

Cottonwood Ranch: John Fenton Pratt and the English Ranching Experience in Sheridan County, Kansas

by Sara J. Keckeisen

THE ENGLISH-BORN IMMIGRANT POPULATION OF Kansas was never numerically significant; in fact, between 1880 and 1890, only about 4 percent of the total population of the state were immigrants from the British Isles.¹ Although English colonies in Kansas, such as Runnymede in Harper County or George Grant's Victoria colony, have received focused study, little attention has been paid to the English non-colonist settler—those English men and women who arrived individually or in family groups rather than as part of an organized colony. Perhaps the reason for this is that, unlike their contemporaries the Swedes, German-Russians and Bohemians, the English immigrants were already familiar with the language and culture of the new land and felt no particular need to congregate into small ethnic communities. The English were thereby freed to spread across the state and diffuse into the general population.

The English began to immigrate to Kansas in force after the Civil War. At that time railroad and land promoters were anxious to attract settlers to the relatively new state of Kansas. The Kansas Pacific, Missouri Pacific, Chicago and Rock Island, Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe and other railroad lines had received from the federal government, in its contracts with the builders of these railroads, land grants of alternate sections on either side of the roads for their entire proposed routes. These lands the railroads intended to sell to settlers. Not only were railroads important for the settlement of the new state but settlers were essential to

the success of the railroads—no settlers, no business, no profits. With 8 million acres of land to dispose of, the railroad companies instituted massive promotional campaigns to attract immigrants to the plains. Public relations men spoke of, and passed out handbills, proclaiming Kansas' rich soils, vast acreages, abundant rainfall, and water easily drilled for.² Kansas was a great land whose treasures awaited the enterprising farmer or stockman who would come west to claim them.

These promotional campaigns were aimed not only at the domestic audience but were also sent across the Atlantic to the British Isles. Railroad land promoters deemed English immigrants highly desirable and made deliberate efforts to attract English settlers to Kansas lands. One of the most effective methods of advertising was through advertisements, testimonials, and the reports of special correspondents in the British press. Established newspapers like the *London Times*, *Liverpool Weekly Courier*, and *Manchester Labourers' Union Chronicle* extolled the virtues of Kansas as a place for the investment of British money and people. There were also special newspapers specifically aimed at encouraging settlement. One of these was the *American Settler*, a separate publication of the *London Anglo-American Times*, which brought this entrepreneurial gospel to thousands of Englishmen and women.³

The first segments of the British population to take an interest in Kansas were the landed gentry and upper middle class. It was members of these classes who first traveled to Kansas after the Civil War, taking

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1. J. Neale Carman, *Foreign-Language Units of Kansas, 1: Historical Atlas and Statistics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1962), 9.

2. 5 Million Acres. *The Union Pacific Guide to Farms and Homes in Kansas and Colorado at Low Prices and 11 Years Credit* (Kansas City, Mo.: Union Pacific Railway, [1882]), 22; Sara E. Judge, "Legacy: The Story of the Mowry, Gilmore, Barr, and Rowleson Families in Sheridan County, Kansas" (unpublished manuscript, 1984), 6, 8-9, Library, Kansas State Historical Society [hereafter cited as Library, KSHS].

3. Oscar O. Winther, "The English and Kansas, 1865-1890," in John G. Clark, ed., *The Frontier Challenge: Responses to the Trans-Mississippi West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1971), 242-43.

advantage of the recently completed rail lines across the state to go on sight-seeing adventures. Englishmen with money and plenty of leisure time were attracted by reports of vast acreages, seemingly fertile soil, and abundant wild game. These travelers were not disappointed and described Kansas in glowing terms in accounts written for the British press. Kansas was "beyond dispute the region in which [the] plains display themselves on the largest scale, and with their points most perfect," an agricultural paradise with its "ever-moving sea of waving grass" and "a balmy, invigorating, almost intoxicating air . . . untainted and unpoisoned by the breaths, smells, and smoke of cities." Virtually all such visitors approved of Kansas as a place for Englishmen to settle and, as long as they came equipped with sufficient capital to get them started, there was really no need to look elsewhere "when the fertile fields of Kansas . . . are so much more suited to their acquirements, tastes, and constitutions."⁴

Members of the landed gentry in England read these accolades and began to believe that Kansas might indeed be a good place to invest their money, as well as their younger, and often wayward, sons. According to the English law of primogeniture, the first born son in a family inherited all his father's land and wealth. This left little for younger sons to look forward to and, consequently, with generous allowances but little direction in life, these sons of wealthy British families often got into trouble at home. To their fathers, Kansas appeared as a possible solution to the problem. Here was a wide open territory that, according to press reports, was capable of furnishing their sons with a good living if they worked diligently. Hoping their younger children would make something of themselves on the Kansas prairies, the landed gentry provided them with liberal allowances and shipped them west. It was these young British "remittance men"⁵ who founded the more well-known British settlements in Kansas like Runnymede in Harper County and Victoria in Ellis County.

Life in Kansas was not easy for these Britishers who had little interest or experience in agricultural pursuits. Kansas was not a western paradise where they could grow rich in a day while feasting on "champagne and venison."⁶ When disaster struck (in Runnymede's case, a crop failure and a disastrous fire; in Victoria's, the death of founder George Grant in 1878), many of the new settlers lost interest in the Kansas prairie and departed.

4. Ibid., 237, 238-39, 241.

5. The term "remittance men" came from the fact that they were subsidized by "remittances," money shipped to them from their families in England.

6. *Anthony Republican and Anthony Bulletin*, May 20, 1948, in "Harper County Clippings," 3: 170, Library, KSHS.

Meanwhile, another British settlement was growing in northwestern Kansas with a character and stability unlike Runnymede, Victoria, or most of the other British colonies in Kansas. Studley, in Sheridan County, was settled primarily by people from Yorkshire County, England. These settlers were middle-class Englishmen and women familiar with rural life and agricultural pursuits, who were poor enough that the lure of "free" homestead land in Kansas was attractive to them but who had enough cash reserves that they could afford to buy seed, stock their farms, and tide themselves over through the lean times until their industriousness paid off.⁷ Like their contemporaries in other settlements, they were men and women with adventurous spirits, willing to leave the security of their homes, face a journey by sea and land of many weeks, to arrive on the high plains of northwestern Kansas and find waiting for them nothing but what they could fashion from the soil with their own hands.

Abraham Pratt of Ripon, in Yorkshire County, England, was no stranger to adventure. Pratt was born in Kirkby Malzeard, just north of Ripon, in 1827, the son of Abraham Pratt, a road surveyor, and his wife Elizabeth Fenton Pratt. As a young man, Pratt was apprenticed into the British navy. In 1848, he was part of a team sent to try to find and rescue British explorer Sir John Franklin who, along with 129 men and two ships, had become lost in the Arctic Barrens while trying to discover a northwest passage.⁸ A year later, while Pratt's ship was docked in San Francisco, the crew mutinied and Abraham got an unexpected opportunity to visit the California gold fields before he was able to make his way back to England.⁹

In 1855, Pratt married Catherine Russell at Kirkby Malzeard and their first child, John Fenton, was born a year later, on June 15, 1856. The Pratts moved to Ripon, where three more children were born: Jane in 1859; Tom in 1861; and Sarah Ann in 1864. In Ripon, Abraham went into partnership with James Taylor, operating a wine and spirits shop with a beer bottling business in the basement.¹⁰

7. Norman Twell, "The British Settlement at Studley" (unpublished manuscript, 1953), 1-2, Library, KSHS.

8. Ibid., 3. See also Owen B. Beattie and James M. Savelle, "Discovery of Human Remains From Sir John Franklin's Last Expedition," *Historical Archaeology: Journal of the Society for Historical Archaeology* 17, no. 2 (1983): 100. Franklin sailed from England in May 1845 with a crew of 129 men aboard two ships, the *H.M.S. Erebus* and the *H.M.S. Terror*. Three years later both ships were abandoned off the northwest coast of King William Island, and the surviving 105 crewmen attempted to travel south to Hudson's Bay Company posts in the interior of the Arctic mainland. Several British expeditions were launched to try to find these 105 men. No survivors were ever located.

9. Richard A. Mermis, ["Brief History of the Abraham Pratt Family"], 1, Richard Mermis Papers, Manuscripts Department, KSHS [hereafter cited as Mermis Papers].

10. Ibid., 1-2.



As part of proving up his land, Abraham Pratt constructed this sod-fronted dugout in a bank along the south fork of the Solomon River.



The original Fenton Pratt home was built by Fenton and his brother, Tom, in 1885. It later served as the core around which a larger house was constructed.



The John Fenton Pratt home, shown here in its completed state with the washhouse on the far right and surrounding cottonwood trees that gave it its name, is today a state historic site.

By 1878, Abraham Pratt was ready to make a change in his life. His wife had died in 1866 and his children were grown enough that they could look out for themselves. Pratt read the many newspaper accounts and advertisements for good, cheap land in America and he remembered favorably his own impressions of the new land he had visited thirty years before. Consequently, in 1878, Pratt persuaded his partner

Taylor to join him in sailing for America. They sold their business and embarked from Liverpool. Later that same year, Abraham Pratt and James Taylor arrived on the high plains of northwestern Kansas. There, along the south fork of the Solomon River on the eastern edge of newly organized Sheridan County, Pratt found the well-watered rich rangeland he was looking for. Journeying to Kenneth, at that time the county seat of Sheridan County, Pratt took out citizenship papers. He then continued north to Oberlin to the federal land office where he filed homestead papers on a quarter section of land on the south side of the Solomon River. There, in a dirt bank, he built himself a sod-fronted dugout and began the task of "proving up" on his claim.¹¹

Two years after Abraham settled in Sheridan County, his oldest son, John Fenton Pratt, arrived. Two years later, in 1882, the second son, Tom, joined his father and brother on the south fork of the Solomon River.¹² The two brothers took up land adjacent to their father's and, over time, by acquiring more land and filing on timber claims, the three Pratts managed to control most of the land on either side of the Solomon River for about a mile west of the county line.¹³

The Pratts were careful to acquire rights to plenty of rangeland with easy access to water as this was essential to the line of business they intended to pursue. The three Yorkshiremen were from an area in England where sheep raising was an important enterprise and all three were familiar with this type of animal husbandry. In addition, raising sheep required no fences, no horses, little extra help, and a small capital investment. A relatively small initial investment in a foundation herd of purebred, wool and meat-producing animals was all that was necessary to secure a product that could live off the land and multiply itself. Sheep ranching seemed a good way for a person to get started in the new country.¹⁴

11. Ibid., 2-3. Kenneth was established as the county seat of Sheridan County in 1879 and remained so until 1886. At that time the town was moved south four miles so that it would be situated along the Union Pacific line. The new county seat was named Hoxie, after H. M. Hoxie, a Union Pacific Railroad official.

12. Twell, "The British Settlement at Studley," 4.

13. Abram Pratt, interview with author, Topeka, Kansas, April 14, 1981.

14. Twell, "The British Settlement at Studley," 4. A search of Fenton Pratt's financial ledgers, on microfilm in the Manuscripts Department, KSHS, does not reveal where the Pratts secured their foundation herds (either sheep or, later, cattle). However, by the 1880s, there were numerous stockyards in Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska where livestock could be purchased and shipped west. In her monograph on the history of the Studley community, Marilyn Mermis Ebersole states: "Settlers often shipped a railroad carload of livestock to the nearest point. Frederick [Turtle, another early settler] brought with him over twenty head of purebred cattle, along with several fine horses." Marilyn Mermis Ebersole, "And It Came To Pass: A Story of a British Settlement," 9, Mermis Papers.

Jennie Elizabeth Place made the journey alone from England to join her fiancé, John Fenton Pratt. Here, Jennie Pratt is seated at far right with her infant daughter, Hilda, and a group of her Studley neighbors.



Sheep ranching was not the only business in which the Pratts engaged. Abraham Pratt established a lumberyard and coal business in the little community that began growing on the north bank of the Solomon River. This nascent town was named Skelton by Pratt, who served as postmaster, and consisted mainly of other British immigrants, who congregated in eastern Sheridan County to ranch or go into business. There was a steady stream of correspondence between the Kansas Pratts and their family and friends in England, and Fenton and Tom returned several times to England for visits. They must have been excellent promoters as many of the town's early settlers were relatives or acquaintances from Yorkshire. Among these were Abraham Pratt's daughter Sally and her husband Charles Lockwood; Abraham's half brother, James Kirk; Charles and James Foster, sons of a boyhood friend of Abraham; and Norman Twell, a nephew of the Fosters. Other English families who settled in the vicinity included the George Pratt family (not related to the Abraham Pratt family); the Frederick Turtles; Howard Turtle (Frederick's brother); Richard Sands (Frederick's father-in-law); James Jefferies; and Frank Brandram. Descendants of some of these Englishmen still reside in Sheridan County.¹⁵

15. Twell, "The British Settlement at Studley," 4-5, 9-13, 15; Helen D. Francis, "Descendants of English Settlers Still Like Tea and Crumpets at Studley," *Hays Daily News*, August 2, 1953. The depression of the 1930s hit the Studley community hard and many business places were abandoned. From a thriving town serving a farming and ranching community and boasting a railroad stop, hardware stores, grocery, bank, pharmacy, school, blacksmith, and other businesses, Studley today has a population of about twenty and its only business is the co-op.

Skelton was in Sheridan County, but just across the county line, the town's railroad depot sat in Graham County. The depot was called Carll. Such confusion was created over which name—Skelton or Carll—more properly was correct that in 1894 the Union Pacific Railway, whose line ran through the community, requested Postmaster Pratt to furnish just one name for the town. Pratt decided on the name Studley, named after Studley Royal, a park and King's hunting grounds near his home in Ripon.¹⁶

Studley began to thrive as more settlers moved into the area. By the turn of the century, the town boasted Pratt's lumber and coal yard, two hardware stores, a bank, a general merchandise store, a blacksmith shop, a livery stable, and a two-teacher school. It also served as the main shipping and receiving point for that part of the country.¹⁷

John Fenton Pratt and his brother Tom became very successful sheep ranchers. Fenton Pratt's business ledgers indicate that in March and April of 1891, for instance, he shipped a total of 3,566 pounds of wool to markets in St. Louis and Philadelphia. A month later, 3,399 pounds of wool were sold to Hagey Brothers in St. Louis for \$522. His livestock tally for 1892 indicated 1,580 sheep on his ranch.¹⁸ In addition to selling

16. Pratt interview; Robert W. Baughman, *Kansas Post Offices* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1961), 123, 229; Mermis, ["Brief History of the Abraham Pratt Family"], 3, Mermis Papers.

17. Pratt interview.

18. Hilda Pratt financial records, 1890-1973, entries for March 6, 1891; April 7, 1891; and May 28, 1891, Pratt ledgers, Manuscripts Department, KSHS.

wool and dealing in the livestock trade, Fenton Pratt served as the local financier, accepting cattle, horses, and farm implements as collateral against loans made to dozens of people in the eastern part of the county.¹⁹

As the sheep business grew, the Pratt brothers concentrated their activities at Fenton Pratt's ranch. From local quarries, the Pratts secured stone enough to build two long shearing sheds, which were connected to each other and to various other outbuildings by a network of stone corrals. These held the sheep as they were brought in to be sheared. Shearers were hired for the season and fetchers, usually the local children, were furnished with shepherd's crooks and employed to keep the shearers supplied with a steady stream of work. All shearing was done by hand and, as the fleeces were released, they were stuffed into huge burlap bags, six feet deep. Each bag was stamped with a "JF" or a "T" to indicate to which brother the fleeces inside belonged, then hauled to the Studley depot and shipped to market.²⁰

In 1885, Fenton and Tom completed construction of a two-room, one-story stone house on Fenton's ranch. The two men batched here, sharing their quarters with other single men who needed a place to stay until they could file on their own land. The first winter in the new house was an uncomfortable one, as the men had not had time to properly insulate the walls or allow the mortar to completely dry before they had to move into their new quarters. The new residents spent that winter contending with the cold damp of thick hoar frost that formed on the inside walls.²¹

Fenton's ranching and business interests prospered and, by 1888, he felt that he was well enough established in the new land to be able to have his fiancée in Yorkshire join him in America. Consequently, later that year, Jennie Elizabeth Place made the long journey to Sheridan County, alone. She arrived at Lenora, Kansas, the end of the rail line, on December 29, 1888. Fenton met her there, they were married the next day, and traveled by wagon overland the thirty or so miles to Studley. Tom Pratt moved out of the stone house he had been sharing with his brother, and Fenton and Jennie set up housekeeping there.²²

19. Ibid.

20. Pratt Interview.

21. Twell, "The British Settlement at Studley," 4-5.

22. Ibid., 6; *Hoxie Sentinel*, August 13, 1953, in "Sheridan County Clippings," 1: 53, Library, KSHS. Tom Pratt constructed a home for himself about a quarter mile west of Fenton and Jennie's home. In 1897, Tom married Elizabeth Mosier, with whom he had eight children. They enlarged Tom's original house and their home became a showplace of flower and rock gardens and lakes and lily ponds. Tom Pratt died on June 20, 1940, and Elizabeth on February 27, 1944. Several of their children, especially Abram Pratt, James Fenton Pratt, and Katherine Pratt Mermis have been instrumental in providing historical background on the Pratt family and the Cottonwood Ranch. See Richard A. Mermis, Jr., "The Family of Tom and Elizabeth Pratt" (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), [2], Library, KSHS.

Sheridan County proved quite a shock for Jennie Pratt. Though Yorkshire's moors and dales looked forbidding and empty, they enjoyed the comfort of neat and frequent farms and the security, for Jennie, of the familiarity of home. At Studley, the vastness of the treeless prairie nearly overwhelmed her while she tried to keep house despite dust, deluges, and fleas. The bane of sheep herders, the fleas, were a constant irritant among the flocks and could hardly be kept from being brought into the house, either in the straw that was sprinkled on the floor as a padding for the rugs or on the sheepmen themselves.²³

The steady stream of people in and out of the house or who dropped in at mealtime expecting to be fed was another adjustment for this British bride. From one meal to the next, Jennie never knew how many she would be feeding. She recalled:

Everybody who came pulled up at the table. Strangers and everyone! When people came to call, they brought their bedding with them. The men slept on the floor and the women in the beds, as long as the beds lasted.²⁴

Jennie adapted to this new environment well, however, and eventually even went into the fields to help with the sheep herding. She took to pioneer life so good-humoredly that she saw nothing anomalous about being a housekeeper, mother, wife, and sheepherder all in one. She perhaps did not realize how much she had adapted to her varied duties until the day a new British bride arrived in the community and responded to Jennie's greeting with the rather scornful acknowledgment, "So! . . . This is the lady I've heard so much about!"²⁵

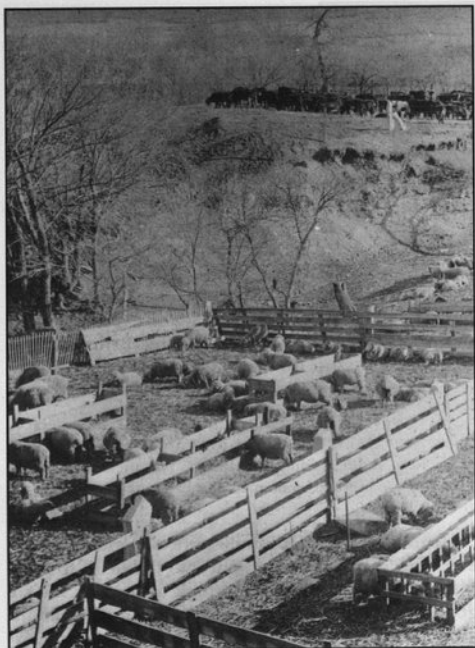
Fenton was proud of the way his wife had met the rigors of the new land and did his best to ease her life and bring some degree of gentility to their home. As the sheep business prospered and their family grew, Fenton began to enlarge and improve the little stone house. In 1889, the year their first child, Hilda, was born, Fenton built a west wing onto the original stone house. A second daughter, Elsie, was born in 1894 and shortly thereafter Fenton completed his home by adding an east wing to the structure. Several stained glass windows graced the completed house, and the dining room featured a fireplace faced by pink, green, and white tiles and surrounded by an ornately carved wood mantelpiece. Fenton sent to England for many of the furnishings, providing for his wife's home a horsehair sofa with four matching chairs, all with mahogany trim;²⁶ a red Chinese screen; a piano; a

23. *Hoxie Sentinel*, August 13, 1953, in "Sheridan County Clippings," 1: 53.

24. *Hays Daily News*, August 2, 1953.

25. "Sheridan County Clippings," 1: 53.

26. *Hays Daily News*, August 2, 1953.



The Pratts began as sheep ranchers, but by the turn of the century most of the sheep had been sold and cattle had taken their place.

chair, its back and seat done in needlework, with a matching footstool; and three brass beds. The washhouse in the backyard, built of the same locally quarried limestone as the main house, had curtains in the window and wallpaper on the walls, and in the front yard Fenton installed a two-seater lawn swing.²⁷

Not only for beautification of his property but also as a necessary buffer against the searing summer sun and the chilling winds of winter, Fenton planted a windbreak of cottonwood trees around his house. Periodic trips to the north fork of the Solomon River were made to cut slips from the trees. The slips were then wrapped in damp cloths and hauled back to the ranch for planting. Fenton planted so many cottonwoods on his property that the place came to be known as Cottonwood Ranch.²⁸

27. Information on some interior furnishings comes from author's personal viewing when author was allowed to tour Pratt home shortly before a public auction of contents was held. The author was privileged to see the original furnishings as they were arranged when Hilda Pratt was last living there. Many of these same furnishings, notably the Chinese screen and the lawn swing, are evident in some of the photographs taken by Fenton Pratt.

28. "Sheridan County Clippings," 1: 54; Pratt interview; Don D. Rowilson, interview with author, Topeka, Kansas, December 15, 1983.

The cottonwoods also served as a windbreak around the Pratt's large garden and orchard. Here the Pratts raised not only fresh melons and produce, but the orchard yielded peaches, plums, apples, cherries, and apricots. Raspberry bushes were set out and an acre of grape vines furnished the family with a yearly average of about thirty gallons of wine. The cottonwoods protected this oasis on the west and south and the whole area was irrigated by a system of pipes run down to it from a cistern by the house.²⁹

By 1895, Fenton Pratt's operations had become a testament to his hard work and business acumen. Of the 320 acres that he claimed, 50 acres were cultivated to corn, oats, sorghum, and millet, and 160 acres were fenced pasture. Nine hundred sheep grazed his land, yielding thousands of pounds of wool a year.

The Pratts and their neighbors were gradually succeeding in wresting civilization from the barren plains. Fenton observed this and captured their efforts on film. An avid amateur photographer, over the years he produced a collection of thousands of images of his family, his ranching and farming activities, the growth of the town of Studley, and the other early settlers in the area.

Abraham Pratt's health began to fail him around the turn of the century and he was eventually forced to give up his home south of the Solomon River. He moved in with Fenton and Jennie, and on August 2, 1901, he died at Cottonwood Ranch and was buried in the Studley cemetery.

About this same time, cattle ranching was growing in importance in Sheridan County. Raising purebred cattle required fencing the open range that had proved so conducive to raising sheep. This, coupled with a fall in the price of sheep, led Fenton and Tom Pratt to sell off their vast sheep herds and go into the cattle business.³⁰

In 1902, when Fenton began selling off his sheep, he also began selling his land. Between 1902 and 1903, he sold 160 acres and over the next thirty years gradually decreased his holdings until by 1936 he owned approximately fifty-nine acres of land—this included the twenty-three acres on which the house and outbuildings stood and some pastureland. The money realized from the land sales was invested in stocks and was also used in Fenton's financial transactions in the county. When John Fenton Pratt died, on November 26, 1937, at the age of eighty-one, he left his widow and daughters well provided for.³¹

29. Hilda Pratt financial records.

30. Evelyn Walden to author, March 6, 1984; "Consideration of the Pratt Ranch, Sheridan County, as an Historic Property Administered for the State of Kansas by the Kansas State Historical Society," 6, Historic Preservation Department, KSHS.

31. Walden to author, March 6, 1984.



The Frederick Turtles were another British family to settle near Studley in 1884. When ranching did not work out, Turtle moved his family into the town of Studley and opened a general merchandise store in a two-room sod building. By the mid-1890s, Turtle was able to build this two-story stone structure; it contained the family's living quarters, an upstairs meeting hall, the store, and post office.



The Pratt's younger daughter, Elsie, had married Clarence Elza Johnson on November 28, 1929, and they left Studley to live in Manhattan, Kansas. Older daughter Hilda never married and remained on the homeplace with her mother, managing what farming activities remained and continuing to record all financial transactions as her father had done.³²

Hilda lived alone at the ranch, after the death of her mother in 1959, until shortly before her own death in 1980. In 1982 the State of Kansas purchased approximately twenty-three acres of the original John

Fenton Pratt ranch; the acreage included the house, outbuildings, an active spring, and some pasture. The Kansas State Historical Society assumed the administration of the ranch as a state historic site and hopes to create there Kansas' first living history working ranch.

The John Fenton Pratt ranch historic site is, at this point, unique in Kansas, not only as an historic ranch but also in the quantity of primary resource materials. Financial ledgers, photographs, and oral history interviews remain to interpret the history and development of the ranch, the English influence in Sheridan County, and the settlement of northwestern Kansas. That is an important inheritance for the people of Kansas.

³² Dorothy Johnson Campbell to Richard Mermis, September 11, 1980.