



**"Crazy Quilt Farming on Round Land": The Great Depression, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Politics of Landscape Change on the Great Plains during the New Deal Era**

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“CRAZY QUILT FARMING ON ROUND LAND”:  
THE GREAT DEPRESSION, THE SOIL CONSERVATION  
SERVICE, AND THE POLITICS OF LANDSCAPE  
CHANGE ON THE GREAT PLAINS  
DURING THE NEW DEAL ERA

NEIL MAHER

*This article examines the interrelationship between environmental and political change on the Great Plains during the Great Depression. It illustrates how ecological change initiated in one farming community's fields, first by the Great Depression and then by the New Deal's Soil Conservation Service, had economic, social, and political influence beyond the farmers' fencerows, and ultimately reoriented local citizens toward the federal government.*

ON 8 OCTOBER 1941, a crowd of more than two thousand gathered on a small farm in Mormon Coulee, Wisconsin, to watch six so-called “dirt farmers” plow a soggy cornfield. The plowmen—along with most of the spectators—hailed from various mid-western states, were thankful the rain had let up and waited anxiously for the contest to begin. When a sudden cannon blast signaled the start of the event, the plowmen revved their tractors while the crowd cheered enthusiastically. The six farmers then began plowing in curves. Each man rounded out an opening furrow on his section of the field, carefully paralleling the slope of the land, and then circled back to arc another row, again along the hillsides. As the tractors continued to coil across the field, judges from the New Deal's Soil Conservation Service scurried up and down the rows inspecting the plow work to determine which contestant had best “lapped a furrow properly on the curve.” After 80 minutes of such plowing, which local reporters labeled “crazy quilt farming,” the judges awarded first

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prize to Wisconsin dairy farmer Bill Moy and crowned him "American Contour-Plowing King."<sup>1</sup>

Plowing competitions were not new to farmers such as Bill Moy; the agricultural communities of both the Midwest and the Great Plains held similar events throughout their history. Yet traditionally these matches had tested skills very different from those on display at Mormon Coulee. In earlier contests, judges awarded points for "straightness of furrow" and "even lands ends," rather than for "furrows on the curve." Moreover, such events had been primarily local affairs. As one Kansan put it, prior to the Great Depression "farmers would brag about how they could make a straighter row than their neighbor. That was the sign of a good farmer . . . that was something to be proud of." The contour-plowing match won by Bill Moy in 1941, the first of its kind in the nation, was therefore quite novel. It also launched something of a fad. Organized and publicized widely by the Roosevelt administration's Soil Conservation Service, this event encouraged many sponsors of straight-row plowing contests to add a "contour" class to their events. Soon, whole competitions were being held "on the curve."<sup>2</sup>

The sudden popularity of contour-plowing matches during the New Deal era indicates not only the acceptance of a newfangled spectator sport by western Americans, but also that broader political transformations were taking place on the Great Plains during the Great Depression. Throughout the 1930s, as more and more farmers across the region plowed under their straight crop rows and began planting curvilinear fields on the contour, they likewise increasingly turned to the federal government for aid. In other words, as the agricultural landscape all around them took on a new appearance, so too did the political terrain, which began reorienting Great Plains farmers away from their local communities and toward Washington, D.C. Bill Moy's victory in 1941 at a contour-plowing match sponsored by the Soil Conservation Service thus suggests that a pair of interrelated forces—one involving landscape, the other politics—were altering the communities of the Great Plains during the New Deal era.

Historians have failed to rule on the political implications of this agricultural shift. Scholars of the Depression-era plains too often emphasize the most visible and publicized event of this period, the Dust Bowl, which affected only a minority of the nation's agrarian population. Almost as alarming is the scholarship, or lack thereof, regarding the rise of the modern welfare state during the New Deal era. While a number of historians and social theorists have convincingly argued that Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal represented a historic period of autonomous and expansive state activity, they have refrained from analyzing the role of the natural environment in this important twentieth-century development. This historiographical gap is all the more

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn Loyd, "Singing Plowboy Plows Crooked to Win," *Soil Conservation* 7 (January 1942): 169–70.

<sup>2</sup> Lyle Rightmeyer, interview by author, Mankato, Kansas, 13 March 1996. On traditional straight-row plowing contests see Hildegard Binder Johnson, *Order Upon the Land: The U.S. Rectangular Land Survey and the Upper Mississippi Country* (New York, 1976), 197; and Loyd, "Singing Plowboy," 171.

surprising considering the plethora of New Deal programs aimed at restoring the country's natural resources, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Soil Conservation Service. There is a need, then, to understand both the experiences of farming communities not inundated by dust during the Great Depression, as well as how such experiences altered the relationship between these agricultural communities and the federal government during the New Deal era.<sup>3</sup>

This essay is attentive to such community transformations. It explains them by examining interrelated changes in the natural and man-made landscape, or cultural geography, of an agricultural community located in north-central Kansas during the 1930s and early 1940s. It shows that ecological changes initiated in this community's fields, first by the Great Depression and then by the New Deal's Soil Conservation Service, had influence beyond farmers' fencerows and in fact affected the economies of grain elevators and banks as well as the social system located around courthouse square at the very center of the community. Furthermore, it argues that much like the process whereby curvilinear crop rows replaced rectilinear furrows, this community change was neither neat nor sudden. Rather it occurred gradually during the 1930s and influenced some communities, as well as some people within certain communities, more intensely than others. New ecologies, economies, and social forces mixed, mingled, and blended with older forms before replacing them to a great, yet never complete, extent. Community, therefore, is understood here less as a place in time than as a process of social interaction. This essay concludes that a new agricultural landscape, sown by both the economic insecurities of the Great Depression as well as the technological innovations of the New Deal's Soil Conservation Service, blossomed into a reconfigured political geography that helped tie the farming communities of the Great Plains more closely to the federal government.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Histories examining community change in the Dust Bowl region during the Great Depression include Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, 1979); Paul Bonnyfield, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (Albuquerque, 1979); Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago, 1981); Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence, KS, 1994). Scholarship on the rise of the modern welfare state during the New Deal includes Theda Skocpol, "Political Response to Capitalist Crisis: Neo-Marxist Theories of the State and the Case of the New Deal," *Politics and Society* (1980); Theda Skocpol, "Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research," in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter Evans, Dietrich Reuschmeyer, and Theda Skocpol (New York, 1985); Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York, 1996); Alan Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State," in *Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> My approach to cultural geography has been influenced by Carl Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape," *University of California Publications in Geography* 2 (12 October 1925): 19–54; J. B. Jackson, "A New Kind of Space," *Landscape* 18 (Winter 1969): 33–5; D. W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (New York, 1979). For the interrelationship between agriculture and culture see also T. H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of the Revolution* (Princeton, 1985). In considering community change, I have relied to a great extent on Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1978), 43.

Jewell County, Kansas, is particularly fertile ground for generalizing about the experiences of western farmers during the Great Depression and New Deal era. Similar to many agricultural communities in the West during the 1930s and early 1940s, Jewell County experienced its share of economic hardship and was also the site of much work by the Soil Conservation Service. It therefore allows an extended analysis of the New Deal program's influence on local farming practices during the Great Depression. Perhaps more important, due to Jewell's location in an agricultural transition zone between the corn belt of the eastern plains and the wheat producing area in the high plains to the west, the county was in many respects ecologically representative of the Great Plains as a whole. It is precisely because Jewell farmers straddled this agricultural fault line that the changes they underwent during the Great Depression and New Deal era can help shed light on the experiences of fellow agriculturalists residing throughout the entire Great Plains region.<sup>5</sup>

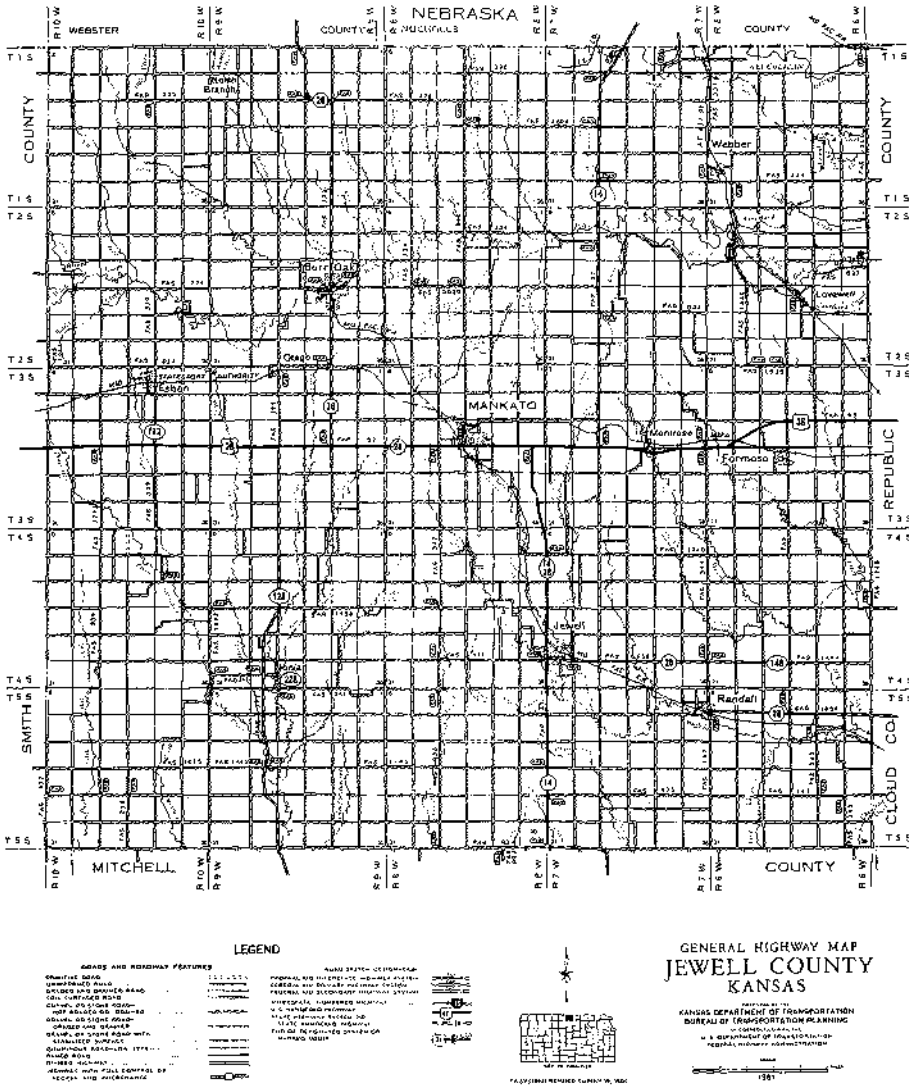
Prior to the stock market crash of 1929, the farmers of Jewell County, Kansas, like most inhabitants of the trans-Mississippi West, maintained a mental map of their communities that was shaped to a great extent by the Land Ordinances of 1785. Not only did the United States Rectangular Survey divide up the American West for efficient settlement, but it also shaped the communities that settlers built upon that landscape. For instance, the survey determined the size and shape of counties and townships, influenced the location and density of homesteads, and even prescribed much of the Great Plains road network when Congress, after realizing it had forgotten to specify the location of public thoroughfares, simply ran them along section lines regardless of the natural terrain. A farmer wishing to travel diagonally across Jewell County was thus forced to zigzag along roads oriented toward the cardinal compass points. The location and main axes of Jewell County's towns were likewise determined by this rectangular road system. (See map 1.) Having ignored the warnings of those who understood that the survey failed to account for the curvature of the earth, Congress had authorized the superimposition of a flat graph-paper-like grid upon round land.<sup>6</sup>

The overall influence of the national survey in shaping the cultural landscape of Jewell County extended to agriculture as well. Not only did the survey's grid inadvertently determine both the size and shape of Jewell's fields, but it also affected the system of land use practiced by farmers in this and other counties throughout the Great Plains. For example, due to the survey, farm properties in Jewell ran north-south and east-west along section lines, as did the fences bordering each homestead. Because fields within

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Soils, "Soil Survey of Jewell County, Kansas," by A. E. Kocher, J. P. Stack, E. H. Smies, and R. I. Throckmorton (Washington, DC, 1914), 6; U.S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, *Soil Survey of Jewell County, Kansas*, by Vernon Hamilton (Washington, DC, 1984), 1-3.

<sup>6</sup> For the influence of the United States Rectangular Survey on the American cultural landscape, especially in the West, see Johnson, *Order Upon the Land*, 40; John Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580-1845* (New Haven, 1982), 101; Carl Sauer, "Homestead and Community on the Middle Border," *Landscape* 12 (Autumn 1962): 5.



Map 1. Jewell County, Kansas.

homesteads ran parallel to property boundaries, they too were oriented toward the cardinal directions. So were the furrows within these fields, which farmers plowed in straight lines along their fences regardless of topography.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> On the National Survey's influence on land-use practices see R. Burnell Held and Marion Clawson, *Soil Conservation in Perspective* (Baltimore, 1965), 278; and Vernon Carstensen, "Patterns on the American Land," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 18, no. 4 (1988): 37.

Although the federal government imposed the rectangular survey upon the western landscape, local affinity quickly took root within the agricultural communities of the Great Plains, Jewell County included. In many respects, this was one of Thomas Jefferson's goals in designing the survey: the creation of an egalitarian society of yeoman farmers that would ensure independence from a potentially tyrannical federal government. "It is not too soon," Jefferson wrote in 1784, "to provide by every possible means that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land." To some extent, the survey encouraged this process of close-knit community formation by reserving one of the center sections in every township for the establishment of public schools and permitting the incorporation of townships and the formation of local government organizations. In 1872, for instance, three settlers surveyed and plotted out the town of Mankato, which became Jewell's county seat the following year after a vote by local residents. And as historian John Mack Faragher has shown, when western settlers chafed under regulations associated with the survey, such as those outlawing squatting, locals often circumvented federal law through communal agreement. Thus, in spite of the federal government's role in helping to settle much of the American West, community formation atop the survey's grid remained a localized process.<sup>8</sup>

In light of this, it is not surprising that when problems arose within their straight-furrowed fields, farmers throughout the Great Plains looked close to home for help. Such was the case during the 1920s, when European nations recovering from the devastation of World War I resumed their own agricultural production and sent prices for American wheat and corn into a tailspin. To make the situation worse, Kansas farmers refused to reduce their acreage, which they had increased from three million acres in 1917 to almost twelve million just two years later, or to abandon the marginal land brought under cultivation during the war. As a result they were ill-prepared for the depression that followed in 1921. During such difficult times, however, Kansas farmers, including those in Jewell County, tended to refrain from seeking federal aid. In fact, throughout the 1920s there seem to have been considerable community pressures that stigmatized those looking to Washington, D.C. for financial support. "The farmer who runs around praying for 'farm relief' when his neighbor is busy going ahead," warned *Jewell County Monitor* editorialist J. O. Rodgers in the spring of 1929, "reminds us of the fellow who stands around waiting for his rich father-in-law to pass on."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jefferson as quoted in Johnson, *Order Upon the Land*, 39. For discussions of localism, the National Survey, and the American West, see John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, 1986), 53–60; Carstensen, "Patterns on the American Land"; J. B. Jackson, "Life and Death of American Landscapes: Jefferson, Thoreau and After," *Landscape* 15 (Winter 1965–66): 26. Jackson writes, "The National Survey of 1785 was not merely inspired by Jefferson, it was a clear expression of the Jeffersonian dislike of powerful government, centralized in cities." On local community formation in Jewell County see "Mankato the County Seat," in *A Commercial and Industrial Survey of Jewell County*, (Mankato, KS, 1929), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Scott Rowland, "Kansas Farming and Banking in the 1920s," *Kansas History* 8, no. 3 (1985): 189–90; J. O. Rodgers, "I've a Notion," *Jewell County* (Mankato, KS) *Monitor*, 10 May 1929, 2.

Rather than look for federal relief, Jewell County farmers during the 1920s relied on the local extension agent for help with their rectilinear furrows. By providing technical information that could be applied directly to fields, county extension agents served as teachers and advisors to local farmers. And because extension farm programs were dependent on locals for both financial and emotional support, these agents were largely independent of Washington and often controlled by local political factions. Such was certainly the case in Jewell, where extension agent Ralph Ramsey provided agricultural information and ran projects for local farmers from his office in Mankato. Through his weekly column in the local newspaper, which often included details on the eradication of farm pests such as oxwarble grubs, canker worms, and gophers, Ramsey also disseminated information to farmers unable to make the trip into his office. He likewise recommended crop diversification, especially the planting of alfalfa, as a strategy to enhance soil fertility and never once in 1929 mentioned contour plowing as a means of retaining soil moisture. Regardless of its content, however, Ramsey's column faithfully championed local interests, as on 3 May 1929, when it provided a detailed report on the activities of Jewell County's numerous 4-H clubs.<sup>10</sup>

During the 1920s, when Great Plains farmers traveled from their fields out into their communities, they drove past other important cultural geographic sites which, like the roads they zigzagged upon, also had been influenced by the national survey. For instance, after converting their crops into capital, farmers deposited these earnings into local banks that often reflected the rectilinear survey lines laid out over the American West. This was due in part to the widespread influence of Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, William Purcell, and George Elmslie, who together gave rise to Prairie School architecture. The banks these men designed between 1905 and 1920 were simple, square or rectangular structures whose horizontal lines, according to Wright, "echoed the spirit of the prairies of the great Middle West." Frequently called "strong-boxes," these banks usually sat on corners along Main Street and faced east-west and north-south much like the roads, homestead sections, fields, and townships of the surrounding county. Such structures undoubtedly influenced the architects who designed Jewell County's banks. The bank erected in 1912 in Burr Oak, a town just northwest of Mankato, was a perfect cube, while those constructed in Jewell City around 1910 and in Esbon in 1924 were rectangular and situated on corner lots along Main Street. The banks built in the town of Formoso sometime around 1910 and in Randall in 1912 also reflected this prairie style of architecture.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> On the power of local extension agents see J. C. Headley, "Soil Conservation and Cooperative Extension," *Agricultural History* 59, no. 2 (1985): 292. On the Mankato location of the Jewell County extension office see Rightmeyer, interview by author, 13 March 1996; Ralph Ramsey, "Help the Farm Situation with Diversification," *Jewell County Monitor*, 28 June 1929, 6; Ralph Ramsey, "Farm Bureau Notes," *Jewell County Monitor*, 3 May 1929, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Irving K. Pond and Frank Lloyd Wright as quoted by William T. Morgan, "Strong-boxes on Main Street: Prairie-Style Banks," *Landscape* 24, no. 2 (1980): 36. On widespread acclaim for prairie banks see *ibid.*, 35-40.



While the architecture of Jewell County banks embodied the gridiron of the national survey, most of the business conducted within their walls focused on the local community. Because Kansas, like most of its neighbors throughout the Great Plains, was a unit-banking state that prohibited branch banks from extending their jurisdiction over state lines, the industry remained unregulated and decentralized during the 1920s with over one thousand small independent banks in operation statewide. Due to such regulations, banks like those in Jewell County were only too willing to promote their own provincialism. In advertisements published in local newspapers prior to the Great Depression, Mankato's First National Bank emphasized its role as "depository for county, township, school district, and city funds," while the State Exchange Bank down the street boasted, "we are not a depository of any Federal or State Funds."<sup>12</sup>

When funds in local banks ran short, as they often did in agricultural communities during the 1920s, many farmers sought help around their county seat's courthouse square. Often built during the nineteenth century and comprised of a grand court building surrounded by a grid of streets extending outward into the countryside, courthouse squares were a common element of county seats throughout the Midwest and Great Plains region. Jewell County's courthouse square was typical. Located in the center of Mankato, which was itself situated in the very middle of the county in aptly named Center Township, Jewell's courthouse square included an imposing court building bordered on all sides by perpendicular streets that ran east-west and north-south. In Jewell, as in most counties throughout the Great Plains, courthouse square mirrored the extended landscape, which was patchworked with straight-rowed fields and dotted with square and rectangular banks.<sup>13</sup>

For Jewell farmers experiencing hardship, all county roads led to courthouse square. Here, gathered inside the courthouse and on the perimeter of the square, were the social institutions that local farmers relied on in good times and in bad. The court building itself housed the county courts as well as a host of government offices, while just outside the courthouse were other equally important relief organizations. For instance, on the periphery of the square facing the courthouse stood religious institutions that represented the first and often only source of community welfare for local farmers. During the late 1920s these included the Methodist, Christian, and United Brethren Churches of Mankato, each of which maintained ladies' aid societies to help members of the community in times of need. Thus, along with reflecting the

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<sup>12</sup> On the decentralization of Kansas banks see Rowland, "Kansas Farming," 186; and David Wheelock, "Regulation and Bank Failures: New Evidence from the Agricultural Collapse of the 1920s," *Journal of Economic History* 52, no. 4 (1992): 815. For an example of Jewell County banks advertising their own provincialism see *Jewell County Monitor*, 11 January 1929 and 18 January 1929.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Price, "The Central Courthouse Square in the American County Seat," *The Geographical Review* 58, no. 1 (1968): 29.

rectilinear character of the national survey, Jewell's courthouse square also oriented local farming communities inward toward the center of the county.<sup>14</sup>

As with Jewell's fields, banks, and courthouse square, the Land Ordinances of 1785 influenced the spatial arrangement of the county's grain elevators as well. After harvesting their fields but before depositing the revenue from their crops into local banks, farmers had to transform their corn and wheat into capital. They did this at the local grain elevator. Like most grain elevators throughout the western United States, the dozen or so in Jewell were situated alongside railroad lines, in this case one of three—the Missouri Pacific Railroad; the Chicago, Rock Island Railroad; and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad—each of which ran their tracks as straight as possible along county section lines. Because the elevators in the towns of Mankato, Formoso, Montrose, and Esbon each loaded grain onto the Missouri Pacific Railroad, they stood at intervals across the Jewell landscape in a near-perfect row from the eastern to the western edge of the county.<sup>15</sup>

Although the location of Jewell's grain elevators reflected the rectilinear character of the national survey, the business conducted within these structures had the potential to be controlled by extra-local forces. While all of the elevators in the county were so-called "country elevators," meaning they received most of their grain from farmers living within a ten-mile radius, they were nevertheless linked by rail to terminal elevators, which in turn shipped Jewell grain to distant domestic and foreign markets. This connection to far-off economies was quite evident when large grain-buying syndicates, aided by railroad companies, began buying up country elevators throughout the Great Plains during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So successful were these syndicates in gaining control of local grain elevators that by 1910 they were able to essentially dictate the price paid to local farmers for crops. As one commentator explained in 1914, "the farmer with grain to sell was no longer master of his situation."<sup>16</sup>

In an effort to reestablish control over their local economy, farmers throughout the Midwest and Great Plains began banding together to form grain elevator

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<sup>14</sup> On Great Plains county roads leading both figuratively and literally to courthouse square see Price, "The Central Courthouse," 56; and J. B. Jackson, "The Almost Perfect Town," *Landscape* 2 (Spring 1952): 5–6. On Jewell County's religious institutions see "History of the Church Organizations of Jewell County," in *A Commercial and Industrial Survey*, 22, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Rightmeyer, interview by author, 13 March 1996. For additional information on Jewell County grain elevators during the 1920s see "Annual Report of the Public Service Commission, Labor Department, State of Kansas," (Topeka, 1926–1942). On railroads in Jewell County see Kocher, "Soil Survey of Jewell County, Kansas," 7. On the role of the National Survey in determining railroad routes, see Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America*, 341–2.

<sup>16</sup> John Hudson, "The Grain Elevator: An American Invention," in Frank Gohlke, ed., *Measures of Emptiness: Grain Elevators in the American Landscape* (Baltimore, 1992), 89; O. N. Refsell, "The Farmers' Elevator Movement," *Journal of Political Economy* 22 (November 1914): 878.

cooperatives. The resulting movement, often called the "farmers' grain elevator movement," reached Kansas in 1892 when residents of Wilson, Kansas, organized the state's first cooperative grain elevator. Although the movement spread slowly throughout the rest of the state in the 1920s, it grew dramatically during the following decade when farmers established two-thirds of Kansas's nearly 300 cooperative elevators. Farmers organized five such grain elevators in Jewell County, one of which, the Farmers' Union Co-operating Association, was created in 1917 and located on the outskirts of Mankato along the Chicago, Rock Island Railroad. In Jewell as elsewhere, cooperative elevators succeeded in providing farmers with local marketing agencies that assured reductions in grain-handling charges as well as the elimination of questionable practices in grading and weighing grain. The other grain elevators in the county remained locally owned during the 1920s. Thus, even though grain elevators posed a potential threat to local economic autonomy, Jewell County farmers were quite successful in insulating their community from these extra-local forces.<sup>17</sup>

Prior to the Great Depression, then, Jewell County farmers relied on the nearby help of their county extension agent for guidance with their straight-furrowed fields. In many respects the nature of both—local aid and rectilinear furrows—extended beyond farmers' crop rows to influence the structure and functioning of Jewell's banks, courthouse square, and grain elevators. The stock market crash in October 1929, however, and more importantly the severe drought that followed on the Great Plains three years later, called this coexistence between a rectilinear landscape and a reliance on local institutions into question. In response, Jewell farmers began reassessing their rather square relationship with a land beginning to flex its curves.

The economic shock of Black Tuesday was slow to reach Kansas. As one Jewell County resident wrote, "farm prices were not high anyway and they did not immediately plummet . . . And besides, there were no skyscrapers from which ruined farmers could jump." Mankato journalists were at first equally optimistic. In his January 1930 New Year edition, the editor of *The Jewell County Monitor* boasted, "never before in the history of this town and vicinity [were] prospects better for a prosperous year . . . business conditions are gradually improving and altogether times are ripe for a good year ahead." In 1933, however, when a drought also struck the Great Plains, Jewell County farmers were faced with the ecological equivalent of the 29 October stock market tumble.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> On cooperative grain elevators in Kansas see Farm Credit Administration Cooperative Research and Service Division, "Operations of Cooperative Grain Elevators in Kansas and Oklahoma 1931-32 to 1936-37, Bulletin No. 30," by Harold Hedges, (Washington, DC, 1939), 1-2. For specifics regarding cooperative grain elevators in Mankato see "Mankato Map," Sanborn Map Company, 1923, located in The Kansas Collection, University of Kansas, Lawrence. On cooperative grain elevators in Jewell County see Farm Credit Administration, "Membership, Financial, and Operating Status of Cooperative Country Elevators in Kansas, 1931-1934," by Roy Green (Washington, DC, 1934), 8; Rightmeyer, interview by author, 13 March 1996.

<sup>18</sup> Dick Judy, "An Era Passes," *The Jewell County (Mankato, KS) Record*, 29 September 1977, 5; "A Prosperous New Year," *Jewell County Monitor*, 3 January 1930, 1.

The drought of 1933 scorched the Great Plains for three consecutive years. Precipitation in Jewell County, which had averaged 23.25 inches per year during the 1920s, dropped to 18.1 inches annually between 1932 and 1936, a decrease of more than 22 percent. While this dry spell proved one of the worst on record, the Depression-era drought was far from unprecedented. As longtime Jewell resident Lyle Rightmeyer explained, "we'd eaten a lot of dirt around this country." Yet unlike those from southwestern Kansas, who either endured or fled the infamous Dust Bowl, the great majority of farmers throughout the Great Plains faced a different, though related, set of ecological problems. Rather than dust, what these farmers found most extraordinary about the 1933 drought were the giant gullies that accompanied it. As one visitor to Jewell put it, "most of the damage here comes from runoff . . . there are many ugly gullies in this semiarid area."<sup>19</sup>

Severe runoff had a number of ecological consequences for Jewell County's fields. As water moved downhill, it carried topsoil along with it and thus cut deeper into the earth. The increased slope transported rainfall at an even faster rate, giving it less time to seep into the soil. The result was a never-ending spiral of steepening slopes and faster moving water that left Jewell's fields drier and less fertile. Wheat yields per acre, for instance, which averaged 15.2 bushels between 1927 and 1931, declined by 50 percent to 7.6 bushels per acre during the drought. Other Jewell County crops more dependent on moisture suffered an even worse fate. "You couldn't raise any corn," explained Lyle Rightmeyer. "It dried up and burned up and died."<sup>20</sup>

While many Jewell farmers cursed the burning sun and lack of rain for their poor harvests, others also began blaming their rectilinear furrows. They did so because on those rare occasions when it did rain, farmers were forced to watch helplessly as their straight crop rows channeled much needed water quickly off their fields, washing valuable topsoil along with it. These furrows, local farmers knew only too well, often deepened into gullies. Jewell farmer Roy Phillips publicly expressed concern as early as May of 1934 that straight-row "soil washing" was decreasing yields on his Odessa Township farm in the eastern part of the county. The local newspaper also ran front page articles on the problem, explaining to its readers that "crops planted in rows up and down the

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<sup>19</sup> Rain statistics maintained by Jewell County Soil Conservation District, Jewell County, Kansas. For a list of previous Jewell County droughts see Kocher, "Soil Survey of Jewell County, Kansas," 9. On Jewell County dust storms see Rightmeyer, interview by author, 13 March 1996. For a description of gullying in Jewell County see U.S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, *To Hold this Soil*, by Russell Lord (Washington, DC, 1938), 86; and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, "Physical Land Conditions Affecting Use, Conservation and Management of Land Resources, Jewell County, Kansas," by Robert Eikleberry, July 1990, File SP 630.7ZEX7PH, Jewell County Folder, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

<sup>20</sup> Kansas State Board of Agriculture, "Soil Erosion by Wind in Kansas," by J. C. Mohler (Topeka, KS, 1937), 16. This report's title is misleading with regards to Jewell County, where water, rather than wind erosion, was the main problem. On corn cultivation see Rightmeyer, interview by author, 13 March 1996.

slope are washed out in some places and buried in others." Even those just passing through Jewell quickly realized that rectilinear furrows were causing severe soil and water erosion throughout the county. As one visitor said of Jewell farmers during the height of the drought, "they like to farm 'on the square,'" with the result that "slopes keep creeping higher . . . and the speed and gnawing power of water has increased accordingly."<sup>21</sup>

Along with losing faith in their straight-furrowed fields, during the early years of the Great Depression Jewell farmers also lost confidence in their local extension agent. When drought hit the Great Plains in 1933, county agents throughout Kansas continued to advocate crop diversification as the best strategy for trapping moisture in soil, much as they had in the 1920s. Jewell County extension agent Ralph Ramsey recommended that local farmers increase their acreage in alfalfa. Yet according to Glenn Grout, who farmed a quarter section in Jewell during the 1930s, Ramsey's suggestion was highly impractical during prolonged dry spells. "Alfalfa," Grout explained, "is probably the crop that would be most affected by drought." Fellow farmer Lyle Rightmeyer put it more bluntly, adding that the county extension agent in Mankato "didn't have any training in soil conservation." Still another indication of the county agent's waning influence is found in the pages of a local newspaper, the *Western Advocate*, which ceased regular publication of Ramsey's extension news column on 9 May 1934. Thus, while Ralph Ramsey experienced broad community support for his programs during the 1920s, enthusiasm for his extension work, like Jewell County's crops, began to wither as the depression and drought deepened.<sup>22</sup>

The loss of confidence expressed by Jewell farmers with respect to both their straight-furrowed fields and their county extension agent was characteristic of a more broad-based anxiety concerning the inability of their community to help them weather the Great Depression. For example, when county farmers deposited revenue from their meager harvests into local bank accounts, it was difficult for them to ignore the changes affecting the Jewell economy. Most obviously, during the 1930s there were simply fewer banks in which to make deposits and from which loans could be drawn. The State Bank of Webber shut its doors on 25 September 1930 due to a run and insufficient funds, and banks in nearby Formoso and Montrose soon followed suit. And although the two banks in Mankato remained solvent throughout the Great Depression, bankers from both institutions were less willing to invest in the local community than they had been during the 1920s. J. P. Fair, president of Mankato's First National Bank,

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<sup>21</sup> On soil washing see "Soil Erosion Notes," *Western Advocate* (Mankato, KS), 1 March 1934, 1 and 14 May 1936, 1. For visitor comments on soil erosion see Lord, *To Hold this Soil*, 86.

<sup>22</sup> On loss of confidence in county extension agents in southwestern Kansas see Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, "From the Horse's Mouth: Dust Bowl Farmers and Their Solutions to the Problem of Aridity," *Agricultural History* 66 (Spring 1992): 138–9. On loss of confidence of Jewell County extension agent see Glen Grout, interview by author, Mankato, Kansas, 13 March 1996; and Rightmeyer, interview by author, 13 March 1996.

admitted to following "a conservative banking philosophy" during the 1930s that often denied local farmers credit but which kept his bank solvent in the long run.<sup>23</sup>

When banks tightened their fiscal belts or went belly-up altogether, Jewell County farmers instinctively turned to their courthouse square for help. But here changes of a social nature were altering their community. Between 1929 and the early months of 1933, the burden of providing relief for Kansas farmers fell upon local welfare groups; the state of Kansas provided only one percent of all relief dollars spent in the state during the 1930s. Not surprisingly, as the depression and drought continued, these grass-roots civic organizations simply lacked the institutional resources necessary to aid their own people. In Jewell, for instance, the growing number of farm families seeking relief quickly overwhelmed the county's ladies aid societies, which from churches around courthouse square had successfully catered to the community's poor during the 1920s. The two community relief committees that Jewell residents established in Mankato during the early 1930s proved equally inadequate. "The local government couldn't help," explained Bradley Judy, who taught high school and farmed in Jewell County during the Great Depression, "And there wasn't any help in the form of community groups." Yet another indication that local relief efforts were insufficient was Jewell's dwindling population, which plummeted by more than 20 percent between 1929 and 1938.<sup>24</sup>

Along with faltering fields, broken banks, and overwhelmed welfare organizations, during the early 1930s Jewell County farmers also experienced the weakening of the cooperative grain elevator movement they had established to insulate their community from extra-local grain markets. During the Depression era, cooperative grain elevators across northwestern Kansas, including Jewell County, experienced on average a 12 to 15 percent decline in active membership. In Jewell proper, the situation was similar. Whereas during the three years prior to the drought, 1930 to 1932, county farmers produced on average more than 1.3 million bushels of winter wheat per year, much of which passed through local cooperative elevators on the way to freight trains, during the three-year dry spell production declined throughout Jewell to just over one-half million bushels per year. As a result, a number of the county's cooperative grain

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<sup>23</sup> "Webber Bank Closed," *Jewell County Monitor* 26 September 1930, 1; "Formoso Bank Quits Business," *Western Advocate*, 2 July 1936, 1. On the closing of the bank in Montrose see Rightmeyer interview by author, 13 March 1996. On J. P. Fair's banking policy during the depression see Dick Judy, "An Era Passes," *The Jewell County Record*, 29 September 1977, 5.

<sup>24</sup> On the failure of state and local relief in Kansas see Pamela Riney-Kehlberg, "Hard Times, Hungry Years: Failure of the Poor Relief in Southwestern Kansas, 1930-1933," *Kansas History* 13, no. 3 (1992): 156-66; Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 12, 35; Peter Fearon, "From Self-Help to Federal Aid: Unemployment and Relief in Kansas, 1929-1932," *Kansas History* 13, no. 2 (1990): 107-22. On failure of relief organizations in Jewell County see "Local Relief Committee Met and Made Plans for Work," *Western Advocate*, 24 November 1932, 1; and Bradley Judy, interview by author, Mankato, Kansas, 13 March 1996. For statistics on Jewell's dwindling population see Kansas State Board of Agriculture, "Biennial Report" (Topeka, KS, 1929-1938).

elevators were forced out of business. As Jewell farmer Glen Grout explained, "a lot of elevators went bankrupt" in the "dirty thirties."<sup>25</sup>

During the early years of the Great Depression, then, when drought aggravated an already dire economic situation, Jewell farmers began questioning their reliance on both straight-furrowed fields and the county extension agent. This loss of confidence extended beyond the ecology of Jewell's fields to include the economics of its banks and grain elevators and the social network of its courthouse square. In response, local farmers abandoned their rectilinear, local orientation and sought replacements. The first step in this search involved the presidential election of 1932, when Jewell residents, along with the majority of their fellow Kansans, forswore their decade-long allegiance to the Republican party's belief in a small federal government little involved in local affairs and voted by plurality for the Democratic nominee.<sup>26</sup>

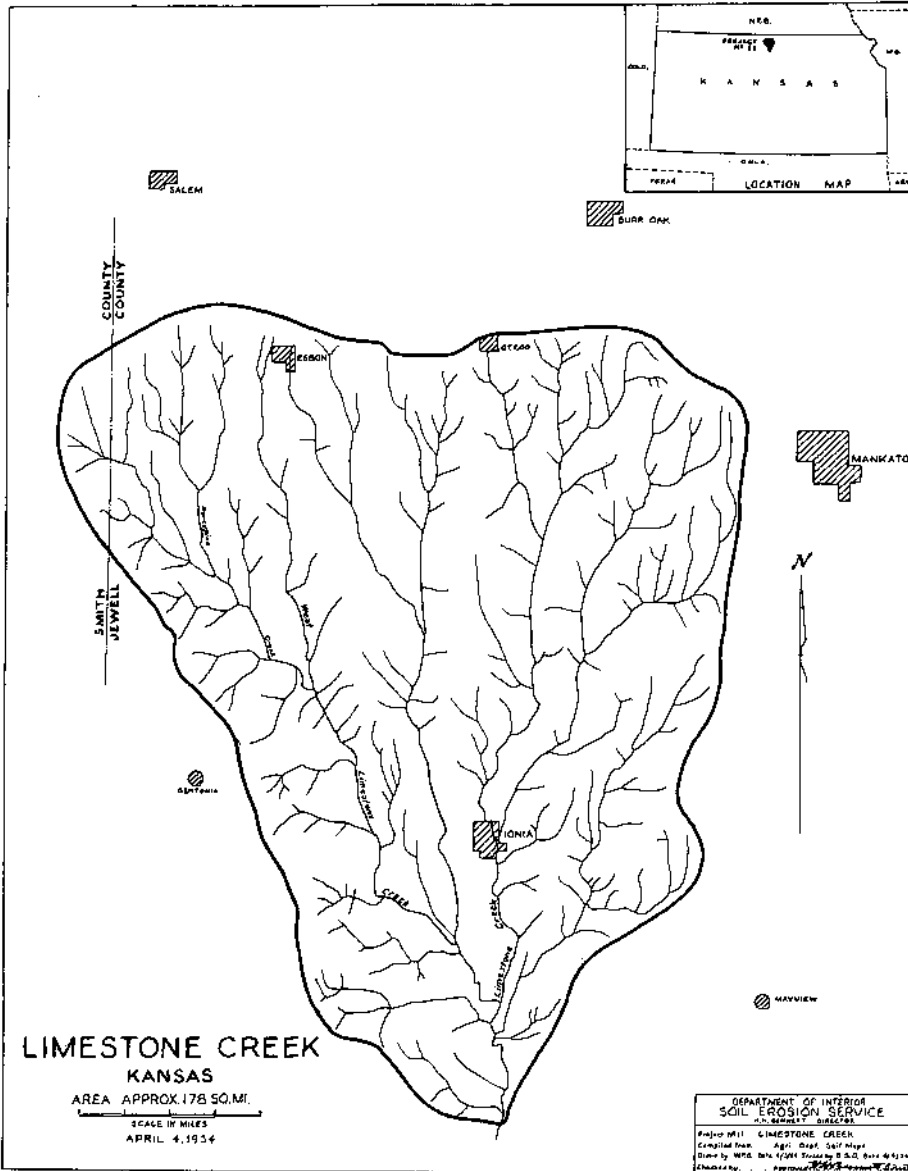
One of the first signs that Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal had arrived in Jewell was an airplane that buzzed back and forth over the western half of the county on a clear Saturday afternoon in December 1933. After considerable speculation, local residents learned that the Soil Conservation Service had hired the plane to take aerial photographs of what was soon to become the Limestone Creek Demonstration Area. As the *Western Advocate* explained to its readers, "instead of having a flat appearance, as one would expect in a photo taken looking straight down, the maps show clearly every gully and slope, even small rises showing up like mountains." A new community map, one that took into account the curvature of the earth, was being prepared by the federal government for superimposition atop Jewell County's rectilinear and locally oriented grid.<sup>27</sup>

The Limestone Creek Demonstration Area was one of 175 projects established nationwide by the Soil Conservation Service during the New Deal era. The concept behind these projects was to convince farmers within a concentrated geographic area to work with the Soil Conservation Service in implementing soil and water conservation techniques. These farms would then be showcased so that other farmers from outlying regions could visit and learn how to implement such agricultural practices on their own land. The service would provide the technical expertise and machinery while those residing in the area would supply the labor. Unlike the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Soil Conservation Service did not pay farmers to

<sup>25</sup> For a description of Kansas elevator cooperatives see Floyd Smith, "Grain Cooperatives: Their Growth and Structural Changes," Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station (Manhattan, KS, 1973), 1-5. On the impact of the drought on cooperative grain elevators in northwestern Kansas (Jewell County included) see Farm Credit Administration, "Membership, Financial, and Operating Status of Cooperative Country Elevators in Kansas, 1931-1934," by Roy Green (Washington, DC, 1934), 2. On winter wheat harvests in Jewell County and their relation to the closing of cooperative grain elevators see Kansas State Board of Agriculture, "Biennial Report," and Grout, interview by author, 13 March 1996.

<sup>26</sup> June Cabe and Charles Sullivant, *Kansas Votes: National Elections, 1859-1956* (Lawrence, KS, 1957).

<sup>27</sup> "Took Photos From the Air," *Western Advocate*, 1 February 1934, 1.



Map 2. Limestone Creek Demonstration Area.

participate. The Limestone Creek project, one of the first, longest functioning, and largest demonstration areas in the nation, encompassed more than 125,000 acres or nearly 200 square miles.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> On Soil Conservation Service demonstration projects nationwide see Hugh H. Bennett, "A New Farm Movement Takes Rapid Root," *Soil Conservation* 6 (February-March



The Soil Conservation Service's Limestone Creek Demonstration Area stood in stark contrast to the rectilinear community farmers had constructed upon the Jewell County landscape. The project, similar to other demonstration areas throughout the nation, was established on a watershed basis, meaning only farms located within the Limestone Creek drainage qualified for inclusion in the federally-funded program. "Erosion and its accompanying evils do not stop at fence lines, or farm boundaries. Neither do they stop at state lines," argued Soil Conservation Service Chief Hugh Bennett. "They are, in general, watershed . . . problems . . . [that] must be treated on that basis." Thus, rather than adhering to township or county boundaries, the Limestone Creek Demonstration Area was shaped like a raindrop and literally seeped over into neighboring Smith and Mitchell Counties in the west and south. (See map 2.)<sup>29</sup>

Along with redrawing maps of the western portion of the county, the Limestone Creek Demonstration Area transformed Jewell's fields as well. Only a few months after snapping photographs of Limestone Creek by airplane, the Soil Conservation Service announced to Jewell County residents its primary strategy for halting soil and water erosion. "Fields are planned to be cultivated on the contour," wrote Soil Conservation Service agricultural engineer John Glass on the front page of the local newspaper. On fields with a gentle slope of less than four percent the service would help farmers replot their furrows parallel to hillsides, while in steeper regions contoured furrows would be supplemented by terraces, also laid out on the curve, and built with machinery on loan from the federal government.<sup>30</sup>

In the beginning, many Jewell County residents were suspicious of both this new type of agriculture as well as the organization promoting it. "My father was skeptical at first," admitted Lyle Rightmeyer, who explained that farmers disliked contour-plowing because it involved more point rows and thus increased the time it took to farm an acre of land. According to Rightmeyer, locals also "didn't want some government man coming out there and saying 'now here's the way you ought to do this.'" Yet as more and more farmers living within the demonstration area began visiting fields contoured by the Soil Conservation Service, they gradually began signing up to have contour guides laid out on their own fields. By December 1935, only two years after the Soil Conservation Service arrived in the county, farmers within the demonstration area had constructed more than twelve hundred miles of contoured terraces, and in 1935 alone they contour planted more than fifteen thousand acres of small grain. As the *Western Advocate* proclaimed soon after the Soil Conservation Service began its work in Jewell County: "There's a new fashion in farming! Straight rows are out; the object now is to plant crops across the slopes paralleling the terraces as nearly as possible."<sup>31</sup>

1941): 193-4; and Phoebe Cutler, *The Public Landscape of the New Deal* (New Haven, 1985), 113. On the size and shape of the Limestone Creek Demonstration Area see "Soil Erosion Project for Kansas," *Western Advocate*, 28 December 1933, 1.

<sup>29</sup> As quoted in Robert Parks, *Soil Conservation Districts in Action* (Ames, IA, 1952), 2.

<sup>30</sup> "Terracing in the Limestone Valley Area," *Western Advocate*, 31 May 1934, 1.

<sup>31</sup> On local opposition to contour farming see Rightmeyer, interview by author, 13

Those living within the demonstration area were not the only farmers in Jewell County abandoning their rectilinear furrows for curvilinear crop rows. The Limestone Creek project also convinced many farmers from the surrounding region, as well as those beyond the county, to practice contour farming. The Soil Conservation Service accomplished this by holding "Field Demonstration Days" throughout the year, during which visitors toured the project area. One such event held on 9 and 10 August 1934, attracted approximately 1,000 people from 43 Kansas counties and 5 states; even Kansas Governor Alf Landon attended. At a similar event the following year, touring tenant farmers from adjacent Cloud County were so taken with the contour farming on exhibit along Limestone Creek that they decided on the spot to survey their straight-rowed fields and plant on the curve. "Many farmers who are not in the area or are non-cooperators have adopted the practice," explained a local newspaper reporter.<sup>32</sup>

As farmers and the Soil Conservation Service gradually replaced straight furrows with contoured crop rows, they slowly transformed the ecology of Jewell County's fields. Unlike rectilinear furrowing, contour plowing slowed water runoff and thus decreased both the washing away of fertile topsoil and the severity of gullying. Perhaps more importantly, the practice kept the occasional rain from running off farmers' fields. "The rows seem almost to run themselves dizzy going across or around the fields in half circles," wrote one visitor to the Limestone Creek Demonstration Area in July 1934. "It is obvious to the naked eye that only during a cloudburst could water find its way out of the system of terraces and corn rows listed 'on the contour.'" Because of such practices, Jewell County's soils were more moist and fertile, and farmers who had difficulty diversifying their crops prior to the arrival of the Soil Conservation Service were now planting a whole host of new species, including sweet clover, alfalfa, kafir, cane, milo, and a variety of grasses. In 1935 alone, acreage in sorghums increased 55 percent throughout Jewell County as a whole and 72 percent within the demonstration area as compared to the previous year.<sup>33</sup>

Along with altering the ecology of Jewell County's fields, the Soil Conservation Service also replaced Ralph Ramsey, the county extension agent, as the main source of agricultural information for local farmers. Like Ramsey, Limestone Creek project manager F. L. Duley also resided and maintained an office in Mankato, the county seat. Yet

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March 1936. On the expansion of contour farming in Jewell see "Soil Conservation Notes," *Western Advocate*, 12 December 1935, 1; "New Fashion in Farming," *Western Advocate*, 18 October 1934, 7.

<sup>32</sup> "Soil Erosion Notes," *Western Advocate*, 16 August 1934, 1 and 21 March 1935, 1; "Soil Conservation Notes," *Western Advocate*, 20 June 1935, 1.

<sup>33</sup> F. E. Charles to R. Gordon Brown, 13 July 1934, Folder "Mankato Correspondence," Box 381, Record Group 114 "Records of the Soil Conservation Service," National Archives, Central Plains Region, Kansas City, Missouri (hereafter NA). For additional descriptions of increased moisture remaining in Jewell's fields see "Soil Conservation Notes," *Western Advocate*, 6 June 1935, 1 and 11 April 1935, 1. On increased crop diversification see "The Banner Corn County Plants 55% More Drought Crops—Soil Erosion Area 72% More," *Western Advocate*, 22 August 1935, 8.

whereas Ramsey's extension column ceased to run regularly in local newspapers in May of 1934, Duley's "Soil Erosion Notes" became a weekly front page item in February of the same year. Even more indicative of this New Deal agency's ascendancy at the expense of the local extension office was Ralph Ramsey's decision in 1935 to abandon his post for a job with the Soil Conservation Service. Such a shift in allegiance was not lost on county residents. According to former Jewell farmer and Soil Conservation Service employee Lyle Rightmeyer, sometime during the mid-1930s local farmers lost confidence in the extension program and turned instead to the federal government's Soil Conservation Service. "We had many more visitors into the Soil Conservation office, coming in for information or assistance, than the traffic to the extension office," explained Rightmeyer. "Somewhere back there . . . the trend began to go that way."<sup>34</sup>

When residents of Jewell County left their homes to tour the Limestone Creek Demonstration Area, or to visit friends, or to shop in town, they found that the ecological changes taking place in their fields were causing economic and social transformations that were likewise shifting their community away from its rectilinear and local orientation. To begin with, the Soil Conservation Service's contour farming helped transform the economic relationship between farmers and local bankers, not just in Jewell County but throughout the country as a whole. Nationally distributed Soil Conservation Service articles with titles such as "Conservation Practices Receive Approval of Bankers," and "Bankers Put Cash Value on Conservation Program," were, as one writer explained, "important messages to the farmer from the banker, by way of the Soil Conservation Service." The Service acted similarly as a conduit for communication flowing in the opposite direction, from farmers practicing contour plowing to local bankers who had money to invest. For example, Limestone Creek project manager F. L. Duley not only invited local and statewide bankers to tour the demonstration area in order to encourage local investment, but he also wrote numerous letters on behalf of Jewell County farmers working with the Soil Conservation Service in an effort to help them secure loans from regional banks. "The Soil Erosion Service of the Department of the Interior has done, during the past year, a considerable amount of improvement on this farm in the way of an erosion control program," Duley explained in a letter to a Wichita banker. "It is my belief that this farm is in much better condition than it has been in the past, and the improvement which we have made should add materially to the value of the farm."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> On the location of Soil Conservation Service project manager residence see "Federal Project to Control Soil Erosion," *The Jewell County (Mankato, KS) Graphic*, 21 March 1934, 6. Duley's column begins to appear regularly in the 22 February 1934 edition of *Western Advocate*, 1. On Ramsey replacing Duley see "Soil Conservation Notes," *Western Advocate*, 24 October 1935, 1; Rightmeyer, interview by author, 13 March 1996.

<sup>35</sup> "Conservation Practices Receive Approval of Bankers," *Soil Conservation* 7 (November 1941): 124; A. E. McClymonds, "Bankers Put Cash Value on Conservation Program," *Soil Conservation* 7 (September 1941): 65. On invitation to bankers to tour demonstration area see F.

While establishing itself as an intermediary between Jewell County farmers and their banks, the Soil Conservation Service also transformed the economic relationship between local farmers and their cooperative grain elevators. Although the promotion by the Soil Conservation Service of the cultivation of nongrain crops, including sorghums and grasses, did little to increase the volume of corn and wheat flowing through Jewell County's elevators, the service did succeed in promoting another type of cooperative relationship that aided local farmers financially. The Soil Conservation Service initiated this relationship late in 1933 when it mailed flyers, addressed "Dear Cooperator," to local residents explaining that the success of the Limestone Creek project depended on "the co-operation of the farmers in this area." Such terminology was not restricted to Jewell County; farmers throughout the nation were required to sign a "Cooperative Agreement" before the Soil Conservation Service performed any work on their land. Jewell County farmers responded enthusiastically to this cooperative approach. By December 1934, 335 of the 629 farmers living within the Limestone Creek Demonstration Area had signed such agreements, while 3 years later the number of cooperators had risen to 583, 92 percent of those residing within the project area. The Soil Conservation Service had thus helped replace cooperation among farmers regarding local grain elevators with cooperation between farmers and the federal government in the plowing of contour furrows.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, the Soil Conservation Service also transformed farmers' relationships with the social welfare system centered around Jewell County's courthouse square. This process began during the mid-1930s, when community residents realized local relief organizations such as the ladies aid societies were unable to help them through the Great Depression and turned instead to the Soil Conservation Service. For instance, in January 1934, nearly one dozen Jewell County residents sent a petition to Limestone Creek project manager F. L. Duley stating that "we the undersigned unemployed men with families . . . wish to file our application for work with you on your Limestone

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L. Duley to L. E. Call, President, Federal Land Bank Wichita, 26 July 1934, Folder "Mankato Correspondence," Box 381, Record Group 114, "Records of the Soil Conservation Service," NA. For example of loan recommendation see F. L. Duley to Federal Land Bank, Wichita, Kansas, 14 December 1934, Folder "Mankato Correspondence," Box 381, Record Group 114, "Records of the Soil Conservation Service," NA. In 1935 the Soil Erosion Service was renamed the Soil Conservation Service and transferred from the Department of the Interior to the Department of Agriculture.

<sup>36</sup> Grout, interview by author, 13 March 1996. On Soil Conservation Service cooperators see Ralph Ramsey to Dear Cooperator, 7 December 1933, Folder "Mankato Correspondence," Box 381, Record Group 114, "Records of the Soil Conservation Service," NA. On the number of Jewell County Soil Conservation Service cooperators see "Soil Conservation Notes," *Western Advocate*, 12 December 1935, 1; and Soil Conservation Service, "Number of Agreements Signed in Region #7," Box 176, Folder "Statistical Correspondence," Record Group 114, "Records of the Soil Conservation Service," NA. In a similar vein, in his study of Dust Bowl farmers Donald Worster writes, "accepting the welfare state's support involved a partial but significant substitution of the government office for the grain elevator and marketplace in the county's life." Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 154.

project." Even the Jewell County Poor Commissioner admitted that the Soil Conservation Service had to a great extent superseded the local welfare organizations situated around courthouse square in providing relief to county farmers. "The Soil Erosion Project . . . is doing a great thing for Jewell," wrote the Poor Commissioner's office in June of 1934. "They have taken up about 25% of the relief load of the county."<sup>37</sup>

Thus during Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, as Jewell County's fields, banks, grain elevators, and courthouse square gradually gave out under the stresses and strains of depression and drought, the Soil Conservation Service arrived in the nick of time. The federal program replaced county extension agents, mediated between farmers and bankers, created alternatives to the cooperative grain elevator movement, and took over many responsibilities of the community's relief organizations. At each point federal was substituted for local. Just as important, this federal presence was linked physically to the curvilinear furrows that were gradually spreading throughout Jewell County's fields. As longtime resident Lyle Rightmeyer explained, "when a farmer drove by a field that had contours on it, he immediately knew that that individual farmer had been involved with the federal government."<sup>38</sup>

The 1941 crowning of Bill Moy as "American Contour-Plowing King" in Mormon Coulee, Wisconsin, signified an important historical development in twentieth-century America. Prior to the Great Depression, plowing matches on the Great Plains had been local affairs, with neighbors often competing against one another at town gatherings or county fairs. As one reporter at Mormon Coulee explained, back then "a man's ability to plow straight determined whether or not he was considered a good farmer in his community." The Soil Conservation Service changed this playing field. By organizing, publicizing, and judging a contour-plowing contest, it introduced Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal to the farmers of Mormon Coulee, Wisconsin. By teaching westerners, such as those in Jewell County, Kansas, how to contour plow their own fields, the Soil Conservation Service did likewise for farmers across the Great Plains. The "American Contour-Plowing" crown therefore symbolized less the beginning of Bill Moy's reign over Wisconsin's "crazy quilt" kingdom, and more the coronation of an expansive federal government throughout the American West.<sup>39</sup>

While the seeds of the modern welfare state were sown in Washington, D.C., they took root in places like Jewell County, Kansas, and were dependent to a great extent upon local circumstances for growth. Ironically, like many drought-ridden counties throughout the Great Plains, Jewell proved incredibly fertile for such a development. The Soil Conservation Service, for example, successfully altered the ecology of Jewell

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<sup>37</sup> Esbon residents to F. L. Duley, 23 January 1934, Folder "Mankato Laborers," Box 380, Record Group 114, "Records of the Soil Conservation Service," NA. On replacement of local welfare agencies by Soil Conservation Service see "Notes From the County Poor Commissioner's Office," *Western Advocate*, 28 June 1934, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Rightmeyer, interview by author, 13 March 1996.

<sup>39</sup> Loyd, "Singing Plowboy," 169.

County's fields in an effort to increase crop yields for local farmers. Such was the primary goal of this New Deal agency. Yet as the experiences of local residents indicate, the Soil Conservation Service also transformed the economy of the county's banks and grain elevators and the social system centered around Jewell's courthouse square. It was this cross-fertilization with local institutions, not merely the changes occurring up and down county crop rows or far off in the nation's capital, that helped this New Deal program blossom. And while many Jewell farmers embraced these ecological, economic, and social changes, they also paid a political price. By welcoming the New Deal into their fields, locals invited the federal government into their lives, and in doing so further reoriented their communities toward Washington, D.C.

This reorientation from the local to the federal demonstrates that landscape change on the Great Plains during the New Deal era could be a complex political process. In Jewell County these transformations—one in landscape, the other politics—did not involve two separate yet parallel transitions, one from rectilinear to curvilinear and the other from local to national. Rather, the two continually influenced each other and represented less a neat shift from one orientation to another and more a layering of landscapes, an overlapping of new ecologies, economies, social systems, and ultimately political relationships, onto an older community map. Thus as Bill Moy plowed under the agricultural terrain of a soggy cornfield in Mormon Coulee, Wisconsin, with "crazy quilt" furrows, he was also helping to superimpose a new political landscape onto the American West.

