

Building Bridges Within Our Communities: The Face of Kansas

Mary Remboldt Gage

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This article is intended to help the reader understand the diversity within Kansas communities as a stepping stone to building bridges among the different groups populating our towns and cities. As you read this article, take time for personal reflection on your own history and environment with such questions as: When did your ancestors come to this part of the world? Why did they come? Where did they work/worship when they arrived? A teaching guide also is available to accompany this fact sheet for those who would like to have related group discussions within community organizations. Contact your local K-State Research and Extension office for more information.

Kansas may not appear to be a melting pot of cultures to some, but our rich heritage and modern mix of cultures attest to a vibrant, expanding ethnicity. Shaped early on by immigrants from places like Germany, Russia, and Scandinavia, Kansas' communities continue to be influenced by diverse peoples from around the world.

Kansas' unique heritage can be traced back almost five centuries to the days of the early Spanish explorers. At that time, the American Indian tribes indigenous to the area were the Pawnee, Kansa, and Osage in the east, and the Cheyenne, Arapaho,

Wichita, Kiowa, and Commanche in the central and west. In the early 1800s, most of these groups were displaced by tribes from the east that had been relocated by the U.S. government.

By the first part of the 19th century, the Ottawa, Potawatomi, Shawnee, Delaware, Wyandot, Chippewa, and Miami were among the tribes living in the Kansas Territory. These American Indians, and others that lived in the state, left a lasting legacy evident in names for towns, counties, landmarks, streams, and streets, not to mention the state itself.

Participant Handout

Today, only the Iowa, Sac and Fox, Kickapoo, and Potawatomi tribes hold reservation lands in Kansas' northeastern region. The American Indian presence, however, is an enduring influence throughout the state in the form of celebratory powwows, arts and craft shows, casinos, museums such as the Mid-America All-Indian Center in Wichita and the Native American Heritage Museum State Historic Site in Highland, and institutions like Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence.

Before the 1850s, settlers trickled into Kansas along the Santa Fe and Oregon trails and around military forts. Once territorial status was granted in 1854, immigrants began to flood the state.

"In the decades after the Civil War, Kansas attracted more settlers than any other state in the country," said James R. "Pete" Shortridge, Ph.D., author of *Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas* (University Press of Kansas). The fertile soil of the plains, along with the enticement of the Homestead Act, contributed to what journalists of the time called "Kansas fever."

"Today," said Shortridge, "immigrants come to urban and agribusiness areas where there are job opportunities. They're also attracted to college towns and military bases, like Leavenworth and Junction City, where international communities have developed."

The following sketch of Kansas'

ethnic heritage and modern ethnic makeup is an effort to highlight the immigrant groups whose presence continues to make an impression on the character of Kansas.

Northeast Kansas

German, Irish, and English settlers were among the largest groups of foreign immigrants in the first decade of settlement. Although they often clustered in the major urban areas of the time — Leavenworth, Atchison, and Lawrence — they also were founding members of many new townships.

German groups founded Eudora and Alma in 1857. Alma's Mill Creek Valley area became a magnet for subsequent German groups in Wabaunsee and nearby counties. The Irish, as well as the German Catholics, spread out from Atchison and Doniphan as the Catholic parishes expanded across that part of the state. The beautiful limestone buildings seen in Alma today are a legacy to those skilled German stonemasons who settled there.

Toward the close of the 19th century, Eastern Europeans were drawn to jobs at factories, stockyards, and meatpacking plants in Wyandotte County. Today, the Strawberry Hill Museum and its adjacent area in Kansas City serve as a cultural center for those of Slavic heritage.

"The museum hosts events throughout the year honoring the various groups," said Adrienne Nastav, a Strawberry Hill Museum board

member. “We also have permanent exhibits, and display artwork by local artists Marijan Grisnik and Ernst Ulmer.” The area also is home to numerous churches representing a multitude of ethnicities, and the origin of Strawberry Hill Povitica Company, a bakery producing traditional Eastern European bread.

The first large influx into Northeast Kansas of immigrants from Mexico started in the early 1900s when the Santa Fe railroad, began recruiting efforts. Groups settled along the lines of the railroad and communities developed in Kansas City, Topeka, and Wichita. Opportunities in subsequent years have drawn more Mexican immigrants to the state, many settling in and revitalizing the older neighborhoods.

Traditional churches, such as Our Lady of Guadalupe in Topeka, and vibrant fiestas throughout Kansas reflect the state’s rich and ongoing connection to Mexico.

Southeast Kansas

European settlement was scattered in southeast Kansas during the territorial years. One place of significance, however, was the German settlement of Humboldt in Allen County.

A large number of foreign immigrants arrived in the mid-1870s when the coal mines opened in the Pittsburg area. Work in the mines attracted immigrants from Germany, Ireland, and Britain at the outset. As the coalfields continued to develop

through the early 1900s, they enticed workers from Italy, Slovenia, France, Belgium, and Austria.

Black Americans were drawn to Kansas as a safe haven prior to, during, and after the Civil War. In the 1870s, black leaders were attracted to the affordable land in the southeast corner of Kansas and established several colonies in the area. Spurred by the “Exoduster” movement, thousands of blacks followed. By 1885, Baxter Springs, Parsons, Oswego, and others had significant black populations.

Many African-Americans in the 20th century, reflecting the worldwide trend, have migrated to urban areas. In southeast Kansas, small black populations can still be found in Montgomery and Labette counties. However, it is just to the west in Wichita, the state’s largest city, where a notable African-American population is apparent. Here, the Black Arts Festival and the Kansas African-American Museum celebrate that ethnicity.

Mexican immigration began in the southeast, as in the northeast, in the early 1900s. The sugar beet industry and the railroad attracted laborers. (In) September, Chanute will celebrate its ... annual Mexican Fiesta — one of the longest running in the state. Today, evidence of the region’s ethnic heritage can be found in the presence of the Italian bakery in Frontenac, McCarthy’s Irish pub in Pittsburg, Mexican restaurants throughout the area, and the Little

Balkans Days Festival on Labor Day weekend in Pittsburg.

"We hope to have 'Taste of the Nations' set up at this year's (Little Balkans) festival," said Pam Henderson from the Crawford County Convention and Visitor's Bureau.

"It's a tasting area where you can try traditional foods from the different ethnic groups. Also, Immigrant Park is under construction. It will have a permanent pavilion honoring the immigrants who came to the region to work at the mines."

Central Kansas

Several towns and regions in central Kansas retain a distinct ethnicity that began in part by one of the first successful direct advertising campaigns conducted by the railroad. Because immigrants commonly came to the area in large groups, often from the same village or province, railroad agents pursued immigrants of particular countries and backgrounds based on their perceived ability as farmers. As a result, productive information, continent-to-continent support structures, and personal visits by promotional agents were abundant in such locations as Germany and Russia. Sweden, Norway, England, Scotland, and Bohemia also were targeted.

Some Kansas counties emerged as vigorous centers for specific groups so that even today, they still retain strong ethnic characteristics. Lindsborg, well known today as "Little Sweden, U.S.A." became so famous

in Sweden during the 19th century that thousands from that country were drawn to Kansas. Swedish was spoken in Lindsborg well into the 20th century, and churches, schools, and a college were established in the Swedish tradition.

In recent decades, Lindsborg began to promote its Swedishness. Visitors now attend one of several annual festivals, shop in quaint Scandinavian-style downtown, view traditional artworks and craftsmen, and eat food such as lutefisk smorgasbord style.

The largest of the European groups to settle in central Kansas were the Russian-Germans. These immigrants were actually two distinct groups, the Volga Germans and the Mennonite Black Sea Germans, and they clustered their settlements in different parts of the state.

The Volga Germans came in strength to Ellis and Rush counties populating Hays, Pfieffer, Catharine, and Alexander, among others. Vestiges of this culture can be found in the magnificent churches of the area, such as St. Fidelis "Cathedral of the Plains" in Victoria, in the Oktoberfest events, and in sites like the Center for Ethnic Studies at Fort Hays State University, where visitors come from as far away as Germany to research family history.

The German Mennonite groups — who were mainly from Russia, but also from Switzerland, France, and the U.S. — settled to the east and south of the Volga group, most notably in McPherson, Reno, Marion,

Harvey, and Butler counties. The Mennonites are well known for their agricultural tradition. This heritage is interpreted and preserved today in the Mennonite Heritage Museum in Goessel and the award-winning exhibit “Of Land and People” at the Kauffman Museum in North Newton.

“Our newest addition,” said Rachel Pannabecker, director of the Kauffman Museum, “is a permanent installation of Mennonite immigrant furniture as part of the Save America’s Treasures collection.”

Other notable groups in central Kansas include the Bohemians in Ellsworth County who celebrate an annual After Harvest Czech Festival in Wilson each July; the English in Clay County who founded the towns of Wakefield, Athelstane, and Exeter; the Irish at Chapman Creek; and the French Canadians in the Concordia area.

Since the 1920s, new immigrants to the area have come from Greece, India, Southeast Asia, and Mexico, and have settled almost exclusively in urban areas. Salina celebrates diversity in the Ethnic Festival in May, and the World Festival happens in Arkansas City in September.

In Wichita, a variety of ethnic restaurants dot the city, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce provides services for current and aspiring entrepreneurs, and the Asian Festival is in October.

“Our Hispanic population has grown tremendously in the last 10 years, and has become one of the

cornerstones of our community,” said Jessica Johnson, City of Wichita marketing director. “They have developed an international marketplace in the northeast quadrant of the city where there is a concentration of Hispanic businesses. You can go there for all the tastes of Mexico, and for traditional clothing for special occasions like weddings or baptisms.

“Wichita also has very active Asian and African-American populations. In fact, the Kansas African-American Museum here is working to secure the Gordon Parks library, and the Lebanese and Greeks who came a generation or two ago are now some of the movers and shakers with many restaurants, construction companies, and shopping malls. We’re a very diverse city, and we’re proud of that.”

Northwest Kansas

Immigration to Kansas already had begun to slow by the time the frontier reached western Kansas. That, in combination with a series of drought years and the natural aridity of the region, kept all but the bravest or most optimistic at bay. Still, there were areas where the Germans, Scandinavians, Russian-Germans, and other groups made an impression.

Cheyenne County, Kansas’ northwestern corner, saw a concentration of both German and Russian-German settlers. Russian-Germans also settled in parts of Gove County near Park and Oakley. Swedish settlers came to neighboring Logan

County and founded the town of Page. They also pushed west into Wallace and Greeley counties, establishing Sharon Springs in the former.

On the Graham and Rooks county lines are two unique communities within a few miles of one another. The first, Nicodemus, established in 1877, is the last surviving African-American pioneer settlement west of the Mississippi. With a population of nearly 700, two newspapers, three churches, and an ice cream parlor at its height, the town is now home to about 20 permanent residents. In 1996, it was designated a National Historic Site, and each July is host to the annual "Emancipation and Homecoming" festival.

Damar, a few miles to the south of Nicodemus in Rooks County, became known as the "Acadia of the West." The stream of French-Canadians who settled the town gave it a decidedly French character, and their impressive Romanesque-style St. Joseph's church is one of the town's highlights.

Southwest Kansas

The southwest part of the state was, and still is, dominated by the cattle business. Early on, settlers came mostly from Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee. European settlement here was light, but still found in a few pockets. A small German contingent settled in Meade County, and Russian-German Mennonites settled parts of Haskell, Gray, Meade, and Scott counties. The Russian-Germans also were several hundred strong in the

Garden City area, lured there by the sugar beet business.

New waves of Russian-German Mennonites are some of Kansas' most recent immigrants, albeit from Mexico. Groups originally settled in Canada in the late 19th century and left there around 1920 to pursue agricultural opportunities in Mexico. Now their descendants, who have retained German as their language, seek jobs in Southwest Kansas and comprise some two-thirds of new agricultural laborers.

They find familiar tastes at Iris' Country Kitchen in Ulysses or Copeland Café in Copeland — establishments that advertise Mennonite-style cooking and baked goods.

In the early 1900s, Mexican immigrants began arriving to work for the railroad and the sugar beet industry.

Immigration from Mexico has been steady to the southwest part of the state as continued demand arises for laborers in the agricultural arena. Southwestern Kansas often reflects the character of the greater Southwest with its Spanish echoes, abundance of Mexican restaurants, and the Cinco de Mayo celebrations.

Garden City, often regarded as the center of the Mexican-American community in southwest Kansas, absorbed one of the state's recent large immigrant groups in the early 1980s when thousands of Southeast Asians arrived to work in the area's meatpacking plants. Vietnamese

restaurants and grocery stores, as well as other Asian-owned businesses, lend this city on the plains a surprisingly international air.

"The history of Southwest Kansas is a story about immigrants," said Penney Schwab, director of the United Methodist Mexican-American Ministries. "We see that evolving even now, and continue to see people from all parts of the world. They come in almost every case for work — we simply don't have the kind of labor pool in Southwest Kansas that would allow economic expansion without immigrants. I think we are gaining some of our most productive and highly contributing citizens through immigration."

Indeed, the ministries' six offices in the region serve immigrants from all backgrounds, and Schwab's staff includes Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, and German translators.

"One last thing," Schwab said, "if you want to eat really well, come to Southwest Kansas. We have any number of excellent Chinese,

Vietnamese, Mexican, even Salvadoran and Guatemalan restaurants here."

And Kansas continues to welcome immigrants. In the last decade or so, the Hispanic and Asian populations have increased by several thousand. At the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Dr. Asma Zaidi is a professor of biochemistry from India.

"We heard this was a good place to raise children with a good academic environment," she said. Nine years later, Zaidi and her family continue to enjoy the quality of life they've found in Kansas.

This handout is part of the *Building Bridges Within Our Communities* lesson. The Leader's Guide is MF2722; the participant survey is MF2722a.

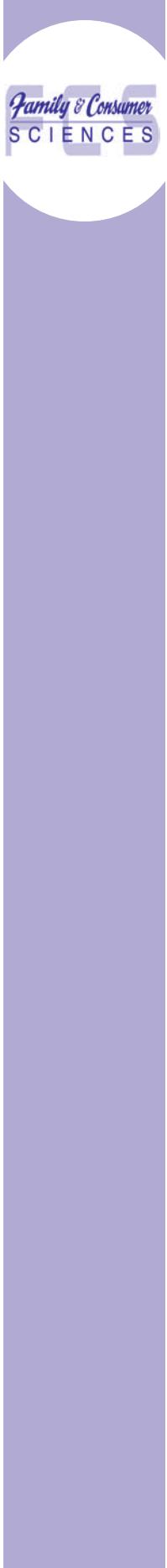
Lesson prepared by:

Carol H. Young

Charlotte Shoup Olsen

Department of Family Studies and Human Services,
Kansas State University





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