On the Horns of a Dilemma: A Life Course and Network Analysis of Strategic Responses to the Enclosure of the Plains as Explored in 19th c. Custer County, Nebraska

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Abstract

In Custer County (Nebraska, central North American Great Plains) from 1879 to 1885, the public domain became enclosed and, yet, the tsunami of incoming farmers was just beginning to crest. Stockmen and cattlemen were faced with a decision regarding their livelihood. They could: maintain access to forage by somehow expanding land holdings via stealth (employees filing homestead claims) or wealth (purchasing tracts of land) or other means; leave the county for, literally, greener pastures; or, become farmers themselves. Which strategy was selected by whom? How did respondents fare? Using census, land record, and homestead patent documents, this analysis considers strategic responses with respect to geography, stockman life course position and aspects of the social network.

Introduction

In 1880, the US. Federal Census in newly forming Custer County in central Nebraska documented 2211 residents. More than 500 of the adult 900 respondents listed "Farmer" as their occupation while some 80 individuals claimed to be stockman, cattleman, stock raisers, or stock dealers. Some of these stockmen were clearly the vestigial part of cattle operations that trailed longhorn cattle from Texas to graze on the lush grasses of the Loup River valley during and after the American Civil War (1861-1864). Trailed and, in the 1870s, now resident cattle were fattened and shipped to eastern markets via railheads at Ogallala, North Platte, and Plum Creek.

As this part of the American West platted, settled, and enclosed, with access to the public domain for forage reduced, how did stockmen react? Some left, some attempted to expand forage options, and some became (small) mixed farm-stock operations. Analysis of historical documents explores which of these different strategies is associated with the stockman's life course position, the richness of their social network, and the richness of the terrain initially settled as well as time in residence.

Background

Historians (e.g., Simpson 1975), anthropologists (e.g., Bennett and Kohl 1994), and sociologists have offered context-rich investigations of how particular individuals and families negotiated complex social and environmental situations as the American frontier was transformed. Complementing recent "big data" analyses of the settlement and agro-pastoral transformation of the Great Plains (Cunfer 2005; Edwards et al 2017), this analysis attempts to build on these earlier efforts, recruiting tools widely employed in social science today.

Social network analysis (SNA) focuses on the relationships among and between social actors such as persons or groups. This tool is useful for assessing the degree of social cohesion within a group or how particular individuals are ranked within a social groups (Lin 2017; Scott 1988;

Wasserman and Faust 1994). Here, I assess the breadth and nature of the social network of the target stockmen along with the degree to which disparate land parcels are potentially accessible, because of social ties, to the stockmen, which is critical for success in a hyper-dynamic, semi-arid grassland.

A life course approach (Elder 2007) considers the connection between an individual's life and the social and economic context of these life events. Elder (2007) considers a life course in terms of life-span, agency, historical and geographic situation, timing of decisions, and linkages to others, for example, peers or kin, themselves with agency and capacity. Here, I consider that persons at different positions within their life course may make different decisions about whether and how to continue with stock-operations in the face of a dramatically transforming landscape where access to forage may be challenged.

Landscape

Custer County is located in what is today central Nebraska, one of the several central Great Plains states in the United States. It straddles the 100th meridian, with the Platte River system to the south and the Sand Hills, a massive dune system now mantled in grass, in the northwestern corner. Between two lie dissected deposits of loess, i.e., wind-deposited silts, on the Platte River pediment. Major tributaries of the Platte River, the South Loup and Middle Loup Rivers, flow from the Sand Hills from northwest to southeast and provide dependable, perennial water. As such, these valleys along with that of smaller tributaries of the Platte River, were sought out early on by stockmen and settlers.

Pressured by railroad entrepreneurs and land speculators, the federal government had removed native Pawnee, Ponca, and Omaha populations to reservations just prior to the time considered here (Wishart 1995). A cattle industry that made use of public domain lands for forage developed in the years succeeding the American Civil War, with, initially, cattle being driven from Texas to forage on central Plains grasses prior to shipment to eastern markets via the new Transcontinental railroad. Gradually, local stock operations developed and these came into competition with both cattle operations relying on the public domain and farmers enticed by the Homestead Act of 1862 to settle on 160 acre parcels and attempt commodity farming. The Homestead Act required settlers make demonstrable investments in the land, i.e., constructing houses and outbuildings along with breaking sod and cultivating the land. After a period some 5 years, less for Union soldiers, the homesteader filed for a patent, with neighbors testifying to the accomplishments of the homesteader. In Custer County, the land was platted between 1869 and 1873, at which time surveyors reported few occupants. Land transfers from the public domain to individuals began in earnest in 1876, which is when the first homestead patent was proved up. (The tension between stock operators and farmers on the Central Plains is captured in Mari Sandoz's history of the cattle industry, *The Cattlemen* [1858], which includes historical sketches of cattle thievery and retribution in Custer County. Readers may be familiar with Solomon Butcher's iconic photographs, with families staged in front of their sodhouses, made throughout Custer and adjoining counties from 1886 into the new century [Carter 1985].)

Materials and Methods

The data analyzed here come from various sources. Individuals and households are tracked via the 1880 US Federal Census and the 1885 Nebraska Census, supplemented by information from online genealogy sites such as FamilySearch.org. Here, we follow the 78 households with a head involved in some form of stock-raising through the mid-1880s (Figure 1). Their life course position is characterized in terms of age, marital status, and offspring. Their social network extent is estimated via name-matching and proximity information along with specific witnesses stipulated by them as part of the homestead patent proof process (when applicable). Information on parcels and their

occupants comes from the General Land Office records on land transfers along with Land Tract books, curated by the Bureau of Land Management. Involvement in stock-raising is estimated via census documents supplemented by information sometimes provided in homestead patent documents.

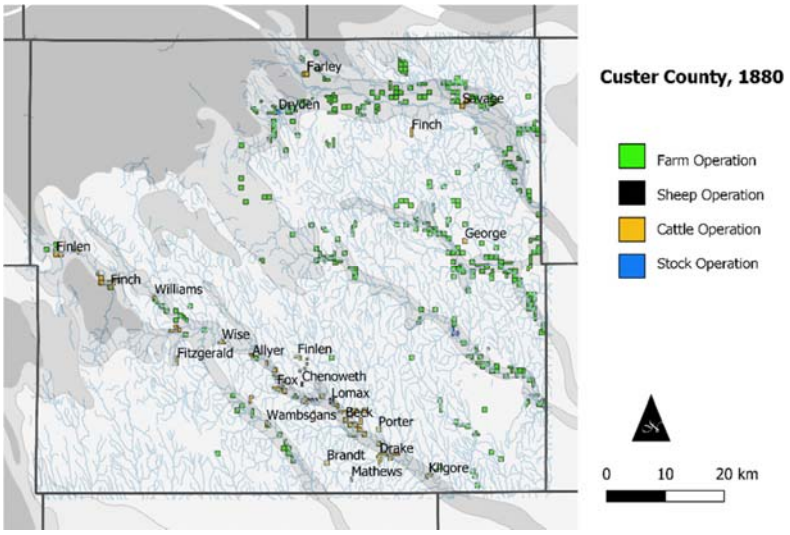

Figure 1. Custer County Stockmen Land Holdings, 1880.

For example, I consider the Williams brothers, two single men who emigrated from Ohio and were running stock along Spring Creek in mid-June, 1880. I contrast these households with those of Henry Goodyear (managing a sheep operation) and Ephraim Swain Finch (managing a cattle operation), older married men also in the stock trade here. Finch appears to have a wide social network populated by kin. He is in effect partnering with a brother and son, both with adjoining parcels. Goodyear has neither. The Finch operation expands over the next two decades; Goodyear's sheep operation disappears.

Conjoined life course and social network analyses of single and married households (one headed by a female), with younger and older principals, some with offspring, some with siblings, are employed to examine propositions about decisions made by stockmen as options for access to forage narrowed as the enclosure of the prairie continued apace.

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