

# Shared Stories of the Kansas Land

## A Reader's Theater Project

### *Of Mines and Men*

Kansas's economy has thrived not just on farm crops, but also on the development of natural resources. The extraction of coal, lead, zinc, oil, and numerous other materials from the land led to community growth, new industries, and tremendous wealth. These developments also attracted new sources of labor from across the world. As immigrants became a greater part of the economic and cultural livelihood of the state, ethnic and political differences sometimes produced conflict between these communities and statewide interests. Kansans have lauded the state's development into "more than a breadbasket," but have had to take in stride the costs in labor discord and ultimately the costs to the land itself.

The *Of Mines and Men* reader's theater script was created using excerpts from historical letters, promotional materials, legal documents, interviews, as well as other sources. Following the reading, participants will have the opportunity to discuss how historic water usage informs Kansans' future relationship to the land, and the rights of rural and urban water consumers.

**Please Note:** Regional historians have reviewed the source materials used, the script, and the list of citations for accuracy.

#### **For More Information:**

Kansas Humanities Council

[www.kansashumanities.org](http://www.kansashumanities.org)



## Introduction

***Instructions: The facilitator can either read the entire introduction out loud or summarize key points.***

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## Group Discussion Questions

***Instructions: The facilitator should pose one or more of these questions in advance of the reading of the script. At the conclusion of the reading, participants can return to the questions for consideration.***

1. What cultural attitudes and beliefs have underscored Kansans' use of natural resources in the past?
2. How do the historical issues inform the state's present relationship with industrial labor?
3. What has been the impact of industrial development upon the land itself?
4. How do Kansas's natural resources work within a vision for a sustainable future?

## Script

**Instructions: Each part will be read out loud by an assigned reader. Readers should stand and speak into a microphone when it's their turn. The source of the quote should also be read out loud (this is the information bolded beneath each quote).**

NARRATOR *Episode One – Days of Discovery*

*Kansas settlers who discovered coal or oil on their homestead claims were excited by newfound possibilities. Compared with their former homes in the eastern United States, where trees and water were abundant, Kansas offered few of the domestic comforts they were used to. Early coal and oil findings eased settlers' worries by providing cheap fuel, new commercial opportunities, and the means to develop industry.*

*Letters such as the one below were common. Although we do not know the true identity of the signatory who went by the initials "RENO," he or she eagerly reported the beginnings of the petroleum industry to the newspaper in Titusville, Pennsylvania, the location of the first U.S. oil boom.*

READER 1 A piece of good luck has befallen this city lately. A valuable coal mine underlying the southern edge of the military reservation, has been opened this summer, and an excellent bituminous gas coal is now being extracted.

**RENO<sup>1</sup>, from Leavenworth, in a letter to the editor of the Titusville, Pennsylvania, *Morning Herald*, August 4, 1870**

READER 2 In Cherokee, Crawford, Bourbon, and Osage counties it is safe to assume there is a coal belt covering an area of seventy by twenty miles, or 1,400 square miles. . . . The farmers or the manufacturers now here, or those who may come for generations hereafter, may rest assured that in Kansas the supply of coal will not fail them.

But it is not in coal alone that the mineral wealth of Kansas consists. Her lead and zinc mines are practically as inexhaustible as her coal, and of a richness and quality that have already established them in markets of the world.

**Manufacturer Alexander Caldwell in an address for the Quarter-Centennial Celebration of Kansas's Statehood, Topeka, 1886**

NARRATOR *Discoveries of oil also had the potential to bring prosperity. Historian Daniel C. Fitzgerald notes that between 1891 and 1897, in Neodesha*

*alone, nearly 241 wells were drilled, of which 137 were dry, and 87 produced enough oil to pay for the failures. Oil booms created a great deal of hoopla, even if the first strikes were minimal. Towns multiplied in size and workers arrived daily by train, bringing along families and their hopes for riches. The industry maintained steady development through the early 1900s, and Standard Oil even built a refinery in southeastern Kansas, near Neodesha.*

READER 4            Back in 1887, a group of men whose names are unknown, opened a shaft in what would today be the northeast part of Lyons to test for gas. At 1200 feet, gas was found and all during the following winter, this gas was used to light the jets at the old Interstate Hotel. . . . Trying to increase the flow of gas, they used dynamite in the shaft resulting in a shut off of the supply. That ended the gas well but thirty seven years later a rich strike of oil was made with the discovery in 1924 at the Welch #1 south and east of Lyons.

**Mae Spear, Rice County historian, Lyons, 1971**

NARRATOR            *“Forests of Oil Derricks Cover the State,” declared the Kansas Chamber of Commerce in 1940. By that point, Kansas ranked “eighth in mineral output. . . fourth in oil; ninth in natural gas.” The oil and gas industry had spread into western Kansas also, as farmers sought new ways to bring value to their land. The success of these industries was meaningful because the state had acquired a mainly agricultural, even backwards image.*

READER 2            I have reported oil on the *Wichita Daily Eagle* for the past ten years. I have seen the gushers and the dry holes, the joys and the sorrows, the hilarious mirth and the weaker member of the fraternity sent to the asylum when he held four acres and fate held the gun in the game of oil. . . . When I see the thousands of lights shining from the derricks of an oil field, I think of the python with button eyes gleaming yellow, charming the dove.

**Kent Eubank, reporter for the *Wichita Daily Eagle*, 1928**

READER 3            It would be a good thing for the people of Kansas to forget their warts, dust storms, chinch bugs, tornadoes and the like and flaunt their graces and blessings a bit.

**Rolla Clymer, editor of the *El Dorado Times*, in a letter to William Lindsay White, editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, July 18, 1939**

NARRATOR            *Episode Two – The Costs of Industrial Development*

*The opening of industries in natural resource extraction created opportunities for the immigration of whole communities of new workers. They were first attracted to the coal camp towns in Crawford and Cherokee counties, bordering Missouri and Oklahoma in southeastern Kansas. This area became known as “The Little Balkans” owing to the mixed ethnic make-up of its workers, who had emigrated from southeastern Europe. The name also references the political strife of the European Balkans, thought to be transferred to Kansas’s “Little Balkans” with the sometimes radical political sympathies of its laborers. Work in the coal mines was treacherous, and pay was low, adding cause for discord within the industry.*

READER 4

Yesterday evening witnessed the most terrible holocaust that ever occurred in this mining district or the west. Mine No. 2 of the Pittsburg and Cherokee (Santa Fe) Mining Company at Frontenac blew up, causing a horrible toll of life. Number of lives lost is not known. Men in the mine at the time of the explosion numbered 164. Many of them made their way out uninjured. . . . Rescue parties have endeavored to enter the mine, but have been driven back by foul air. The fans were demolished by the explosion and men are working frantically to replace them so air can be sent into the mine.

***The Pittsburg Daily Headlight, reporting from Frontenac, November 9, 1888***

READER 1

Twenty men, at least, lost their lives in the explosion at a mine near Stone City early this afternoon. According to reports thirty-nine men were entombed by the explosion.

The explosion is said to have been one of gas accumulated in an old entry that is being reopened. Part of the men were working so far back from the shaft that it is a difficult task for the rescuers to reach them. . . . Death came to most of the victims by suffocation.

***The Pittsburg Daily Headlight, December 13, 1916***

NARRATOR

*These two events were the deadliest in state history, totaling at least 170 lives lost, but individual incidents could also be heartbreaking. The following was the case report of an accident that killed sixteen-year-old Evan Davis at the Coughlin Coal Company mines in Osage County. He lived, worked, and died in the company of his father, a widower. His was the twentieth fatality accident reported in 1900.*

READER 2

The deceased, who had been working with his father in a room in the

above-named mine, was in the act of handing props to his father with which to prop the roof. His father noticed the roof moving, and called out to the boy to follow him. The boy, instead of following his father, crawled out backwards in the opposite direction, towards the roadway, and had almost got clear into the roadway when the soapstone fell, the end of it striking him on the head and neck. . . .

The father and son had been mining under this stone all morning, without thought of danger, and they had finished mining this side of their place, and were preparing to prop it at about one o'clock in the afternoon, when the roof fell, with the above results. . . . From all I could gather, the incident was caused by one of those unforeseen dangers that confront the miner from the time he goes into a mine till he arrives on top again.

**Report of the State Inspector of Coal Mines in Peterton, Osage County, December 7, 1900**

NARRATOR

*Working in the oil fields was less hazardous than in underground mine shafts. Wages also tended to be higher, and jobs were available throughout the year. But turnover was high and life for the largely immigrant labor population was difficult without the ethnic neighborhoods they had enjoyed in coal communities. Furthermore, foreign oil workers did sometimes face harassment, as when local residents opposed a pipeline being built to take oil from the Coffeyville area to Kansas City. The pipeline was dynamited in seven places on December 17, 1904. Instigators took aim at the workers by intimidating them and ruining their tools.*

READER 3

A little before 10 o'clock Saturday night, a young man named Carl Pinkston was patrolling the line, having been placed on guard by the pipe line contractors. Suddenly he found himself the center of a big band of horsemen, whose eyes gleamed through masks and who were further disguised by wearing old ragged clothing. A dozen Winchesters were pointed at him and he was gruffly commanded to get off his horse and "hike." He lost no time in obeying. A few moments later the first explosion occurred. Then the rest followed. . . . At one place, several dozen picks and shovels were piled up and the handles burned off.

Sunday a large number of the laborers quit their jobs and started for Kansas City. They said they were tired of being arrested and were afraid they would get hurt.

**Coffeyville Daily Journal, December 19, 1904**

NARRATOR

*Beyond these politically charged situations, direct harassment of the immigrants was also common. Disdain for ethnic differences and a dislike*

*for the transitory nature of jobs that brought immigrants in and out of a local community led some locals to use highly derogatory terms as descriptors for the immigrants who came to work. Over the long term, conditions stabilized. Companies piped in natural gas to fuel home appliances; community schools, groceries, and other amenities developed; and workers began to nourish a sense of community among themselves. Many of the camps built in southeastern counties during the 1920s remained until the 1950s.*

READER 1

Our people had begun to feel that Anderson County had been invaded by Italy but it later developed that they had been employed by the Prairie Oil and Gas Company to lay the pipeline from the oil field to Kansas City and had just completed their work and had been paid off. They were in town spending their money. . . . The dealers who handled underclothing, soap, toothbrushes, and Bibles were not overlooked. [The Italians] are not desirable citizens and we are glad to see they have left.

**The Garnett Eagle-Plaindealer, October 14, 1904**

READER 2

A farm lady . . . came in one day and said she had some apples, wanted to know if I wanted some apples. I said, "No, I have apples . . . we get them from the wholesale house [in] Emporia." She said, "Well, I've got lots of them." And I said, "Well, if somebody comes in [and] wants some, I'll tell them you have apples for sale." She said, "I don't want no oil field people." I said, "Well, alright." But I never did tell anybody 'cause I was oil field people too. But, that was kind of the way they felt. After a lot of them [oil field families] left, why they [farm folks] kinda got friendly with the ones that was left there. And they were nice people, too, the farmers were. I don't know, seems as though they [had] thought oil field people was tough, following the camps, you know.

**Verna Beeman, former resident and grocer at Seeley Oil Camp, Eureka, 1981**

NARRATOR

*Episode Three – Industry Confronts the State*

*Tensions were substantially higher in the coal industry than in the oil fields. The First World War set off a confrontation between the state government and the coal industry. In 1917, the state accused operators of overcharging customers in order to pay for favorable dealing with the railroads, which along with the industrial sector absorbed 75 percent of the coal business at a substantially lower price than the public paid. The federal and state governments exercised the powers granted by wartime necessity to set prices on essential industries like this one. Mine operators responded that they were hamstrung by government price ceilings.*

READER 3                    Let me tell you that the price of coal today is too low. That is true as compared to conditions a year ago. You said you didn't want to hamper industry. That is just what you are doing. You are doing it unjustifiably.

**George Walker, mine operator for the Jackson-Walker Coal Company, quoted in the *Topeka Capital*, August 20, 1917**

READER 4                    The coal mines in Kansas will not be closed. The operators will not bluff the federal and state government. If any effort is made, as threats of operators would indicate, to defeat or annul the orders of the president in fixing the price of coal in Kansas, the operators will be up against more trouble than they have ever faced before. The people must have coal, and they are going to have it as long as it is in the ground and can be mined.

**Governor Arthur Capper, quoted in the *Topeka Capital*, August 23, 1917**

NARRATOR                    *Relations between the state and the mines again escalated after the war as a series of nationwide coal strikes hit southeast Kansas. Labor strikes were nothing new in the area: over 360 were reported between 1916 and 1918. Workers struck for higher wages and against the encroachment of mechanized equipment. In 1919, the Kansas Supreme Court ruled in favor of the state securing and operating the coal mines for a short time. Volunteers were called in to complete mine operations after miners refused to return to work. The state took over the mines until mid-December.*

READER 1                    It is the duty of government, and it has the inherent power, to protect the people whose welfare is dependent upon it. . . . If government is to mean anything, then its obligation is to prevent innocent people from becoming the victims of a fuel famine, which, in the course of events, is both unnatural and unnecessary.

**Governor Henry J. Allen, quoted in the *Topeka Capital*, November 28, 1919**

NARRATOR                    *Allen's sentiments about the rights of the public, what he called the "party of the third part" in disputes between labor unions and company management, led him to initiate the creation of a Court of Industrial Relations. This institution was the first of its kind as a means for the state to arbitrate such disputes. Many Kansans hailed this pioneering step in labor relations.*



READER 2           The Legislature of the State of Kansas, out of deference to labor, created here a tribunal in which justice is administered without money and without price. The poorest man in Kansas, if he is engaged in any of the essential industries named in the law, may at any time come into this court and make his complaint known. The state provides him with a lawyer who will prepare his case for him without charge. It provides him with expert accountants and engineers, and with trained examiners, who will investigate his case and prepare his evidence for him, free of charge.

I have never heard of any such a court before. I have never heard of any legislature or parliament in any country in the world that has created such a tribunal, into which the poorest citizen may come and receive the same treatment, and the same advantages, and the same justice, as though he were a millionaire. I know of no other state that has by law required that every industrious and faithful worker shall receive a fair wage.

**W.L. Huggins, Judge of the Kansas Court of Industrial Relations, in the article “The Court of the Penniless Man,” Pittsburg, April 7, 1920**

READER 4           The remedy for bolshevism, anarchy and [the Industrial Workers of the World] is clearly within our own hands. . . . Our people read and do their own thinking, it remains only to stop the stream of poison that flows out and through certain newspapers and publications printed chiefly in foreign languages.

**F.J. Moss, President of the American Sash and Door Company, to Governor Henry J. Allen, Kansas City, January 6, 1920**

READER 3           The time has passed in Kansas (the most forward State in matters of the improvement of conditions of society) when the necessities of the people of this good State, are to be either forgotten, or used as chess men, to play out a waiting game or a game of ‘strong arm’ between two powerful and rich organizations [the mine operators and the labor unions] for the purpose of determining who is to win in a big contest of freeze out, with the public’s necessities as the goal.

**John Crain, Attorney, to Governor Henry J. Allen, Ft. Scott, January 6, 1920**

NARRATOR           *Though some praised the Court of Industrial Relations as another sign of Kansas’s particular brand of progressivism, labor leaders disapproved of its intentions to prevent strikes altogether. Fears of communist or anarchist sentiments on the part of labor unions such as the United Mine*

*Workers of America or the radical International Workers of the World were common in the post-World War I “Red Scare,” but laborers did not think this warranted the repression of their voices within the state. Strikes continued in the coal fields and other industries in defiance of the state’s policies, while workers continued to fight for fair wages and representation before the mine operators.*

READER 2            In regard to the bill you are trying to introduce in the legislature, known as the Court of Industrial Relations Bill, which provides penalties on workers for striking or causing shut-downs for discriminations or other causes, be it known that we, the members of Local Union No. 533, Dist. 14, U.M.W. of A., pronounce it slavery for you to take away the only method we have to right the many wrongs we suffer; and at the same time to impose a penalty of \$1000.00 fine and imprisonment on our officials should they attempt to right any cause for discord that we may happen to have.

READER 3            We are living in a country that has always advocated free speech and collective bargaining, and we think we are still capable of doing our own business without said bill and without your committee of three.

**Alf Dainty, J.M. Gold, and J.T. Ogilvie in a letter to Governor Henry J. Allen, Pittsburg, January 7, 1920**

READER 4            We officials of the United Mine Workers of District 14 do not recognize this industrial court. Let its members go down into the mines and dig coal and learn the business the same as we did. If they do not know the coal mining business they are unfitted for the position and are wholly incompetent.

**Alexander Howat, quoted in the *Topeka Capital*, April 7, 1920**

NARRATOR            *The families of striking men also got involved in the battle for justice against a state system that no longer legally permitted them to strike and forced them to seek arbitration in the Court of Industrial Relations. The women of the “Army of Amazons” held marches and protested against “scab” labor in their efforts to uphold working men’s rights to make a fair wage. Although fears of Bolshevism and the recent expansion of women’s rights led many to criticize the marchers as unfeminine foreigners, the women emphasized their American loyalties and efforts to protect their families’ livelihoods. They fought to protect the democracy upheld during the World War, and to end industrial “slavery.”*

READER 1            We don’t want any bloodshed here in Kansas like there was in the Ludlow Strike, and in Alabama and Mingo County, West Virginia. What we want is our industrial freedom and liberty and we want our men to be

good, true, loyal union men and 100 percent American citizens, not like you and your dirty bunch of strike breakers. In the World War we bought liberty bonds.

Our boys that didn't enter service stayed over here, worked day and night in the coal mines to supply coal for our battleships, etc., and they done without sufficient food to win democracy in Europe. And now we are going to fight for our rights here in Kansas.

**Fannie Wimler, Women's March participant, in the article "A Mob Member is Defiant," *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 15, 1921**

NARRATOR

*Popular strikes in the coal fields suggested that the Court of Industrial Relations was not working quite as intended. When the labor unrest expanded to railroad workers and Emporia newspaperman William Allen White supported them, the issue came to a head. White had formerly supported the Court as a means of producing peaceful resolution of conflicts, but he disapproved of the state's decision to prevent Kansans from expressing support for the railroad strikers. When White posted a sign of solidarity with the strikers in his news office window, Governor Allen had him arrested. White's Pulitzer Prize winning editorial, "To An Anxious Friend," defended the freedom of speech.*

READER 4

You tell me that law is above freedom of utterance. And I reply that you can have no wise laws nor free enforcement of wise laws unless there is free expression of the wisdom of the people—and, alas, their folly with it. But if there is freedom, folly will die of its own poison, and the wisdom will survive. That is the history of the race. It is proof of man's kinship with God. You say that freedom of utterance is not for time of stress, and I reply with the sad truth that only in time of stress is freedom of utterance in danger. No one questions it in calm days, because it is not needed. And the reverse is true also; only when free utterance is suppressed is it needed, and when it is needed, it is most vital to justice.

**William Allen White, editorial for the *Emporia Gazette*, July 27, 1922**

NARRATOR

*Epilogue – Natural Resources and the Future of Modern Kansas*

*Although industrial development brought substantial economic gains to the state, it sometimes threatened workers' safety and political freedoms. Natural resource extraction also left a visible mark on the land. As the mining industry began to decline in the 1930s, area residents considered the legacy of the land hollowed out by underground shafts and left bare by strip mining.*

- READER 3            The average price of farm land in the stripping territory has been \$25 to \$35 per acre. Stripped land has been valued by coal companies at \$10 per acre. The loss to the county in taxable valuation is evident.
- Many of the earliest stripped lands have become quite well reforested . . . [and] nature has converted the last runs of the shovels into lakes, many of which have been stocked with fish through natural processes. A number of these pit-lakes have been leased by private parties for recreation grounds and have been made to yield small returns to the owners. In 1928 the citizens of Pittsburg purchased 400 acres, 80 percent of which is old strip pits, and presented the tract to the state of Kansas. This became the Crawford County State Park.
- Fred N. Howell, in the article "Some Phases of the Industrial History of Pittsburg, Kansas, " 1932**
- NARRATOR            *For those wishing to live on such land, however, the infrastructural and environmental challenges have become increasingly apparent.*
- READER 1            Zinc, lead, coal, salt, gypsum, and stone have all been won entirely or in part by underground mining methods in Kansas. Results of those efforts have been important to the economy of the state. However, the space left after mining and the weakening of the overlying rocks with time present potential hazards. These problems must be recognized by geologists and engineers now and in the future as they cope with subsidence, collapse, and weakening rock when roads, buildings, and other structures are constructed over those problem areas.
- Lawrence L. Brady, report for the Kansas Geological Survey, 2015**
- READER 2            Some of [the towers of waste rock, or chat] are 200 feet tall, and their dust, which on breezy days blows across the prairie, still contains enough metal to make blood-lead levels among young children here three times higher than the national average.
- Then there's the water. The local Tar Creek is the color of orange juice, and it smells like vinegar. This is because when the mining companies left, they shut off the pumps that kept abandoned shafts from filling with groundwater. Once water flooded the tunnels, it picked up all the trace minerals underground — iron, lead and zinc — and flushed them into rivers and streams. Fish and fowl fled or went belly-up.
- Wes Enzinna, *New York Times Magazine*, reporting from Treece, May 16, 2012**
- READER 4            Local kids used to skinny-dip here all the time. . . . We'd see kids with

sunburns all over their bodies. They had been chemically burned by all the acids in the water.

**Dennis Johnston, former resident of Treece, 2012**

NARRATOR

*The EPA and Kansas Department of Health and Environment have tried to turn this area on the Kansas-Oklahoma border into a wildlife reserve, but the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism declined to take over the project. An official noted, "That land is inadequate for supporting wildlife, or from what I hear, any other kind of life." The EPA now intends to clean up the remaining rock and haul it to fill in abandoned mines. Private holders will then be able to buy the land for hunting and farming "at their own risk."*

— End —

***Instructions: The facilitator will now return to the questions found on page 3 for consideration and discussion by the group.***

***At the conclusion of the event:***

- ***The local coordinator will indicate whether the scripts need to be returned.***
- ***The page titled Citations is intended to be a take-home handout for participants.***

*Notes:*

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The identity of the signatory, "**RENO**," is unknown. Paul H. Giddens, who transcribed these letters for publication in the *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, found these letters in the Titusville newspaper by chance, as he was researching the beginnings of the petroleum industry in Pennsylvania. Such letters reporting on discoveries in the West were common.