Shared Stories of the Kansas Land
Reader's Theater Project

Sodbusters and Rainmakers

If the rain did not fall, where would you find water? If your crops failed, would you start over and plant your fields again?

In the 1860s, 70s, and 80s, homesteaders, immigrants, and freed men and women arrived in Kansas. They had to negotiate new ways of life in an unpredictable climate. Water could be plenty or scarce. Land could yield abundant crop, or corn could wither on the stalk.

The *Sodbusters and Rainmakers* reader's theater script was created using excerpts from historical letters, diaries, reports, government documents, and newspaper articles. Following the reading, participants will have the opportunity to discuss what settlers went through when encountering a new territory.

Please Note: Regional historians have reviewed the source materials used, the script, and the list of citations for accuracy.

For More Information:
Kansas Humanities Council www.kansashumanities.org

Introduction

Instructions: The facilitator can either read the entire introduction out loud or summarize key points.

If the rain did not fall, where would you find water? If your crops failed, would you start over and plant your fields again?

The Homestead Act and the Emancipation Proclamation ushered homesteaders and freed men and women to Kansas. The Exodusters soon followed. Homesteaders hoped to claim their acreage and cultivate the land; freed slaves strove to make new lives for themselves and their families. Upon staking their claim, most settlers broke their plows into the thick Kansas prairie sod. The land was planted in corn and, later, in the mid-1870s, in wheat. This vast alteration of prairie to farmland radically changed the Kansas landscape.

Settlers endured incredible hardship and abundant harvest, oftentimes within the span of several years. Three major droughts in 1860-61, 1874, and 1890-91 gave Kansas its nickname, "Droughty Kansas." Nearly half or all crops failed. Small rural towns and bustling cities experienced scorching heat, blustering wind known as the "Kansas zephyr," grasshopper plagues, hailstorms, and more—perhaps the very worst Kansas had to offer. Almost one-fourth of the state's population left the state in 1860, but many stayed, sometimes from sheer force of will, but oftentimes because there was no other choice.

During drought in the early 1890s, average daily temperatures rose above 100 degrees and left the land parched. Some western Kansas towns hired rainmakers, who claimed that they could coax rain to fall once again. Fortunately, at least for some of these towns, the proceeding years yielded enough rainfall and crops.

This script will revolve around the lives of late 19th century Kansans, focusing on key events that highlight the relationship between people and their shared environmental heritage.

Shared Stories of the Kansas Land brings to life the voices of the people who lived through events that altered the land and the environment.

Group Discussion Questions

Instructions: The facilitator should pose one or more of these questions in advance of the reading of the script. At the conclusion of the reading, participants can return to the questions for consideration.

1. What attitudes did the settlers bring to the land?

2. How do environmental conditions influence the cultural landscape of Kansas? How is your community influenced by the environment?

3. How do communities come together during scarcity and natural disaster? How does your community come together in times of need?

Script

Instructions: Each part will be read out loud by an assigned reader. Readers should stand and speak into a microphone when it's their turn. The source of the quote should also be read out loud (this is the information bolded beneath each quote).

NARRATOR *Episode One – The Dry Years*

READER 1 Rain! rain! O God, send rain!
For the vault above is brass;
And the earth below lies sore with woe,
With neither corn nor grass;
And the very eyes of the cattle look
Like globes of crimson glass!

Thaddeus Hyatt[1], "The Drought In Kansas: A Prayer for Rain," published in the *Lawrence Republican*, September 13, 1860.

READER 2 We have been greatly deceived in regard to our corn crops. A close examination proves that there will not be one-third the corn we had supposed there would be … seven-eighths of the stalks are without corn. What little there is—is badly eaten with worms.

Charles P. Twiss of Coffachique [pronounced kaw-fah-cheek] Township, Allen County, October 1860.

READER 3 In the south and west [no farther west than Cottonwood Falls], and on the high prairie lands, crops have been in most cases entire failures. Nor has it been for want of labor and effort on the part of farmers. Early in the spring large fields of spring wheat were sown. This failing, the ground was plowed over and planted in corn. This again failing, the ground was sown in turnips or buckwheat; and this also proved a failure.

J.G. Reaser and S.M. Irvin in the article "The Drought and Famine in Kansas," *New York Daily Tribune*, October 10, 1860.

READER 2 Quite a good deal of corn had been left over from the year before, so we had mush without milk, and cornbread and such other corn dishes as desperation could suggest. I made cornbread day after day until the odor of its cooking would almost nauseate me, so tired I had become of it; but I had to make it and had to eat it, too, for at times there was nothing else.

One time I got some potatoes from the "Aid Store." As I was peeling them for boiling purposes, an old lady, who happened to be calling on me, seriously chided me because I did so, for even potato peelings were too precious to be thrown away. Can any woman who has ever done her own cooking think of a worse situation in the face of insistent demands of vigorous young appetites?

Martha Valentine[2] reflecting back in the article "Home Life in Early Days," *Topeka Capitol*, February 23, 1908.

READER 4 Kansas is as quiet and stagnant as ever since I have been here. My coming was a trifle unfortunate as to time. A year earlier would have been better, though I have no just reason to complain. The trouble is there is nothing here to attract money. The actual exports of the country, corn, pork and hides, has not yet been enough to pay for the whiskey that is drunk every month, and men are living on what they had, or the charity of their friends. A good deal of corn is being shipped this spring and some hides, but prices are so low that it hardly remunerates the grower for his labor.

John James Ingalls of Sumner County in a letter to his father, April 3, 1860.

NARRATOR *In 1860, Thaddeus Hyatt, the President of the National Kansas Committee, strove to make the country aware of the lives of Kansans, who were under duress from severe drought conditions. His hope was that his letters and poems to newspapers and politicians would secure philanthropic donations.*

READER 1 Like a vortex, this frightful famine draws to its insatiate centre all conditions—hour by hour it enlarges—with each recurring day the calamity spreads wider. They who had food yesterday, have none today. They who have food today, have none for tomorrow. Desolation covers the land, and sorrow fills the hearts of the people.

A hundred thousand dollars are needed for food alone, and another hundred thousand for seed. Who will help us? To the heart of the country and in the name of Christ, we make this earnest appeal.

Thaddeus Hyatt in a public notice titled "Starvation in Kansas," February 4, 1860.

NARRATOR *However, some settlers did not fully agree with receiving assistance. Although they acknowledged the truth of Hyatt's pleas, they still wished*

to rely on their own resourcefulness and endurance, living on hope that conditions would improve the following year.

READER 4 We don't want any assistance this winter. We are going to do on our own resources, unless we are all taken down sick, and our cattle all die off with the blackleg or starvation.

We are doing what we can to provide against the latter. It is far gloomier to contemplate the coming winter than it was the winter of '56 and '57. This is an old settled neighborhood, and the people just here are better prepared to withstand the fearful calamity that has fallen upon the Territory than those of the more newly settled portions. I suppose Mr. Hyatt's statements reveal the *actual truth*. And yet the real suffering has not commenced. Our next door neighbors on two, or three sides, here in this old settled neighborhood will be obliged to get aid from some quarter.

Sarah Everett[3] of Longwood, Miami County, in a letter sent to her sister Jenny, September 6, 1860.

NARRATOR *All Kansans, including those who had been living off the land long before the settlers had arrived, had to navigate the circumstances brought on by the drought, or travel elsewhere.*

READER 3 The Osage Indians have gone to the Buffalo Country to keep from starving. Chetopa the Chief, 93 years old, never knew till this year a want of grass for the ponies to live on, and corn has always been raised till this year. Unless there is some help for southern and western Kansas it will be depopulated. Houses are vacated, people moving out. Women have been compelled to cut squashes with blooms on to cook for their children.

J.C. Lambden in a report on Butler, Hunter, and Otoe Counties in south central Kansas, 1860.

NARRATOR *As the droughts came and went, so did the grasshoppers.*

READER 2 There is not a grain of old corn on hand on Walnut Creek, an extent of 65 miles, except what has been hauled from Cottonwood, a distance of 50 miles. The grasshoppers came to that country in a cloud about two weeks ago, and after destroying the corn and buckwheat are now eating the leaves of the trees. He saw clouds of them in the sky on the day they came, as high up as he could see.

John L. Pratt, Report on drought conditions in Chelsea, Butler County, 1860.

READER 4 It's no use for me to try to describe grasshoppers [since] I could not do it justice. Some days when they [were] shifting you would hear a noise over your head like a train of cars in the air. On looking up you would see the whole elements darken with grasshoppers. When they came down at night they would cover the ground completely. Those that lit down on a cornfield, no difference how large it was, would devour it in one day's time. Neither leaf blade [nor] husk [nor] corn on cob. We had to cut our hay in August on account of them, and then they would jam the sickle so we could hardly cut. They took everything we had except our wheat.

A.W. Johnson and Isabella Johnson of Osage Mission, Neosho County, March 24, 1875.

NARRATOR *Extreme heat and wind, and severe storms, were not uncommon occurrences for early Kansans.*

READER 3 Yesterday morning just before day a hurricane passed over these parts. It blew down the house, a new frame building of our next neighbor, Mr. Holaday, and killed his wife. He tried to get her to come out as the wind suddenly raised, and they heard the roaring of the coming tempest, but could not persuade her. When the crash came he stood by the door and reached to draw her out, but something came between. He sprung through the door and was knocked down by the falling house but fortunately away from it. He asked his wife if she was killed. She said she was afraid she was. He asked her if she could hold out till he went to Everett's for help, but the poor woman spoke not again.

John Everett of Longwood, Miami County, June 9, 1860.

NARRATOR *Newspapers and other observers recounted the dust, wind, and heat that persisted across the state.*

READER 1 At about 12 o'clock, as we were sitting in our office, we felt a gust of wind so hot and scorching that we at first supposed some building close by must be on fire, and rushed to the window to ascertain. We found, however, that it was nothing but the air, but such an air! Scorching, withering, blighting in its effects, it rapidly drove everyone within doors, and forced them to close every aperture through which it could gain admittance.

We understand that in some parts of the country all vegetable matter was withered and shriveled as though by fire, and it is feared much damage is done to the crops. What was the cause of this strange freak of nature, we are unable to explain. We hope, however, never to see the like again.

***Freedom's Champion*, Atchison, July 14, 1860.**

READER 2 The hot, burning breeze of yesterday (Monday) [July 9] was unprecedented and cannot be accounted for by the oldest of the old inhabitants. It seemed as if the gates of Hell (metaphorically speaking) had been thrown open…

***Leavenworth Dispatch*, July 14, 1860.**

READER 3 On Monday afternoon last this region of Kansas was visited by so extraordinary a windstorm as to seem out of the course of nature, except on the burning deserts of Africa. So suddenly did the storm come up, and so hot was the wind that many persons at first supposed some building near by them was on fire. Others, though the weather was very warm, closed their doors and windows to keep the scorching air out of their houses. For some time the inmates of our dwelling took refuge in the cellar from the oppressive heat of the almost scalding wind. The leaves of plants were literally parched up and killed, as if by a heavy frost. Every breath we drew seemed to almost dry up the vital moisture of our lungs, and leave only an inward burning sensation.

***The Independent*, Oskaloosa, July 11, 1860.**

NARRATOR *Through these times of distress and scarcity, Hyatt continued to ask for assistance from the East, even directly imploring President James Buchanan. Aid did arrive and relieved many suffering Kansans. Communities also came together.*

READER 4 We helped each other to the best of our ability in a material way, made a sport out of our necessities, tried not to lose heart, and acted like any other community of young men and women, sanguine and optimistic, would act. Comparatively few journeyed back East; nearly all stuck it out to a glorious victory. We made coffee out of parched corn principally, though occasionally we would use barley or parched oats; tea was a whispered luxury. Even sugar was beyond reach and a little sorghum molasses took the place of all sweeteners.

Martha Valentine, "Home Life in Early Days," *Topeka Capitol*, February 23, 1908.

READER 3 Today a man by the name of Budd came over from Grasshopper Falls begging for work! Said he left at home a wife and four children, with only a half-bushel of meal in the world! And no money to buy more. I loaned him one bushel of your meal and he took it joyfully upon his back! To walk with it 26 miles. He said he would not have the meal as a gift, but would pay for it sometime.

From Topeka-Shawnee came a man today and is now stopping here all night (as he could not pay hotel fare). He offers to work for one dollar per day with his team! A good span of horses! I have encouraged him to start in the morning for buffalo meat. They are very fat and fine now just above Fort Riley.

I tell them you furnished what little I now bestow. And you have gone East to see if others will combine their efforts with yours.

S.C. Pomeroy[4] of Atchison, Letter to Thaddeus Hyatt, October 10, 1860.

READER 1 I do not believe that the same number of acres in any county ever witnessed greater diligence or more remarkable perseverance. The people of Kansas show a splendid record of industry and manly determination. Strong as has always been my faith in them, I am free to say that their record is beyond even my expectations!

Thaddeus Hyatt, *New York Tribune*, September 14, 1860.

NARRATOR <u>*Episode Two – Exodusters and Immigrants*</u>

Settlers continued to pour into Kansas in the 1870s and 80s. Some came from the East, while others came from the South. Many of these settlers were motivated by the opportunity to become landowners, made possible for some by the provisions of the Homestead Act, which took effect on January 1, 1863. Soon after, the pre-Exoduster community of Nicodemus was advertised as a refuge for freed men and women.

READER 4 Nicodemus … is beautifully located on the north side of the south fork of the Solomon River … and is designed for the Colored Colony. By September 1st the Colony will have houses erected and all branches of mercantile business will be opened out for the benefit of the Colony. A church edifice and other public buildings will be erected. No saloons or

other houses of ill-fame will be allowed on the town site within five years from the date of this organization.

We invite our colored friends of the Nation to come and join with us in this beautiful promised land.

Advertisement for Nicodemus, April 16, 1877.

NARRATOR *Immigrants from the East were also dreaming of success. In Indiana, Flora Moorman Heston wondered about her future life in Kansas while her husband purchased land there.*

READER 3 I do so want to succeed out west. If we do have hard times don't let us give it up, for if we get good land we can surely make it. Everybody here has the Kansas Fever.

Flora Moorman Heston[5] of Amboy, Indiana in a letter to her husband, February 18, 1885.

NARRATOR *In order to succeed, one had to cultivate the land, which required hard labor. As freed men and women arrived in Nicodemus, they began this task.*

READER 2 But everybody went to work. Those who had teams broke for themselves and others. Some were able to get a little breaking done for them by outside parties. Those who could not do better went to work digging up the ground with a spade and grub-hoe, determined to make a crop in some way; and some families (the women turning in and helping) got two or three acres in crop by this slow and laborious process.

The solicitation for aid has been continued to some extent until recently. But, two weeks since, a public meeting was called, and, after full consideration of the subject, it was voted to disband the colony organization. A series of resolutions was passed, thanking the people of the State for the aid that had been so freely given, and stated that from this time no further aid would be solicited, as it was believed that, with proper effort and industry, the community could be self-supporting.

O.C. Gibbs, "About Nicodemus," reprint in *Lawrence Daily Journal*, April 30, 1879.

NARRATOR *Working the land took enormous effort, but so did finding water. A constant source of tension in early settlements was access to water. How*

far would the homesteaders have to travel for water? Did the land have a well? If there was no water, what would they do?

READER 3 We will dig a well before long. Sam carries water a half-mile from a lagoon. It tastes pretty well after it sits a while.

Sam spaded up three large beds yesterday, and I set out onions, planted peas and beans and we were aiming to plant a lot more, but the wind raised so we couldn't plant any small seeds. Yesterday was right cool and very windy, but this morning the sun shines warm and it is still. I think we surely have a good farm ... I think I will like Kansas.

Flora Moorman Heston of Clark County, Letter to her mother and sisters, April 12, 1885.

READER 1 Securing an adequate water supply was one of the biggest problems of the early settlers. It was necessary to sink wells from one hundred to two hundred feet, and few could afford to do so. So hauling water occupied much time, and one of the common sights on the prairie was a wagon or sled with several barrels covered with burlap sacks, which kept the water from splashing.

Francis L. Pierce, "Sketches of Early Days in Kearny County," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, February 1938.

NARRATOR *When African American Exodusters began entering the state, seeking work and shelter, a decision had to be made: Would Kansas assist these refugees or not? Many Kansans did not believe that aid should be given. But despite longstanding and ever growing prejudice against Exodusters, Governor John P. St. John set out to establish the Kansas Freedman's Relief Association in 1879.*

READER 2 In view of the unexpected influx of colored refugees from the Southern States to Kansas, many of whom are in destitute conditions, the dictates of humanity, as well as the honor and good name of Kansas, demand that the destitute of this class of people should not be neglected, nor permitted to suffer for the necessary wants of life… The people are mostly farmers, are industrious and not only willing but anxious to labor, and require only temporary aid.

Let it never be said that Kansas closed her doors against or withholds aid from any law-abiding human being who is willing to work for an honest living.

Governor John P. St. John[6] in the *Wyandotte Gazette*, April 25, 1879.

NARRATOR *People experienced difficult conditions. Some sought to escape the state, but others saw Kansas as salvation from their prior circumstances. In order to preserve her Exoduster grandmother's legacy, Mattie Bradshaw broadly chronicled her grandmother's life in her school newspaper.*

READER 4 Thus, while so many members of my race were emigrating, grandma struck the soil of "free and bleeding Kansas." She was accompanied by her husband, six sons, and two daughters. They immediately moved to Hodgeman County [in April 1879], where grandfather took up a homestead. After they were there about six months grandfather finished his work on earth and went to answer the roll-call of death. Soon "hard times" began. They were in a new country, sparsely populated and with arid soil. Grandma had a hard time. Twice the first winter they thought they would have to give up, but they did not yield, for the privations were nothing compared to the persecutions and oppressions endured in the southlands. Many times they wore "gunny" sacks around their feet in place of shoes. Frequently they ate bread made of bran, but they called no man "master."

Mattie Bradshaw[7], "Eliza Bradshaw: An Exoduster Grandmother," *State Normal Bulletin*, October 18, 1907.

NARRATOR <u>*Episode Three – Questions of Water*</u>

In the 1880s, rain fell on western Kansas. Fueled by the belief that "the rain follows the plow," people and railroads continued to trek further west, which doubled or even peaked the population of many small towns. But another drought that lasted through the 1890s sent many Kansans into a panic.

READER 1 The returns of drought which cover a broad area and the severity of effects produced are more general and the depression greater than the signal service record of temperature appears to indicate. One factor in the blighting of vegetation is evidently the hot winds that have scorched the lower basin of the Missouri valley and the Ohio valley.

In Kansas the severity of the drought has culminated.

***Iola Register*, August 15, 1890.**

READER 3 There will be very little corn raised in Osborne county this year. There has been no rain since the 3rd of July. The prospects for rain is good now, but it will come too late to help the corn crop.

There has been no rain here [in Attica] and the corn crop is burning up. There will not be over one-fourth of a crop.

There has been no rain here [in Glasco], and yesterday was the worst day on the crop we have had. Most favorable weather now cannot make over half of a crop.

***The Wichita Daily Eagle*, "Cries of the Drought," July 22, 1890.**

NARRATOR *Some towns went to extreme measures to ensure rain for their crops. Rainmakers, also known as "rain wizards," claimed to create rain. One of the most famous rain wizards, Frank Melbourne, was hired by the town of Goodland to produce rain for the county. Melbourne's top secret process took place behind closed doors. Of course, Melbourne's services came at a monetary cost.*

READER 4 Let every farmer who is able act promptly and contribute to this fund, and we will give to Goodland and Sherman County a valid boom such as they have never enjoyed before.

Goodland *News*, September 10, 1891.

READER 1 The most wonderful inventor of the century, Melbourne the "Ohio Rain Wizard," will be at Goodland Fair Week, and has contracted to produce a heavy rain the last day of the fair, September 26. The management of the Fair Association will spare no pains or expense to make this fair the most entertaining of ever held in western Kansas.

Handbill advertisement for the Sherman County Fair, 1891.

READER 3 If Kansans are gullible enough, and Providence helps the wizard out with one or two coincident wet spells, this is liable to prove a good thing for Melbourne, who, of course, is not in the business for his health.

***The Globe Republican*, Dodge City, December 10, 1891.**

READER 4 We have got the world by the horns with a downhill pull and can all wear diamonds pretty soon. We can water all creation and have some to spare.

Goodland *News*, November 5, 1891.

NARRATOR *Melbourne's efforts yielded little rain for the county, and he moved on. The citizens, having exhausted their own resources, turned to the government for guidance.*

In order to manage and standardize water use policy across Kansas, the House Committee on Irrigation wrote an act to regulate water use. This document set the precedent for industrial and domestic water use, including eminent domain, responsibility and compensation, and right of way policy.

READER 1 In all that portion of the state of Kansas situated west of the ninety-ninth meridian, all natural waters, whether standing or running, and whether surface or subterranean, shall be devoted first, to purposes of irrigation in aid of agriculture, subject to ordinary domestic uses, and secondly, to other industrial purposes, and may be diverted from natural beds, basins or channels for such purposes and uses.

READER 2 Provided, that no such diversion shall interfere with, diminish or divest any prior vested right of appropriation for manufacturing or irrigating purposes, without due legal condemnation of, and compensation for, the same. And natural lakes and ponds of surface water, having no outlet, shall be deemed parcel of the lands whereon the same may be situate, and only the proprietors of such lands shall be entitled to draw off or appropriate the same.

Act regulating the diversion, appropriation, storage and distribution of water for industrial purposes, by the House Committee on Irrigation, March 10, 1891.

NARRATOR *Kansans in industry and in the home now had a government-set law to access water. While the rainmakers would return in the 1950s to once again try their hand at producing rainfall, the majority of Kansans now utilized what water was already in the state. Water would continue to have utmost importance.*

READER 1 What we want is less politics and more water.

Letter to the *Garden City Weekly Herald*, July 26, 1888.

— End —

Footnotes:

[1] **Thaddeus Hyatt** (1816-1901), a prominent abolitionist and inventor, served as the president of the National Kansas Committee. Originally from New York, he sought aid back east to relieve drought conditions in Kansas in the early 1860s. During the Civil War, he served as American consul at La Rochelle, France. After the war concluded, he became a pioneer in the cement industry and returned to the United States.

[2] **Martha Valentine (née Root)** (1836-1924) married Daniel M. Valentine in southwestern Iowa in 1855. She moved to Kansas in 1859 with Daniel, who would eventually serve as a justice on the Kansas Supreme Court. They first settled in Leavenworth and then in Peoria in Franklin County in 1860. They raised 12 children together. She later wrote about her pioneer experiences, which were published in the *Topeka Capitol* in 1908.

[3] **John Everett** (1820-?) and **Sarah Everett** (1830-1864) were married on July 19, 1852 and immigrated to Kansas Territory in the spring of 1855 from Oneida County, New York. They settled near Osawatomie, which is in present day Miami County. Both were dedicated to the anti-slavery movement in Kansas and wished to help make Kansas a free state.

[4] **S.C. [Samuel Clark] Pomeroy** (1816-1891) served as the mayor of Atchison from 1858 to 1859, and then served as a Republican Senator from Kansas from 1861 to 1873. He became president of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad in January of 1864.

[5] **Flora Moorman Heston** (1859-1886) was born in Miami County, Indiana, on January 25, 1859. She grew up on a large farm and, after her father's death in 1877, pursued becoming a teacher. Soon, however, she met her husband Samuel Heston in Kokomo, Indiana. They married in 1878, and moved to a farm near Wabash, Indiana later that year, where Flora gave birth to three children (George, Fern, and John). In the fall of 1884, Samuel left the farm to purchase land in Kansas. Flora and the children joined him in the spring of 1885. She died on June 12, 1886, after giving birth to her son Alfred Elliot. The children were brought back to Indiana, and Samuel sold the Clark County farm, engaging in a number of ventures until his death in 1930.

[6] **John P. St. John** (1833-1916) was the eighth Governor of Kansas. He assisted in creating the Kansas Freedman's Relief Association in 1879 and was a leader in the temperance movement. He ran unsuccessfully for President in 1884.

[7] **Mattie Bradshaw** (1888-1956), the granddaughter of Eliza Bradshaw (1827-1913), moved from Hodgeman County to Topeka in 1889 with her parents, Charles T. and Mary Elizabeth Bradshaw. She received her education at Topeka High School and the Kansas State Normal School (now Emporia State University) in 1908. She taught at the segregated schools in Topeka for 25 years. After she resigned from teaching, Mattie remained active in church activities and served as a caseworker for the Shawnee County Welfare Department.