

**Homecoming
LEAD**

Date: December 10, 2014

SUGGESTED LEAD-IN:

The population decline within the Southern High Plains has been well documented. However...there are some communities within the region that are holding their own. University of Kansas Journalism Professor David Guth has been researching the area's declining population. And in this report...Guth says that family ties and aggressive community planning may be the reason some cities and towns are faring better than others....

NARRATOR:

Layton Ehmke has come home to farm in Lane County, in west-central Kansas. That may surprise some. Nowadays...it's a lot more common for folks to leave this rural part of the state than it is to return. However...a bigger surprise was how Ehmke announced that he was leaving Chicago – in a February 2013 article for *Playboy*. In it he wrote, “Now that I’ve been gone 15 years...it is easy to imagine giving up the city and trading it in for a wildly different career path.”

LAYTON-WHY:

“I wake up and wonder ‘what the hell am I going to move out in the middle of, you know, no place?’ And it’s an easy answer because, you know, I’m joining the family farm. I am building a place I am going to die in. I am going to be pulled out of there in a box (laughter). But I am honestly going to be able to live the rest of my life there. And I want to be able to do that before I am old.” (21 seconds)

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NARRATOR:

We visited with Layton Ehmke and his father Vance at the family's seed farm near Healy in June 2014. Vance said his son's decision to return to western Kansas made perfect sense...

EHMKE-VANCE:

"A lot of people from urban areas look at this area and say, geez, your quality of life must be horrible. And then you talk to these people who currently live in Chicago, and they've got all these great examples of a very poor quality of life in Chicago and it has a lot more to offer out here." (20 seconds)

NARRATOR:

Layton and Vance Ehmke echo a sentiment heard across the Southern High Plains – that it is a nicer, friendlier and safer place to live. Roger Stanger is the mayor of the eastern Colorado town of Lamar...

STANGER:

If you want a slower lifestyle. If you want a lifestyle to where you can raise your kids and not worry about a lot of the stuff that comes with the big city. I know there's people in Lamar that still don't lock their doors." (14 seconds)

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NARRATOR:

This is not to suggest that the population of the old Dust Bowl is growing. The opposite is true. The population of the region – as a whole – has been in steady decline for decades. But there are certain pockets in the area – regional population centers – that continue to hold their own. Scott City is one of them. Katie Eisenhour of the Scott County Development Committee says her community made a conscious decision in the 1990s to reinvest in community services and facilities...

EISENHOUR-RENOVATE:

Slowly, but surely, we started by doing a ‘reno’ 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.” (17 seconds)

NARRATOR:

Another community holding its own is Garden City, in Finney County. It’s the most diverse city in Kansas. The local meat packing industry has long attracted immigrants looking for their own American dream. But it’s more than immigration that drives growth in this town. Chamber of Commerce President Steve Dyer says Garden City has become a regional commercial center...

DYER-MORE2DO:

“Well, part of it is that’s there more to do here. We are getting some of the shopping. We have a lot of the restaurants. We have the diversity of things. It’s easier to experience the world from a smaller town, now.” (11 seconds)

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NARRATOR:

In a sense...Dyer practices what he preaches. He grew up in Finney County...moved to the Denver area after college...and came back home to Garden City in 2012...

DYER-COMEBACK:

"I think a lot of it is just, 'hey, it's fine to go out and see the world. But after a couple of years of doing that, come back here and have a place for you.' " (8 seconds)

NARRATOR:

That's sort of the plan for Marit Ehmke...Layton Emke's sister. She's a recent journalism graduate from the University of Kansas and works as a copy editor for the Lawrence newspaper...

MERIT-RETURN

"I'd like to see myself going back. But there are some things I need to do first. I would...I think I would regret only living in Kansas." (10 seconds)

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NARRATOR:

Whether Merit Ehmke eventually joins her brother and family back home on the family farm is problematic. Lane County has lost nearly 20 percent of its population since 2000. Dighton is its only city. And with less than three people per square mile -- Lane County is technically designated as frontier. It's easy for those living in more populated communities to overlook...or even dismiss... rural areas in the Southern High Plains. However, people like Lamar Mayor Roger Stanger say that would be a mistake...

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." (19 seconds)

NARRATOR:

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...family ties 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.