

# Irrigation *and* Boosterism *in* Southwest Kansas, 1880–1890

*by Anne M. Marvin*

**The** beginnings of irrigation in southwest Kansas were characterized not only by indecision as to whether irrigation was necessary at all but also by debate over who should be responsible for developing irrigation facilities. Particularly along the Arkansas River in Finney and Kearny Counties, the situation was further confused when the physical realities of irrigation practice became entangled with boosterism and local politics. Although severe drought in the late 1880s convinced many that irrigation was a necessity, legal and economic structures were not in place to support its development. The resulting free-for-all is well illustrated by efforts to bring irrigation out of the valley onto the upland regions north and west of Garden City.

The Arkansas River is a central feature in the landscape of southwest Kansas. During the 1870s railroad builders had followed the river, and settlers had followed the railroad. At that time the Arkansas, still largely unfettered by upstream development, flowed half a mile wide through the future Kearny County.<sup>1</sup> Over many years the stream had formed a flat valley floor, varying in width from less than one mile to more than four miles. Beyond the bottom was an outer valley ranging from five to twenty miles across and rising as much as twenty-five feet above the valley floor. Beyond the valley stretched the gently rolling uplands covered with buffalo grass.<sup>2</sup>



*In the late nineteenth century as the promises of early irrigation failed to materialize in southwest Kansas, the vast and semiarid region became a "grave-yard of hopes."  
Photo taken in Finney County.*

# “A Grave-Yard of Hopes”



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1. *Lakin Herald*, June 24, 1881. The spelling of the county name changed from “Kearney” to “Kearny” when the county was officially organized on March 27, 1888. To avoid confusion, the latter spelling is used throughout this article except when found in a quotation or a newspaper title.

2. Walter H. Schoewe, “The Geography of Kansas,” in Kansas Academy of Science, *Transactions* 52 (September 1949), 291–300; *ibid.* 54 (September 1951), 295–98; *see also* Don W. Steeples and Rex Buchanan, *Kansas GeoMaps*, Educational Series 4 (Lawrence: Kansas Geological Survey, 1983), 6–7.

**The** earliest residents of Garden City began to arrive in March 1878. By the next summer a considerable acreage of wheat had been planted, and plans were made to construct a grist mill to be run by the current of the Arkansas River.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately 1879 was a year of severe drought, therefore producing no grain to grind. Town promoters sought means to enable fledgling farms and towns to survive. In 1880 the efforts of Garden City businessmen led to the construction of a small irrigation ditch from the river, resulting in impressive crops of vegetables on about one hundred acres. This ditch experiment established that irrigation of the bottomlands could be accomplished at moderate cost.<sup>4</sup>

Irrigation enthusiasm flourished in the valley. By mid-August 1881 ten irrigation corporations had filed charters in what are now Hamilton, Kearny, and Finney Counties. They proposed to build irrigation facilities to serve almost all of the valley from the state line to Garden City and beyond. Five actually constructed or attempted to construct ditches to redistribute Arkansas River water.

The intensity of this early irrigation fervor appears puzzling at first, given the lack of experience and scarcity of capital in the region. However, circumstances indicate that irrigation enthusiasm was a symptom more of speculative zeal than of an overwhelming desire to adapt to climatic conditions. This zeal was perhaps most evident in Charles J. "Buffalo" Jones, one of Garden City's first residents. Of the ten ditch companies previously mentioned, five were initiated at least partially through Jones's efforts. The en-

3. L.H. Pratt, "A History of the Rise and Progress of Garden City," *Garden City Herald*, December 1, 1883; William Ellsworth Smythe, *The Conquest of Arid America*, 3d ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), 109.

4. F.G. Adams, "Irrigation in Kansas," in Kansas Academy of Science, *Transactions, 1879-1880* 7 (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1881), 78; Richard Pfister, *Water Resources and Irrigation, Economic Development in Southwestern Kansas, Part IV* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, School of Business, Bureau of Business Research, 1955), 48-49; Schoewe, "The Geography of Kansas," in Kansas Academy of Science, *Transactions* 56 (June 1953), 177. Several settlers in the area apparently had experimented with small-scale irrigation of garden plots before this time; see *ibid.* and *Garden City Paper*, June 19, 1879.

thusiasm of men such as Jones was infectious. By the summer of 1882 local newspapers were referring to the irrigation system being built around Garden City, comprising thirty-three miles of main irrigating canal and capable of watering 60,000 acres, but with the potential when completed of serving 262,000 acres (four hundred square miles). In reality only 500 irrigated acres were reported in 1881 and 1,000 to 1,200 acres in 1882.<sup>5</sup> Although actual local interest in irrigation remained muted, the idea of irrigation caught the imagination of speculators. Promoters saw to it that irrigation became an integral part of the Garden City image, a drawing card for settlers and investors.

Irrigation boosterism in the 1880s was encouraged by the fact that the Arkansas valley was in the midst of a regional economic boom. The period was one of feverish activity in railroad promotion and town building. Eastern investors eagerly loaned their money, and much of this financial backing was secured with farm real estate mortgages.<sup>6</sup>

Early in the 1880s new settlers had begun to respond to the attractions of southwest Kansas, and in March 1883 a federal land office opened in Garden City. By 1886 boosters claimed a population in Finney County of ten thousand. The population to the west also was rising, as Hamilton County (on the Colorado border) was officially organized in 1886.<sup>7</sup>

5. *Irrigator* (Garden City), August 31, 1882. For other descriptions of the canal system, see *ibid.*, July 20, September 28, 1882, May 10, August 30, 1883; *Lakin Herald*, February 24, 1883; *Cultivator and Herdsman* (Garden City), August 1884; *Garden City Sentinel*, September 15, 1884; Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, *A Map and Description of the Irrigable and Grazing Lands of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad Company in Western Kansas* (Chicago: Poole Bros., 1884); *Irrigator*, August 31, 1882; A.T. Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas*, vol. 2 (Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883), 1616; Noble L. Prentis, *Southwestern Letters* (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1882), 32.

6. James C. Malin, "The Kinsley Boom of the Late Eighties," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 4 (February 1935), 23-49, and *ibid.* (May 1935), 164-87, discusses the boom as reflected in the press in Edwards County, downriver from Garden City. For discussions of the fever of speculation during this period, see also Pfister, *Water Resources and Irrigation*, 58-59, and Gilbert C. Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier 1865-1900* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 117-26.

7. David W. Craft, "A History of the Garden City, Kansas, Land Office, 1883-1894" (master's thesis, University of Kansas, 1969), 12; *Directory of Finney County, Kansas* (Salina: Salina, Kansas Directory Company, 1886), 22; *History of Kearny County Kansas*, vol. 1 (Lakin, Kans.: Kearny County Historical Society, 1964), 102.

The area advertised its own unique version of “rain follows the plow.” Prospective settlers were told of the “inexhaustible” supply of water in the Arkansas River, the impressive yields from irrigated plots, and the certainty that irrigation helped to increase rainfall by encouraging more extensive cultivation and by saturating the ground and adding humidity to the atmosphere.<sup>8</sup> Although this theory of causality may not have been scientifically accurate, precipitation had in fact increased. The 1884, 1885, and 1886 seasons brought unusually high rainfall that resulted in fine crops even without irrigation. Unfortunately the increased rainfall discouraged use of irrigation water, which left the ditch companies short of customers and cash. Despite their central role in the boosters’ vision of southwest Kansas, irrigation facilities began to show signs of neglect.<sup>9</sup>

As indicated by the low number of irrigated acres, irrigation remained a marginal enterprise during the wet years of the mid-1880s. Locally the physical presence of ditch facilities generated some minor adjustments such as awareness of the need for bridges and of the danger of flooding. Generally, however, irrigation was not viewed as absolutely necessary to the survival of the community, and its development remained unregulated, unsystematic, and whimsical.

The primary role of irrigation as a promotional device rather than as an active feature in the local economy became quite evident with a change in the weather in the late 1880s. The summer of 1887 was dry. Not only was rainfall short but the Arkansas was

beginning to reflect the extensive irrigation development upstream in Colorado. In 1888 the economic boom ended rather suddenly with less-than-expected yields of settlers, railroads, industries, rain, and crops. Drought and poor crop production continued into the next year. Since the late 1870s average annual rainfall at Garden City had been slightly more than twenty inches. Between January 1 and December 1, 1889, only twelve inches fell.<sup>10</sup>

*The* collapse of the boom deflated the hopes of western Kansans, many of whom had invested in the future by taking out mortgages to cover farm improvements or by sinking money into land and community building. With worsening conditions, outside capital began to dry up, causing declines in construction and the loss of cash flow associated with labor and business development. Between 1887 and 1891 the population of Finney County dropped from 8,084 to 2,951, mirroring the general depopulation of western Kansas.<sup>11</sup>

The post-boom years brought changes in attitude among those who remained in the region. Many began to regard irrigation as essential to settlement and agriculture. Demands for more extensive and better-managed irrigation ditches became increasingly urgent. Efforts were made to expand the scope of irrigation beyond the river bottom and onto the northern uplands.

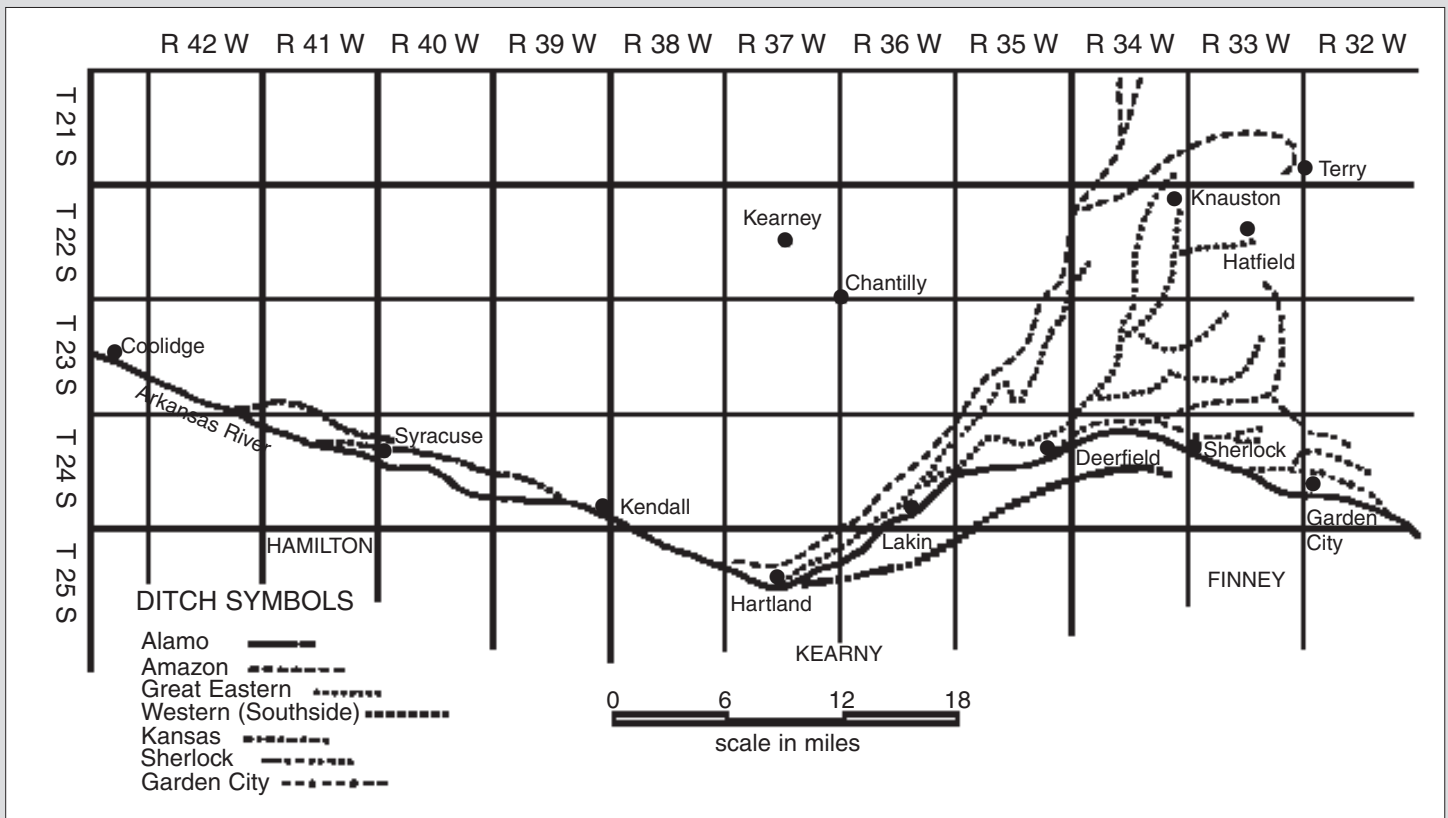
During the dry summer of 1887 rumors began to circulate of a new northside ditch to tap the river just west of the state line. Such a ditch could be led onto the uplands far enough west to provide water for the northern townships in Kearny and adjoining counties. Throughout the summer farmers in northern Hamilton and Kearny Counties met to discuss how to encourage construction of this new irrigating ditch.

8. See *Syracuse Journal* quoting *Garden City Sentinel*, May 20, 1887; *Kearney County Coyote* (Chantilly), June 22, 1887; *Cimarron New West*, February 9, 1888. For a discussion of the “rain follows the plow” theory, see David Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), chapter 6; Paul D. Travis, “Changing Climate in Kansas: A Late 19th-Century Myth,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 1 (Spring 1978): 48–58.

9. Richard J. Hinton, *Irrigation in the United States*, 49th Cong., 2d sess., 1886, S. Doc. 15, serial 2450, 143; “Climate of Kansas,” in Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Quarterly Report* 67 (Topeka: State Printer, June 1948), 34; *Garden City Sentinel*, July 30, 1884, July 23, 1886. For a discussion of the difficulties faced by ditch companies during years of high rainfall, see Anne M. Marvin, “The Fertile Domain: Irrigation as Adaptation in the Garden City, Kansas Area, 1880–1910” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1985), 74–106.

10. *Lakin Index*, January 3, 1890.

11. Finney County population figures for 1887 and 1891 from Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Sixth Biennial Report, 1887–1888* (Topeka: State Printer, 1889), pt. 2, 3; *ibid.*, *Eighth Biennial Report, 1891–1891* (1893), 73; see also Pfister, *Water Resources and Irrigation*, 58–59; *Lakin Pioneer Democrat*, April 13, 1889; *Garden City Weekly Herald*, April 11, 1889.



In August a formal farmers' club was organized in the northeast corner of Kearny County. Awakened to the need for irrigation by the hot, dry weather, more than fifty farmers attended and discussed how to persuade capitalists to finance a canal through northern Kearny County. By the end of August almost every township in the northern tier had such a farmers' irrigation association. By organizing and working together, farmers hoped to see a ditch project underway by October 1.<sup>12</sup> The consumers were taking the initiative.

Talk of a new ditch proposal caught the ear of at least one local entrepreneur—C.J. Jones of Garden City. In late August 1887 the *Kearny County Coyote*, an upland newspaper, published a letter from Jones proposing a plan for financing and building a ditch in the northern townships. Jones said he could put in

12. *Syracuse Sentinel*, August 12, 1887; *Kearny County Advocate* (Lakin), August 20, 1887; see also July and August 1887 issues of *Kearny County Coyote* as well as other issues of *Kearny County Advocate* and *Syracuse Sentinel*.

the largest canal ever built in the United States for irrigation and manufacturing purposes and could give it such a flow and depth of water that it would wash out its own sediment besides providing water power. He even had an engineer, teams, and machines all ready to go on the project. He would, however, need the cooperation of upland farmers so that it would not be necessary to "scatter our canal all over the country in order to get a little business."<sup>13</sup>

Reaction in the press varied. A Hamilton County newspaper supported early acceptance of the project so that work could begin the next spring. The editor foresaw a general economic lift from the canal construction. It would give the farmers work immediately and better crops in the future. The *Coyote* appealed to its readers' worst fears by repeatedly stating that another bad year would force settlers to move out of the area and that farmers should accept the proposal at once if they hoped to have irrigation by the fol-

13. *Kearny County Coyote*, August 27, 1887.

*Irrigation enthusiasm was a symptom of speculative zeal, which was perhaps most evident in C.J. "Buffalo" Jones (right), one of Garden City's first residents.*



*Major irrigation ditches and towns in southwest Kansas, ca. 1890 (left).*

lowing season.<sup>14</sup> The editor of Lakin's *Kearney County Advocate* took the most cautious attitude. Certainly something must be done to allay the effects of drought, the editor wrote, or "long ere the drought and hot winds can be overcome, our homes will be under mortgage and other people will stop in and reap the benefits of this sowing we are now passing through."<sup>15</sup> The *Advocate's* editor looked askance at Jones, however, warning farmers to be aware of his history of wheeling and dealing for personal gain. During Jones's campaign for the state legislature in 1886, the *Advocate* had criticized him for being allied with the ditch company owners rather than with the water consumer. The editor reminded readers of this and attacked the ditch project as just another one of Jones's "visionary schemes":

Jones, in his time, has projected numerous ditches—in fact his statesmanship consists in taking out charters and making a perfect neat work of canals and railroads all over southwestern Kansas, and by thus holding a right of way prevent the building of legitimate enterprises unless his imaginary rights were purchased at a large figure.<sup>16</sup>

The editor also noted that Jones seemed to be in quite a hurry with his ditch proposal, having hired an engineer and machinery before determining the needs and wants of his prospective patrons.

On September 8 Jones met with about one hundred farmers at Chantilly, Kearney County, to present his proposition, and much interest was expressed. A

14. *Syracuse Sentinel*, September 23, October 14, 1887; *Kearney County Coyote*, August 27, September 3, 1887.

15. *Kearney County Advocate*, September 3, 1887.

16. *Ibid.*, October 8, 1887. An example of this sort of action was the Great Western Irrigating Water Power and Manufacturing Company, one of Jones's early ditch enterprises, which claimed in its charter the purpose of irrigating between the Smoky Hill and Arkansas Rivers from the Colorado line east to Sedgwick County, all the lands "that are not already lawful [*sic*] held for irrigating by prior charters." See Corporation Charters, 12:72, Records of the Secretary of State's Office, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; *Kearney County Advocate*, October 23, 1886, September 3, 1887.



general meeting, to be attended by five delegates from each of the eleven township organizations, was announced for September 13.<sup>17</sup>

On September 12 the Suez Irrigating, Water Power and Manufacturing Company filed a charter of incorporation with Jones as one of its directors.<sup>18</sup> Company representatives attended the September 13 farmers' meeting and presented their proposition for a ditch project. The Suez would furnish water at one dollar per inch to farmers in Hamilton, Kearny, and Finney Counties provided that the company received enough pledges before beginning work. Each subscriber would be required to take water for ten years. A committee of one representative from each township attending voted eight to three in favor of the proposition. A minority opposed the plan on the grounds that they did not approve of mortgaging their farms for security in their agreement with the ditch company.<sup>19</sup>

During the ensuing weeks farmers were assured that the ditch was a sure thing, although Jones had had some difficulties securing the right-of-way and signing up sufficient subscribers. Supposedly two hundred names had been sent to the company, and an engineer had already begun a preliminary survey for the ditch. Through a letter to the *Kearney County Coyote's* editor, Jones reminded Kearny County farmers that they had priority in signing up for the water rights but that Finney County farmers were eager to bid for the canal, which they would get if any rights were left.<sup>20</sup>

Promoters claimed that the projected canal would be capable of watering millions of acres. In addition the project would increase rainfall, remove the uncertainty from farming, and raise land values 20 percent. The canal was to begin near the state line and run northeast through the three-county area. The project-

ed length of the finished ditch varied from one hundred to two hundred miles plus several hundred miles of laterals. Projected completion of the entire canal was set for the spring or early summer of 1888.<sup>21</sup>

*I*t all sounded too good to be true, and indeed the *Advocate's* dire predictions about the Jones scheme came to pass all too soon. The focus of the Suez project suddenly was shifted east. It was reported that Jones as president of the Suez canal company had signed a contract with Asa T. Soule, financial backer of the mammoth Eureka canal in Gray and Ford Counties east of Garden City. Jones's contract specified that he would construct a huge ditch starting near Hartland in Kearny County, running across Finney County, and joining Soule's Eureka canal farther east. Such a project would almost entirely bypass the upland townships in north Kearny County. On November 29, 1887, the Amazon Irrigating Company, with purposes corresponding to the rumored Jones-Soule project, filed a corporation charter. Among the directors was C.J. Jones.<sup>22</sup>

Newspaper coverage, like the ditch situation, began to get somewhat confused. Although some newspaper accounts still referred to Jones's company as the Suez, others had begun to use the name Amazon. Despite assurances that the Suez, said to be one-and-a-half times the size of the Amazon, would still be built, the doubtful in Kearny County voiced feelings of confusion and betrayal.<sup>23</sup> The editor of the *Kearney County Advocate* accused Jones of leading north Kearny County farmers into thinking that the Suez was a sure thing, then merging the idea into the Amazon project and leaving the farmers with nothing. The *Kearney County Coyote*, however, reported that changes in plan were due to technical difficulties discovered during the survey for the Suez. It had been found that to achieve the projected route the

17. *Kearney County Advocate*, August 20, 27, September 10, 1887; *Syracuse Sentinel*, August 26, September 9, 1887; *Kendall Boomer*, September 7, 21, 1887; *Kearney County Coyote*, September 10, 17, 1887.

18. Corporation Charters 30:45.

19. *Syracuse Sentinel*, September 16, 1887; *Kearney County Coyote*, September 17, 1887.

20. *Kearney County Coyote*, October 15, 1887.

21. *Ibid.*, September 24, October 8, 15, 22, 1887; *Garden City Weekly Herald*, October 13, 1887; *Coolidge Citizen*, October 21, 1887.

22. Corporation Charters 30:383.

23. *Garden City Weekly Herald*, November 3, 1887.

ditch company would have had to place the headgate at least fifty-five miles west of the state line.<sup>24</sup>

Obviously ditch building was an attractive activity for incurable speculators such as C. J. Jones. However, another even more significant aspect to the upland ditch issue remained. The ditch debate was intimately related to county seat politics. This relationship is clearly revealed upon closer examination of Kearny County's political chronology and of the Kearny County newspapers and their geographic locations.

In the spring of 1887 residents of the as-yet-unorganized Kearny County petitioned the governor to proclaim Kearny an independent political entity. In response the governor appointed a census taker in April to determine whether the actual population of the area justified this distinction. Although the area's population had not yet been affected by the drought or economic collapse, local histories indicate that the census process involved considerable manipulation of reality. Somehow sufficient population was recorded, however, for the governor to declare Kearny a county in March 1888. The county seat election was scheduled for the next winter. It is evident that the period of speculative effort on the upland ditch project coincided with the political activity involved in creating the new county and its county seat.

The positions taken by local newspapers on the ditch issue were blatantly tied to their county seat preferences. The *Kearny County Coyote*, one of the most vocal proponents of Jones's Suez project, seemed to exist for the sole purpose of associating itself with the future county seat, although in the first issue the editor righteously declared his fervent desire to "advocate what is right and criticize the wrong."<sup>25</sup> The paper's first home was Kearney, on the uplands eighteen miles north of Hartland. Kearney had been laid out in July 1886 in hopes of becoming the county seat. The Kearney area would of course

benefit politically and economically if a ditch were run through the northern townships. As of May 14, 1887, the *Kearny County Coyote* had moved to Chantilly, another north Kearny County town, which the paper declared to be "the Future county seat." About a year later it moved to Omaha, another northern hopeful in the county seat race, and in December 1888 the paper found a home in Hartland. Kearny County officially had been declared an organized county as of March 27, 1888, and Hartland was to win out over Lakin in the county seat election of February 18, 1889, under rather suspicious circumstances. The *Kearny County Advocate*, an opponent of Jones's "schemes," was not free of political biases in the matter. When it began in 1885, the paper had declared one of its purposes to be the establishment of Lakin as county seat. The *Coyote* accused the *Advocate* of opposing the north Kearny County ditch because such an enterprise would reduce Lakin's chances in the county seat race.<sup>26</sup> The *Coyote* made its own interest very clear when it abruptly dropped coverage of irrigation in the spring of 1888 to concentrate on the county seat issue.

**Soon** after the formation of the Amazon, Jones's canal project with Soule, farmers renewed efforts to secure a ditch for northern Kearny County. Coverage of the issue disappeared abruptly from the newspapers in mid-March 1888. The Suez project in Kearny County was never heard from again.

Increasing attention to the Amazon project in northern Finney County may have been due to the engineering problems of the Suez, but it is apparent from the timing of the switch that Jones's involvement in land speculation and politics also contributed to the change. His interest in north Finney County appears to have been linked directly to the expansion of the Great Eastern company's ditch system in the same area.

24. *Kearny County Coyote*, November 4, 1887; *Kearny County Advocate*, November 26, 1887.

25. *Kearny County Coyote*, January 1, 1887.

26. *Ibid.*, September 24, 1887; *History of Kearny County Kansas*, 101, 103.





Early in the 1880s settlers began to respond to boosterism efforts in southwest Kansas. In 1883 a federal land office opened in Garden City as newcomers came to the area seeking land.

Beginning with the 1887 season, the Great Eastern extended to the vicinity of Hatfield, a community north of Garden City in Township 22, Range 33. No plans were made to run the ditch farther during the 1887 season, and excess water was emptied from the end of the ditch into a natural basin southeast of Hatfield to make a lake and park.<sup>27</sup> By the fall of 1887 farmers in the Hatfield area were expressing interest in extensions of the Great Eastern. They subscribed almost two thousand dollars for water contingent on canal expansion, while farmers in the Knauston area a few miles northwest demonstrated their interest by increasing their list of prospective subscriptions to four thousand dollars. The ditch company worked on expanding and improving its service by enlarging the main ditch and creating new lateral ditches. Unfortunately for the company, north Finney County cus-

27. *Syracuse Journal*, July 12, 1889; *Kearney County Advocate*, December 7, 1889; *Garden City Imprint*, December 7, 1889.

tomers began to complain of water shortages in the early summer of 1888. In late June, at a time when crops were greatly in need of water, the ditch was shut down for a few days for repairs. Farmers in Kearny and western Finney Counties reportedly were ready to file a number of damage suits against the company.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile competitive promotion of the Amazon continued. Shaky relations between the Great Eastern and its patrons no doubt contributed to interest in the Amazon as an alternative water source. The *Terry Eye*, located in an area to be served by the Amazon, printed wildly enthusiastic reports on the ditch's construction and credited Jones with its town's future

28. *Kearney County Advocate*, August 20, September 10, 1887; *Hartland Herald*, September 10, 1887; *Hatfield News*, September 28, 1887. For coverage of work on the canal, see *Hatfield News*, September 28, October 26, November 16, 23, 30, December 4, 1887, February 8, 1888. Regarding damage suits, see *Kearney County Advocate*, June 16, 1888; *Garden City Weekly Herald*, June 28, 1888; *Finney County Democrat* (Garden City), June 30, 1888.

When the unusually high rainfall ended in 1887, C.J. Jones responded to farmers' irrigation needs stating that he had teams and machines ready to build the largest irrigation canal in the United States.



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prosperity. Throughout the spring of 1888, Jones continued meeting with area farmers and signing them on as subscribers to the project.<sup>29</sup>

Jones and the Amazon were not without opponents, however. During June 1888 the *Terry Eye* printed a letter to the editor that was highly critical of Jones's intentions and motives. The writer did not trust Jones to keep the ditch in repair, suspecting that instead he would dump the projects in the laps of the stockholders—that is, the farmers who had subscribed for water. The writer expressed resentment at Jones's pressure tactics and the assertion that farmers must have irrigation immediately, no matter what the cost, or accept the fact that they would have to leave the county. Also, Jones's figures as to the money he would have to raise to cover construction costs

seemed doubtful.<sup>30</sup> The *Garden City Weekly Herald* responded immediately, accusing the other papers of printing false letters ostensibly written by farmers against the Amazon. If Jones were making such a killing on the Amazon, the newspaper asked, why wasn't everyone out promoting ditches? The *Weekly Herald* also printed a letter attributed to a reader in Terry saying that ditches were a necessity, and it did not matter who built them. It was not true, anyway, that farmers would be asked to mortgage their farms to the ditch company; and besides, "the farmers of north Finney know that C.J. Jones is the only man that has ever done anything for the people." The *Weekly Herald* further asserted that a conspiracy was afoot to discredit Jones in the Amazon matter so that he would not get the Republican nomination for Finney County representative to the state legislature.<sup>31</sup>

29. *Terry Eye*, November 17, 24, 1887; *Hartland Herald*, December 3, 1887; *Kearney County Advocate*, March 17, 1888; *Terry Eye*, March 22, April 26, May 31, June 28, 1888.

30. *Terry Eye*, June 7, 1888, reprinted in *Weekly Sentinel and Cultivator* (Garden City), June 13, 1888, and *Kearney County Advocate*, June 30, 1888.

31. *Garden City Weekly Herald*, June 14, 1888.

North Finney County residents had long been well aware of the ongoing political struggle, as indicated by stories in the *Terry Eye* during April and May 1888. When Jones and others of the Amazon had failed to appear at a meeting with 150 farmers at Terry, the *Eye* had declared that “this fooling with the farmers must be stopped. The next time any man wants an audience in Terry he will not get it; bear this in mind, ye office seeking nabobs of Boomadom—Garden City.”<sup>32</sup> The *Eye* noted that in May the battle already was beginning between the *Garden City Weekly Herald*, a pro-Jones paper, and the *Garden City Weekly Sentinel and Cultivator*, which backed his opponent in the race. The *Weekly Herald* launched an attack on J.W. Gregory, editor of the *Weekly Sentinel and Cultivator*, implying that he had been involved with ballot box stuffing in 1886 when Jones had lost to H.P. Myton in the race for a seat in the legislature.

Gregory responded that although everyone knew the necessity of irrigation, farmers in northern Finney, Kearny, and Hamilton Counties should not be swindled into mortgaging their land to support a pipe dream. In response to the *Weekly Herald's* coverage of the matter, Gregory wrote:

Wanted—two or three men who can write a column or two of something they know nothing about and will never be able to learn, to be headed “defense of a Irrigating Ditch Grab,” and signed “Farmer,” “Constant Reader,” or “Citizen.” Grammar no object. No honest man need apply. Call on or address the Evening Gutter Snipe.<sup>33</sup>

The *Weekly Herald* ran a letter from a Hatfield farmer who asserted that J.W. Gregory wanted both Myton and Jones out of the 1888 political race so that Gregory could become a compromise candidate. Because of Gregory’s attacks on Jones, the writer stated, farmers had not signed contracts with Jones when they should have. This had led to a lack of certainty of water for the next season, which would force many to

leave their homesteads and find work elsewhere. The *Weekly Herald* asserted that Gregory’s opposition to the Amazon was not just a private political wrangle but an issue that could lead to the ruin of Finney County.<sup>34</sup>

The *Weekly Herald* backed up its assertions by stating that while farmers in Finney County were involving themselves in a political argument, Scott County farmers were subscribing freely to the Amazon project. This may or may not have been true, for less than a month later the *Terry Eye* noted that Scott County farmers were not happy with the contract Jones was offering.<sup>35</sup>

*Amidst* the political and personal feuding, the problem remained of how farmers could obtain water in time to save their crops and allow them to stay on the land. The *Hatfield News* declared in the summer of 1888 that irrigation was being performed in a manner entirely unsuitable to the people. The paper acknowledged that “no one questions the value of a country with a good system honestly and carefully managed, but they cannot wait always for it to be brought about,” and it advocated a “united and persistent effort of the people to secure a thorough system of irrigation in this part of the country wherever it can be had.”<sup>36</sup> Most citizens shared a feeling that time was of the essence in obtaining irrigation for north Finney County. A letter to the editor of the *Garden City Weekly Herald* summed up what surely was the attitude of many farmers in the area: “What we want,” the writer stated, “is less politics and more water.”<sup>37</sup>

Complaints of mismanagement and poor water supply continued, and the situation in north Finney County changed little. During the spring of 1889 many farmers were reported to be planting crops far-

32. *Terry Eye*, April 12, 1888; see also *ibid.*, April 5, 12, May 3, 1888.  
33. *Weekly Sentinel and Cultivator*, July 18, 1888.

34. *Garden City Weekly Herald*, July 19, August 16, 1888.

35. *Ibid.*, June 14, 21, 1888; *Terry Eye*, July 12, 1888.

36. *Hatfield News*, June 13, 1888.

37. *Garden City Weekly Herald*, July 26, 1888; *Terry Eye*, July 19, 1888.

ther up the ditches, where they could be sure of the water supply. Promises of water from the Great Eastern and the Amazon during the preceding two years had not been realized, and the farmers were not prepared to live on hope again.<sup>38</sup>

The Great Eastern continued to have trouble with water supply into northern Finney County, and complaints from patrons continued. By the end of 1889 the fate of the ditch seemed uncertain. Rumors flew about changes in ditch ownership, including the story that Asa Soule, of Eureka ditch fame, had bought the company.<sup>39</sup>

For awhile construction of the Amazon appeared to be proceeding well. In early December reports indicated that eighty miles of the ditch had been finished. Problems soon arose, however. The *Garden City Weekly Sentinel* asserted that parts of the ditch ran uphill and that grading and construction generally had been shoddy and inadequate. At the end of May 1889 the ditch broke and flooded parts of the town of Lakin. Later in the season the river rose, rushed into the wide-open headgates, and washed out a newly constructed flume.<sup>40</sup>

By early June 1889 Jones was claiming that he had long ago sold out to an English syndicate, as had been rumored during the preceding fall. Editor Gregory responded to this reported sale to English capitalists by stating that “the only ‘English’ capitalists we have heard of as dabbling in our ditches are Kansas City speculators.”<sup>41</sup> The *Weekly Sentinel* accused Jones and his business associates of buying out landowners along the ditch. In November 1889 the *Garden City Imprint* abandoned its noncritical attitude toward the Amazon and printed similar accusations of fraud and land speculation. The *Kearney County*

*Advocate* joined in the condemnation of the ditch owners. Finally in June 1891 Amazon water reached the ditch in the Terry area. The *Imprint* declared that it looked as though north Finney County might produce a good crop for the first time in five years.<sup>42</sup>

The precedents of speculative development established during the “boom” had continued to govern irrigation operations during the lean years of the late 1880s. Various economic and political schemes were intermixed with irrigation projects, thus diluting corporate response to what many farmers viewed as a desperate situation. The disappointments of the late 1880s motivated southwest Kansans to seek better ways of financing, managing, and regulating irrigation works. The debate intensified over who should provide the necessary capital for larger irrigation works—associations of farmers, private corporations, the states, or the federal government. Increased discussion ensued regarding the need for federal aid to irrigation and for state legislation governing irrigation.

Disgust with both politics and corporations is evident in newspaper coverage of the north Finney County situation. The *Garden City Weekly Sentinel and Cultivator* noted that for years the farmers had been dependent on the ditch companies, which had been given a fair trial and had proven untrustworthy. Farmers now should take steps to put the canals under the control of those who used them.<sup>43</sup>

Two different groups of farmers in the greater Hatfield area took up the cause. The *Hatfield News* noted in mid-July that sixteen farmers in the area six miles south of Hatfield had formed the Farmers’ Kansas Ditch Company to build and operate a new irrigating ditch between the Great Eastern and the Illinois (Garden City) ditches. Shortly thereafter, another group of farmers organized the Peoples Irrigation and Water Supply Company to serve the Knaus-

38. *Hatfield News*, March 30, 1889.

39. *Garden City Imprint*, May 25, June 22, July 20, 1889; *Kearney County Advocate*, July 20, October 5, 1889; *Kearney County Coyote*, October 12, 26, 1889; *Garden City Imprint*, November 6, 1889.

40. *Garden City Weekly Herald*, December 6, 1888; *Weekly Sentinel*, May 18, June 1, 1889; *Kearney County Coyote*, June 1, 8, 1889; *Kearney County Advocate*, October 26, 1889.

41. *Weekly Sentinel*, June 1, 22, 1889; *Garden City Weekly Herald*, August 9, 23, 30, October 4, 1888; *Terry Eye*, October 4, 1888.

42. *Weekly Sentinel*, May 18, 1889; *Garden City Imprint*, November 23, 1889; *Kearney County Advocate*, November 30, 1889; *Garden City Imprint*, June 6, 1891.

43. *Weekly Sentinel and Cultivator*, July 11, 1888.





Construction of the mammoth Eureka irrigation canal in Ford County (left).

During the dry seasons of 1887–1888 northern Finney County farmers relied on the Great Eastern irrigation ditch, which had numerous problems supplying the necessary water. Shown at right are the headgates of the Great Eastern ditch near Garden City.

ton-Hatfield-Terry area, filing a charter on July 31, 1888.<sup>44</sup> Financing or enthusiasm or both were not sufficient, however, and the newspaper coverage of these projects soon ceased.

Farmers also had taken action to pressure the existing ditch companies into providing better service. In June 1888 residents of northern Finney County had decided to “complete a permanent organization the object of which will be to take a united effort in a direction that will lead to a better success in irrigation, also to advance farmers’ interest generally.” The official name was the Farmers Protective Alliance. The organization quickly gained interest in its efforts to straighten out the ditch situation. Seventy members attended the first meeting.<sup>45</sup> The alliance apparently

44. *Hatfield News*, June 27, July 18, 1888. Presumably this was the group officially known as the Farmers Irrigating Canal Company, chartered July 12, 1888, to irrigate lands in Kearny and Finney Counties. See *Corporation Charters*, 32:286, 34:87; *Hatfield News*, April 11, May 9, 1888.

45. *Hatfield News*, June 13, 29, 27, July 4, 1888. The Farmers Protective Alliance apparently was involved with the Peoples Ditch project. The *Hatfield News*, July 25, 1888, noted that the group was getting encouragement on its ditch project. Since the alliance was active west of Hatfield, where the Peoples Ditch was to run, one may assume that the *News*’s reference to the alliance ditch meant the Peoples ditch rather than the Farmers ditch, which was farther south.

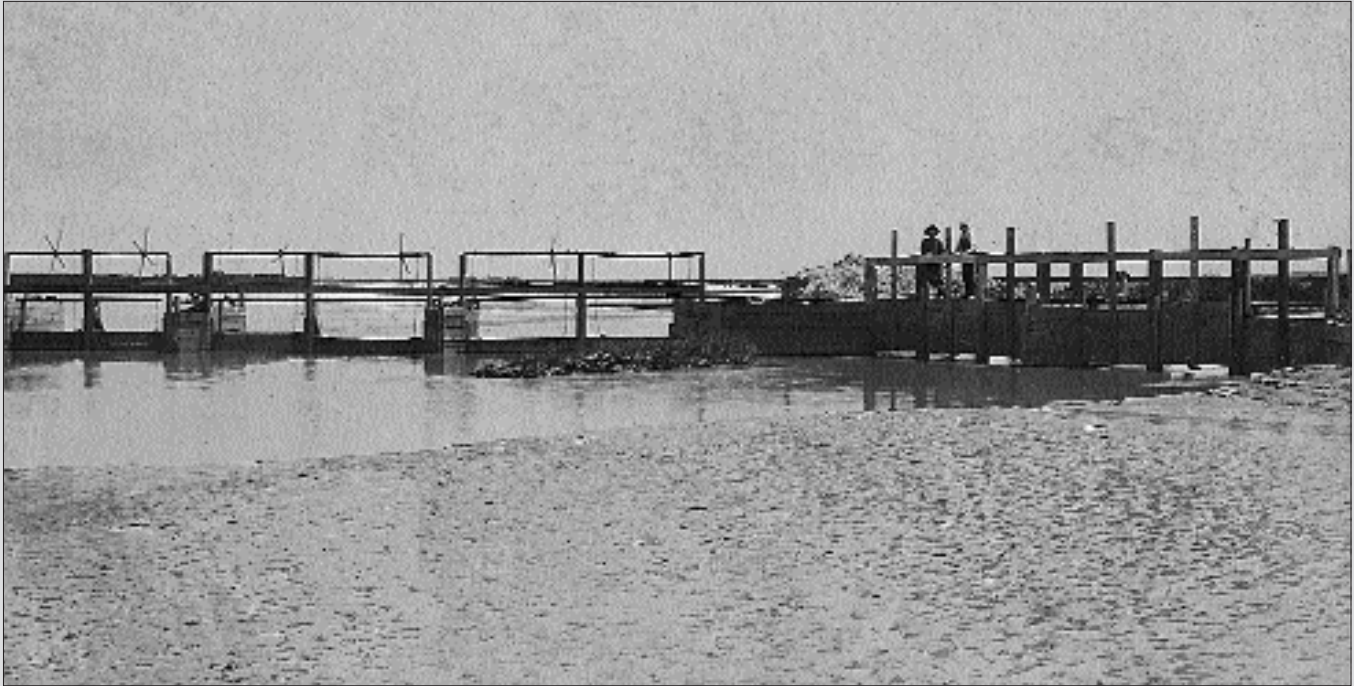
was able to exert some pressure on both the Amazon and the Great Eastern. Due to its criticisms of the Amazon project, the alliance was accused of trying to injure Jones politically. The organization also was able to pressure the Great Eastern to improve service, winning promises from management that specific steps would be taken to improve water supply and regulate its distribution.<sup>46</sup>

*In* Kansas as well as throughout the semiarid West came ever-increasing appeals for federal assistance to develop irrigation facilities. Coverage of the issue in Garden City-area newspapers reflected a larger debate about private enterprise versus government action. Some urged more aggressive encouragement of private investment, since government help, if offered, would be too slow.<sup>47</sup> Some believed that a sure supply of water could never be developed in time to help suffering settlers unless the government aided the effort. Pri-

46. *Hatfield News*, August 22, 1888; *Weekly Sentinel and Cultivator*, July 25, August 23, 1888.

47. *Garden City Imprint*, August 31, 1889; see also Fite, *The Farmers’ Frontier* 1865–1900, 187.





vate development, it was said, would be slow, wasteful, and unsystematic. Private investors would overdevelop some areas and ignore others while taking “the cream of the benefits to be derived and leaving only skim milk for the people.”<sup>48</sup> Those farming in a newly settled area could not afford to wait five or ten years for such uncertain rewards. The government was urged to take action immediately to speed irrigation development.

Increasing requests for federal aid to irrigation led to the formation of a U.S. Senate Committee on the Irrigation and Reclamation of Arid Lands. Committee members took a fact-finding tour through the West in the fall of 1889, and their short stay in the Garden City vicinity stimulated proposals for improving the water supply and funding irrigation systems. The committee’s final recommendations, however, led only to federal funding of investigations into the groundwater supply.<sup>49</sup>

Some citizens of southwest Kansas hoped that state legislation could produce a workable irrigation

system, although others thought that such action would take too long to be of practical effect. Proposals for legislation focused on how to finance and establish irrigation facilities.

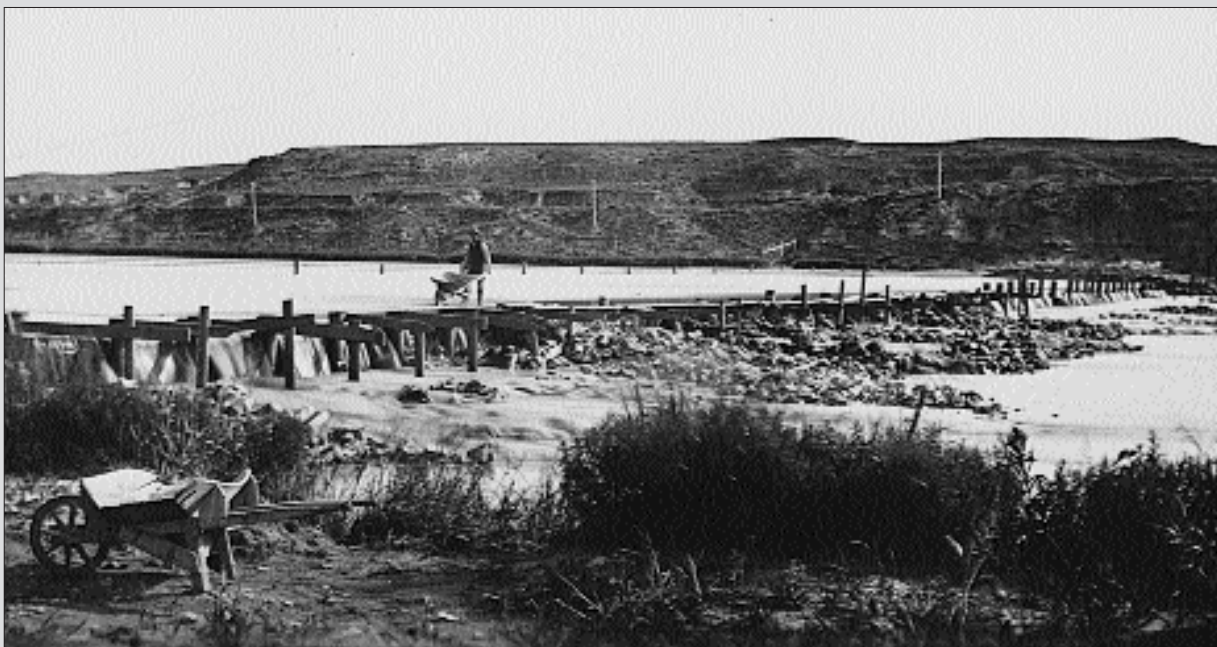
The idea of bonding irrigation works had been discussed during the late 1880s, but at the time state law did not allow township bonding of such projects. Some opposed bonding on the grounds that such financing would result in an unfair distribution of cost since it would tax those who would not benefit directly from the ditches. One writer cited the precedent of a county road system in Indiana to support the suggestion that only the lands benefiting directly from irrigation should be taxed to finance the bonds.<sup>50</sup>

Another suggested alternative for financing ditches was to provide for the formation of irrigation districts. Under such a plan the county could issue bonds to finance the purchase of ditches, which

48. *Weekly Sentinel*, September 14, October 5, 1889.

49. *Kearney County Advocate*, December 7, 1889; Alfred R. Golze, *Reclamation in the United States* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952), 22–23.

50. *Garden City Weekly Herald*, July 19, 1888; *Weekly Sentinel and Cultivator*, July 11, 1888. On township bonding, see *Hatfield News*, August 22, 1888; for farmers’ discussion of the bonding issue, see *Weekly Sentinel*, September 6, 15, 1888.



Like the Eureka Canal, photographed here in ca. 1890, other major canals in the Finney-Kearny County area utilized water from the Arkansas River in their early, and vain, attempts to irrigate southwest Kansas.

would then be managed by a county irrigation board. Taxes would be levied to finance the bonds and keep the ditches in repair.<sup>51</sup> In the wake of rivalries among the Amazon, the Great Eastern, and farmer-initiated ditch companies in northern Finney County, the *Hatfield News* advocated forming a district with the purpose of building or purchasing a ditch to secure a satisfactory water supply for the area. At the newspaper's urging a petition circulated advocating that an irrigation district bill be sent to the legislature. The district system, the *News* declared, was the only way irrigation ever had been successfully conducted, as such a system was directly controlled by law and government, as it ought to be. The *News* urged that bonds issued by the district should be financed by taxing all irrigable lands. This would force nonresident speculators, who held extensive acreage, to give their share in developing the country, so that the burden would not fall solely on farmers and other residents. The idea of taxing irrigable acres, whether or not cultivated, also had been suggested as a compo-

ment of fair legislation by the Farmers Protective Alliance.<sup>52</sup>

Debate continued over whether development of irrigation works would be better left to private capital. The *Weekly Sentinel* appeared to back off the bond idea in late 1889 when it insisted that irrigation works were a sound investment that paid good returns to capitalists. The *Garden City Imprint*, however, continued to advise that the ownership of ditches ought to be turned over to the owners of the land irrigated from those ditches. A relatively comprehensive state irrigation law was passed in 1891, including regulatory measures and provision for financing irrigation works through bonds issued by locally operated irrigation districts.<sup>53</sup>

The people of southwest Kansas did not, however, follow through on the district plan. Several factors contributed to this situation. The market for district bonds remained poor due partly to lack of faith in their stability and partly to generally bad financial

51. *Garden City Weekly Herald*, July 19, 1888.

52. *Garden City Sentinel*, February 16, 1887.

53. *Hatfield News*, January 19, 26, February 9, 1889; *Weekly Sentinel and Cultivator*, July 25, 1888; *Weekly Sentinel*, November 9, 1889; *Kansas Laws* (1891), ch. 133.

conditions beginning in 1893. The legal status of irrigation districts was uncertain until the mid-1890s because of challenges from anti-irrigationists who owned district lands and did not wish to pay taxes to support irrigation. Passage of the district bill also coincided with a change of ownership of most of the ditches in the Garden City area. Patrons may have had a genuine desire to give new owners a chance to better their service before plans were made to implement an alternative irrigation system.

Enthusiasm for districts, and irrigation in general, also was dampened by more favorable weather in the immediate area. The *Lakin Index*, referring to failed efforts to establish districts during the comparatively wet year of 1892, stated that “the matter is not exciting much attention, as it is only in dry weather that we look upon irrigation with great favor as an indispensable necessity.”<sup>54</sup>

Federal groundwater investigations and the new state irrigation law did not result in the short-term relief that farmers so desperately needed. For all the

talk of legislation and farmer-operated projects, pressure for the immediate creation of usable irrigation facilities favored a continuation of privately owned ditch corporations. In fact, the immediate reaction in the region was largely what it had been in the 1880s—to rely on private investment to establish irrigation facilities and hope for climate change that would make irrigation unnecessary.

Despite some private efforts to promote use of groundwater resources, irrigation projects generally went into sharp decline until after the turn of the century. Speculative development had proven to be incompatible with the farmers' need for stability, security, and reliability in water supply. Yet the farmers themselves were unwilling to invest time and money toward irrigation projects that they continued to hope were not actually necessary. For the moment the promises of early irrigation failed to materialize, and southwest Kansas remained “a grave-yard of hopes.”<sup>55</sup>



54. *Lakin Index*, May 21, 1892.

55. The phrase “a grave-yard of hopes” is used to describe the region in a later article about a U.S. Reclamation Service irrigation project in Garden City. See Anne Hard, “The Waters Under the Earth,” *Technical World Magazine* 2 (April 1909): 127–36.