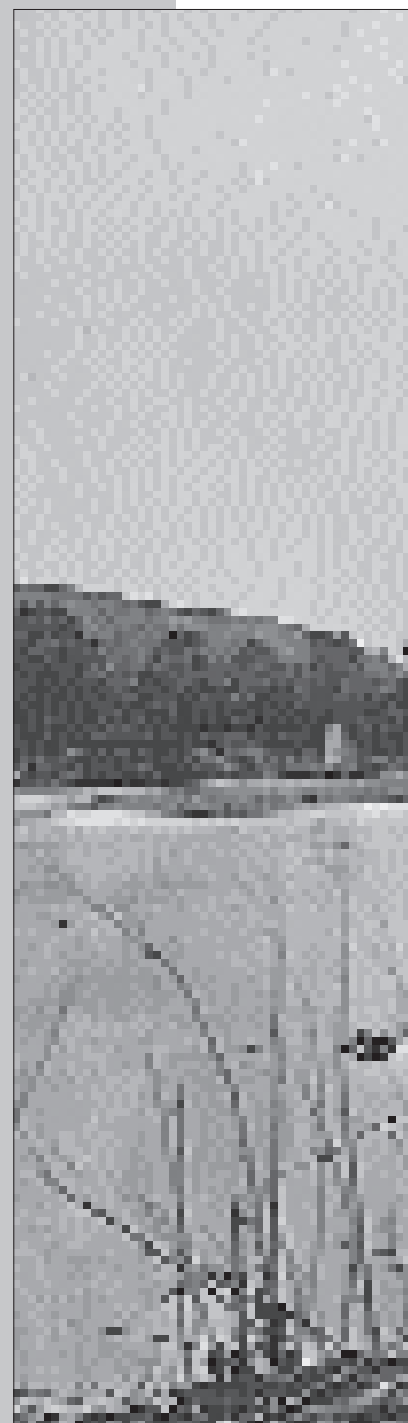


“ONE
OF THE
NASTIEST RIVERS
THAT
I KNOW OF”

MUNICIPAL AND
RURAL SANITATION
IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY KANSAS

by William A. Dobak





The Kansas River, ca. 1874, was described in 1887 as "one of the nastiest rivers that I know of."

Dead pigs bobbed in the swollen waters of the Republican River. "The hogs and other animals drowned in the late freshet," the editor of the *Cloud County Critic* wrote in June 1885, "have been left to decay and pollute the water and the air, endangering the health of the communi-



Concern for public health and sanitation in the mid- to late-1800s increased as did the numbers of animals roaming the city streets, contaminating the environment and fouling the air. Large numbers of animals, as well as poor care and crowded conditions, as seen here in Abilene, increased the risk of pollution and disease.

dles is increasing—that if it keeps on it will soon furnish him a good business,” adding, “The report we publish elsewhere concerning some of the wells in the main part of town ought to help still further.” Not all the threats to health in nineteenth-century Kansas originated in the countryside.¹

Nascent industries fouled the air. Clay Center’s board of health “was out . . . viewing and smelling the slaughter houses, stock pens, and other ‘bad places’” in April 1886. “A large size row is breeding,” the editor of the *Dispatch* commented, “and there is trouble ahead for somebody unless certain premises are cleaned and kept clean.” Minneapolis moved its slaughterhouses outside the city limits and “thoroughly disinfected the old sites.” The *Concordia Daylight Democrat* singled out the “hog pens back of the Nazareth Academy” for its opprobrium and deplored “such filth in our city.” Sanitary practices were rudimentary

and streets often untidy. “Weeds hide lots of rubbish,” the editor of the Clay Center *Times* reminded his readers. “The weeds are so high along some of the principal streets of the city, it will not be long until they shade the sidewalks without the aid of trees,” the *Abilene Chronicle* predicted. Newspapers promoted municipal improvements as well as commercial and agricultural growth. Editors everywhere sounded the same chord: public health demanded better sanitation. Implicit in the quest for improvement were the problems of what direction development should take and who in the community should

ty.”

Hog carcasses floated down the Solomon too. The *Minneapolis Messenger* accused farmers of dumping dead livestock in the river and called it “a crime against the health of the community.” The *Junction City Union* noted that farther downstream, “Complaint about dead hogs in the rivers continues to grow” and reminded readers that “municipalities below us are using the water of these streams.” The same issue of the *Union* quoted a local merchant’s claim that “the demand for the spring water he han-

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1. *Cloud County Critic* (Concordia), June 24, 1885; *Minneapolis Messenger* (Minneapolis), June 18, 1885; *Junction City Union*, June 6, 1885.

2. *Dispatch* (Clay Center), April 15, 1886; *Minneapolis Messenger*, July 1, 1886; *Concordia Daylight Democrat*, September 21, 1886; *Times* (Clay Center), July 2, 1885; *Abilene Chronicle*, June 25, 1886.

determine that direction.²

When most people think about what they loosely call the environment, they often envision trees, flowers, or exploitable resources. Human waste, however, is equally part of the environment, and waste disposal was of immediate concern to town- and city-dwellers throughout the country during the nineteenth century, as it is now. Waste disposal is not a problem usually associated with the Old West, but a glance through nineteenth-century newspapers reveals that animal carcasses frequently lay unclaimed in the streets, where stray swine and “unruly cattle” roamed. Newspaper editors in state and territorial capitals like Springfield, Illinois, and Cheyenne, Wyoming, fretted about the same subjects that distressed editors in Kansas county seats.³

The problem of sanitation was nationwide. During the cholera epidemic of 1866, New York City’s municipal board of health ordered the removal of 160,000 tons of animal droppings that had accumulated over the years in the streets and vacant lots. In 1880 New York had to dispose of the carcasses of fifteen thousand dead horses. People as well as animals were untidy; filth lay everywhere, and sanitation was rudimentary.⁴

Military posts faced the same problems. The old worn-out barracks floors at Fort Riley had “been washed with water for many years, the dirty water running through them, onto the ground underneath,

[which] renders the Quarters unhealthy. . . . Old cans and rubbish [were] scattered over the grounds, particularly so in rear of the Quarters.” In 1887 an up-to-date water and sewer system for Fort Riley was in the works, and Captain George Pond, the army quartermaster in charge of construction, wrote that

ever since [the fort’s] foundation the efforts of its occupants have constantly been to find some other source of water supply than the Kaw River. It is one of the nastiest rivers that I know of, being the natural sewer of an immense agricultural district, flowing for hundreds of miles in an alluvial bottom and draining innumerable pig farms. One can stand on the bank and see almost any day dead animals floating down and our suction [proposed intake from the river] would be less than three miles from the output of the sewers of Junction City with a swift current between.⁵

Captain Pond was not exaggerating about the animal carcasses. He had arrived at Fort Riley in September 1885, a year when the hog population of Kansas had peaked at just over 2,460,000, having increased by nearly 110 percent during the previous four years. An epidemic of the viral disease known as hog cholera or swine flu then struck, killing more than one-third of the animals across the state. Estimated losses exceeded four million dollars. The counties upstream from Fort Riley on the Republican, Smoky Hill, Solomon, and Saline Rivers were not hit as hard as those in the northern tier of the state, but they lost nearly 144,000 hogs, many of which the owners dumped in the riv-

3. During the post-Civil War years the Springfield *Illinois State Register* and the Cheyenne (Wyo.) *Daily Leader* contained much the same sort of stories that appeared in the *Junction City Union*. On hogs roaming at large, see *Illinois State Register*, March 11, 1873; *Daily Leader*, April 17, 1871; *Junction City Union*, December 7, 1867. On dead animals left to rot, see *Illinois State Register*, February 19, 1873; *Daily Leader*, March 31, 1871; *Junction City Union*, May 27, 1865. On general filth in the streets, see *Illinois State Register*, June 6, 1873; *Daily Leader*, February 4, 1871; *Junction City Union*, July 16, 1868. “Unruly cattle” is from the Junction City Council Minutes, April 10, 1874, Junction City Municipal Building, Junction City, Kans.

4. The New York City cleanup is in Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849 and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 210. The horse carcasses are in Martin V. Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform, and the Environment, 1880–1980* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1981), 25. In the nineteenth century New York City did not yet include Brooklyn (then a separate city), Queens

County, or Staten Island.

5. Captain L.E. Campbell, memorandum, November 24, 1886, box 139, Letters Received, Department of the Missouri, 1882–1886, U.S. Army Continental Commands, RG393, National Archives; Endorsement of Captain George E. Pond, September 5, 1887, in Surgeon Charles Page to Adjutant General, Department of the Missouri, August 30, 1887, box 142, *ibid.*

6. Clay, Davis (now Geary) and Dickinson Counties, closest to Fort Riley, lost more than thirty-eight thousand hogs; with losses in Cloud, Ottawa, and Saline Counties to the west, the total came to 143,897 animals. (The statewide mortality rate in 1886 was 37.6 percent, more than treble the 12 percent of 1885.) Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Fifth Biennial Report, 1885–1886* (Topeka: State Printer, 1887), pt. 1, 10, 135, 141, 170, 182, 430, 505, pt. 2, 50, 186.



The problems of general filth in the streets and water sources of Manhattan, shown here in 1867, became so great that in 1859 the city government began to stipulate fines for dumping animal carcasses in the Blue River, and in 1860 the city passed an ordinance prohibiting swine running at large.

ers. The Kaw must have been a nasty river indeed.⁶

Today we know that hog cholera is a viral infection easily transmitted among dense populations, but the nature of the disease perplexed nineteenth-century farmers and veterinarians. Readers of the *Kansas Farmer*, a weekly newspaper published in Topeka, speculated that it was caused by tiny worms in the bloodstream; that it was transmitted by rats; that the first outbreak of the disease, near Cincinnati in 1850, had been “caused originally by the use of still slops for feed,” and that to eradicate the disease it would be necessary to abolish distilleries. Both the state veterinarian of Kansas and the chief of the U.S. Bureau of Animal Industry, writing for popular audiences, attributed the disease to “germs,” meaning that it was communicable and did not “originate spontaneously” from “filth.” The only control was to kill hogs at the first sign of the disease and to burn or bury the

carcasses.⁷

No one advocated dumping dead hogs in the river, but it was a common practice. The editor of the *Junction City Union* noted that the post surgeon at Fort Riley

had “forbidden the use of river water by the troops for drinking purposes. The quantity of cholera hogs in the stream doubtless had something to do with this,” the editor concluded. “It must be cheerful fluid for Topeka after another hundred miles of drainage has been added, and the usual proportion of idiotic farmers have contributed their dead hogs to it.” Nevertheless, streams were convenient and dumping so prevalent that the Kansas legislature, at its next session, declared it a misdemeanor.⁸

By that time local governments in Kansas had been wrestling with the problem of livestock—dead or alive—for nearly thirty years. In February 1859 the city government of Manhattan forbade dumping carcasses in the Blue River, stipulating a maximum fine of ten dollars for the first offense and twenty dollars for the second. (This was a severe fine; civilian teamsters at Fort Riley were earning twenty-five dollars a month and the fort’s blacksmith forty-five dollars.)

7. Geoffrey P. West, ed., *Black's Veterinary Dictionary*, 16th ed. (Towata, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1988), 606–7; *Kansas Farmer* (Topeka), June 3, September 30, November 11, December 9, 30, 1885.

8. *Junction City Union*, August 15, 1885; *Kansas Farmer*, March 10, 1886.

Taking an opposite stance, a municipal ordinance in Salina nine years later designated “the River adjacent to said Town” as the appropriate depository for “Garbage or Refuse matter,” lest residents merely pitch it into the streets. By 1872, however, even county governments were worried about their “rivers, creeks, ponds, roads, streets, alleys, lanes, lots, fields, meadows and commons,” and they moved to prosecute persons who strewed the landscape with dead animals.⁹

Live animals presented another nuisance. As early as 1860 Manhattan had passed an ordinance prohibiting swine running at large. Stray pigs would be impounded; the owner would have to pay one dollar to recover an animal and a fifty-cents-a-day boarding fee. Unclaimed pigs would be sold after ten days. The ordinance was not effective. The year 1868 opened with a councilman moving that the city marshal round up all hogs running loose within the city limits. The pigs were still at large that October when a newspaper editor called the “attention of the city authorities . . . to the loose hogs in the streets. They (the hogs, not the authorities),” the editor made clear, “ought to be ‘pounded.’ They are a great nuisance.” By that time the council had broadened the scope of the ordinance to include sheep, which petitioners complained were doing much damage to gardens and shrubbery. Eighteen years later the situation had improved little. In 1885 the council received another petition “praying for the suppression of stock running at large” and ordered the city attorney “to prosecute all parties who may leave dead animals unburied on the commons adjoining the city limits or within the city limits.” A Manhattan resident visited Junction City and noted with approval “the absence from the streets of all live stock, reaching over and

9. Manhattan City Council Minutes, February 26, 1859, Riley County Historical Society, Manhattan, Kans.; Salina Town Trustees Minutes, May 13, 1868, Salina City Office Building, Salina, Kans.; Ottawa County Commissioners’ Journals, February 22, 1872, WPA Historical Records Survey, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society. Wages at Fort Riley are from Captain James G. Martin, Report of Persons and Articles Employed and Hired, April 1860, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG92, National Archives.

breaking down gates and fences, trampling the lawns, browsing the shrubbery, and ornamenting the sidewalks.”¹⁰

“Ornamenting the sidewalks” was a serious concern because in the days before window screens, flies were a persistent nuisance. They swarmed from the ubiquitous animal droppings into the kitchens of restaurants, boardinghouses, and private dwellings and were an important disease vector. The concern with fences, lawns, and shrubbery, on the other hand, was mostly cosmetic, yet together these conditions represented a dimension of civic conflict that is barely noted in most historical studies of nineteenth-century communities.¹¹

Near the western limit of settlement, around the railroad towns that served as entrepôts of the cattle trade, farmers wanted to keep out Texas fever (splenic fever, transmitted by ticks that rode with the trail herds), which threatened their livestock. The Kansas legislature attempted to restrict the range of newly arrived Texas cattle by a quarantine line that moved farther west every few years as the edge of settlement advanced. East of the quarantine line, in counties with burgeoning towns and increasing numbers of grain farmers whose crops needed protection from loose livestock, the term “herd law” had as much to do with imposing civic order as with preventing Texas fever. The struggle pitted property owners against poorer residents. Thus, when an ordinance to prohibit animals from running at large came before the Junction City Council in 1872, the mayor spoke against it:

10. Manhattan City Council Minutes, January 28, 1860, January 11, April 27, 1868, December 2, 1884, and May 8, 1885; *Manhattan Standard*, October 10, 1868; *Junction City Union*, June 6, 1885.

11. C. Robert Haywood, *Victorian West: Class and Culture in Kansas Cattle Towns* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 82–84, describes the filth but neglects the social dimension of the cleanup. Don H. Doyle, *The Social Order of a Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Illinois, 1825–70* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 199, dismisses sanitation in one paragraph, although on page 195 he mentions the transformation of “local government from a minimal provider of janitorial services into an important mechanism of social discipline.” John M. Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 132–33, discusses an Illinois herd law in the 1820s that was “denounced as being aristocratic.”



Privies were common parts of the landscape, as seen in this photograph of Abilene. Improper placement of and drainage from these structures frequently resulted in foul air and contamination of public water sources.

We have a population in this city of about twenty eight Hundred a great majority of them are in limited circumstances the most of whom own their own cow or cows and some of the other animals enumerated in the ordinance. . . . We have an area of about thirteen Hundred acres within the city limits but thinly settled with a common and unsettled territory as large if not larger than any city of our population within the state of Kansas, and it is my firm conviction upon mature deliberation that it would [be] an exceeding great hardship upon our citizens in general to enforce said ordinance.¹²

According to the 1870 Junction City census, the four

members of the city council who were present owned property in amounts varying from thirty-five hundred dollars to fifty-five thousand dollars; the mayor, who according to the census “work[ed] in [a] flour mill,” owned none.¹³ The ordinance passed.

The question of stockgrowers’ responsibility to fence cattle in versus farmers’ responsibility to fence them out made for heated debates. Newspapers often printed letters on the subject, but most of the letter

writers were pseudonymous, and it is hard to ascribe authorship and so be able to categorize the partisans of either side as rich or poor, prosperous or struggling. In his book *The Cattle Towns*, Robert R. Dykstra quotes a letter written in 1873 by an Ellsworth County farmer who complained that “‘rich men’ [rural stock raisers] . . . ‘care no more for the success of the poor man [the small farmer] than for the life of a troublesome flea.’” Dykstra comments that the farmer was strikingly class conscious, but it must be remembered that in 1873 the number of granges (local chapters of the Patrons of Husbandry) increased more than tenfold in Kansas. The Ellsworth County farmer’s class consciousness may have been striking,

12. Junction City Council Minutes, September 3, 1872.

13. 1870 U.S. Census, Davis (later Geary) County, Kansas. The county’s name change occurred in 1889.

but it was hardly surprising. And the notion of “class” encompasses more than mere wealth; the term “middle class” connotes love of order and privacy as well.¹⁴

When the voters of Davis (Geary) County were considering a herd law early in 1873, the *Junction City Union* printed nearly twenty letters on the topic during the weeks before the election. From the outset, correspondents argued in terms of wealth and poverty, with partisans on both sides of the issue signing themselves “A Poor Settler,” “Scrub Farmer,” and “Poor Man.” According to “Scrub Farmer,”

We don't want the herd law in this county. . . . A majority of our farmers like their fields fenced, and they raise enough produce to feed and clothe themselves, but their profits lie in their stock, which, under the present system, costs but little to raise them fit for market. And if this herd law is adopted in this county, it will drive the stock out of the county or into the hands of professional stock dealers, which will deprive the small farmer of the profits he would have, in case he could combine stock-raising with agriculture.

Conversely, “Poor Man” declared himself

in favor of a herd law. In my own neighborhood the rich farmers are opposed to it, and the poor men are in favor of it. If a man has money enough to build fences he is able to hire herders, and I can't see what difference it makes . . . except that fences cost the most. But to the poor man, who is dependent on his crops for his daily bread, it makes every difference in the world.¹⁵

Both sides in the controversy tried to pose as the poor man's party. Does this mean, however, that the farmers were class conscious? Probably not, for as one antiherd law correspondent wrote to the *Union*, “we all wish to make ourselves rich,” and if passage

14. Robert R. Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 184. According to Concordia's *Republican Valley Empire*, June 6, 1873, the state counted 10 granges at the beginning of the year and more than 150 by June. The *Junction City Union*, June 21, 1873, gave the figure as 128.

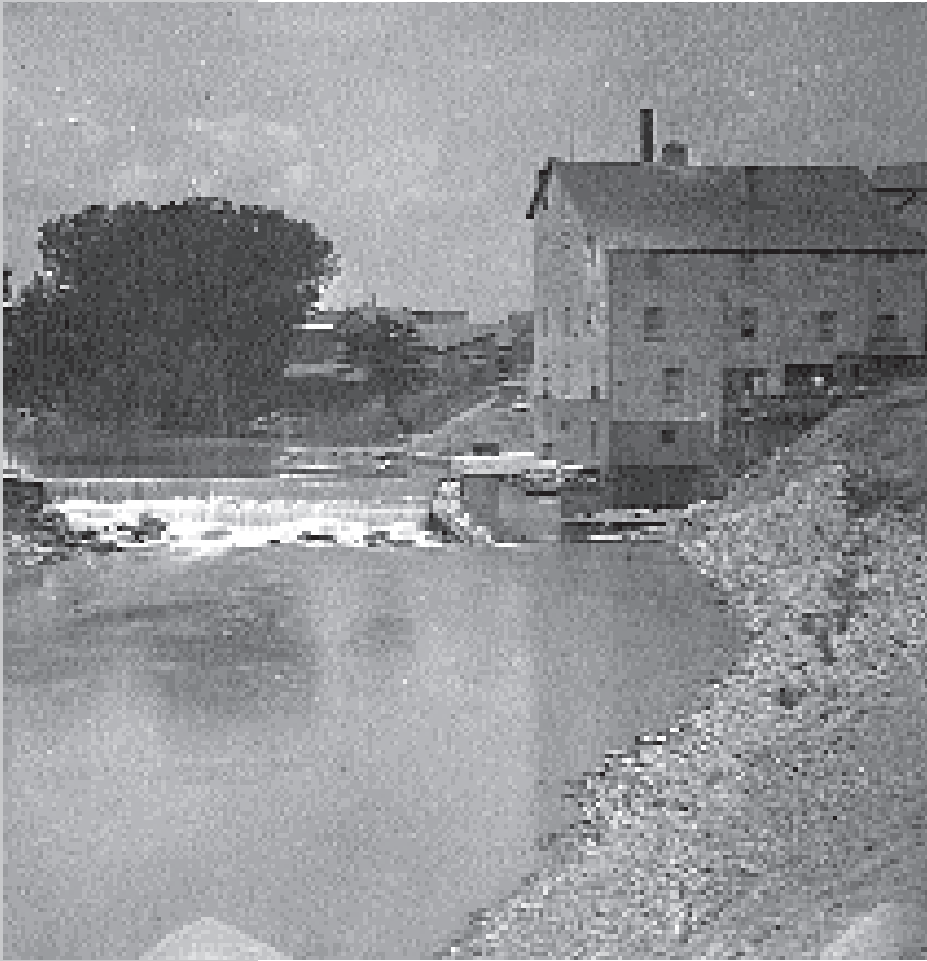
15. *Junction City Union*, February 15, 22, 1873.

of a herd law were to bar livestock from grazing on “the many vacant acres of land that lay around us . . . the poor prairie farmers will have to toil on from morning to night without getting a step nearer riches.” Historians have commented on the nimble footwork that enables westerners to sidestep the bounds of logic in pursuit of their own interests; Malcolm Rohrbough observes, for instance, that “the West was not so much anti-government in public deed as in public rhetoric. . . . Although vociferous cries appeared against the restrictions imposed on acquisition of the ‘public domain’ and other resources, an endless chorus of pleas arose for assistance from the federal government.” Prosperity seems to have been the farmers' common ambition; to impute class consciousness to them is probably anachronistic.¹⁶

The theme of rich and poor was echoed in a meeting of the Davis County commissioners a year later. In April 1873 more than three-fourths of the voters in the rural townships around Junction City had rejected a herd law, but that November the commissioners passed, by a vote of two to one, an order that applied only to one of the townships, in which the vote had been evenly split. The dissenting commissioner spoke at length:

It is well known that the ‘herd law’ is being agitated mostly by a set of land agents and speculators backed by the railroad companies (who are not for the farmers, and whose hands are ever raised against the farming community) for the purpose of selling the lands of the railroad. . . . I believe that . . . said agents are so working, not for the interest of the farmers of the county, but for their own greedy and capacious pockets. . . . It is claimed that the herd law is a benefit to the poor man, but it is plain to every reflecting mind . . . that it is an injury to him; one reason being that the poor man with his few head of cattle cannot afford to herd them as successfully as his more fortunate neighbour who

16. Malcolm Rohrbough, “The Continuing Search for the American West: Historians Past, Present, and Future,” in *Old West/New West: Quo Vadis?*, ed. Gene M. Gressley (Worland, Wyo.: High Plains Publishing, 1994), 125–46.



Mill dams, like this one in Salina, frequently were scenes of accumulation of dead animals that had been disposed of in rivers and streams. The health dangers created by such practices led to legislation in the 1880s to prevent disposal in water sources.

owns a large number. . . . This county without this odious law . . . is a good place for the poor man to make a living and become prosperous, as there is in any State in the Union; to illustrate that fact, a majority of the people of the county came here poor, and are now in a promising way of making a respectable living, as well as accumulating some property for their children.

A week later the dissenting commissioner, who represented precincts that had voted nearly 95 percent against the herd law, was re-elected with an absolute majority in a field of five candidates. He had mastered the art of appealing to voters who wanted to

improve their economic position and were impatient of any restrictions on their freedom of action.¹⁷

Unfenced animals, however, were by no means the only source of pollution in rural and small-town Kansas. In 1885, the year of the hog cholera, the *Junction City Union* printed a report on a sample of water from a half dozen wells, mostly in the business district of town. All water tested was “in a very bad condition, according to the report, which went on to cite the causes:

The Bartell House privy is forty feet distance from the well. The School House well is near two privies about thirty feet distant. The well back of

D[aniel] Weber’s property [listed in the 1880 census as a bakery and boardinghouse] has in close proximity ten privies, varying in distance from twenty-five to eighty feet, with a hog-pen and manure pile close to it. . . . The privies around these wells vary from eight and twelve feet in depth, and many of them have stood there for years and have drained their filth through the narrow strata of sand which separate them from the wells. The premises around these wells are in the majority of cases strewn with old cans, slops, decaying matter of all kinds, which add materially to the filth found in them.

The report called for construction of a municipal water treatment plant and as an interim measure rec-

17. Proceedings of Davis County Commissioners, April 8, November 1, 7, 1873, Geary County Office Building, Junction City, Kans.

ommended “that privies be placed . . . not nearer than fifty feet from the well in a clay soil and in a sandy soil not nearer than three feet for every one foot in depth of the well.”¹⁸

Privies and pure water were among the chief concerns of the Kansas State Board of Health, established in 1885. The work of the United States Sanitary Commission during the Civil War and an effective response to the cholera outbreak of 1866 by New York City’s newly established board of health had led to the founding of state and local public health organizations throughout the country. The Kansas legislature, however, provided for a decentralized board that lacked power to impose fines for noncompliance with its edicts; could not enforce compulsory smallpox vaccination of schoolchildren; and could not even persuade many physicians to furnish statistics on births and deaths in their neighborhoods. The 1885 act constituted the members of each county commission as a county board of health and directed the county board to appoint a local physician as county health officer. Health officers were paid by the county at a rate set by the commissioners.¹⁹

The problem of floating carcasses attracted the health officers’ attention at once, with reports coming in 1885 from Clay and Hodgeman Counties as well as from Saline that dead animals accumulate “above the mill-dams of our quiet streams, and in the neighborhood of our towns and villages, and become a source of imminent danger.” Two years later the health officer in Washington County noticed that the legislation of 1886, to prevent carcass-dumping, seemed to be effective.²⁰

Meanwhile, however, Cloud County’s health officer in Concordia was having his own troubles with

live pigs and law enforcement:

Last spring I ordered all hogs removed from corporations, and had an officer to go around and notify each and every family to comply at once. Some, who were inclined to obey the law, acted promptly, and removed their hogs and cleaned up their premises. I at once appealed to the County Attorney, who looked up the law in the matter, and kindly informed me there was no law to compel them to do so. I then appealed to our City Council to pass an ordinance . . . , but a portion of the Council were in favor of keeping hogs in town, and they failed to come to our relief. I do not think our Legislature should occupy any time at all in passing advisory laws; they are of no good in these cases; we can get plenty of such law from the pulpit.²¹

Where scientific reason and moral suasion failed, civic boosterism sometimes worked. “During the past year [Dodge City] has been emerging into a more metropolitan aspect,” Ford County’s health officer reported, “and we cheerfully state that the sanitary progress has been fully equal to the material.” He cited “about two miles of first-class sewers” as well as graded and guttered streets and “proper sanitary appliances” in the new brick buildings.²²

By 1885 most county seats had their own municipal waterworks or aspired to build one. Most of them also had a board of health, including at least one physician, authorized to detect nuisances that threatened the public health according to current theories that attempted to account for the cause and spread of diseases. Editors frequently invoked the sense of smell to encourage the local board in its efforts. “The hogs and other animals drowned in the late freshet on Elk Creek have been left to decay and pollute the water and air endangering the health of the community,” the editor of the *Cloud County Critic* complained.²³

In the towns, slaughterhouses and stockyards also were sources of effluvia. “Of all the diabolical

18. *Junction City Union*, June 6, 1885.

19. John Duffy, *The Sanitarians: A History of American Public Health* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 110–56; Harriet S. Pfister, *Kansas State Board of Health*, University of Kansas Publications, Government Research Series no. 13 (Topeka: State Printer, 1955); “Reports of County Health Officers,” in Kansas State Board of Health, *Second Annual Report, 1886* (Topeka: State Printer, 1887), 5, 7, 116.

20. Kansas State Board of Health, *First Annual Report, 1885* (Topeka: State Printer, 1886), 68, 83, 108; *ibid.*, *Third Annual Report, 1887* (Topeka: State Printer, 1888), 191.

21. *Ibid.*, *Third Annual Report*, 162.

22. *Ibid.*, 168.

23. *Cloud County Critic*, June 24, 1885.

24. *Times*, May 27, 1886; *Dispatch*, August 19, 1886.



Although cattle and hogs roaming at large presented serious health concerns, laws to fence livestock created much controversy among farmers and stockmen.

stenches that ever offended the nostrils of man, that which comes from the south side of town is the worst," a Clay Center editor fumed. The "dead cattle, horses, hogs and garbage on the other side of the river, . . . the stock yards and Dexter's hog yards near the mill make a combination that is almost strong enough to raise the dead. . . . More disease is attributed to these places than any other cause." But the aroma's origin might well have been private, rather than commercial. "Look out for the 'nuisance' cards," one editor warned his readers. "You will be ashamed when one is plastered on the door of your filthy reeking outhouse."²⁴

Sometimes government could be part of the problem rather than the solution. In June 1873 the Abilene City Council declared the privy behind the Dickinson

County courthouse a public nuisance. After more than six months had passed, a group of offended residents pre-sented

a petition, and the city council finally ordered the obnoxious privy boarded up. Faced with a lockout, the county commissioners took a four-year lease on a six-by-ten-foot plot of land and had a new privy built, at a cost of forty-four dollars to the Dickinson County taxpayers. The real estate developer from whom they leased the land was himself a former city councilman who must have been familiar with the sanitary requirements of public officials.²⁵

Municipal cleanup efforts in nineteenth-century Kansas focused as much on the physical aspects of life as on the more colorful moral aspects such as saloons and prostitution, which

25. Abilene City Council Minutes, June 18, 1873, January 5, 1874,

Abilene Municipal Building, Abilene, Kans.; Journal of Dickinson County Commissioners, January 13, 14, 1874, Dickinson County Courthouse, Abilene, Kans.

26. Kansas State Board of Health, *First Annual Report*, 74.

During the nineteenth century filth and pollution plagued towns such as Junction City, photographed here in 1900. A gradual change in townspeople's attitudes eventually would bring about much-needed municipal sanitary reform.



have received so much scholarly attention. The editorial content of newspapers from the six counties upstream from Fort Riley indicates that people in Clay Center, Concordia, and Salina faced the same problems as did the residents of Caldwell, Dodge City, and Wichita who Robert Dykstra and C. Robert Haywood described. Townspeople's attitudes toward stray livestock, carcasses in the rivers and streets, refuse disposal, and filth in general contain more than a hint of the struggle to impose the values of the Victorian middle class. That hint is found occasionally in the

proceedings of local government, in newspapers, and in a health officer's complaint that "farmers, whose interests do not extend beyond their own immediate self-interests," formed the majority of his county commission and impeded his efforts.²⁶ Contention over rural and municipal sanitary reform—whether loose livestock, unrestricted industry, or overflowing privies—was an important aspect of the social development of nineteenth-century Kansas. Gambling, liquor, and prostitution may be the stuff of western movies, but sanitation is the stuff of everyday life.