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Article Summary: Pioneer Sheridan County farmers claimed Box Butte Tableland acreage in preference to Sandhills land. Drought and economic depression caused many of those Tableland settlers to give up on farming and relinquish their claims. By 1900 livestock grazing had become a prominent activity in both areas of the county.

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Names: Gouverneur K Warren, W B Lawson, T E Calvert

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Photographs / Images: Fig 1: outline map showing the position of Southwestern Sheridan County; Fig 2: land types in Southwestern Sheridan County; Fig 3: status of land entries in Southwestern Sheridan County, 1892 and 1899; Table I: changes in acreage under entry and patented acreage in Southwestern Sheridan County, 1892-1899; Fig 4: population distribution in Southwestern Sheridan County, 1890 and 1900; Fig 5: farms and ranches in Southwestern Sheridan County, 1899

ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION AND GEOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN SOUTHWEST SHERIDAN COUNTY

By MARSHALL BOWEN

THE STORY of exploration, settlement, adjustment, change, and disruption in the Nebraska Panhandle and adjacent Sandhills has been a favorite theme of historians and other investigators.¹ Strangely, relatively little attention has been paid to the geographic impact of men's differing reactions to the varied environment of northwestern Nebraska. In view of this gap, and in the light of scholars' increasing attention to environmental perception,² this paper focuses on changes in men's attitudes toward the usability of land where the Sandhills and the Box Butte Tableland meet in southwestern Sheridan County.

This area, consisting of Ranges 45 and 46 between the Niobrara River and the county's southern border, is a tract of approximately 400 square miles, of which nearly 60 percent is in the Sandhills and about 40 percent is on Box Butte Tableland (Figs. 1 and 2). The former consists of hummocky, steep-sided dunes loosely clothed with clumps of shin-high bunch grass. They surround flat-bottomed basins that in most cases contain shallow lakes—often saline—and marshy areas that are surficial expressions of a water table that is seldom more than a dozen feet beneath the basin floor. Reeds, rushes, and dense stands of heavy meadow grass and bunch grasses spread across the surface of most depressions. Seen from the air, the green, lake-dotted depressions provide a vivid contrast to the choppy, dun-colored dunes whose surfaces are here and there pockmarked by "blowouts" of loose, shifting sands.

West of the Sandhills, Box Butte Tableland is a flat to gently rolling short grass upland that is broken by a narrow ribbon of moist meadowland paralleling intermittent Box Butte Creek from the Sheridan-Box Butte

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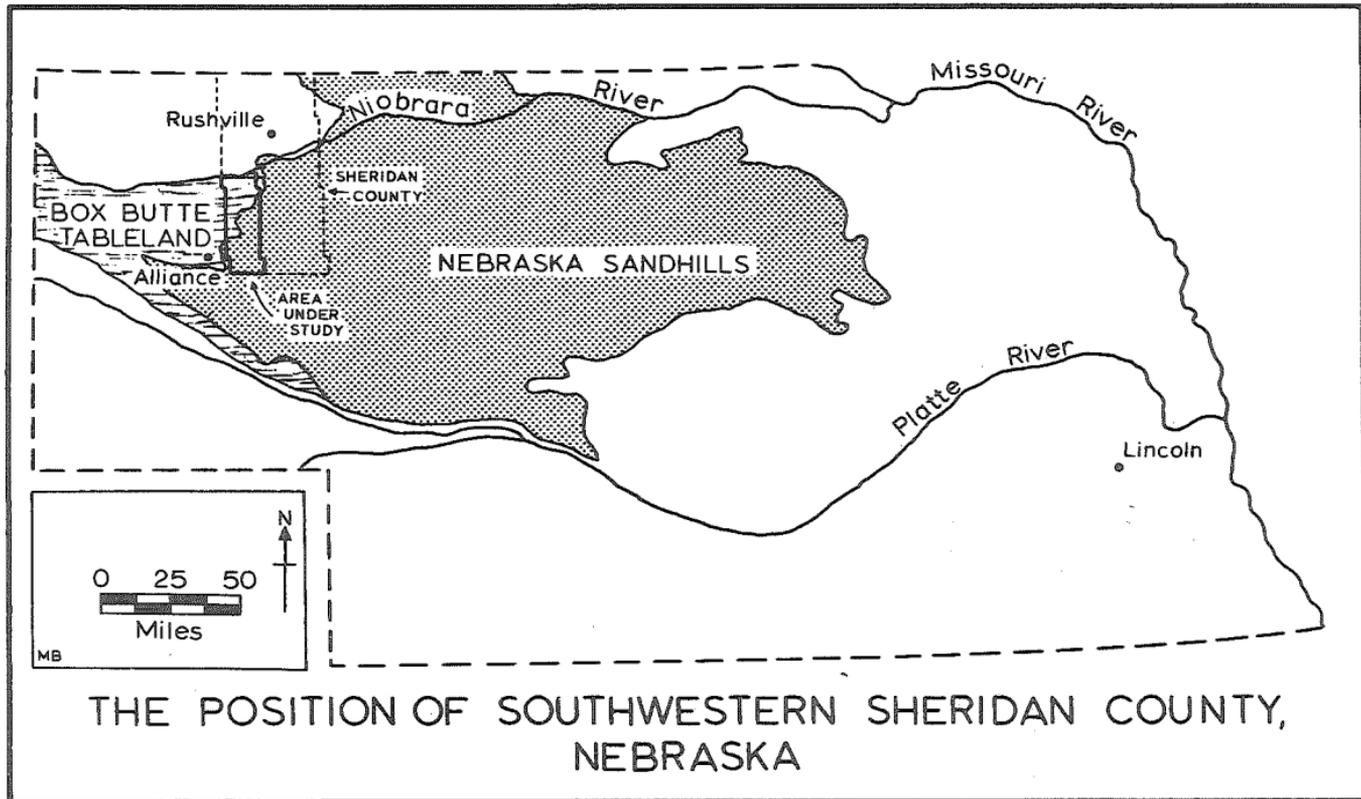


Figure 1.

County line to the Niobrara, where another strip of meadow and scattered cottonwoods mark the tableland's northern margin. Soils on the Box Butte Tableland in Sheridan County range from a variety of generally fertile loams of the Rosebud series near Box Butte Creek and the Niobrara, to potentially less productive Valentine sandy loams, loamy sands, and sands close to the western fringe of the Sandhills. The dunes themselves are merely piles of virtually sterile sands, while in the basins between them a variety of sands and soils resembling muck are poor for crop-raising but support lush growths of native hay.

The entire area under study experiences a cool semi-arid climate. Average annual precipitation figures for stations near southwestern Sheridan County average from 14 to 19 inches, but unreliability of rainfall characterizes the long-range pattern. For example, Hay Springs, some 15 miles north of the Niobrara, has experienced as much as 29 inches and as few as 10 inches of precipitation in a single year, while for Alliance, just west of the study area, annual precipitation totals have varied from 9 to 31 inches.

White men's earliest recorded opinions about the usability of land in southwestern Sheridan County for settlement, farming, or grazing were far from uniform. In general they praised the quality of Box Butte Tableland and slighted the Sandhills. Lieutenant Gouverneur K. Warren, exploring the dune country east of Sheridan County in 1855 and 1857, described the Sandhills as "exceedingly solitary, silent, desolate, and depressing to one's spirits."³ To him they were just an area of "barren sand . . . blown by the wind into high hills," and dotted with "lakes of water which we found are impregnated with salts and unfit to drink."⁴ That he encountered higher dunes, worse travelling conditions, and more unpotable water as he moved westward, did nothing to raise his esteem for the westernmost Sandhills.

Surveyors crisscrossing southwestern Sheridan County in 1879-1880 did not find the Sandhills as objectionable as Warren thought they would be. The man in charge of surveying almost all of the Sandhills portion of southwestern Sheridan County concluded that in some places "the surface is good with wide rich valley's" [*sic*], there was "good 2nd rate soil in the uplands and 1st rate in the valleys," and an entire township was considered "well adapted to agricultural and grazing purposes."⁵ A map published in 1885, presumably based on reports such as these, included the words, "Rich loams, Abounding in Fertile Valleys" strung out across the Sandhills of southwestern Sheridan County.⁶

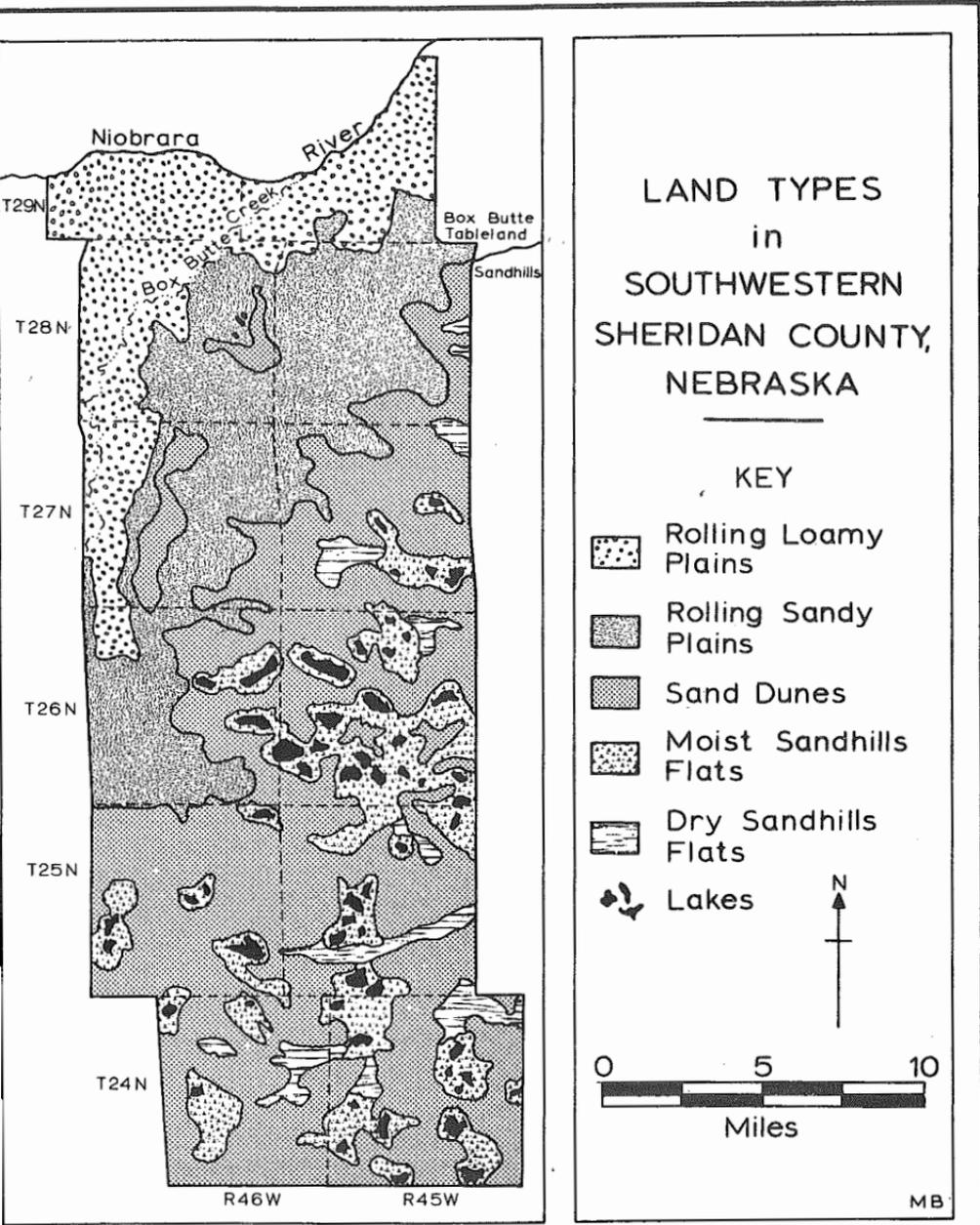


Figure 2.

However, when men penetrated this part of the Sandhills and were faced with practical problems of actual settlement or construction of a rail line, they found that the steep hummocks and soggy basins had about as much appeal for them as the dunes farther east had had for Warren. W. B. Lawson, commissioned by the Burlington railroad to report on the feasibility of building a line across the Sandhills, wrote that the region was

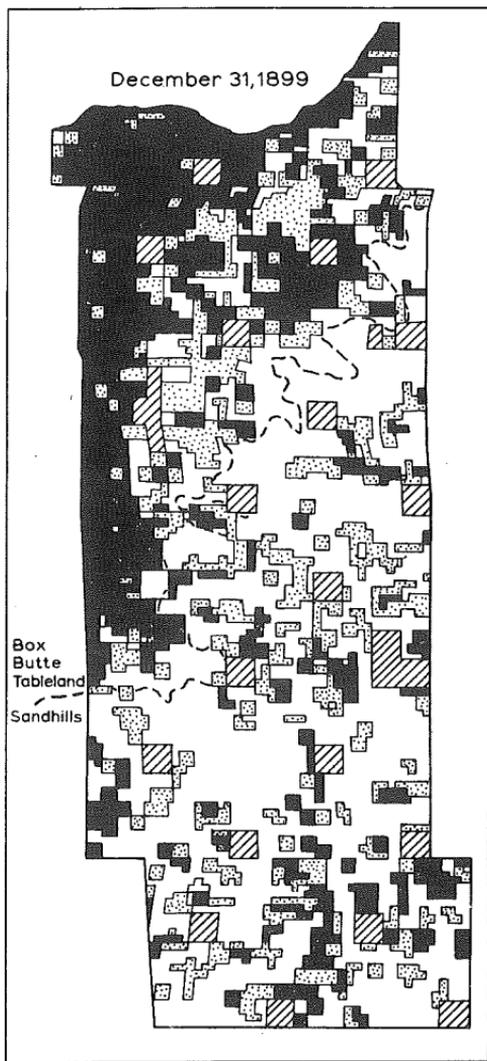
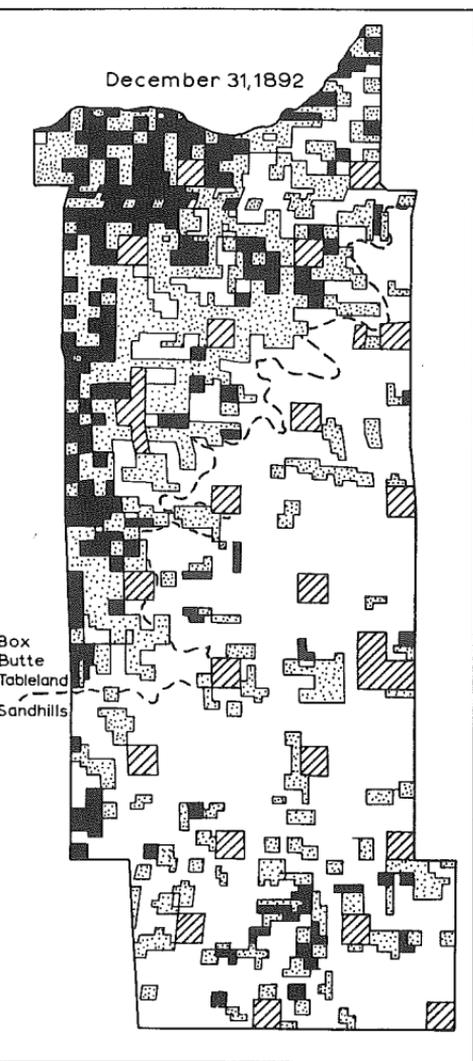
an endless and dreary succession of white-topped, wind-riven hills and ridges of tiresome sand, heaped up and piled and scooped out and re-heaped and piled, with no apparent system or order, over and over again, until apparently the wind itself became bewildered and whirling round and round, scooped out the hill sides and tops into all manner of shaped holes and pits, without regard to shape or position or depth or size.⁷

Lawson did find a number of basins in the far southwestern corner of Sheridan County that he felt would "yield some hay and afford good winter pasture,"⁸ but this benign aspect was offset by a number of mid-basin lakes "of alkaline water, usually dry by August, with coarse grass and rushes around it, and flies and mosquitoes that outweigh any number of Texas steers in a square fight."⁹

Three years later T. E. Calvert, sent by the Burlington on a mission similar to Lawson's, echoed his predecessor's sentiments. Around the lakes, he observed, "the mosquitoes are so bad that I think it impracticable to grade it [the proposed railroad bed] except in the fall or spring. Stock could not be held, and I do not think men would work there in the summer."¹⁰

Furthermore, he alleged, it would be impossible "to winter cattle successfully in that country because of changes in grass. It grows rank and furnishes good grass in summer, but dies and does not cure for winter, on account of the change in rain fall."¹¹

Farmers from eastern Nebraska and Iowa found nothing in the westernmost Sandhills to encourage their settlement there. Familiar with more level land which received more rainfall and had rich, black soil, they decided that this dune country, whose outermost fringe contained a number of tracts of loose, blowing sand, was "worthless, of no use to them."¹² A schoolteacher from Rushville, the county seat, probably consolidated sentiment against the southwestern Sheridan County Sandhills when he reported in a local newspaper that he became lost during an 11-day holiday trip in a maze of soggy basins north of present Antioch



STATUS OF LAND ENTRIES IN SOUTHWESTERN SHERIDAN COUNTY, NEBRASKA, 1892 and 1899

Entered and Patented
 Entered but not yet Patented

Not Entered

Not Subject to Entry



Source: General Land Office
Tract Books.

MB

Figure 3.

before resuming his journey in drier, attractive, more regularly-aligned dune and valley country in the southeastern part of the county. ¹³

In contrast, the men who penetrated or crossed the Sheridan County portion of the Box Butte Tableland wrote of its genuine attractiveness for agricultural settlement. One surveyor commented that along Box Butte Creek the land was "rolling; Soil good 2nd rate." ¹⁴ From here to the Niobrara the surveyors classed most land as "first rate" or, occasionally, "good 2nd rate." ¹⁵ Between Box Butte Creek and the Sandhills the bulk of the soil was judged as "2nd rate," but the land in general was thought of as being "well adapted to grazing and agriculture." ¹⁶

A man from Rushville who travelled to the Box Butte Creek area wrote that the land had "inviting and attractive scenery—a country which consists principally of beautiful valleys and extensive table lands which produce an abundance of excellent grasses." ¹⁷ He was especially taken by a depression containing three small lakes, located between the creek and the Sandhills. Here, he attested, "The soil . . . of dark sandy loam, is very fertile, and contains sufficient moisture to produce big crops of hay. Much of the valley appears to be well adapted to the production of vegetables, corn, wheat, oats, rye, and other cereals." ¹⁸

Finally, Calvert, who had a relatively low regard for the Sandhills, concluded that all of Box Butte Tableland in Sheridan County was "good country . . . very fine agricultural country. . . The soil looks good and . . . it lays beautifully." ¹⁹

By 1887 enough men had evaluated southwestern Sheridan County's land and had written their opinions about its worth to make it clear that in most people's minds the Box Butte Tableland was good enough for agricultural settlement but the adjacent Sandhills were not. This view was expressed most clearly in a newspaper account of activities in one township (T28 R45) straddling the tableland-dune country border, where the editor of the *Rushville Standard* asserted that there was "considerable good land. . . . Probably about half of this township will make good farming land." ²⁰

In view of the regard that men had for the different land types in southwestern Sheridan County, it is not surprising that when the tide of settlement reached northwestern Nebraska, the Sandhills were largely avoided, while pioneer farmers quickly took land on Box Butte Tableland. The first claims (1884-1886) were made near the Niobrara and along Box Butte Creek, but by 1890 most of the sandy tableland was under entry. By

the end of 1892 almost three-quarters of all claims, including those already patented in southwestern Sheridan County, had been filed on land west of the Sandhills (Table 1 and Fig. 3, left). Only a shade over 20,000 acres had been filed on, and a mere 6½ square miles (26 quarter sections) had been patented in the 230 square miles of dunes and basins of the southwestern Sheridan County Sandhills.²¹ Most Sandhill claims were on basin land in the southernmost tier of townships across which the Burlington tracks had been laid in 1888.

TABLE I

CHANGES IN ACREAGE UNDER ENTRY AND PATENTED ACREAGE
IN SOUTHWESTERN SHERIDAN COUNTY, 1892 - 1899^a

	December 31, 1892			December 31, 1899		
	Entered, Not Yet Patented	Entered and Patented	Total Under Entry	Entered, Not Yet Patented	Entered and Patented	Total Under Entry
Box Butte						
Tableland	45,720	22,560	68,280	18,160	51,040	69,200
Sandhills	20,160	4,160	24,320	37,080	17,520	54,600

^aCalculated from lists of entries and patents in General Land Office Tract Books on file at Bureau of Land Management, Silver Spring, Maryland.

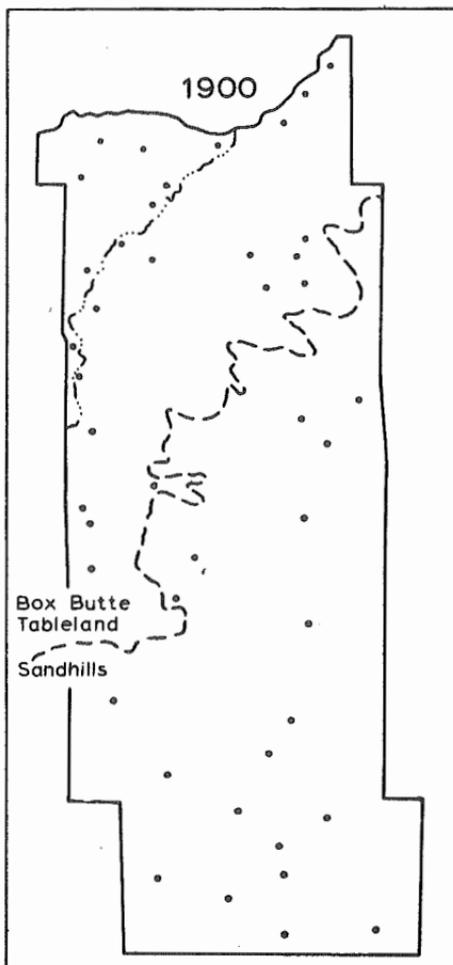
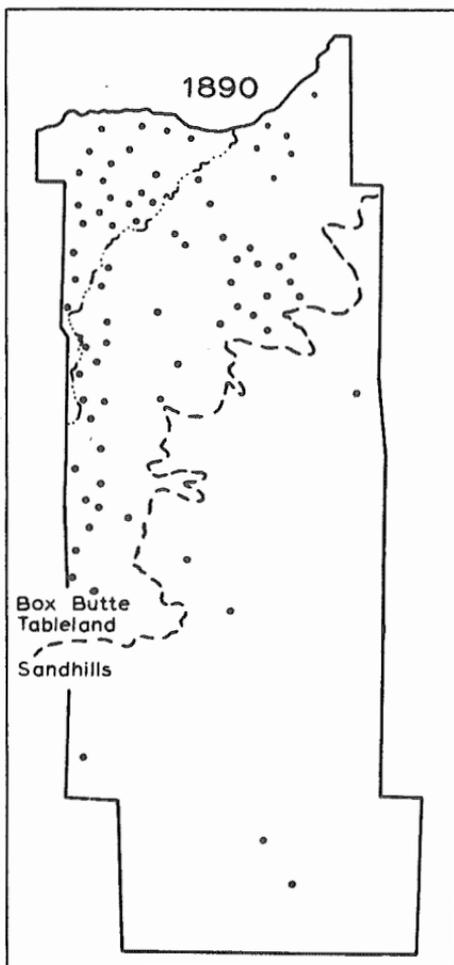
Population distribution in 1890 reflected settlers' decisions to take land on the tableland and avoid the Sandhills (Fig. 4, left). Of the 750 people living in southwestern Sheridan County in 1890, fully 90 percent of them made their homes on Box Butte Tableland. Only a handful of intrepid Sandhillers lived among the dunes.²²

The bulk of the settlers on Box Butte Tableland attempted to emulate farming systems that had been successful farther east. As early as 1885 the direction in which initial land use practices was heading could be identified. Of the ten men known to have established homes on Sheridan County's share of Box Butte Tableland by late June, 1885, nine were identified as "farmers" and only one was termed a "stock raiser." All of the men had broken some sod, and half of them were tilling 10 acres or more. Six of them owned horses, four kept poultry, but only one—the "stock raiser"—had any cattle.²³ Sod corn was usually the first crop

planted, followed by a variety of garden vegetables. Eventually the tableland farmers put in some spring wheat, and when they obtained some cash from this crop they purchased a dairy cow or two, a few hogs, and gathered together a flock of poultry.²⁴ In the late 1880's and early 1890's farming based upon production of corn, wheat, oats, and barnyard livestock gained a strong foothold on Box Butte Tableland.²⁵ One man who homesteaded on a tract of loamy sand about three miles northwest of the Sandhills in 1886 recalled years later that he plowed up ten acres in the first year, "got fair crops, and . . . got nicely started."²⁶ Closer to Box Butte Creek another farmer raised 1,000 bushels of corn in 1890 and sold the crop for 70 cents a bushel.²⁷ There is no reason to believe that agriculture elsewhere on Box Butte Tableland was very different from that in other farming sections of Sheridan County, where in 1890 corn and wheat vied for first place in crop acreage, and barnyard livestock outnumbered range cattle.²⁸ For farmers firm in the belief that they could establish a pattern of agriculture similar to that in Iowa and eastern Nebraska, these were, as one old-timer has written, "The Years of Promise."²⁹

Meanwhile, the southwestern Sheridan County Sandhills, still nearly vacant, contained just a few cattle ranchers. Some of these men had become acquainted with the area while working on Burlington track-laying crews, and when the job was completed they claimed a quarter-section tract and invested their earnings in cattle, which were fed hay from homesteaded meadows and grazed the surrounding public domain.³⁰ Despite their success, they were definitely still in the minority in southwestern Sheridan County. The continuing emptiness of the Sandhills domain is illustrated by one rancher's recollection that in 1888 there was only one other house between his home and Whitman, some 60 miles to the east.³¹

Then, in 1893 people who thought that southwestern Sheridan County's population and land use patterns were set were confounded when drought and depression struck simultaneously. Rainfall at Hay Springs, which had been 27.84 inches in 1892, dropped to 11.71 inches in 1893. In the latter year less than an inch of rain fell in May, which is ordinarily the wettest month. In 1894 just 12.99 inches were recorded, and in 1895 totals crept up to only 15.69 inches. Until 1901 there was only one year (1897) when total annual precipitation exceeded the long-term average. To the southwest at Alliance incomplete records suggest that from 1892 until the twentieth century there was no year when annual rainfall exceeded 15.5 inches; in only two years was annual precipitation



POPULATION DISTRIBUTION IN
SOUTHWESTERN SHERIDAN COUNTY,
NEBRASKA,
1890 and 1900

Each Dot Represents 10 Persons



Source: U.S. Census, 1890 and 1900

MB

Figure 4.

more than 13.5 inches.³² Crops which had been so promising failed to reach maturity.³³ On one farm, for example, a man's "crops failed so that he was not able to get enough from them to pay for having it threshed, and not enough to feed his stock."³⁴ A neighbor's crop failure was so complete that the family managed to survive on the homestead only through income that the settler earned while working for transient harvest crews farther east.³⁵

The effects of drought were accentuated by a nationwide depression. In the United States as a whole more than 800 banks failed, 20 percent of the nation's work force became unemployed, and prices paid for farm products dropped by about 20 percent from 1892 to 1896.³⁶ Sheridan County tableland farmers, their crop-livestock systems barely stabilized after initial pioneering efforts, were especially hard-hit. The price of a bushel of wheat, which had been 85 cents in 1888 and had approached a dollar in 1890, plummeted to 35 cents in 1893, and was still only 54 cents in the fall of 1896.³⁷ Corn brought only 26 cents a bushel in 1896, and the price of hogs dipped from over \$8.00 to about \$3.50 cwt.³⁸ It was hardly worth the effort for farmers to try to raise a crop or fatten some hogs.

Faced with such dire circumstances, it is understandable that weary, disenchanted farmers gave vent to their frustrations. From 1893 through 1899 nine persons were charged with murder in Sheridan County, compared to one in the previous five years and four from 1900 and 1910.³⁹ During the same period forty-one persons were committed to institutions due to insanity, in contrast to a mere twenty-nine for the entire first decade of the twentieth century.⁴⁰ Over 500 foreclosures were recorded in Sheridan County from 1893 through 1899, six times the number registered for the next ten years.⁴¹ An index of failure and frustration on Box Butte Tableland alone is found in delinquent tax reports. In 1895 only one other unit in all of extensive Sheridan County had more property with taxes unpaid on it than Box Butte Precinct, where taxes were delinquent on 62 percent of the acreage patented by the time.⁴² A year later taxes on a shade over two-thirds of the patented land in a highly-regarded township (T28 R46) astride Box Butte Creek were delinquent.⁴³

Unpaid taxes not only reflect the difficulty that struggling farmers had in raising money, but also hint at the dimensions of land abandonment from the Box Butte Tableland. One man and his family were reduced to a diet of corn meal, bread, milk, and whatever game he could shoot before

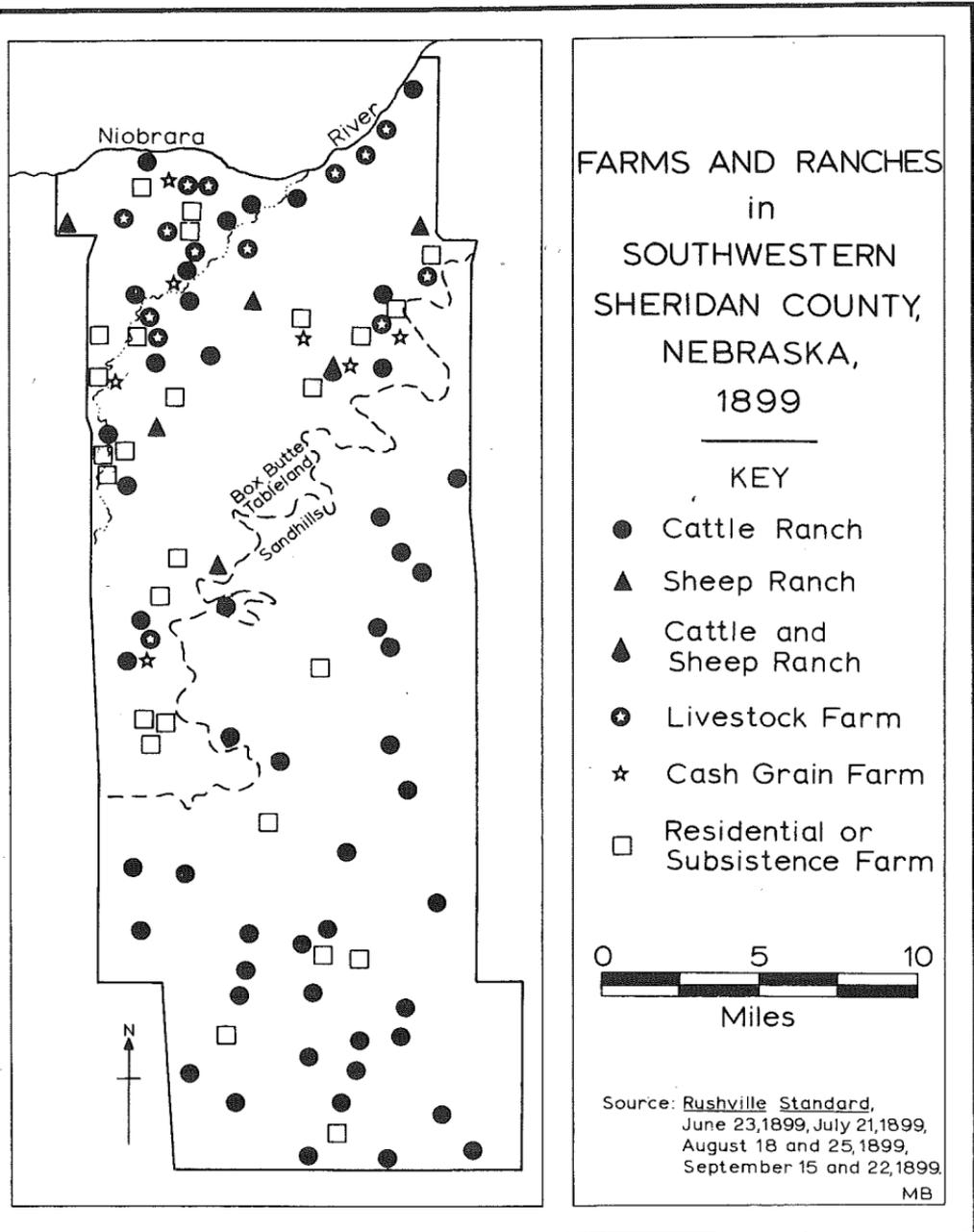


Figure 5.

finally giving up the homestead and moving in with his brother in Box Butte County.⁴⁴ Others left the area. In September, 1895, the local news column written from a neighborhood between Box Butte Creek and the Sandhills contained the following item:

Business of all kinds seems to be at a standstill except for those who are making preparations to leave Sheridan County. Four families will leave next week, viz: Daniel Studebaker, Will Neat, Peter Hahn, for Cedar county, Neb., and Mrs. Liege, for Mo.⁴⁵

Census figures demonstrate the immensity of departure. The population of four townships which made up Box Butte Tableland's most populous precinct before the onset of drought and depression dropped from 451 in 1890 to just 164 in 1900. More than half of the tablelanders living within three or four miles of the Niobrara in 1890 were gone ten years later. In 1900 no more than 250 people lived on Sheridan County's share of the Box Butte Tableland, where a decade earlier almost 700 had made their homes⁴⁶ (Fig. 4, right).

It is implicit that settlers who left the Box Butte Tableland during the drought and depression of the 1890's had changed their opinion about the land's usability. Equally revealing, and more clearly spelled out, are the views of those who stayed. One farmer, who initially perceived the rolling plains near Box Butte Creek as good cropland, acknowledged in 1899 that his land was better suited to "the hen, cow, cattle, and horses."⁴⁷ His neighbor had "tried farming" on a quarter section of drouthy Valentine sandy loam since he arrived from Missouri in 1889, but during the middle 1890's he "learned that stock raising was easier and more profitable."⁴⁸ Farther east, less than two miles from the Sandhills, a beleaguered farmer, who had tried to last out the dry years by weaving and selling baskets,⁴⁹ concluded that in his neighborhood, where there was almost total crop failure,⁵⁰ survival depended on men's ability to "work into the stock business."⁵¹ The editor of the *Standard*, reviewing changes that had come to the Sheridan County tablelands since 1892, echoed these sentiments when he wrote:

In a way, times have improved in Sheridan County. The most of our people who devoted themselves exclusively to farming, have "starved out" and left the country, and those who have turned their attention to a mixture of farming and stock raising, dairying, or exclusive stock business, have by their industry, improved their condition. This is the best stock country in the world.⁵²

A few months later the same man, writing about the land around Box Butte Creek, noted that from 1886 to 1892 it had been "quite thickly settled with farmers," but that since 1893 cattle had been gaining a position of prominence as men learned that on the dry upland tables a spell with no rain did not affect rangeland "as much as it does the grain field."⁵³ Men seemed to be in agreement that if they were to remain on the Box Butte Tableland, they would be wise to use their land for grazing livestock instead of planting crops.

Analysis of cropping patterns and livestock numbers on individual operational units on Box Butte Tableland in the summer of 1899 demonstrates how completely the area's systems of resource utilization had changed from crop-raising to production of livestock. Of the sixty-four farms and ranches on Box Butte Tableland described in a house-by-house survey conducted by the *Rushville Standard*, seventeen were cattle ranches, another five were sheep ranches, one was a combination cattle and sheep ranch, and fourteen more were livestock farms (Fig. 5). Only seven farmers still counted on crops for the bulk of their income.⁵⁴ The fact that 20 units, producing so few crops and having so few livestock that they must have been bare subsistence operations, were situated on the Box Butte Tableland is a further testimony to the distress that had come to the plains west of the Sandhills.⁵⁵

While settlers were relinquishing claims on the Box Butte Tableland and returning to land farther east, a quite different situation was occurring in the southwestern Sheridan County Sandhills. Rainfall was no heavier among the dunes, but the basin flats, close to the water table, did not dry out as completely as the high tablelands nearer Box Butte Creek.⁵⁶ Local news items describing the grass as "excellent," "looking rich," and "much better" in southwestern-most Sheridan County and in the basins farther north testify to somewhat more favorable conditions in the sandhills.⁵⁷

Compared to Box Butte Tableland, the southwestern Sheridan County Sandhills, with open, available space and green, moist meadows must have seemed more attractive to men still intent on making a living in the Nebraska Panhandle. For example, a Box Butte County farmer, "deciding that exclusive farming to be unprofitable business . . . came into the 'hills' and entered his present home place."⁵⁸ Another man who had been farming the tableland east of Box Butte Creek since 1890 "discovered that raising grain for the market was unprofitable. In '94 with five horses and thirty head of cattle he moved onto his present place four miles into the Sandhills to engage in stock raising exclusively."⁵⁹ A former neighbor and

his brother, seeing that "the corn kept growing shorter" on Box Butte Tableland,⁶⁰ saw the prospects for ranching in the Sandhills and took land in a moist depression between the dunes about eight miles southeast of his original claim.⁶¹ Still another man, who had "tried hard to farm his land but found that conditions were against him," decided that his land was better suited for grazing, and after holding his property "for ten years without doing much in the way of improving it," bought some calves in 1897 and embarked on a cattle ranching career.⁶² It is clear that in the 1890's when tableland residents were discovering how unwise their earlier decisions to farm had been, men were taking a second look at the adjacent Sandhills, and were guessing correctly that the dunes and basins that others had rejected did extend an invitation to aspiring ranchers.

The impact of decisions to move in the Sandhills in the 1890's is seen in Figure 3 (right) and Table 1. From January 1, 1893, to the end of the nineteenth century, 30,280 acres in the southwestern Sheridan County Sandhills were filed upon for the first time, compared to a paltry 920 acres of new entries on the portion of the Box Butte Tableland under study. By December 31, 1899, 39.8 per cent of all available Sandhills land in southwestern Sheridan County was under entry, and 12.3 per cent of it was already patented.⁶³ Admittedly the Box Butte Tableland property under entry or patented at this time still outweighed that in the Sandhills,⁶⁴ but as an index of new confidence in the Sandhills' capacity to support permanent settlement, the changes in the pattern of claims that occurred during the drought-depression years are startling.

By 1900 about 190 people—43 per cent of the study area's population—were living among the Sandhills in southwestern Sheridan County (Fig. 4, right).⁶⁵ This figure represents a slightly more than threefold increase in population in the dune country since 1890, compared to a 64 per cent decline on Box Butte Tableland. In 1900 the southwestern Sheridan County Sandhills' population density of nearly one person per square mile was almost as high as that on the Box Butte Tableland, where there were a shade fewer than 1.5 persons for every square mile. These figures are a striking contrast to those of a decade earlier, when Box Butte Tableland's density of over four people per square mile exceeded by sixteen times the figure for the southwestern Sheridan County Sandhills.

At the close of the nineteenth century the thirty-nine households in the southwestern Sheridan County Sandhills were bases for thirty-three cattle

ranches and six residential-subsistence "farms," all of which strongly stressed production of livestock (Fig. 5).⁶⁶ The largest ranch in this portion of the Sandhills was the operation of the Krause Brothers, who in 1899 owned 2,240 acres, leased 4,000 more acres, and grazed 1,400 head of cattle on their range in the westernmost dunes.⁶⁷ Much more common, however, were small ranches such as the one situated adjacent to a shallow lake some five miles from the tableland-dune-country contact, which was based upon 160 deeded acres and a quarter-section hay flat entered under the Timber Culture Act, and where 130 head of cattle were grazing.⁶⁸ Many of the new Sandhills ranchers had been farmers just a few years before. In one Sandhills township (T24 R45) six of the nine heads of families living on ranches in 1899 had been farming, not ranching, elsewhere in 1892. In an adjacent township (T25 R45) four of the five ranchers had been farmers living elsewhere in 1892. Significantly, all but one of the transplanted farmers in the latter township had been raising crops and caring for barnyard livestock on Box Butte Tableland homesteads.⁶⁹

By 1900 patterns of population and land use in southwestern Sheridan County were roughly similar on Box Butte Tableland and in the Sandhills. Certainly there were some farms, and a few more people, on the tableland than among the dunes, particularly near the Niobrara and along Box Butte Creek. But in the generally even but light sprinkling of population and heavy stress on livestock grazing, the strong areal distinctions that had existed in southwestern Sheridan County in 1892 were largely obscured. Demographic and economic changes that had occurred since 1892 were a testimony to changes in the views of men who decided, after some vacillation, that under the stressful conditions of the drouth-depression 1890's, when farming in northwestern Nebraska was next to impossible, the dunes and basins of the Sandhills held about as much promise for an evolving livestock grazing economy and permanent settlement as the narrow meadows and dry upland plains of the Box Butte Tableland.

NOTES

1. For example, Marie Sandoz, *Old Jules*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962); Arthur R. Reynolds, "The Kinkaid Act and Its Effects on Western Nebraska," *Agricultural History*, 23 (January, 1949), 20-29, and "Land Frauds and Illegal Fencing in Western Nebraska," *Agricultural History*, 23 (July, 1949), 173-179; Charles D. O'Kieffe, *Western Story: The Recollections of Charley O'Kieffe* (Lincoln University of Nebraska Press, 1960); Anna N. Phillips and Vilma D. Ball, *History of Box Butte County, Nebraska* (Hemingford, 1939); William Driver Aeschbacher, "Development of the Beef Cattle Industry in the Sandhills of Nebraska, with Special Emphasis Upon Grant County," unpublished M.A. Thesis, Dept. of History, University of Nebraska, 1946, "Development of the Sandhill Lake Country," *Nebraska History*, 27 (July-September, 1946), 205-221, and "Development of Cattle Raising in the Sandhills," *Nebraska History*, 28 (January-March, 1947), 41-64; Curtis Mervin Wilson, "The Regional Geography of the Box Butte Tableland, a Sub-Region of the High Plains of Nebraska and Wyoming," unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Dept. of Geography, University of Nebraska, 1944, and "The Box Butte Tableland," *Ohio Journal of Science*, 51 (September, 1951), 227-248; Addison E. Sheldon, "Northwest Nebraska and the Box Butte Table," *Nebraska History Magazine*, 11 (October-December, 1928), 223-232, and "The Sheridan County Region—Origin and Early History," *Nebraska History Magazine*, 16 (October-December, 1935), 241-249; Durfee Larson, "A Geographic Study of Population changes in Western Nebraska," unpublished M.A. thesis, Dept. of Geography, University of Nebraska, 1932; Kathryn L. Lichty, "A History of the Settlement of the Nebraska Sandhills," unpublished M.A. thesis, Dept. of History, University of Wyoming, 1960; Winfield Stuart Delle, "The Role of Barbed Wire in the Cattleman Versus Rancher-Farmer Conflict of Sheridan County, Nebraska, 1885-1910," unpublished M.S. thesis, Chadron (Nebraska) State College, 1968.

2. A few examples of recent works in this field are Thomas Frederick Saarinen, *Perception of the Drought Hazard on the Great Plains*, Department of Geography Research Paper 106 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966); Douglas R. McManis, *The Initial Evaluation and Utilization of the Illinois Prairies, 1815-1840*, Department of Geography Research Paper 94 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964); R. L. Heathcote, *Back of Bourke: A Study of Land Appraisal and Settlement in Semi-Arid Australia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1965); C. Howard Richardson, "The Nebraska Prairies: Dilemma to Early Territorial Farmers," *Nebraska History*, 50 (Winter, 1969), 359-372; Martyn J. Bowden, "The Perception of the Western Interior of the United States, 1800-1870: A Problem in Historical Geography," *Proceedings of the Association of American Geographers*, 1 (1969), 16-21.

3. Lieutenant Gouverneur K. Warren, quoted in "Explorations in the Dakota Country in the Year 1855," in *Exploring the Northern Plains, 1804-1876*, ed. Lloyd McFarling (Caldwell, Idaho: 1955), 222-223.

4. *Idem*, quoted in Lichty, *op. cit.*, 19-20.

5. D. V. Stephenson, "Certified Field Notes of Government Surveys of Sheridan County," July-August, 1879. Typed copy of original manuscript, filed at the Sheridan County Courthouse, Rushville, Nebraska.

6. *The Official State Atlas of Nebraska* (Philadelphia: 1885), 167.

7. W. B. Lawson, "Copy of Report of Reconnaissance, Northwestern Nebraska, August and September, 1883," 4. Burlington Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. T. E. Calvert, untitled report of reconnaissance of northwestern Nebraska, June, 1886. Burlington Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Interview with Carl Lockmon, Rushville, Nebraska, August 23, 1966. Mr. Lockmon, a resident of Sheridan County since 1885, has been an intent observer and recorder of local history.

13. "Professor" Read, in the *Rushville* (Nebraska) *Standard*, January 9, 1886.

14. S. C. McElroy, "Certified Field Notes of Government Surveys of Sheridan County," September 13-17, 1879.

15. *Ibid.*; Charles R. Starkweather, "Certified Field Notes of Government Surveys of Sheridan County," September 13-17, 1879.

16. Stephenson, *op. cit.*, August 13-22, 1879.

17. S. C. Gallup, Letter to the editor, *Rushville Standard*, January 23, 1886.

18. *Idem*, *Rushville Standard*, February 20, 1886.

19. Calvert, *op. cit.*

20. *Rushville Standard*, April 22, 1887.

21. General Land Office Tract Books on file at Bureau of Land Management, Silver Spring, Maryland.

22. Dept. of the Interior, U.S. Census Office. *Census Reports. Eleventh Census: 1890*, Vol. 8, Part 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895), 234, and General Land Office Tract Books.

23. *Schedules of the Nebraska State Census of 1885*. Microfilm roll 52, Nebraska State Historical Society. In 1885 the single stock-raiser, Jacob Kiff lived along Box Butte Creek in T28, R46, where he grazed two milk cows and thirty-two other head of cattle. The other nine settlers, some of them made prominent by Mari Sandoz in *Old Jules*, lived north of Kiff's place within two or three miles of the Niobrara.

24. For more details on establishment of midwestern farming systems on Sheridan County's tablelands, see Marshall Bowen, "Changes in Resource Evaluation as Keys to Selected Aspects of Geographic Change: The Case of Sheridan County, Nebraska, 1875-1925," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of Geography, Boston University, 1970, 353-368.

25. *Rushville Standard*, August 18, 1899; Wilson, "The Regional Geography of the Box Butte Tableland . . .," *op. cit.*, 301 and 303.

26. *Compendium of History, Reminiscence, and Biography of Western Nebraska* (Chicago: 1909), 722.

27. *Ibid.*, 1030; *The Nebraska Cattleman*, 14 (April, 1958), 32.

28. U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Census Office, *Statistics of Agriculture in the United States . . . 1890* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895); Wilson, *loc. cit.*

29. Carl Lockmon, "The Years of Promise," *Sheridan County Star*, (Rushville, Nebraska) January 5-December 7, 1967. Lockmon's serialized reminiscences concentrate on settlement of Sheridan County's tablelands from 1885 to 1892.

30. *Compendium . . . , op. cit.*, 540, 748, 1049.

31. *Ibid.*, 1049

32. *Climatic Summary of the United States—Section 38—Western Nebraska* (Washington: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Weather Bureau, 1932?), 7 and 12.
33. *Rushville Standard*, August 18, 1899; *Compendium . . .*, *op. cit.*, 722, 746, 806-807, 987, 1030-1031, 1040.
34. *Ibid.*, 722.
35. *The Nebraska Cattleman*, 12 (July, 1956), 32.
36. Charles Hoffman, "The Depression of the Nineties," *The Journal of Economic History*, 16 (June, 1956), 137-164.
37. Sandoz, *Old Jules*, *op. cit.*, 114; *Rushville Standard*, August 8, 1890, October 23, 1896; interview with Carl Lockmon, August 23, 1966.
38. *Gordon Journal*, January 17, 1896.
39. Delle, *op. cit.*, 114.
40. *Ibid.*, 115. Delle attributes the bulk of the violence and insanity at this time to drinking and economic hardships on the farm during drouth and depression, and loneliness in the face of declining rural population. *Ibid.*, 61-64.
41. *Ibid.*, 43.
42. *Rushville Standard*, October 4, 1895, and General Land Office Tract Books.
43. *Rushville Standard*, October 2, 1896, and General Land Office Tract Books.
44. *Compendium . . .*, *op. cit.*, 746-747.
45. *Rushville Standard*, September 27, 1895.
46. U.S. Census Office, *Census Reports*, Vol. I, 1900—*Population, Part 1*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901), 262; *Rushville Standard*, June 23, 1899 and July 21, 1899.
47. *Rushville Standard*, August 18, 1899.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Compendium . . .*, *op. cit.*, 722; *The Nebraska Cattleman*, 20 (December 1963), 50.
50. *Compendium . . .*, *op. cit.*, 722, 806-807, 1030; *The Nebraska Cattleman*, 14 (April, 1958), 32.
51. *Rushville Standard*, August 25, 1899.
52. *Ibid.*, December 2, 1898.
53. *Ibid.*, August 18, 1899.
54. *Rushville Standard*, June 23, 1899, July 21, 1899, August 18, 1899, August 25, 1899, September 15, 1899. The following somewhat arbitrary guidelines were used to determine the farm and ranch categories: Cattle Ranch: less than 10% of total acreage in crops, more than 30 beef cattle; Sheep Ranch: less than 10% of total acreage in crops, more than 100 sheep (actually, the smallest sheep ranch in this area had 260 sheep, while the four others had over 1,000 sheep); Livestock Farm: more than 10% of total acreage but less than 120 acres in crops, between 24 and 100 cattle, or, in two cases, between 24 and 100 cattle and hogs; Cash Grain Farm: more than 60 acres of grain, fewer than a total of 24 cattle, hogs, and sheep; Residential or Subsistence Farm: less than 60 acres of grain and fewer than a total of 30 cattle, hogs, and sheep. While these categories are not in themselves mutually exclusive, they do permit categorization of all but one farm or ranch in operation in 1899 in southwestern Sheridan County. The one exception was the operation of Thomas Lee, living about seven miles east of Box Butte Creek, who had 80 acres in grain, and ran 125 beef cattle and 300 sheep on his own homestead and adjacent abandoned land. For the purposes of this paper, Lee has been classified as a combination cattle and

sheep rancher, although some argument might be made for his inclusion with the other fourteen livestock farmers.

55. *Ibid.* Some of these "residential or subsistence farmers" were male settlers who were barely scraping by, while others were women like an invalid widow living a mile south of the Niobrara who raised no crops but kept six head of cattle and seven horses on her property.

56. Delle, *op. cit.*, 64.

57. *Rushville Democrat*, June 12, 1896; *Rushville Standard* January 24, 1896, July 2, 1897, January 14, 1898, and May 19, 1899.

58. *Rushville Standard*, September 22, 1899.

59. *Ibid.*, September 15, 1899.

60. *The Nebraska Cattleman*, 14 (September, 1957), 32.

61. *Ibid.*; *Compendium . . .*, *op. cit.*, 1030-1031; *Rushville Standard*, August 25, 1899.

62. *Compendium . . .*, *op. cit.*, 1040.

63. General Land Office Tract Books. Almost every other acre of land in southwestern Sheridan County was claimed within a few months of the passage of the Kinkaid Act of 1904, although many final patents were not issued until the 1915-1920 period.

64. Many patents on land on Box Butte Tableland were issued in 1893 and 1894 to settlers who filed claims in 1888 and 1889, and who did not leave the area until later in the decade. Other patents were issued in the very late 1890's to people who entered timber culture claims or filed contests on land initially claimed by neighbors who had moved away. The significant fact is that only four per cent of Box Butte Tableland property still open for initial entry in 1893 had been claimed by 1900. General Land Office Tract Books.

65. U.S. Census Office, *Census Reports*, Vol I, 1900: *Population . . .*, *loc. cit.*; *Rushville Standard*, August 25, 1899, September 15, 1899, September 22, 1899.

66. *Rushville Standard*, August 25, 1899, September 15, 1899, September 22, 1899.

67. *Ibid.*, September 15, 1899. It is likely that the Krauses controlled more land than the 6240 acres described here. Six years later they were convicted in a Federal Court of having illegally fenced 7500 acres of public domain and intimidating prospective homesteaders. Reynold, "Land Frauds . . .," *op. cit.*, 175, and Lichty, *op. cit.*, 141-142.

68. *Ibid.*, September 22, 1899.

69. *Ibid.* A similar pattern was also evolving in the 1890's in the lake basin and dune country of south-central Sheridan County, but not in southeastern Sheridan County, where the presence of the powerful Spade Ranch was sufficient to deter an influx of most prospective small ranchers. Bowen, *op. cit.*, 498-509 and 525-528.