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# Oasis in the Short Grass

## Geography, Politics, and Urban Water Supply in Garden City, Kansas, 1925–1960

by Margaret A. Bickers

When readers reached page 6 of the August 1, 1940, *Garden City Telegram*, they found a story about the hardships faced by farmers in Osborne County, seventy miles northeast of Garden City, Kansas. The article described farmers spending the night lined up at the few wells in the county that were still producing water, taking turns filling trucks and barrels with the vital fluid. Two pages later, *Telegram* editor Robert B. Reed contemplated the need to irrigate Garden City's trees, insisting that "to let an appreciable number of these trees die from want of water would be nothing less than criminal negligence. After all, water costs only twelve and a half cents a thousand gallons and the saving of a few trees is not going to break anyone." Reed argued that since the city commission had reduced water rates specifically to encourage irrigation of trees and lawns, every resident should do his or her duty to the trees, drought or no drought. The Arkansas River had run dry, and farmers lined up for water not all that far away, so why was Garden City "spending" water on trees? Surely there were other more important concerns for the city's leaders than greenery. Or perhaps not.<sup>1</sup>

Garden City's proximity to the Arkansas River and easy access to groundwater allowed civic leaders to view water as a tool to be used in large quantities to improve the city. Beginning within a decade of the city's founding, ready access to soft water through comparatively shallow wells and the ability of the Arkansas River to carry away sewage insulated Garden City from some of the difficulties experienced by other more upland communities. Drainage of storm water and sewage caused as many, if not more, complaints from citizens than did a lack of potable water as the city expanded across the river valley. Municipal water seemed to be an unlimited and easily available resource, a tool for urban improvement there to be used. Because of this seemingly unlimited supply, between 1887 and 1935 municipal water and infrastructure development occurred on an as-needed basis, with the city digging a well or laying pipe whenever residents or businesses required and finances permitted. Threats from floods along the Arkansas and municipal drainage problems caused more difficulties

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1. "Water Shortage Becomes Acute in Kansas" and Robert B. Reed, "Trees," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, August 1, 1940.

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Main Street, Garden City, Kansas

for city leaders than did supplying domestic and industrial taps, although during the wartime 1940s, population increases and materials shortages led to temporary growing pains. Even the extended droughts of the 1930s and 1950s did not change the attitude among city leaders toward what they had always viewed as being the proper use of water—“spending” it freely on municipal growth and beautification.<sup>2</sup>

2. Most of the research on this area and the influence of access to surface water and groundwater on the High Plains has focused on agriculture because agriculture uses account for over 90 percent of groundwater consumption in the area. See, for example, James E. Sherow, *Watering the Valley: Development Along the High Plains Arkansas River, 1870–1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990); Anne M. Marvin, “The Fertile Domain: Irrigation as Adaptation in the Garden City, KS Area, 1880–1910” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1986); John Opie, *Ogallala: Water for a Dry Land*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000). David E. Kromm and Stephen White’s work includes urban growth and survival, but as it relates to an irrigation-based economy. See David E. Kromm and Stephen E. White, eds., *Groundwater Exploitation in the High Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992); Stephen E. White, “Ogallala Oases: Water Use, Population Redistribution and Policy Implications on the High Plains of Western Kansas, 1980–1990,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 84, 1 (1994): 29–45.

Garden City sits on the floodplain of the Arkansas River in the semiarid short-grass plains of southwestern Kansas, where average yearly precipitation is 19 inches. The river at this point is a wide, sand-bedded stream bordered by low hills on the north and sandhills south of the valley. In the 1880s, a few springs bubbled up where the river cut into the water-bearing layer of sand and gravel known as the Ogallala Aquifer, and marshy bottomlands marked former channels of the Arkansas that had been abandoned when the river filled them with sand and shifted to a lower part of the valley. Bunch grasses and other drought-tolerant plants covered the sandhills south of the river—sandhills created thousands of years earlier by windstorms that dwarfed the dusters of the twentieth century. Even though the Arkansas River occasionally ran nearly dry, water still remained close to the surface of the riverbed or available from the springs. On the uplands north of the river, the fertile, stumpless, and stoneless soil did not make up for the lack of moisture; 20 inches of precipitation is the minimum needed to grow wheat, corn, and other crops consistently, and the

High Plains receives that annual amount less than half the time.<sup>3</sup>

The river eventually called the Arkansas provided people with water for centuries before Europeans and Anglo-Americans visited the stream. Apache, Kiowa, and later Comanche Indians used the Arkansas River valley prior to the arrival of Anglo-American ranchers in the 1870s. The valley provided access to firewood, shelter, and plants not always found on the drier uplands or in the sandhills, and springs or seeps from the Ogallala Aquifer supplied water even when the river disappeared into the sand during dry periods. After 1820 the trade caravans of the Santa Fe Trail made use of the river as well. Ranchers moved into the area once the Native Americans had been forced out in the 1870s, and land speculators eyed the advance of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad across the region.<sup>4</sup>

The Anglo-American pattern of farmers following the ranchers held true for southwestern Kansas. In 1872 Decatur "Doc" Wellbourne Barton and his brother brought a herd of Texas cattle to the present site of Garden City before moving south from "the big cottonwood tree" and spring on the Arkansas River to a location a few miles away. That same year the Santa Fe Railroad laid track from Dodge City west along the river, designating stops that included Pierceville, Lakin, and Sherlock (modern-day Holcomb) but not Garden City. In 1878 James R. and William D. Fulton and C. J. "Buffalo" Jones founded a new town in (Sequoyah) Finney County, and the next year settlers began arriving at the town site despite warnings and discouragement from ranchers who wanted the land to remain open range. The Fultons dug a well and irrigated a small garden, getting good results from the silt-enriched bottomland soil.<sup>5</sup>

3. Thomas Dunne and Luna B. Leopold, *Water in Environmental Planning* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1978), 605; U.S. Surveyor General of Kansas and Nebraska, Department of the Interior, Plat Maps, 1872, Township 24S, Range 33W, and Township 24S, Range 32W, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; Rex Buchanan, ed., *Kansas Geology: An Introduction to Landscapes, Rocks, Minerals and Fossils* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 38.

4. Rain falling on sandhills soaks into the groundwater very quickly, recharging local water tables much faster than does rain on loam or clay soils. James E. Sherow, "Discord in the Valley of Content: Strife over Natural Resources in a Changing Environment on the Arkansas River Valley of the High Plains" (Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado at Boulder, 1987), 15, 50; Agnesa Reeve, *Constant Frontier: The Continuing History of Finney County, Kansas* (Garden City, Kans.: Finney County Historical Society, 1996), 3; U. S. Surveyor General of Kansas and Nebraska, Department of the Interior, Field Notes, 1872, Township 24S, Range 33W, and Township 24S, Range 32W, Book 334, part B, page 18, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; U.S. Surveyor General of Kansas and Nebraska, Plat Maps, 1872.

5. Leola Howard Blanchard, *Conquest of Southwest Kansas: A History and Thrilling Stories of Frontier Life in the State of Kansas* (1931; reprinted,

That well and others like it quickly proved necessary because the wet period of the early and mid-1870s ended in July 1879. The wheat crop failed, and miller William Henry Armentrout agreed to let Squire Worrell convert Armentrout's new gristmill's race into an irrigation ditch as an experiment. Worrell's previous experience with irrigation paid good dividends and inspired the larger-scale irrigation that began developing around Garden City. Irregular rains and the lack of high-volume pumping equipment led farmers to depend on the Arkansas River in dry years and to complain about paying for unneeded irrigation water in wet years. The town prospered along with the local farmers and incorporated in January 1883 as a "city of the third class," with elections for mayor and councilmen two weeks later.<sup>6</sup>

**D**uring this period, other communities in far western Kansas developed along the railroad lines. Liberal, sixty miles south of Garden City on the border of "No-Man's Land" (the Oklahoma Panhandle), arose at the terminus of the Chicago, Kansas and Nebraska Railroad in 1888. Although the town site sat on dry uplands, plentiful groundwater from the Ogallala Aquifer made up for the lack of streams or a river. Near the northern extreme of the Kansas High Plains, Goodland incorporated in September 1887, just ahead of the arrival of the railroads. The Middle Fork of Sappa Creek ran within a mile of the town site but failed to provide enough flow for the railroad or a town. As with Liberal, plentiful groundwater made up for the lack of surface supplies.<sup>7</sup>

The early 1880s, a period of wet years, saw Garden City grow from a small collection of sod houses and a store into a town of 1,500 by 1890. "Businessmen and property owners," the town's unelected civic leadership, founded

Garden City, Kans: Finney County Historical Society, 1989), 46, 195, 75–77, 232; Marvin, "The Fertile Domain," 50, 51; Craig Miner, *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865–1890* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 179; James R. Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 148.

6. Blanchard, *Conquest of Southwest Kansas*, 239, 254; Sherow, *Watering the Valley*, 83; Marvin, "The Fertile Domain," 98. For a fine discussion of the ditch irrigation boom of the late 1880s, which is not really part of our story, see Anne M. Marvin, "A Grave-Yard of Hopes: Irrigation and Boosterism in Southwestern Kansas, 1880–1890," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 19 (Spring 1996): 36–51.

7. Harry E. Chrisman, *Lost Trails of the Cimarron* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1964), 129, 155; U.S. Geologic Survey, "Liberal Quadrant," 7.5-minute scale (1971; revision, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Geologic Survey, 1983); U.S. Geologic Survey, "Goodland Quadrant," 7.5-minute scale (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Geologic Survey, 1965). For a brief history of the City of Goodland, see "city overview" at [www.goodlandks.us](http://www.goodlandks.us).

the *Garden City Herald* newspaper in 1885. Garden City installed the first sewer lines and municipal water-supply system in 1887, featuring a combined sanitary and storm-water system that drained into the Arkansas River, along with wells and a standpipe capable of providing 1.1 million gallons per day of domestic and firefighting needs. These water systems augmented or replaced individual domestic wells and reduced insurance rates for businesses as well as improving public health by replacing the “leaky privy vaults” behind homes and businesses. In comparison, Liberal supplied water to businesses beginning in 1890 and offered delivery to its 1,700 residents for \$.50 per household barrel. Liberal’s sanitary and storm sewer system was not well-developed until 1911, after the addition of five hundred structures to the city during 1907 and 1908 pushed municipal leaders to act. “Forward-looking” Garden City’s future seemed bright, with increased rainfall and good wheat crops suggesting that if common wisdom was true and rain really did “follow the plow,” then urban development and prosperity would follow the rain.<sup>8</sup>

Garden City weathered political growing pains along with its economic booms and busts. Despite another drought, a nationwide depression, and a local “bust” in the 1890s, Garden City survived on slowly-increasing irrigated agriculture and its own municipal wells. The development of sugar-beet cultivation in the area and the 1906 construction of a sugar-beet refining plant in the city encouraged a population rise to 3,171 in 1910 and 3,848 in 1920. Local businessmen, like Progressive-era reformers in larger cities, became unhappy with the seemingly inefficient seven-member city council and in 1910 started a petition drive to convert Garden City to a “more professional” commission system. The drive failed due to lack of interest, but events surrounding a 1912 bond issue for a municipal light plant revived the idea. The initial \$40,000 bond issue passed, but during an investigation some thought to have been inspired by the privately owned Garden City Light utility company, John S. Dawson, the state attorney general, found the election invalid on a technicality and ordered a new election.

8. Sherow, *Watering the Valley*, 83; Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains*, 203; “How the *Herald* Came to Be,” *Garden City Herald*, February 26, 1925; “City Commission Moves to Control Truck Problem,” *Garden City Daily Telegram*, August 29, 1940; Olga Montgomery, Finney County Historical Society, to author, February 24, 2005; “Report of the Committee,” *Garden City Weekly Herald*, August 4, 1887; “Aqua Pura,” *Garden City Weekly Herald*, September 22, 1887; City of Liberal, “City History,” [www.cityofliberal.com/aboutliberal/history/index.html](http://www.cityofliberal.com/aboutliberal/history/index.html); “Liberal Has Voted Down,” *Liberal News*, July 1, 1909.



*Garden City* photographer Henry L. Wolf made this image of his town’s waterworks around the turn of the twentieth century. At the time municipal water was readily available and seen as a tool for urban improvement, there to be used. Because of this seemingly unlimited supply, between 1887 and 1935 municipal water and infrastructure development occurred on an as-needed basis, with the city digging a well or laying pipe when residents or businesses required and finances permitted. The original standpipe, pictured here, was capable of providing 1.1 million gallons of water per day for the city’s domestic and firefighting needs.

At the first city council meeting after the light-plant-bond revote, a petition to change to a commission came before the council with over four hundred signatures. Both newspapers supported the measure wholeheartedly, although Ralph Henry Paxton of the *Telegram* opined that he preferred a purely professional manager and small elected “board of directors” as being more efficient. The measure passed with

**AQUA PURA.**

—

**Among the Many Other Public Improvements in Which the Citizens of Garden City Take a Just Pride,**

—

**We Must Not Forget the Magnificent System of Water Works That Have Just Been Completed at a Cost of \$15,000,**

—

**And Which Have a Capacity of Over Forty-one Thousand Gallons Per Hour, or a Million Gallons Every Day.**

—

**The Water Mains Extend to all Parts of the City and Aggregate Nearly Five Miles in Length.**

—

**The Stand Pipe Ten Feet in Diameter, One Hundred and Thirty High and Constructed of the Best of Tank Iron.**

—

**The Pumping Plant Consists of Two Main Service Pumps That Will Pump Over One Million Gallons Per Day.**

—

**Everything Connected With the Plant of the Most Durable and Substantial Character.**

—

Garden City Weekly Herald, September 22, 1887

“practically no opposition” during the April general election, although “quite a number did not vote either way,” and neither newspaper published the final tally.<sup>9</sup>

Garden City’s leaders worked to expand the city’s infrastructure despite a series of downturns in the agricultural economy that formed the city’s fiscal foundation. In 1917 the city expanded the underground sanitary sewer system, which routed raw sewage into the Arkansas River, and in 1919–1920 it expanded the waterworks as well. Liberal also expanded its water systems in 1917, digging additional supply wells and sending sewage into a septic tank and filter, then into a dry lakebed east of town. Farther to the north, Goodland waited until 1920 to run sewer pipes and filtered waste to Sappa Creek, although a deep-well water-supply system had been constructed in the 1890s. Despite dry years and poor harvests in the mid-1920s, Garden City carried on and continued growing, reaching a population of 5,124 in November 1926.<sup>10</sup>

**I**n 1925 Garden City’s commissioners began business by trying to balance requests for improvements with a tight budget. In March members of the Cemetery Club committee approached the commission about getting a better water supply and were told that indeed, “more water is needed at the cemetery but the city has not the money to increase the supply.” Because of the city’s otherwise plentiful supply, the next month the commission ordered the sewers flushed and the streets washed (or sprinkled if unpaved) to keep down any dust and to reduce odors. Finances apparently improved during the year,

9. Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains*, 203; “Commission Form of Government Carried,” *Garden City Telegram*, April 4, 1913; “To the Voters,” *Garden City Herald*, November 21, 1912; Kansas State Historical Society, “State Attorneys General,” [www.ksks.org/genealogists/individuals/officials/attygenl.htm](http://www.ksks.org/genealogists/individuals/officials/attygenl.htm); “The Council Meets Later It Adjourns,” *Garden City Telegram*, January 21, 1913; R. H. Paxton, “Commission Government,” *Garden City Telegram*, March 21, 1913; “Commission Government Now,” *Garden City Herald*, April 3, 1913; Bradley Robert Rice, *Progressive Cities: The Commission Government Movement in America, 1901–1920* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 117. Apparently much work of city government was done outside the formal city commission meetings or was simply not recorded in the official minutes because through the 1920s, at least, most commission records are simply lists of expenditures with some additional notes rather than the transcribed meeting minutes found in other municipalities.

10. C. A. Haskins, “The Sewage Disposal Problem in Kansas,” in F. M. Veatch, H. P. Evans, and L. E. Jackson, *Sewage Disposal in Kansas: A Discussion in Certain Municipalities, Together with Instructions to Plant Operators, Bulletin of the University of Kansas, Engineering Bulletin No. 9* 18 (December 1, 1917): 18, 19; Reeve, *Constant Frontier*, 82, 84, 85, 89; City of Garden City, Kansas, City Commission Records, vol. July 22, 1918–June 13, 1927, November 14, 1926, 466.

in part due to income generated by the summer's record water consumption. Lower summer water rates encouraged greater consumption, and the commission and both local newspapers urged citizens to water their trees and irrigate lawns, an efficient method of improving the appearance of the town while filling municipal coffers.<sup>11</sup>

A constant theme in both Garden City newspapers during this time was the value of city's climate and its water, especially for civic beautification. Editor Elmer Ellsworth Kelley, who now published the *Herald* with three of his adult children, suggested in a June editor-

ial that "while we can be justly proud of Finney County as a farming community ... the greatest asset for it is the climate," with its warm days, cool nights, rain when needed, and abundant sunshine. Later that summer, the Kelleys pointed out proudly, "More water was used in Garden City in July than during any other month on record, according to Ben Bullard, superintendent of the water works." Granted, the pressure got a little low between 4:00 and 8:00 in the evenings, but the soft water was good for the trees and lawns. Frank Ewing of the *Telegram*, more of a civic booster than the Kelleys, reminded his readers during that record-setting month how fortunate Garden City was to have such an "inexhaustible supply of cold soft water" and urged its use on lawns and in the parks. "Our water supply is one of our greatest assets and it is being used lavishly to conserve and add to the beauty which is ours." Throughout the 1920s, and even through the 1950s, trees and lawns were seen as some of Garden City's greatest assets, and city water was the key to keeping things green.<sup>12</sup>

Another example of how Garden City's leaders viewed proper water use for a prosperous, orderly town could be



*Despite another drought, a nationwide depression, and a local "bust" in the 1890s, Garden City survived on slowly increasing irrigated agriculture and its own municipal wells. David W. Pitts, a clothier who served for a time as the city's postmaster and clerk of the district court, heeded the entreaties of city leaders at his home on North Tenth Street—he watered his trees and lawn as an efficient method of improving the appearance of the town.*

seen in the "Big Pool," the 2.5-million-gallon concrete-lined structure that still extends over half a city block in Finnup Park. Dug by hand in 1922 and advertised ever since then as "the world's largest free, concrete-lined municipal swimming pool," the Big Pool served several functions. It provided a place for local and visiting children (and adults) to play and swim under the supervision of lifeguards, reducing the danger of drowning and mischief. The pool also formed a unique feature to use in advertising Garden City—"the world's largest free, concrete-lined municipal pool" sounded more memorable than "We have nice parks." And the city's ability and willingness to "spend" 2.5 million gallons of water for recreation suggested that technology, progress, and good urban order could conquer the semiarid climate: Trees and gardens replaced short-grass and sagebrush, and a giant, ultramodern swimming pool supplanted swimming holes on the Arkansas River. By using pool water to irrigate the park and some alfalfa during water changes, Garden City's leaders achieved a pinnacle of efficient water use and urban modernity—at least by their standards.<sup>13</sup>

This refrain of "use, use" caused some frustration within the water department in March 1926, when a growing population and the desire for fire protection led to the need for temporary reductions in consumption. William Trull of the water department complained to the *Herald*

11. Garden City Commission Records, March 2, 1925, 367; *ibid.*, April 20, 1925, 377; *ibid.*, April 27, 1925, 378; "July Was a Record Breaker for Water Consumption," *Garden City Herald*, August 6, 1925; Frank Ewing, Editorial, *Garden City Telegram*, July 16, 1925.

12. "Finney Synonymous with Climate," *Garden City Herald*, June 11, 1925; "July Was a Record Breaker"; Frank Ewing, Editorial. E. E. Kelley, a former state printer, had only recently arrived in Garden City from Toronto, Woodson County, Kansas. See William E. Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1918), 5: 2294–2295; *Garden City Directory, 1926–1927*.

13. Welcome to Garden City, "Hometown Garden City," [www.garden-city.net/info/hometown.html](http://www.garden-city.net/info/hometown.html); Kansas Sampler Foundation, "The World's Largest in Kansas," [www.kansassampler.org/wckan/largest.html](http://www.kansassampler.org/wckan/largest.html).

that “when I ask [householders] to use the water within reason the man will come back at me with an unreasonable argument. ... Unless there is some way to check this willful waste of water the time is short when we will be unable to show any pressure on the gage.” The problem was not exactly that there was not enough water but that consumption drained the water tank so low that there would not be enough pressure should the fire department need to put out a blaze. The problem recurred in June 1927, prompting the commission to institute watering restrictions between 4:30 and 10:00 P.M. and to insist that “in case of sounding of the fire alarm, faucets must be closed immediately.”<sup>14</sup>

Part of the city’s problems lay with the rising prosperity that allowed people to purchase water-consuming appliances or install indoor plumbing, and the propensity of Garden City residents to use more water once it became available to them. Washing machines, lawn sprinklers, bathing on more than just Saturday night, and flush toilets all contributed to increasing water consumption. After all, if the municipality had water to “spend” on pools and parks, as city actions and newspaper editorials suggested, then there should be more than enough water remaining for domestic uses and improved sanitation.

The disposal of this used water (sewage) and rain gave the city commission seemingly continual headaches. Like other growing towns in level places, Garden City’s location on the flat river-valley floor made drainage quite challenging, especially as houses and pavement covered more of the land surface, leading to increased runoff because there was less open ground to absorb rainfall. Although city drainage ditches, curbs, guttering, and storm sewers provided some relief, topography worked against engineering as the town expanded to the north, away from the river. The land rose very slightly as one moved north, then descended into an older river channel before rising again. One experimental solution, at least for storm water in the northern part of town, lay in collecting storm water, filtering it, and allowing it to run through a recharge well and then back into the groundwater. This failed to solve the problem over the long term, and only one recharge well was ever recorded.<sup>15</sup>

Both the storm sewers and the original sanitary sewer drained into the Arkansas River, downstream from the irrigation intake gates used by nearby farmers. In this, Garden City followed the lead of larger cities such as New York or Chicago or Topeka by applying the dilution theory of sanitation, which stated that the larger body of water would eventually dilute and sterilize the sewage that flowed into it. One can imagine the problems caused by the raw sewage pouring into the Arkansas River, especially as the population increased. It is likely that noxious smells filled the air, especially in summer, if river flow slowed or stopped altogether. One mechanical difficulty with this system lay in ensuring that the outflow pipes remained above the water level or that ways existed to prevent backups if the river pressure exceeded outflow pressure, especially if high water coincided with a local rainstorm. The larger problem, and one that remained through the 1960s, was how to achieve the proper slope on the outflow pipes to keep sewage or storm water flowing using gravity when the city was almost perfectly flat. This led to the need to flush the sewers, as was done in April 1925 and on other occasions, in order to address complaints about bad smells and blockages that arose when sewer contents failed to move.<sup>16</sup>

By 1928 city growth had prompted commissioners to hire the Well Works Manufacturing Company to drill two test wells north of town “with a view to expanding the water supply” and to approve storm and sanitary sewer expansions at its March 26 meeting. After a laboratory tested the water and sent the results to the State Board of Health, the commission received approval from the board for increasing the water supply in early November of that year, and Well Works proceeded to complete the two new wells. The first new well came into use in April, complete with pump house and derrick installed by Lester Palmer, and producing a flow of six hundred gallons per minute. In January, as part of an article in a series about Garden City’s assets and strengths, the *Garden City Telegram* pointed out that the city possessed, to date, sixteen miles of water mains; nine hundred taps; nine hydrants; and the ability to pump 150,000 gallons per day at the main pumping station, drawing water from “deep wells” on the north side of the Ar-

14. “A Word to the Public,” *Garden City Herald*, March 25, 1926; “City Orders Conservation of Water Supply,” *Garden City Herald*, May 30, 1926.

15. Dunne and Leopold, *Water in Environmental Planning*, 275; Finney County map, *The Official State Atlas of Kansas* (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1887); “To Dispose of Rainwater,” *Garden City Herald*, August 30, 1920.

16. “Utilities of a City an Asset for Residents,” *Garden City Telegram*, January 3, 1929; Martin V. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 163; Garden City Commission Records, October 11, 1926, 460; Veatch, Evans, and Jackson, *Sewage Disposal in Kansas*.



Captioned "A residence street in Garden City, in the heart of the new irrigation area," this photograph appeared in an April 1909 article titled "The Waters Under the Earth," published in *Technical World Magazine*. Through much of the early twentieth century, modern science bolstered a common attitude among city leaders toward the proper use of water—"spending" it freely on municipal growth and beautification.

kansas River. Roughly twenty miles of sanitary and storm sewers of varying size drained the city.<sup>17</sup>

The 1920s had been a good decade from the perspective of those interested in growing Garden City. The *Telegram* editorialized in early April 1929 that agricultural and business conditions looked so good that "one hesitates to throw cold water." But "no one wants a repetition of '86 and '87 or rather a repetition of the nineties which were a direct result of the boom of '86 and '87," and the newspaper cautioned readers not to get too enthusiastic. Five months later, while requests for sewer and water service backed up in the commission, the *Telegram* took a positive view of the difficulty: "New improvements mean more taxes *but* there are parts of the city that are not supplied with water and sewer ser-

vice" because the city had outgrown the old system from the 1910s, and taxes were a part of growth. The city had grown by 2,700 people since 1920, reaching a population of 6,121 in 1930. Such growth, steady but not "booming," was all to the good, according to city leaders.<sup>18</sup>

Government aid helped Garden City survive the Great Depression of the 1930s. Although the population barely increased, from 6,121 to 6,258, Garden City fared better from a Chamber of Commerce view than its elder sister Dodge City, which lost almost 1,600 people, and Goodland and Liberal, which lost 10 percent and 20 percent of their populations, respectively. Garden City's governmental function as the county seat and its role as a focus for federal aid once the New Deal programs started both assisted the local econ-

17. City of Garden City, Kansas, Commission Records, vol. June 20, 1927–August 1, 1934, August 27, 1928, 75, 76, 94, 101, 125; "City Commission Meeting," *Garden City Telegram*, April 11, 1929; "Utilities of a City an Asset for Residents."

18. "General Conditions Here," *Garden City Telegram*, April 4, 1929; "Increasing Water System," *Garden City Telegram*, September 12, 1929; *Garden City Commission Records*, September 23, 1929, 158; Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains*, 382–383.

## Finney Synonymous With Climate

While we can be justly proud of Finney county as a farming community, for it ranks today as by far the greatest diversified farming county in the state; yet the greatest asset for it is its climate. There are many climates that are nice to live in during certain seasons, but for an all-year-round climate, for a place that one must live in year in and year out, there is perhaps, no place in the United States that furnishes the ideal and agreeable weather that one will find in Finney county. Our dry, crystal clear atmosphere; an abundance of sunshine; wonderful cool summer nights; glorious spring and fall days; mild and pleasant winters in the main; our invigorating air; and altitude that is easy to live in with the same benefits of a mountainous country, yet, that is not oppressively too high, all go to make this ideal. This county has over 300 sunny days, perhaps forty days that are cloudy part of the time and only twenty days of absolutely cloudy weather. There are few places, if any, that you will find as many beautiful and delightful days as one finds here.

Our summer and fall nights are perfect, being neither too hot nor too cold. No matter how hot the day the nights are sufficiently cool to require covers on the bed, which allows complete rest. California, which boasts and advertises its climate so much, either has cloudy, rainy, foggy weather, or intensely hot weather. Oregon and Washington have months and months of damp, drizzly weather. The east and north are cold and stormy; the south has one season, monotonous climate, which drags one's energy to a low level.

The four season climate is by far the best one in which to live if one desires to lead an active invigorating life. The gradual changes affected in this country seem to be just what the physical system needs. We have a four-season climate that is mild and pleasant. All who are interested in Finney county should talk more about our climate and advertise it more than is being done.

California, through advertising has made her state synonymous with the words "ideal climate" and we should be doing the same thing. Once having lived in the clear sunshine of this county one is seldom satisfied to live where heat and humidity go hand in hand. From the standpoint of health and climate you cannot beat Finney county.

Garden City Herald, June 11, 1925

omy and helped modernize the city's infrastructure. At the same time, Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds supported street and sewer work, including expansion of sewer and water mains into new parts of town. Garden City did not run short of municipal water during the drought, although well levels dropped along with the river and the local water table.<sup>19</sup>

**A**nother factor for Garden City's survival was the development and expansion of the Hugoton natural gas field during the mid- to late 1930s. Pipeline jobs and royalties from gas helped landowners to hold out through the Depression,

19. Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains*, 382-383; City of Garden City, Kansas, Commission Records, vol. August 8, 1934-October 29, 1947, August 14, 1940, 882.

while Liberal and Hugoton became the sites of energy-company regional offices and equipment suppliers. During the final years of the decade, the end of the drought combined with growing demand for wheat and other foodstuffs because of the war in Europe brought greater prosperity to the region and the city. Natural gas remained important, but wheat income quickly eclipsed royalties in regional economic importance after the rains returned.<sup>20</sup>

As Robert B. Reed, editor of the *Garden City Telegram*, was to rejoice in the New Year's Day headline for 1941, 1940 stood as "the Great 'Recovery Year' for Southwest." The city received over 21 inches of rain over the course of the year, in contrast to 10.5 inches the year before, 15.33 inches in 1938, and 8.8 inches in 1937. In addition to good rains, national wheat prices were not bad and the crop was the largest since 1931, and, according to federal census figures, local merchants sold "more goods retail in relation to the size of the town, than any other merchants in the state." Although other parts of Kansas, including Osborne County and areas east and north of the Arkansas River valley, still suffered from agricultural drought, the southwestern part of the state seemed well on the road to recovery from the Dust Bowl.<sup>21</sup>

Prosperity brought rising requests for amenities such as running water and sewers. Residents of the city living south of the railroad tracks, between the tracks and Finnup Park, petitioned the city commission for water-main and sewer extensions in late March 1940. Although the sewer request along Joseph Street received approval, the commission deferred water mains because there were not enough customers to justify the cost at that time. Commissioners approved water-main extensions around the WPA work area west of downtown in August.<sup>22</sup>

Drainage difficulties after storms proved to be the most numerous water matters before the commission. Mary A. Fuqua and nineteen other residents came before the com-

20. Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains*, 200; Craig Miner, *Next Year Country: Dust to Dust in Western Kansas, 1890-1940* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006), 219, 220.

21. Robert B. Reed, "1940 the Great 'Recovery Year' for Southwest," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, January 1, 1941; "Snow and Wind Greet 1942," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, December 31, 1941; "Water Shortage Becomes Acute in Kansas," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, August 1, 1940.

22. Garden City Commission Records, March 27, 1940, 858; *ibid.*, August 14, 1940, 882; "Petition for Water Service," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, April 4, 1940.

mission in mid-June to complain about flooding along Fair Street (at the base of the hills on the north side of the river). In the face of flooded basements and low terrain, "the commissioners were dubious about being able to make any improvements in the situation" but agreed to look into the matter. George Knox addressed the commissioners in late August because of problems around his grocery store at Main and Laurel. Heavy rains flooded the streets and sidewalk until pedestrians could not cross, and sometimes the water ran into his store. Because part of the problem lay in the fifty-three-year-old storm sewers, the commission stated only that a larger storm sewer would probably be installed at a later date. Three months later commissioners did vote to start "immediate" work on storm sewers and street widening along Fulton Street. They also followed an ongoing tradition of taking funds from the utility and electricity accounts to pay for other civic expenses.<sup>23</sup>

**T**hat next March residents from seven blocks in the new Teitelbaum addition, northwest of downtown, petitioned for new storm and sanitary sewers. Since the area sat in the northerly, low part of Garden City, discussion centered on the technical difficulties and cost involved. Sewage and runoff from that area would have to be pumped; "gravity flows could not be obtained" because the pipes would be lower than the main sewer. Another consideration was the size of the existing sewer main to which the new pipes would be connected, and Streets and Public Utilities Commissioner Sam H. Templeton expressed some doubt "that existing sewer lines could carry that much" more sewage. Robert Reed reminded readers in a sympathetic *Telegram* editorial that drainage problems were not new to Garden City: "Drainage of surface water has been a headache for the municipality for years," and "it has been necessary to spend considerable money for storm sewers and even now, a hard rain sometimes sends water into basements." Another factor contributing to sewer overload was industrial air conditioners that drained into the sanitary sewer system, overloading it during the summer months. After a motion from Commissioner Templeton, the commission requested on July 30 that "business firms discharging large quantities of water from cooling systems into the sanitary sewer system" reroute their cooling sys-

23. Garden City Commission Records, June 12, 1940, 872; *ibid.*, August 28, 1940, 885; "Commissioners Consider Budget Requirements," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, June 13, 1940; "City Commission Moves to Control Truck Problem"; Reed, "1940 the Great 'Recovery Year.'"

tem drains into the storm sewers, a move that would ease the strain on the sanitary system and help flush the contents of the large-diameter storm drains.<sup>24</sup>

Infrastructure improvements and repairs became even more difficult with the onset of World War II. After December 7, 1941, wartime materials restrictions and the draft combined with the needs of a quickly growing population and the new Army Air Corps base to strain the city's ability to solve water-related problems. Difficulties began in mid-February 1942 when the pump on the city's east well developed problems. Members of the water department were still trying to find either parts or a replacement pump over a month later in order to put the east well back on line in time for the summer season. The next week Finney County assisted the city by replacing the old pump with a new one. As the pump hunt concluded, the local office of the federal Public Works Reserve (PWR) section of the WPA presented the city with plans for future improvements, including "\$250,000 worth of new and extended sanitary sewer, and a \$121,000 sewage disposal plant." The *Telegram* hoped that "when the war is over, parts of this ambitious sanitation program will probably be under way," along with the larger storm sewers along Main and other streets also suggested by the PWR's six-year plan.<sup>25</sup>

A flood of historic proportions on the Arkansas River redirected the city's attention starting on April 20, 1942. George W. Finnup had donated the land along the river to the city for use as a park and fairgrounds that eventually became the site of the Big Pool, a park and the zoo, and the county fairgrounds. Heavy rains in Kansas, eastern Colorado, and northeastern New Mexico in late April started the Arkansas and the Cimarron (to the south) rising. The Arkansas broke through dikes and flooded Finnup Park, along with everything below Maple Street on the west side of Main south of downtown, while spreading up to a mile wide on farm ground outside town and forcing two hundred people from their homes downstream in Dodge City. Fair Street and Teitelbaum had flooded due to heavy rains

24. "Ask Extension of Sewer Service," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, March 6, 1941; Garden City Commission Records, March 5, 1941, 913; *ibid.*, July 30, 1941, 943; Robert B. Reed, "Odds and Ends," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, March 6, 1941. The author noted during her residence in Garden City, April 2001–July 2003, that certain parts of town still have street flooding after strong storms.

25. Reeve, *Constant Frontier*, 122–124. Reeve credits the air base and sugar demand for stimulating the city's growth. Garden City Commission Records, February 18, 1942, 978; *ibid.*, March 25, 1942, 984; *ibid.*, April 1, 1942, 985; "Plan for a Greater City," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, April 9, 1942.



Another example of how Garden City's leaders viewed proper water use for a prosperous, orderly town could be seen in the "Big Pool," the 2.5-million-gallon, concrete-lined structure that still extends over half a city block in Finnup Park. Dug by hand in 1922 and advertised ever since as "the world's largest free, concrete-lined municipal swimming pool," the Big Pool served several functions. It provided a place for local and visiting children (and adults) to play and swim under the supervision of lifeguards, and it formed a unique feature to use in advertising Garden City. The city's ability and willingness to "spend" all that water for recreation also suggested that technology, progress, and good urban order could conquer the semiarid climate; trees and gardens replaced short grass and sagebrush, and a giant ultramodern swimming pool supplanted swimming holes on the Arkansas River.

between April 15 and April 20, compounding the city's difficulties. Although the river began falling on April 29, forecasts of rain raised more concerns about street flooding because the storm-sewer mouths remained underwater and any rain would back up in the system. On April 30 the city commission spent a great deal of time discussing flood-control projects, including the storm sewers on Main Street, and dike repair and extension to provide protection for the fairground west of Finnup Park. Jim Roby, the city engineer, believed that much of the work—especially the dirt work—could be done despite federal limits on construction materials. After looking into other flood-control options, the commission let contracts for repair and extension of the dikes along the north bank of the Arkansas in September, encouraged perhaps after further rains in late June sent streams



out of their banks again. It would be another year before the storm sewers received much attention.<sup>26</sup>

Because of a surging population, Garden City's water resources reached their limits in early 1942, pushing the city's leaders to hire the H. H. Doerr Mercantile Company, a large pump, irrigation pipe, and hardware retailer from Larned, to dig, at Second and Fulton Streets in the south-central part of town, what would be the eighth city water well. As with the east-well pump, finding casing pipe, a pump, and the other materials necessary for drilling and finishing the well proved difficult during rationing, and in July the commission asked the city clerk to draw up an "application of priorities" for putting in the new well and to submit it to the proper federal authorities. Mayor Harvey F. Jones and the rest of the commission reassured Doerr on July 15 that the contractor would not be liable for not meeting his deadline if the city could not produce the performance ratings required in order to prove the need for the pump and pipe to the War Production Board, which oversaw production and allocation of war materials, including pipe, pumps, and wires. In August the city engineer was still struggling to find pipe and a pump for the east well. Engineer Roby persevered, however, and in September he received orders to finish plans for another new well, two blocks north of the most recent one.<sup>27</sup>

In light of these and other difficulties, one can understand the reluctance of the men on the commission to implement an order from the State Board of Health in October that all cities with more than three thousand people must chlorinate their water, a directive that stemmed from a dysentery outbreak in the eastern part of the state. Partly because the city's water tested "very pure," according to the state laboratories, the commission opted after much discussion to appeal the order to state Attorney General Jay S. Parker. Garden City eventually received the requested delay in chlorination in May 1943, and in September 1943

the State Board of Health laboratory reported that all eight wells were "free from contamination."<sup>28</sup>

As soon as the commission dealt with one matter, others developed. In response to the city's growing complexity, in January 1943 Garden City's commissioners voted to split the job of "utility director" into two positions: a superintendent of electricity and one of water. At the same meeting they also opted to repair the dike on the west side of Finnup Park in order to protect the Main Street storm-sewer ditch from backups. The river had chewed away part of the bank west of the storm-sewer outflow pipe, and by March City Engineer Roby suggested that putting a dump on that portion of the bank might help stabilize and prevent the erosion and thus "lessen the menace." The owner of the land upstream of Finnup Park agreed to a dump where the river was washing away the bank, provided the city put in a road, and the commission voted unanimously to do so.<sup>29</sup>

As soon as the commissioners had solved the river problem, their frustration with federal restrictions resurfaced in late April 1943. Garden City had signed a contract with the federal government to provide utilities to the new trailer camp for air base personnel and war workers. However, that same week the War Production Board ordered the city to stop making so many new connections for electricity and water.<sup>30</sup>

In May the commission's attention returned to planning, especially for drainage north of Kansas Avenue, and Roby began work on long-range storm-sewer improvements, along with shorter-term plans for concrete drainage dips in some streets. When Kenneth McCall replaced Roby as city engineer in August 1944, McCall continued working on Roby's plans. Included were suggestions about acquiring water from the sandhills south of the Arkansas River, because such water "was softer," and building the sewage treatment plant to meet the needs of Garden City's grow-

26. "Finnup Day Declared," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, May 2, 1929; "Temporary Bridges Wrecked," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, April 20, 1942; "Arkansas River Spreads Through Lowlands," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, April 27, 1942; "Level of Arkansas River Flood Falling Today," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, April 29, 1942; "Discuss Flood Control Plans," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, April 30, 1942; Garden City Commission Records, May 6, 1942, 992; "Let Contract for City Dike," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, September 24, 1942; "Kansas Soaked by Rain—Streams Leave Banks," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, June 22, 1942.

27. Garden City Commission Records, June 24, 1942, 1002; *ibid.*, July 8, 1942, 1004; *ibid.*, July 15, 1942, 1005; *ibid.*, August 12, 1942, 1012; Sallee to Albert A. Doerr, February 14, 1940, Series III, Collection 763, Box 10, File 9, Albert A. Doerr Papers, 1847–1998, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; "Let Contract for City Dike."

28. "Discuss State Board of Health Order," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, October 29, 1942. Chlorination did not become mandatory until January 1, 1958; see Russell L. Culp, "History and Present Status of Chlorination Practice in Kansas," *Journal of American Water Works Association* 52 (July 1960): 891; Garden City Commission Records, October 28, 1942, 1029; *ibid.*, September 6, 1943, 1081; Kansas State Historical Society, "State Attorneys General," [www.kshs.org/genealogists/individuals/officials/attygenl.htm](http://www.kshs.org/genealogists/individuals/officials/attygenl.htm).

29. Garden City Commission Records, January 6, 1943, 1042; *ibid.*, March 31, 1943, 1055; *ibid.*, April 7, 1943, 1056.

30. Garden City Commission Records, April 28, 1943, 1060; *ibid.*, May 5, 1943, 1061.

ing population, which had increased by a thousand people since 1940, reaching 7,265 in 1944.<sup>31</sup>

In April 1944 attorney A. M. Fleming replaced real estate and insurance broker Harvey Jones as mayor, and in his first official proclamation Fleming announced that drainage of all kinds would be a special concern for his administration. Multiple water-line and sewer extension requests came before the city over the summer, most of which were deferred. In line with this emphasis on drainage and disposal, Garden City citizens who had enjoyed the benefits of indoor (or outdoor) plumbing without paying for sewer connections found their freedom curtailed in September when the commission announced that there would be no more leniency for those who used "toilet facilities" that did not connect to the city sewers. The year closed with the decision to dig a new well a few blocks west of the Finney County courthouse to boost local water pressures on the west side of town.<sup>32</sup>

Drought returned to southwest Kansas in the early 1950s, beginning in Texas and eventually spreading across the country by 1953. Looking back from 1955, Dr. L. D. Wooster of Fort Hays State College pointed out that after a wet period between 1946 and 1951, from 1952 to 1955 Hays saw an average of 17.5 inches of rainfall, the driest on record for that town. Closer to Garden City, Liberal received only 14.28 inches in 1955 and 9.68 inches (less than half the average) the following year. Garden City itself received 10.88 inches total in 1954 and had not gotten much more per year between 1950 and 1953. After an "average" 1955, 1956 went on record as the driest year in Kansas history. The Arkansas dried up downstream from Great Bend and had little flow upstream, and the Saline, Neosho, and other rivers also failed. Dust storms returned to the scene despite greatly increased irrigation and work by the Soil Conservation Service.<sup>33</sup>

31. "City Arranges for Construction Projects," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, May 13, 1944; "Sewer Line Progressing," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, September 30, 1944; Garden City Commission Records, September 6, 1943, 1081; *ibid.*, June 7, 1944, 1128; *ibid.*, August 9, 1944, 1142; *ibid.*, August 17, 1944, 1144.

32. "Mayor Fleming Issues First Proclamation," *Garden City Telegram*, April 13, 1944; *Hays' 1940 Directory of Garden City, Kansas* (Brush, Colo.: The Hays and Hays Directory Service, 1940), 20, 31; "Airport Lighting System Progresses," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, September 28, 1944; "City Planning New Water Well," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, November 16, 1944; Garden City Commission Records, December 27, 1944, 1169.

33. Melosi, *Sanitary Cities*, 308; "Last Three Years Are Driest in Weather History of Kansas," *Garden City Telegram*, January 13, 1955; "Early A.M. Rain Floods Streets," *Garden City Telegram*, June 16, 1955; "Water Supply Section," *Twenty-ninth Biennial Report of the Kansas State Board of Health* (Topeka, Kans.: State Printer, 1959), 167-168; "Water Supply Section," *Twenty-*

Natural gas helped prevent another regional exodus like that of the Dust Bowl by serving as fuel for irrigation pumps and providing royalty income, although the loss of the sugar-beet plant in 1955 left Garden City searching for a new industry. In 1952 Earl Brookover had provided the beginning of one when he opened the Brookover Feedlot on high ground roughly two and a half miles northwest of downtown Garden City. This formed part of the city's new beef industry and became the first in a series of feedlots and associated businesses that came to dominate the local economy into the twenty-first century.<sup>34</sup>

In 1948 Congress had passed the Water Pollution Control Act, aimed at reducing interstate pollution and giving states assistance in removing pollution sources, including the untreated municipal waste flowing from Garden City and other Kansas towns into the Arkansas, Republican, and other rivers. An offer from the federal government to pay over half the cost of a new sewage treatment plant provided the impetus needed for Garden City to act, and in January 1955 serious discussion began about the sewage plant mentioned in the 1942 six-year plan. At the same time Liberal, Dodge City, Goodland, and other communities also took advantage of federal assistance. On February 23 the Garden City commission drew up a contract for surveying and initial planning of the new plant, and in March the commission hired an engineer to oversee the work. Garden City officials purchased land for the sewage treatment plant in June 1956 and let the bid for construction in January 1958.<sup>35</sup>

**T**hese moves were not without some controversy, especially considering the requirement for a municipal bond to pass before Garden City could receive federal assistance. Stuart Awbrey of the *Telegram* explained that the federal contribution would come because of the water quality: "The Arkansas River has been so polluted to a degree at times that there is a grave question as to how much longer it can be used as a water supply source." Eventually, the federal government con-

*eight Biennial Report of the Kansas State Board of Health* (Topeka, Kans.: State Printer, 1956), 250-255.

34. Shortridge, *Cities on the Plains*, 345.

35. Melosi, *Sanitary Cities*, 315. Liberal, for example, voted \$208,000 for sewage treatment bonds. Dwight F. Metzler, "Sanitation," in *Twenty-sixth Biennial Report of the Kansas State Board of Health* (Topeka, Kans.: State Printer, 1952), 136; "Sewage Plant Is Discussed," *Garden City Telegram*, January 21, 1955; City of Garden City, Kansas, Commission Records, vol. March 2, 1953-July 10, 1958, February 23, 1955, 2178; *ibid.*, June 13, 1956, 2291; *ibid.*, January 6, 1958, 2441; "Engineer Firm Hired for Sewage Plant Plans," *Garden City Telegram*, March 10, 1955.



*The refrain of "use, use" sometimes caused frustration within Garden City's water department. The problem was not exactly that there was not enough water but that consumption drained the water tank so low that there would not be enough pressure should the fire department need to put out a blaze. In June 1927 the commission instituted watering restrictions between 4:30 and 10:00 P.M. and insisted that "in case of sounding of the fire alarm, faucets must be closed immediately." That same year the city purchased a new five-hundred-gallon pumper truck, which is being tested here at the municipal pool.*

tributed \$112,090 toward the facility, which came on line on March 3, 1959.<sup>36</sup>

The ongoing drainage problem returned with hard rains that fell in June and July 1955, forcing the city to deal with the continuing Fair Street flooding problem. Garden City received 1.25 inches in one forty-five-minute period on June 16 and a total of slightly less than 2 inches for that particular storm. May had also been wet, and the result was street flooding, with the intersection of Fair Street and Main under two feet of water and people wading the business district while waves lapped the front door of the Windsor Hotel. The low areas along Fair Street flooded again in July, prompting another round of complaints to the commission. City Manager Deane Wiley presented a new surface drainage plan to the commission that dealt with the problem of going under an irrigation ditch, in part by using a series of local ditches around the Sixth and Fair Street intersection before feeding the water into an underground conduit. Wiley also reminded house owners that the lack of curbing and guttering in the area contributed to their problems. The

commissioners approved the new master plan at their next meeting, and work on the ditches and sewer connections began soon after.<sup>37</sup>

**M**eanwhile, the drought and the four thousand people who moved to Garden City between 1940 and 1950 strained the city's wells once again. New test holes were drilled not far from Brookover Feedlot in the far northwest of Garden City to get data for a new well. In June 1955 work also began on a new well in the central part of town, bringing the total number back up to nine. Water department workers hoped that this would allow one well to go off line for service during the summer peak and still ensure enough supply for the city. Six months later, test wells from Valley View Cemetery on the hill north of town came in, and by May 1956 a well and pump had been installed there. The original well in Finnup Park failed completely two weeks later, necessitating the construction of a new one. The dry July of 1956 and copious water use by Garden City residents

36. Stuart Awbrey, "Answers on Sewage Bond Issue," *Garden City Telegram*, March 20, 1957; City of Garden City, Kansas, Commission Records, vol. July 10, 1958–March 15, 1963, March 11, 1959, 2563; "Sewer Fees Start June 1," *Garden City Telegram*, March 11, 1959.

37. "Early A.M. Rain Floods Streets"; Garden City Commission Records, July 13, 1955, 2214; *ibid.*, July 27, 1955, 2216; "Drainage of North Area Is Discussed," *Garden City Telegram*, July 16, 1955.



*Residential street scene, early 1950s. A stand of trees surrounded by green lawns gave notice to the world that Garden City still lived up to its name, defying the semiarid nature of the region, and that city leaders and residents had turned the valley's abundant groundwater into an oasis in the short grass.*

drew all the city wells down by five feet in the course of the month, a problem still not resolved in October when the Water Department reported that "some areas of the city are seemingly getting more sand in the water system than in the past." As a result, the commission decided to flush the entire system while keeping the lower summer water rates in effect through November 25 "due to the drought." Contracts for the fourth well in two years went to Jim Dunn, with work to begin in early February 1957.<sup>38</sup>

38. Garden City Commission Records, January 12, 1955, 2163; *ibid.*, March 9, 1955, 2179; *ibid.*, January 11, 1956, 2257; *ibid.*, January 25, 1956, 2260; *ibid.*, May 9, 1956, 2280; *ibid.*, May 23, 1956, 2284; *ibid.*, August 22, 1956, 2308;

The next water-born irritation for the city commission was the open storm sewer that ran from the northwest corner of town, below Brookover Feedlot's hill, and out to the river. Rains in 1958 washed manure out of the lot and into the ditch, where it settled to the bottom and very slowly decayed. Citizens complained about the resulting stench, with little result until the county medical officer became involved. At his insistence, workers from the utility department poured a thousand gallons of water per minute

*ibid.*, October 10, 1956, 2320; *ibid.*, January 23, 1957, 2348; "New Water Well Contract Signed," *Garden City Telegram*, June 8, 1955; "Tribune Citizens Vote on \$60,000 Water Bonds," *Garden City Telegram*, September 9, 1955.

through the ditches for two days in order to flush out the city drainage ditch. Stuart Awbrey of the *Telegram* editorialized that local residents should quit complaining about the smell and let the city do something about it instead. The “smell those little moneymakers” hints in Awbrey’s editorial suggest the economic and political influence feedlots such as Brookover were beginning to have on the city.<sup>39</sup>

A traveler from 1880 would hardly have recognized Garden City of 1960. Irrigated fields dotted the surrounding land, replacing the native short grass with winter wheat and corn. Water diversions upstream shrank the Arkansas River to a trickle, although it continued to flow past the city until the 1970s. A stand of trees surrounded by green lawns gave notice to the world that Garden City still lived up to its name, defying the semiarid nature of the region. The city’s leaders and residents had turned the valley’s abundant groundwater into an oasis, complete with a giant swimming pool.<sup>40</sup>

For over a century Garden City’s movers and shakers had viewed water as a tool for growing the city. They encouraged lavish use of water on parks and trees as a way of improving and maintaining the image and reality of an orderly, well-run city in the middle of Kansas’s “Nile Valley.”

39. Garden City Commission Records, May 28, 1958, 2483; “Start Flushing Fouled Drains,” *Garden City Telegram*, May 29, 1958; Stuart Awbrey, “Lets Not have a Big Stink,” *Garden City Telegram*, May 29, 1958.

40. Holly Hope, *Garden City: Dreams in a Kansas Town* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 16.

Because groundwater proved to be both plentiful and easy to access, Garden City’s leaders devoted more attention to problems with draining excess rainwater than to planning for future water supplies, while also “spending” water on parks, lawns, trees, and the Big Pool. It was not until the 1960s that the city began developing systematic plans for its water-supply system. Earlier city leaders did not have to plan because one needed only to dig a well for the “underflow” (the Ogallala Aquifer) to provide water.<sup>41</sup>

City officials and town boosters viewed the city’s relatively abundant water as a commodity to be used for urban improvement. They “spent” water lavishly because that was the best way they knew to grow a clean, respectable city with decent, hardworking citizens. Drainage remained a greater concern than water supplies during this period, so elected and unelected city leaders encouraged water consumption through irrigation of trees, lawns, and city parks. Even regional droughts failed to seriously challenge the city leaders’ views on water use because outside economic assistance (and eventually pump irrigation) stabilized the economy and the city itself never ran low on water. Garden City remained an oasis of shade and civilization in the midst of the High Plains. [KH]

41. Dave Glenn, water utilities superintendent, City of Garden City, to author, June 22, 2004.