# Kansas historical quarterly

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# Communications

THE EDITOR OF THE KANSAS HISTORICAL QUARTERLY:

WINTER WHEAT RAISING IN EARLY WESTERN KANSAS.—I have had the opportunity of reading in the interesting *Quarterly* of August, 1941, the article by Prof. James C. Malin entitled: "Beginnings of Winter Wheat Production in the Upper Kansas and Lower Smoky Hill River Valleys." He takes the trouble to dispute my treatment of this topic in my book *Conquering Our Great American Plains,* but does not, unfortunately, inform the reader that I discoursed on winter wheat only in connection with the region from about the Sixth Principal Meridian on west. I included my county Dickinson bordering on the meridian on the east. For there at Abilene the battle was fought publicly in the early 1870's between the droughty plains and the winter-wheat culture as the one cash crop which might solve the acute agricultural puzzle and worry facing that part of the state.

Winter wheat and other crops had not succeeded here before 1871. My book sets forth that about July 1, 1871, my brother was much relieved over his gratifying harvest of five acres of winter wheat in our river bottom, the seed having been sown, of course, in the previous autumn. It was an experiment, a test, a demonstration, in front of a local doubting public anxious to know whether that country could ever be made prosperous independently of the Texas cattle trade. This trade provided the sensation of the time and inspired farmers, and my brother as will presently appear, with the idea of livestock, not crops, being the chief or only agricultural hope.

Professor Malin characterizes the story of the five acres in 1871 as the product of the imagination of a boy. It stands to reason that a lad of nearly eleven would not concern himself sufficiently with an extended and complicated agricultural matter to conceive of a fable about it. He would merely repeat what he heard from his elders at home and neighbors and others in stores and offices. My brother talked frequently to us of the incident and had always fretted over that country's prospects for farming because of the prevailing droughts.

Professor Malin was born about 1893, had no personal experience with the subject and is in no position to say what went on in my family twenty years before. The point at issue is whether dry western Kansas, as usually called there, was and had long been profitably raising winter wheat. His salient statement is: "Winter wheat had been raised on both bottom lands and *uplands* [the italics are mine] for years prior to T. C. Henry's activities. . . ." The sentence should include the word successfully or equivalent or it does not make practical or realistic sense. This was not a question of raising winter wheat for chicken feed.

I fear that he contradicted his statement in his pages immediately preceding. He there presents at some length, from a public address of my brother in 1870, the showing that winter wheat could not be counted on as a market or export crop, and that the main hope of farmers, he said, was to farm "eighty to 160 acres selected 'with the view to rearing stock.'" He supplements this remark by the following: "[I would grow] only so much grain as I [repre-

senting the farmer] needed for consumption upon my own farm" (including naturally the feeding of it into livestock, as such grain was of too poor quality to market or export). And if "I found myself with a surplus [of such grain], I should retain it for provision against a possible scarcity in the future. I should sow winter wheat, but do so early and in season."

Professor Malin comments apropos: "In the course of his [T. C. Henry's] remarks he described [this as] his ideal of a model farm." And adds: "He [T. C. H.] would sow rye and oats for stock feed to provide against a more or less complete corn failure once in every three or four years." Further: "as Henry was placing his greatest reliance at this time on livestock and diversified agriculture, his views on livestock and environment require emphasis." Professor Malin admits: "The general interpretation of agriculture and environment which Henry presented became a permanent part of his thinking, but his livestock theme is in sharp contrast with his reputation only five years later as the Wheat King of the Golden Belt. His views on livestock were more or less typical, however, of the time and circumstances." Would my brother have talked like this if winter wheat had, according to Professor Malin, been grown satisfactorily for years before the former's activities? Professor Malin acknowledges here the general opinion in 1870 to be that livestock, not crops, was the chief or only hope of farmers, crops having "fizzled out," thus disputing his salient statement given first above. Why would the government be busily giving away that land if everybody knew it would produce say twenty bushels of winter wheat to the acre which at eighty cents would bring a gross return of sixteen dollars?

Professor Malin seeks to prove his idea as to when my brother started winter-wheat raising by a sentence my brother wrote long afterward and by newspaper items. About 1904 my brother sent an article to the Kansas State Historical Society (published in *Kansas Historical Collections,* v. IX, pp. 502-506): ". . . In 1873 I was ready to introduce my system of winter-wheat culture, mainly based upon changes of methods, and then began operations." Professor Malin claims from this that my brother did not commence winter-wheat raising until 1873 instead of 1871 as I stated. The word "system" means in Webster: "An aggregation or assemblage of objects united by some form of regular interaction or interdependence. . . . An organized or methodically arranged set of ideas . . . a definite or set plan of ordering, operating, or proceeding." T. C. Henry had been reared in New York as a thorough farmer. Consequently in using the word system he indicated what this word clearly implies: practical experience, the trial and error plan. He was one who would experiment actually by farming as well as by observing other farmers, most of them being poor at the job.

In that contribution to the Society he did not wish, naturally, to consume space with every detail, for readers would merely be interested, if at all, in major points. In the fall of 1871 he had in more winter wheat and the next fall still more. He was feeling his way. Without such experience it would have been folly to open up a five hundred-acre farm of that crop in 1873 even on bottom land, upland being everywhere there considered worthless for crops. The operation necessitated the outlay of much cash and the fifty-fifty chance was that the crop would fail as a crop or fail of favorable financial results since wheat might drop to a new low on the market. He would

then be left with this property. It was a lusty invitation to bankruptcy. I am glad to take this opportunity of correcting for the record a statement in my book as he put in only some parcels of land in winter wheat in the fall of 1871.

The fact that the Henry farm in 1873 illustrated a unique example and won prominent attention also unsettles Professor Malin's self-contradictory contention. If all people who wanted to had long been successfully raising winter wheat in the Henry region there would not be need for this large and hazardous experimenting enterprise. Acreages do not count. What counts is the yield of an exportable grade of winter wheat which would sell on the great markets. National laws compelled homesteaders and preëmption right owners to put in a certain acreage of grain each year to justify their titles whether it failed or not or whether they wanted to or not. To be a success twenty bushels at least to the acre had to be raised.

In the T. C. Henry article written many years later for the Kansas State Historical Society's *Collections,* v. IX: "Sporadic attempts to grow winter wheat had been made in the county, but with irregular and precarious results." About 1881 he wrote: "The experience of the past few years has shown the settlers in western Kansas that winter-wheat raising is never a sure thing, and that other crops may be more profitably and surely raised."

It is perfectly true that a settler on a river or creek bank sowed or planted small patches of almost every sort of crop he could hear of in order to learn if they would thrive in this new home so different from any he had known. On the banks the soil is moist and water has seeped down, far down. Such land would be better fitted to resist drought, but was an infinitesimal proportion of the total desert expanse. Those inhabitants were nearly all wagon immigrants—those who had come before the railroads. They could not be classed as well-trained, hard-working farmers. What they raised was poor and fed habitually into their livestock. Professor Malin cites the case of James Bell at Abilene as a successful farmer, by implication a winter-wheat man. My brother wrote: "My first seed was grown by James Bell." I went to school on the Bell farm. It lay next to the town, smooth as a table top. It stretched along the creek and half a mile from the river. He had every advantage to raise winter wheat but it "did not give a large yield"—a customary mild way of acknowledging it virtually failed. In 1873, tired of the competition with dry weather, Mr. Bell sold out and moved out of the state.

Most of Professor Malin's paper relates to Kansas from Junction City eastward, and is beyond the scope of my book and therefore not for consideration here. We regarded Geary county as in eastern Kansas. It was more adapted for agriculture. The occasional vagueness or incompleteness in his language tends to create false pictures. He notes cotton as apparently a good crop. "Cotton was grown as far west as Geary county during the early sixties, and was listed in 1864 among the proven drought-resistant crops." Citizens from Mars would gather that Kansas was quite a cotton state. He classes uplands and bottom lands together as equally prosperous crop raisers. In county recorders' offices can be read the prices in deeds of land and farm sales indicating plainly that more was paid for bottom lands.

In addition to emphasizing the one "system" sentence above of my brother, Professor Malin depends on a few newspaper items to back up his winter-

wheat theory. This is an inconclusive and misleading basis. If a baby swallows a safety pin and is bundled off to Philadelphia for a dangerous operation, that is news for a newspaper. The millions of babies who do not swallow safety pins or do not need to submit to a miraculous feat of surgery, do not provide news items. Friends from Mars, reading our press, should not jump into the conviction that American babies generally have safety pins in their throats or stomachs. If a farmer of my region in 1870 dropped in on an editor and said: "I have been raising winter wheat," it would be printed as out of the ordinary. But such items would not disclose how much acreage he had in and the kind of land and how many bushels he harvested to the acre. It would be a small patch in a river or creek bend with an unsatisfactory history as seen in the James Bell instance. It should not be interpreted as indicating that farmers flourished in raising that crop.

In all western Kansas Professor Malin could accumulate seven newspaper items on winter wheat. These bear evidence that the topic was exceptional enough to provide news. To be able to rely on the accuracy and relative value of such gossip in any place at any time one should know the editor and the farmer. Not everybody in the world could be called reliable. News items were not always correct. Especially was this true in western Kansas. For newspapers and many inhabitants there formed an informal conspiracy, regardless of facts, to boom the country for farming in order to induce a greater influx of immigrants with money. The citizens had something to sell and only Easterners had cash. Farms and businesses were for sale and also homes. To combat the dry weather discouraged residents. They dreaded the incandescent summers and wished to go on to the enchanting and picturesque West. Any item or idea that the plains possessed widespread agricultural chances went into the printing room. Hardly any story was too "tall" for publication. If a subscriber told editors that he raised pineapples, they would hurry to publish, perhaps tongue in cheek, this electrifying information. Droughts, blizzards, chinch bugs and the other drawbacks were played down.

The seven items Professor Malin culled came from my town paper, the Abilene *Chronicle,* in the early 1870's. That journal had, he admits, a booming column. It bravely printed market reports of crops when none worth mentioning was at hand to sell. It scattered agricultural notes about in different issues with no relation to the general facts and general conditions throughout the county and that region. Our editor could blandly put forth a paragraph like this in unmeasured praise of our wonderful Kansas: "Even that year [the drought year of 1860] the upland prairies produced as much as 15 bushels of winter wheat to the acre. The wheat crop never fails here. . . ." The item exposes the inefficacy of the *Chronicle* as a historical guide. The first unverified sentence, if correct, could apply merely to eastern Kansas. The second sentence is, of course, an absurdity. No non-irrigated crop anywhere never fails. By 1874 our farm population could accumulate so little reserves that that dreadful time of drought and grasshoppers brought them to the verge of destitution and starvation. Urgent, piteous appeals were dispatched to Washington and for Eastern charities to send food, clothing and seed grain. I saw boxes of this "relief" dumped on our depot platform before a grateful community.

Our boosting town paper in 1870 advertised that Abilene had a flour mill.

The small mill stood on the river some miles below Abilene and toward Geary county. Agreeably to custom in booming, what existed elsewhere was made to appear as if reaching over to where the writer lived. From Professor Malin: "Most of the wheat produced, however, was shipped east, a large part at least, to the Shawnee mills at Topeka. A large quantity of the winter-wheat crop harvested in 1870 was supposed to be still in the farmers' hands in January, 1871; some farmers were credited with shipping a carload at a time, and the local grain dealers were paying eighty cents per bushel." Wherever this was it was not in the Abilene district. How did it happen that those farmers four years later were poverty-stricken, with little to eat and begging for charity from the East?

Here again Professor Malin contradicts what he set forth before readers apropos of the T. C. Henry speech of 1870. The speech showed, to repeat, that livestock, not winter wheat, was regarded as the only good prospect for farmers. Since even James Bell, the best pioneer farmer in Dickinson county had enjoyed no success in winter wheat right by town, it can be judged that this crop cut little figure except in the imagination. But to brag of the plains was in the air. Professor Malin speaks of dealers in flour advertising winter-wheat flour, "a distinction which was significant, not only for flour, but which was a mile post in the approaching ascendancy of winter-wheat production in the upper Kansas valley." The Abilene flour merchants were the small retail grocery stores which sold sacks of flour along with other little commodities to the homes. This flour could be said to come from outside the county as I had reason to know because I marketed for the family.

Pioneer newspaper items, where the journals were necessarily poor and cheap in early dry western Kansas, with no expert staffs and no facilities for verifying items, do not furnish an adequate and secure foundation for the writing of history. Their items were not coördinated nor connected up to provide a comprehensive and convincing body of general fact or general truth. They were stray, dispersed morsels of unsubstantiated gossip. Interesting as curious, unexpected or exceptional side lights for what they were worth they are not sufficient for the firm rebuilding of an epoch to be read of with confidence by posterity.

The following transaction in 1882 settles finally the question of early successful winter-wheat raising in western Kansas. The records of the land department of the M. K. & T. railroad show that my brother then formed a syndicate of New York monied men and bought all the railroad's uplands—about a hundred thousand acres. They were smoothly rolling, beautiful and of the best grade of the kind. They lay in northwestern Morris county and southeastern Dickinson, extending from eighteen to twenty-eight miles southwest of Junction City and seventy miles west of Topeka. I was the financial detail man in the operation. The average price of the purchase stood at a dollar and eighty-seven and a half cents an acre on very long time and very easy installments. The speculation was held to be highly doubtful. In fear of droughts the syndicate hastened to sell out in parcels at a net profit of about a dollar an acre. As only ten percent had been paid down the syndicate had fortunately had to invest but a small sum. That is, it made a quick profit of a hundred thousand dollars on an outlay of about twenty thousand dollars.

Since those lands were still on the market and almost worthless proves

bluntly how the country in the longitude between Junction City and Abilene had not been prosperously raising winter wheat before 1871. Professor Malin should not have relied so much on journalistic data, for what is journalistic is, following Webster, characterized by haste, superficiality of thought, inaccuracies of detail, and sensationalism. Had he, instead, examined the nominal prices in farm sales in the deeds in the county recorders' offices of those western counties, he would have seen that these prices had not been affected by any gratifying winter-wheat crops, and that uplands were in an inferior category compared to bottoms. This would be incontrovertible evidence. For it is the crop yields which in the main govern the prices of farms.

In his resurrection of newspaper items he is only able to bring to light one small grist mill, some carloads of winter wheat from one does not know where, and no grain elevator, in the two-thirds part of the state. He could not do more for that would not have been western Kansas in 1870.

STUART HENRY.

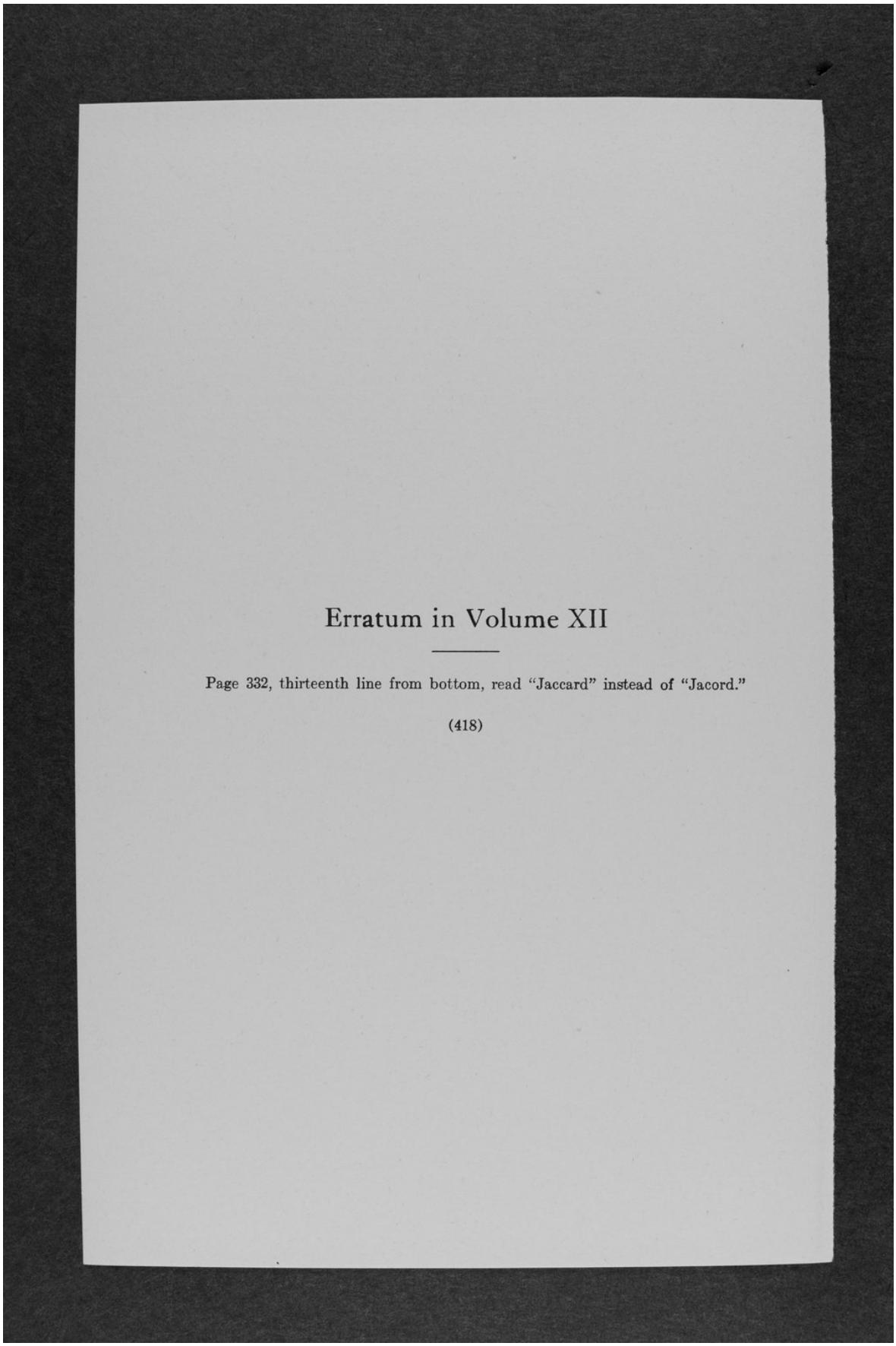
*4 Ardsley Road,*
*Douglaston, L. I.*

THE EDITOR OF THE KANSAS HISTORICAL QUARTERLY:

I have read Stuart Henry's letter relative to my winter-wheat articles. He has made no contribution and is much confused on the whole subject. The issue I raised was the story of the secret five acres and there is no reason for modifying any part of what I wrote relative to that. I shall trust to the good judgment of the readers of my four articles as to whether or not they are sound.

JAMES C. MALIN.

*University of Kansas.*



## Erratum in Volume XII

Page 332, thirteenth line from bottom, read "Jaccard" instead of "Jacord."

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