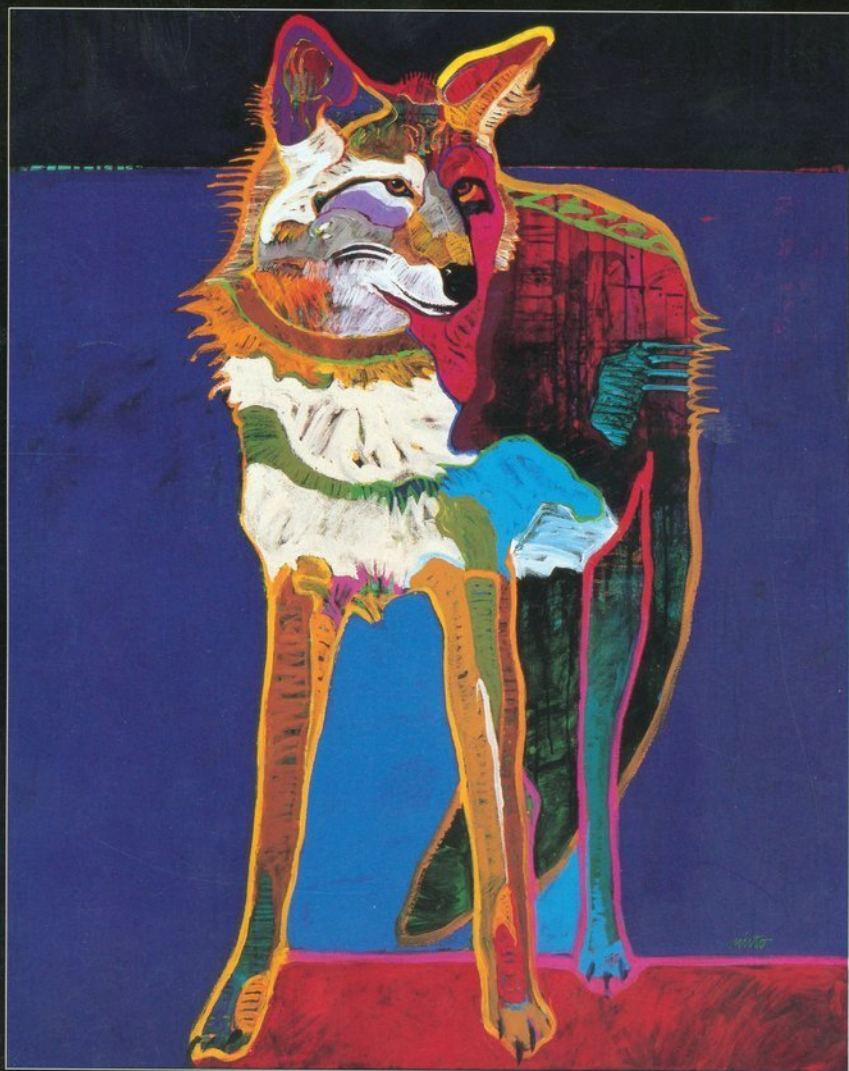
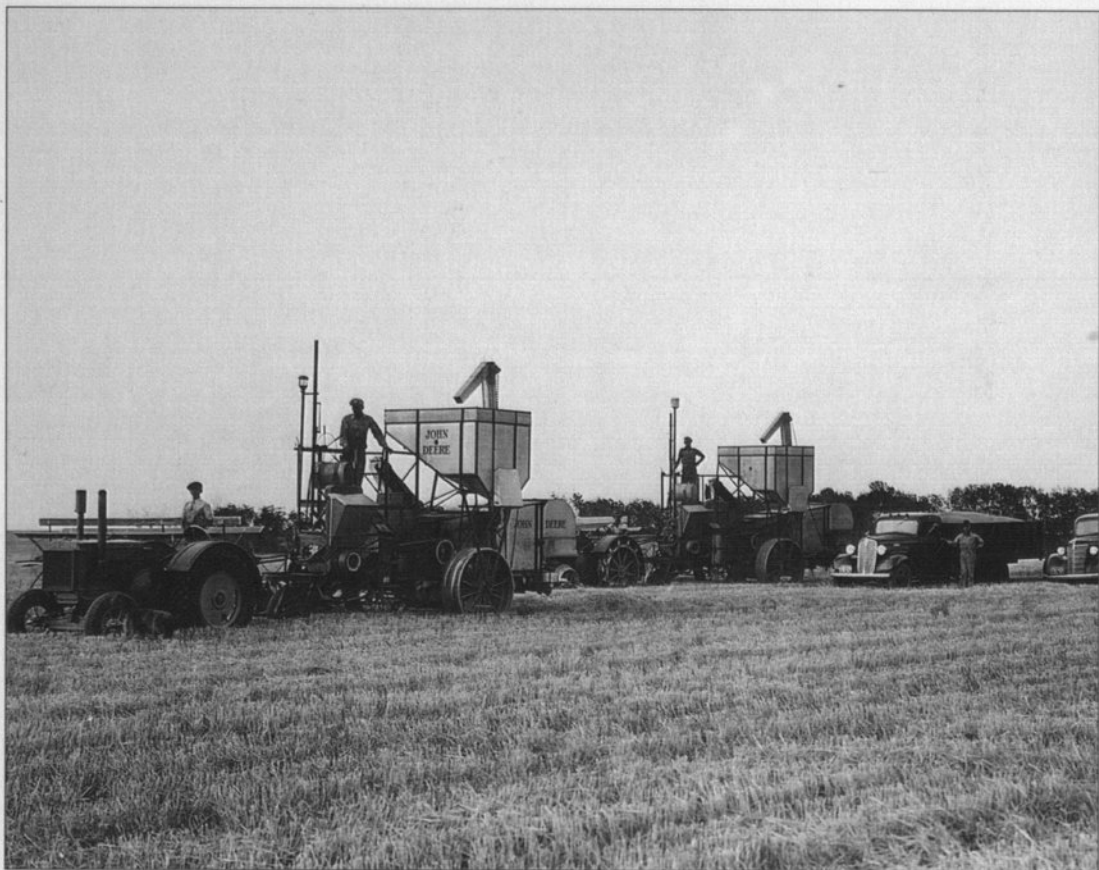


KANSAS HISTORY

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Combine Harvesting, Cheyenne County, ca. 1939

When the European war commenced in 1939, Kansas agriculture was in the early stages of a demographic transformation and in the midst of a "technological revolution." Mechanization became more and more common as the Second World War accelerated an existing trend. The most obvious symbol of "power farming" in the first half of the twentieth century was the farm tractor, but on the Great Plains the combine was vying for that distinction by the end of the depression decade.

The combine, which actually had been around for a century when this Cheyenne County photograph was taken, "combined" the reaping and threshing tasks in one machine. Technical advancements, not the least of which was the gasoline tractor, made the combine practical and popular with Midwest and Plains farmers by the late 1930s. Harvesting, which took from four to six hours per acre with the older method, decreased to three-quarters to one and one-half hours with a combine. "For the farmers who could afford the machine," wrote historian R. Douglas Hurt, "the combine made them almost independent from hired help. Not only was the crop

removed at once and the field thereby cleared for immediate plowing, but the cut straw was also scattered across the ground to help build soil humus. Furthermore, the combine freed farm women from the drudgery of cooking meals for large threshing crews."

Although relatively scarce at the end of the First World War, combines became almost commonplace by the mid-1920s, with some localities harvesting nearly all their wheat with these machines by 1926. Cheyenne County farmers, who harvested 899,000 bushels of wheat in 1939 and 1,386,000 in 1940, employed more than 350 combines. This was up from only 82 in 1925 and 171 in 1930—a remarkable increase for the intervening decade marred by drought, dust, and depression. At the end of World War II, Cheyenne County farmers owned more than 550 combines, and throughout the state more than 50,000 were enumerated.

This is the third in a four-part series of photographs on the inside front cover of Kansas History during 1997 highlighting twentieth-century change in harvesting technology.

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by John Nieto, serigraph edition 195. The coyote is the
subject of this issue's
"Against Kansas's Top Dog,"
beginning on page 160. Back
Cover: Lawrence: Today
and Yesterday, published for
the 1913 reunion of the sur-
vivors of Quantrill's raid on
Lawrence. An article on the
reunion begins on page 176.

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