

Davis-Debate:

“It is a complex issues. There are a lot of people that have very different opinions on this. But I will tell you that everybody who is a stakeholder in this debate will agree on one thing: It is going to take some resources to address this issue and we have to address this issue because it is vital to our state’s economy.”

Guth:

The 50-year water vision mentioned by Governor Brownback is currently under review. The proposal includes a blend of conservation...reservoir management... technological advancements in irrigation and plant varieties...and development of new sources.

There’s one idea out there – not specifically mentioned in the water vision draft – that has been a source of debate for more than 30 years. In 1982, the U.S. Commerce Department proposed construction of an aqueduct to pump water from the Missouri River in far-eastern Kansas to western Kansas. That’s about 400 miles, uphill. The initial cost estimate was four-point-four billion dollars. However...updated figures from the Army Corps of Engineers in January 2015 now place the price tag at 18 billion dollars. K-U Anthropology Professor Donald Stull has extensively studied this issue...

Stull-aqueduct:

“You do have, of course, the people talking about the aqueduct from northeast Kansas down to southwest Kansas. People talk seriously about that in southwest Kansas. That ain’t gonna happen in my lifetime, I don’t think, given the politics of Indian water as well as interstate issues. It’s just not going to happen.”

Guth:

Water conservation is high on the list of things to do to extend the life of the aquifer. As we mentioned, there have been many steps taken over the years to deliver the crop using less water. There's also the effort to voluntarily reduce water use through Locally Enhanced Management Areas or LEMAs. However...as noted...there's only one small LEMA currently in operation – meaning that any savings realized are literally just a drop in the bucket. Dust Bowl Historian Donald Worster says the concept of conservation often conflicts with the pursuit of the American Dream...

Worster:

“Well, its hard when you are obsessed with the image of infinite possibilities. When you don't accept the fact that there are natural limits and that we have to understand and deal with them. Sometimes those limits change.”

Guth:

Closely related to the water issue is the erosion of the region's population. As we have heard...some towns are continuing to thrive as regional population centers while others are slowly disappearing. Anthropologist Donald Stull...

Stull-Forward:

“As an anthropologist, I am not a big fan of the “great man” theory of history. But, in looking at communities like Garden, and Lexington and Guymon and other places over the last 30 years, it's clear that some communities have a great human capital than others. Some communities have individuals that are forward-thinking, progressive and that are in positions of leadership in the police, in the newspapers, in the schools and in the faith community that really do adapt much better than some other communities where, for reasons that really can't be easily explained, the leaders of those communities are not forward-thinking and often take steps that are counter to their best interests.”

Guth:

There are several initiatives aimed at stemming the region's population decline. One is the state's Rural Opportunity Zones program. It involves tax waivers and student loan repayments for those eligible. Chris Harris...who oversees the program for the

Kansas Department of Commerce...told the legislature that 330 individuals received 800-thousand dollars in tax waivers in 2014. He says they will have an estimated 44 million dollar economic impact on the state. Critics of the program note that nearly half of the recipients come to work in public sector jobs...such as education and health care. Similar programs are being considered in Oklahoma and Nebraska.

There's also an effort underway at the University of Kansas. Its RedTire program matches Kansas college graduates with rural business owners looking for a successor. Wally Meyer heads up the program for the K-U School of Business...

Meyer-RedTire:

"If there was void being created by the lack of successor management for these businesses that were essential to the community, and on the other hand, here at KU and the other Regents universities we have a reservoir of talent that we are regularly graduating, wouldn't it make sense to try and match-make between those two halves? That was the origin, if you will, of RedTire.

Guth:

While most Americans live in more populated places... approximately one-point-two million people live in the High Plains. That's only one-half of one percent of the nation's population. So why should we care? Lamar, Colorado, Mayor Roger Stanger...

Stanger-eat:

"Well, one of the reasons is if they want to eat to need to start thinking about the smaller agricultural communities. They are the ones that put the food on the table for the bigger cities. They are the ones out there, you know, toiling the ground, and raising the cattle and going through the blizzards – and doing all that stuff so that there's food out there for us to eat."

Guth:

It's now 80 years later and the weather has been as dry – if not drier – than it was in the Dirty Thirties. It begs the question: Could there be another Dust Bowl? Boise City, Oklahoma, newspaper editor C-F David says no...

David:

Not like the Thirties, I don't think because they learned quite a bit. And the government's come in and bought up a lot of the land here. We have a lot of state land here and federal land that's been turned to grass. We farm differently.

Guth:

David's opinion is typical of many of the region's farmers and community leaders. However...about a mile down the road from the *Boise City News*...Jody Risley says the area can expect more dust storms...

Risley-Dust:

Yes we can. We had some this year. I mean we've had the dirt storms this year.

Guth:

Risley is the Director of the Cimarron Heritage Cultural Museum. Her museum provided much of the source material used in the Ken Burns Dust Bowl documentary...

Risley-Hearty:

They were hearty people. And I guess it is why some of us second and third generations are hearty people. It's because we have to be to be able to stay here and, you know, keep surviving.

Guth:

That may be true, but the essential math remains the same. There's a continuing exodus from the Southern High Plains. More people are going than coming. The hardships of drought... declining groundwater reserves...extreme weather...and isolation are not for the faint of heart. However...strong local leadership and the region's innate pioneer ethic are helping some communities rise above these challenges...and even flourish.

For Kansas Public Radio News...I'm David Guth.

Music:

"The Plow that Broke the Plains: Prelude" (BACKTIMED TO 58:00. ESTABLISH AND THEN UNDER)

Schafer:

Amber Waves of Change: Hard Times on the High Plains. Written and produced by David Guth, with editing help from J. Schafer. The music is from the Dust Bowl documentary "The Plow that

Broke the Plains.” Written by Virgil Thomson. Performed by the Angel Gil-Ordonez & Post-Classical Ensemble.

Copyright 2015.

This is a presentation of Kansas Public Radio and the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Kansas.

Music:

“The Plow that Broke the Plains: Prelude” (BACKTIMED TO 58:00. FADE)

RT: 58:00