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**MOBILITY, SPECULATION, AND POOR FARMING:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE
“MALIN-LEDUC THESIS”**

YASUO OKADA

Land speculation has been one of the major topics in the history of the American frontier and public land policies. Though Frederick Jackson Turner was sometimes criticized because of his neglect of speculators, he did recognize the significance of land speculation in the development of the West.¹ Benjamin Hibbard not only devoted a chapter of his book to land speculation, but gave much attention to the activities of speculators throughout his work.² Roy M. Robbins stated that much of the history of the public land system had centered around the struggle between squatterism and speculation,³ and Paul Gates reemphasized the importance of land speculation in the Western development in his monumental work.⁴

It is not easy to define the term “land speculator” as it meant different things to different people. It seems, however, possible to classify various kinds of speculators roughly into two categories: the professional speculator and the settler-speculator. Thomas LeDuc once wrote that most modern historical writers had been unaware of the latter’s existence.⁵ This statement is apparently an exaggeration, since it is not difficult to find references to this type of speculators in the earlier works on the public lands.⁶ It is not to say that the settler-speculator has been treated fully by historians. The attention of public land historians has been concentrated on big, professional operators. As a result, professional speculators are more familiar to the students of the frontier history than small, settler-speculators.

¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The United States, 1830-1850* (New York: Henry Holt, 1935), p. 292; Ray Allen Billington, “The Origin of the Land Speculator as a Frontier Type,” *Agricultural History*, XIX (1945), 204-212.

² Benjamin Horace Hibbard, *A History of the Public Land Policies* (New York: Macmillan, 1924).

³ Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain, 1776-1936* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942), p. 9.

⁴ Paul Wallace Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1968).

⁵ Thomas LeDuc, “Public Policy, Private Investment, and Land Use in American Agriculture, 1825-1875,” *Agricultural History*, XXXVII (1963), 3-9.

⁶ For example, Turner wrote: “In a sense, the settler himself was a speculator, for he bought more land than he could farm, hoping for the increase in value that would benefit his children if not himself.” *The United States*, p. 292; see also Hibbard, *Public Land Policies*, pp. 211-212; Joseph Schafer, *Four Wisconsin Counties, Prairie and Forest: Wisconsin Domesday Book, General Studies*, Vol. II (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1927), p. 123.

One of the reasons for this relative neglect of the settler-speculator is the lack of source materials, which makes it extremely difficult to pinpoint his activity. Another is probably that the operation of small speculators was neither glamorous nor colorful enough to attract the attention of historians. There is, however, another important reason why the ubiquitous settler-speculator has been overlooked by scholars. In spite of the fact that the activities of speculative settlers were vividly described by keen observers such as Horace Greeley and Albert Richardson, most historians seemingly assume that settlers should not be treated as speculators.⁷ According to the Turnerian tradition, pioneer settlers were the real empire builders, even if they might have speculated in a small way. They were distinct from the large-scale speculators who held the best tracts idly and hindered the development of the West. So long as land speculation is considered as an undesirable, obnoxious activity, the recent revisionists' argument to the contrary notwithstanding,⁸ it is quite natural that historians have hesitated to label settlers as "speculators."

Only recently have historians come to realize the essential importance of the settler-speculator in the westward movement. One of the earliest scholars who questioned the above assumption that settlers should not be treated as speculators was James Malin. In an article published in 1935, Malin showed that the turnover rate of farm population in Kansas had been amazingly high during the settlement period regardless of the difference in local physical environment. The problem was "primarily one of group behavior, apart from specifically assignable accidents of farm life in the separate communities or regions involved."⁹ Upon the result of this finding and continuing research, Malin constructed a remarkable hypothesis, discarding the conventional assumption mentioned above. According to Malin, the concept of "actual settler" is largely a myth. Most landowners, irrespective of whether they were resident or nonresident, bought land on expectation that it would be soon resold at a profit. To put it differently, the actual settler was just as speculative as the professional operator. "For the most part, each farmer was a speculator who made a living from the farm until he could sell it at an advance in price." Poor farming practice on the frontier was a result of this speculative tendency and instability of pioneer settlers.¹⁰

⁷ Horace Greeley, *An Overland Journal from New York to San Francisco* (New York, 1860), pp. 68-70; Albert D. Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi* (New York, 1867), pp. 137-141.

⁸ Robert P. Swierenga, *Pioneers and Profits: Land Speculation on the Iowa Frontier* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1968).

⁹ James C. Malin, "The Turnover of Farm Population in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, IV (1935), 339-372. The quotation is from p. 353.

¹⁰ James C. Malin, "Mobility and History: Reflection on the Agricultural Policies of the United States in relation to a Mechanized World," *Agricultural History*, XVII (1943), 177-191. The quotation is from p. 182; see also Malin, *Winter Wheat in the Golden Belt of Kansas*

To do justice to Malin, it should be mentioned that the central theme of his work was the adaptation of the white man to the grassland environment, and that the above summary is only a part of his broad scholarship.¹¹ Nevertheless, Malin's notion of speculative settlers influenced the thinking of public land historians, some of whom were induced to reexamine the traditional interpretation. Thomas LeDuc elaborated Malin's argument and advanced a hypothesis that public land policies had retarded the development of the West by allowing settler-speculators to control a large amount of idle acreage. The petty speculator was, of course, a pioneer of sorts, but he was a speculator first and a farm-maker second or not at all. As a result, the land was not fully utilized and the production remained meager. "Cheap land magnetized a class of settlers who had nothing to lose and few qualifications for farm entrepreneurship."¹² Let us hereafter refer to this interpretation as the Malin-LeDuc thesis, though there are others who follow this line of argument.¹³ The purpose of this paper is to examine the thesis in three aspects: (1) mobility, (2) land speculation by settlers, and (3) poor farming. Since Malin's initial study was on the turnover of farm population in Kansas, we will focus our attention on Kansas and see if the thesis can be proved in its original setting.

I

Malin divided Kansas into five rainfall belts and selected sufficient number

(Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1944); Malin, *The Grassland of North America: Prolegomena to its History* (Lawrence: Author, 1947).

¹¹ Thomas LeDuc, "An Ecological Interpretation of Grasslands History: The Work of James C. Malin as Historian and as Critic of Historians," *Nebraska History*, XXXI (1950), 226-233; Robert Galen Bell, "James C. Malin and the Grasslands of North America," *Agricultural History*, XLVI (1972), 414-424.

¹² Thomas LeDuc, "History and Appraisal of U.S. Land Policy to 1862," in Howard W. Ottoson, ed. *Land Use Policy and Problems in the United States* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), pp. 3-27. The quotation is from p. 26; LeDuc, "Public Policy, Private Investment, and Land Use."

¹³ Leslie E. Decker, "The Great Speculation: An Interpretation of Mid-Continent Pioneering," in David M. Ellis, ed. *The Frontier in American Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), pp. 357-380. Marcus Lee Hansen noted that the migratory habit of the people and the prevailing type of agriculture as well as the coming of immigrants had been the reasons of the mobility of the American population. See Hansen, *The Immigrant in American History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940), 53-76. See also Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966) which discusses various aspects of mobility. LeDuc's argument on the effects of land policy is criticized by Robert William Fogel and Jack Rutner in "The Efficiency Effects of Federal Land Policy, 1850-1900: A Report of Some Provisional Findings," University of Chicago, Center for Mathematical Studies in Business and Economics, Report 7027 (June, 1970).

of townships in each to make a fairly representative sampling of each area. Using the manuscript federal and state censuses, Malin studied the turnover rate of farm operators in sample townships. In every township he studied, he found that less than 50 percent of the farm operators had remained on their farms for more than ten years during the settlement period. Though it might be possible to question the appropriateness of his sampling method and statistical analysis, we will rather devote our attention to the qualitative side of his conclusion, accepting the above finding to be quantitatively correct.¹⁴

One might say that the high turnover rate of the frontier population was the expression of sheer restlessness so characteristic of American life. This, however, does not explain anything. The merit of the Malin-LeDuc thesis is that it singles out land speculation by settlers as the dominant cause of mobility. In order to test the validity of the thesis, we should first ask whether it is justifiable to lay stress upon land speculation. It is not necessary to spend much time searching for the causes of mobility other than land speculation, especially in the case of Kansas. One can immediately think of the severe condition of the pioneer life in Kansas as a probable cause of out-migration from the state. Destitution on the Kansas frontier in the 1870s is a familiar story to the students of Western history. Descriptions of drought, grasshoppers plague, chinch bugs, crop failure, and starvation abound in the reminiscences of pioneers.¹⁵ Those who have read John Ise's story of his parents' lives would remember the almost unbelievable hardship of the pioneer life in Kansas.¹⁶

After the grasshoppers plague of 1874, the Kansas State Board of Agriculture gathered information on the condition of farmers. A correspondent in Barbour County wrote: "The resources of the county are absolutely nothing in the way of crops. . . . The corn crop, which would have been sufficient for the use of the county, notwithstanding the disadvantage under which we have labored, was entirely destroyed by grasshoppers."¹⁷ According to the county clerk of Rooks County, there was "no corn in the county. . . . No

¹⁴ Malin, "Turnover of Farm Population." It should be mentioned that Malin was one of the earliest to utilize manuscript censuses and quantitative methods in historical studies.

¹⁵ See, e.g., E. N. Morrill, "The Early Settlers of Kansas: Their Trails, Privations, Hardships, and Sufferings," *Kansas State Historical Society, Collections* (hereafter cited as *Kansas Historical Collections*), V (1891-1896), 148-154; W. D. Street, "The Victory of the Plow," *Kansas Historical Collections*, IX (1905-1906), 33-44; A. E. Bingham, "Sixteen Years on a Kansas Farm, 1870-1886," *Kansas Historical Collections*, XV (1919-1922), 501-523. See also Gilbert C. Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier, 1865-1900* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 55-74.

¹⁶ John Ise, *Sod and Stubble: The Story of a Kansas Homestead* (New York: Wilson-Erickson, 1936).

¹⁷ Kansas State Board of Agriculture (hereafter cited as KSBA), *The Third Annual Report* (1874), p. 18.

wheat in the county, and no money.” The farmers in the county lost two consecutive crops, and were very poor. About 250 families would need assistance. He added, “Some have left, and more are going unless something is done immediately.”¹⁸ In Smith County, half of the people needed help. It was reported that many had already left, and more were going.¹⁹ These difficulties undoubtedly contributed to the high turnover rate of farm population in Kansas. Most of the settlers who migrated to Kansas during the settlement period probably had little knowledge about the new environment. Moreover, they rarely had enough capital to weather through the difficulties, and were vulnerable to natural hazards. In the case of failure, those who could leave Kansas and go back to their wives’ folks were fortunate. It was once reported that some families had “spent their all,” and were “too poor to emigrate.”²⁰

Nature frowned on mankind, but that was not all. Pioneer settlers in Kansas had to suffer from periodic low prices of farm products. The most important cash crop for Kansas farmers was wheat, though it was subordinate to corn during the early period. The trouble was that wheat was quite uncertain in its yield and price, both of which fluctuated widely from year to year. During the 1870s, the yield of wheat ranged from 18.7 bushels per acre to 10.6 bushels, and the price from \$1.26 per bushel to 57 cents. In the 1880s, the yield moved between 22.3 bushels and 6.8 bushels, and the price between \$1.05 and 45 cents.²¹ In 1881 the Kansas State Board of Agriculture sought opinion of “the most prominent and intelligent” farmers in the state about wheat growing. According to their judgment, the yield should be more than 15 bushels per acre, and the price more than 75 cents per bushel in order to make a reasonable profit on wheat.²² It is obvious that there were many unprofitable years for wheat growers in Kansas, some of whom were forced to leave their places.

Several studies on the population of middle western states indicate various causes of mobility other than speculative tendency of pioneer settlers. A study on a Nebraska township by Arthur Bentley reveals a variety of reasons for settlers to leave their places. During the period of twenty years after the first settlement of the township in 1872, there were 190 purchases and entries of lands. Among them 106 tracts were sold or relinquished in the same period for following reasons: (1) Owing to prevalent agricultural conditions, 14; (2) Sales by those who had bought in hopes of an advance, 19; (3) Failure to improve or cultivate the land, 9; (4) Involved in other troubles, 16; (5) Died, 7;

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²¹ Statistics are from KSBA, *The Thirteenth Biennial Report* (1901-1902), p. 1035, and United States Department of Agriculture, *Statistical Bulletin*, No. 15 (1927), p. 199.

²² KSBA, *Quarterly Report* (September, 1881), pp. 61-117.

(6) To move to better farms, 16; (7) To move to cheaper farms, 7; (8) To move to towns or villages, 18. As far as we may judge by the above statements, only item (2) including 19 sales is the clear case of land speculation, but others cannot be classified as such.²³

Mildred Throne found that only 30 percent of the people in all occupations had remained through 1850 to 1860 in Wapello County, Iowa. However, the mobility was not constant among different occupational groups. Non-farmers were more mobile than farmers; and among farm population, farm laborers and farmers without farms were less persistent than ordinary farmers. William Bowers' study of an Iowa township, Peter Coleman's research on a Wisconsin county, Merle Curti's memorable work on another Wisconsin county, and Allan Bogue's study of Illinois and Iowa frontiers are some of the important works on the mobility of population, all of which show similar results. In every frontier community, people were restless, staying there only for a short time and moving on. There were, however, differences in turnover rates among various groups. The mobility of non-agricultural population was higher than that of agricultural population. Those who owned more property were more persistent than those with less property. As will be expected, young people and single men tended to be more mobile than the middle-aged and the married.²⁴

The high turnover rate of population was observed not only in the Middle West but also in the East. A study of the ownership and mortgage history of farms in the Town of Newfane, Niagara County, New York, shows that it is common in the early deed records to find farm purchasers who stayed only a year or two in the township. However, the transfer of farm ownership took place more frequently on unproductive land than on fertile land. The average length of ownership before 1841 was 2.9 years for unproductive land, and 6.2 years for fertile land. For the period between 1841 and 1865, the length was 7.0 years for the former, and 16.1 years for the latter. The inheritance and sales within the family were more common on fertile land, and foreclosures and deed-backs more common on unproductive land. Therefore,

²³ Arthur F. Bentley, *The Condition of the Western Farmer*, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, XI (Baltimore, 1893), p. 39.

²⁴ Mildred Throne, "A Population Study of an Iowa County in 1850," *Iowa Journal of History*, LVII (1959), 305-330; William L. Bowers, "Crawford Township, 1850-1870: A Population Study of a Pioneer Community," *Iowa Journal of History*, LVIII (1960), 1-30; Peter J. Coleman, "Restless Grant County: Americans on the Move," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XLVI (1962), 16-20; Merle Curti, *The Making of an American Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), pp. 65-77, et passim; Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 21-28. See also Lowell E. Gallaway and Richard K. Vedder, "Mobility of Native Americans," *The Journal of Economic History*, XXXI (1971), 613-649.

farms in the fertile area have stayed longer in the same family.²⁵

One may expect to find differences in turnover rates among various groups of frontier population. From our viewpoint, the very existence of the differences is significant, which gives us much insight into the question of mobility. Malin tried to explain the mobility by focusing attention on speculative tendency of settlers. Is it possible to explain differences in turnover among settlers by the degree of their speculative tendency? Young settlers could be more speculative than elderly farmers. But, it is not easy to say whether those on poor land were more speculative than those on rich land. Even those without a bent for speculation might be forced to leave their farms if they had obtained unproductive land, since the probability of failure was certainly high on such land.

A weak point in Malin's argument is that it slights the external factors which surrounded pioneer settlers and influenced their behavior. There is no doubt that Malin knew the condition of rural life on the Kansas frontier better than anyone else.²⁶ Nevertheless, the emphasis upon speculative settlers eventually led his argument to the virtual neglect of other factors. It is true that Malin carefully avoided the use of such words as "cause" and "result" in his first article, and scorned any single-factor interpretation in history.²⁷ But, he tended to explain almost everything in terms of mobility and settlers' speculative inclination. For instance, he was critical about land policies planning to provide land and homes to actual settlers. He said that the Homestead Act had been a failure because it violated the mobility factor of the frontier. According to Malin, "actual settlers who were desirous of land upon which to establish a home for their life time . . . were virtually nonexistent."²⁸ It is premature to decide whether the Homestead Act was a failure or not, considering the recent development of the discussion of this issue. It seems, however, safe to say that the degree of its success or failure depended upon time and places.²⁹ What, then, caused the Homestead Act to work satisfactorily

²⁵ Herrell F. Degraff, "The Ownership and Mortgage History of Farms in the Town of Newfane, Niagara County, New York," Cornell University, Agricultural Economics, No. 341 (1941).

²⁶ See, e.g., Malin, *Winter Wheat*, pp. 102-137.

²⁷ Malin, "Turnover of Farm Population," p. 342; LeDuc, "An Ecological Interpretation," p. 228.

²⁸ Malin, "Mobility and History." The quotation is from p. 181; Malin, *Winter Wheat*, p. 133.

²⁹ Lawrence B. Lee, "The Homestead Act: Vision and Reality," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, XXX (1962), 215-234; Paul Wallace Gates, "The Homestead Act: Free Land Policy in Operation, 1862-1935," in Ottoson, *Land Use Policy*, pp. 28-46; Gates, "The Homestead Law in Iowa," *Agricultural History*, XXXVIII (1964), 67-78; Gates, *Public Land Law Development*, pp. 387-434, et passim; Homer E. Socolofsky, "Success and Failure in Nebraska Homesteading," *Agricultural History*, XLII (1968), 103-107.

or miserably in the eyes of its framers and supporters, depending upon the time and place of its operation?

Malin vigorously explored and examined the mobility of the frontier population and offered a penetrating analysis of the cause of population turnover. It is, however, difficult to explain the differences in turnover rates among various groups of settlers unless we take into consideration other factors than land speculation by settlers. So long as we stay in the framework of Malin's interpretation, a number of important questions should remain unanswered. It is particularly important to remember that Malin's view originated from the research on the condition of pioneer Kansas where the life of settlers was extremely hard. This point should be borne in the mind while we discuss the more generalized form of Malin's interpretation which we call the Malin-LeDuc thesis.

II

The Malin-LeDuc thesis stresses the speculative tendency of settlers, dissenting from the traditional view. One might say that the traditional interpretation gradually emerged from the debates in Congress, the editorials of newspapers, the addresses at farmers' meetings, and so forth during the nineteenth century. "The ambition of the early pioneers was to found home for themselves, provide for their families, and then to aid in laying the foundation of a magnificent commonwealth."³⁰ This statement is a good example of the orthodox treatment of pioneer settlers.

It is, however, not difficult to find descriptions of settlers by contemporary observers which defy their traditional images. A homesteader in Osborne County, Kansas, wrote: "The curse of this country is land-grabbing. Few men are satisfied with one claim." He also said, "Some of these settlers are great wanderers, and I have no doubt many of them will go on farther west when this country is well settled."³¹ On the speculative tendency among settlers, a travelling merchant told an interesting story. One night, he stayed in a settler's home, who had taken up 240 acres of land and was raising corn on 40 acres. While at breakfast next morning, the traveler was asked if he did not want to buy the land.³² This type of anecdote abounds in reminiscences and travel accounts of the nineteenth century. A prominent English

³⁰ G. W. Glick, "The Railroad Convention of 1860," *Kansas Historical Collections*, IX (1905-1906), 467.

³¹ John Ise, ed. *Sod-House Days: Letters from a Kansas Homesteader, 1877-1878* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), pp. 206-7, 211-2.

³² James C. Horton, "Peter D. Ridenour and Harlow W. Baker: Two Pioneer Kansas merchants," *Kansas Historical Collections*, X (1907-1908), 589-621.

agricultural chemist, James F. W. Johnston, noted that "every farm from Eastport in Maine, to Buffalo on Lake Erie" was for sale.³³ It was not only the American who was always ready to sell out, though some historians emphasize the love of the soil among the European stocks. A Norwegian immigrant wrote a letter which clearly revealed his speculative inclination. After talking about a plan to buy a section of land in Kansas, he wrote that even if he did not move to the land and live on it, the land would rise in value and it would be a good investment.³⁴

While it is possible to multiply these examples showing the ubiquity of speculative settlers, we can also accumulate evidence which indicates the opposite tendency among settlers. Many of them were satisfied with their land, and developed it into stable farms, keeping away from speculation.³⁵ Though the lack of local attachment was deplored by a number of contemporary observers, there were settlers who wanted to stay at their place even under extremely difficult circumstances. In Decatur County, Kansas, the settlement commenced one year before the grasshoppers plague of 1874. Grasshoppers devoured corn, and drouth destroyed wheat, oats, barley and potatoes. Fifty-one families in the county made a petition to the Governor requiring assistance. They asked for a temporary relief, and desired to remain on their claims. A correspondent in the county wrote: "They came to secure homes. Had means to build cabins, break considerable land, . . . make some other improvements, and had means enough left to live through until something could be raised. They had good crops; were hopeful and well satisfied with the country, but the drouth and grasshoppers have taken their dependence, and they must leave or be aided. . . . With moderate aid, and arms for any emergency, our people will stay and battle the storms on the frontier."³⁶ Many of these settlers probably left the county, but it seems to be unfair to call them speculators.

Though Malin focused his attention on settlers' speculation and the resulting high turnover rate of population, speculative farm operators did not always sell out and move to new places. It was also a common practice among settlers to take up more land than they could utilize in the hope of obtaining a profit from the sale of the surplus. It is well known that the squatters'

³³ Cited in Paul Wallace Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815-1860* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 400.

³⁴ Theodore C. Blegen, ed. *Land of Their Choice: The Immigrants Write Home* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), p. 316. Among those who emphasize the difference between native and foreign-born are Joseph Schafer and Marcus Hansen. See Schafer, *Four Wisconsin Counties*, p. 123, and Hansen, *Immigrant*, pp. 61-2.

³⁵ Hartman Lichtenhan, "Reminiscences," *Kansas Historical Collections*, IX (1905-1906), 548-552; Ise, *Sod-House Days*, p. 211.

³⁶ KSBA, *The Third Annual Report* (1874), p. 21.

associations usually protected the claim of a settler to the extent of 320 acres instead of 160 acres which was more adequate as the size of a farm in that period.³⁷ As shown by the letter of a homesteader in Osborne County quoted above, even those who took land under the Homestead Act were not contented with one claim. It should be pointed out, however, that it is quite difficult to make distinction between land speculators and bona-fide settlers, since motivation is crucial in identifying the speculator. Contemporary accounts would not help very much in clarifying the issue, as they are likely to confuse land speculation and genuine farm expansion. A farmer came from Illinois to Kansas in 1876 and homesteaded a quarter section of land in Rush County. In the course of years, he expanded his farm and finally became the owner of a 1,200 acre farm. Another farmer from Illinois bought 160 acres of land in Kansas in 1883, and he operated a profitable farm of 1,040 acres in 1901.³⁸ Their neighbors might have described these farmers as land-grabbers or speculators.

Notwithstanding the inherent difficulty in identifying the speculator, it is feasible to discover large-scale speculators and analyze their operation quantitatively.³⁹ Compared with large-scale operators, small settler-speculators are far difficult to pinpoint. When a nonresident investor obtained, say, 10,000 acres of land in the West, and resold it later at a considerable profit, no one would hesitate to designate this operation as land speculation. Speculative activities of settlers are less easy to ascertain, especially when they were making their farms and cultivating their land. When a man obtained, say, 320 acres of land, and cultivated only 80 acres some years later, can we conclude that the remaining 240 acres were for speculation? It is almost impossible to determine the exact, or even approximate, amount of land held by settler-speculators at a certain period of time. In most cases, therefore, it is necessary for us to rely upon fragmentary or anecdotal evidence, which seldom proves to be sufficient to determine the extent or the nature of land speculation by settlers.

Some scholars tried to look at the problem from a different angle. According to LeDuc, the fact that settlers were willing to pay extremely high rates of interest to purchase their land should be taken as an indication of their speculative motives.⁴⁰ The prevalence of high interest rates on the frontier is a familiar story to every student in the Western history. In territorial Kansas, any rate of interest was permitted until 1860. A writer reported

³⁷ Allan G. Bogue, "The Iowa Claim Clubs: Symbol and Substance," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, VI (1958), 231-253.

³⁸ KSBA, *Biennial Report* (1901-1902), pp. 618-9, 625.

³⁹ Swierenga, *Pioneers and Profits*.

⁴⁰ LeDuc, "Public Policy, Private Investment, and Land Use" p. 5.

that it had been as high as from 24 to 120 percent per annum. Though the legislature set the legal maximum rate later, lenders found several ways to get around the legal limit and settlers continued to borrow money at high rates.⁴¹ In the agricultural literature of the period, one can often find advice against borrowing money, which indicates that many farmers did borrow money rather unhasitantly. As there was too much caution about going into debt, one writer even found it necessary to say, "When the proper time arrives, be courageous in doing so [borrowing money]. . . . Writers urge its avoidance as you would a pestilential disease, but this wholesale condemnation is unwise."⁴²

As was pointed out by contemporary observers and historians, a considerable amount of capital was necessary to establish a farm on the frontier.⁴³ Many of the early settlers in the West apparently did not own enough money to commence farming, which made it inevitable for them to borrow money even at an exorbitant rate of interest. In many cases, it might have been impossible for them to secure their claims and improvements without going into debt. The willingness of settlers to pay high interest rates should not be taken as a definite proof of their speculative tendency. It is not to deny that there are studies which strongly support LeDuc's view. Studies on the squatters' associations show the speculative intention of the members of these extralegal organizations, which once believed to be a manifestation of the frontier democracy.⁴⁴ However, most of the evidence on land speculation by settlers have only shed side light on this problem, and any definite conclusion seems to be beyond reach.

Why is this so? Is this ambiguity owing to the lack of research or source materials? Considering the amount of effort which has heretofore made by various historians, it is unlikely that the mere accumulation of research would eventually solve the problem. The trouble seems to be engendered by the ambiguity intrinsic to the very nature of land speculation by settlers. One might define "land speculation" as an activity in which a person or a group of persons acquire land in order to obtain capital gains by reselling it some-time later. So far as this definition is concerned, it is not necessary to make

⁴¹ Paul Wallace Gates, "Land and Credit Problems in Underdeveloped Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XXXI (1965), 41-61; Street, "Victory of the Plow," p. 36. One of the ways to evade usury laws was "time-entry." See Swierenga, *Pioneers and Profits*, pp. 149-151.

⁴² James F. Martin, "A Little Talk to a Young Farmer," *KSBA, Quarterly Report* (December, 1885), pp. 176-7.

⁴³ Clarence H. Danhof, *Change in Agriculture: The Northern United States, 1820-1870* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 73-129.

⁴⁴ Bogue, "Iowa Claim Clubs." See also Martha B. Caldwell, "Records of Squatter Association of Whitehead District, Doniphan County," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XIII (1944), 16-35.

distinction between land speculation by settlers and that of big, professional operators. There was, however, an important difference between these two types of land speculation not only in terms of its effect upon the local community but also its objective.

It is true that professional speculators sometimes made improvements on their land in order to enhance its value, or put tenants on their holdings as a means to defray the cost of maintenance. But, their chief concern was to obtain profits from land dealings, which were usually drained off to other areas and never plowed back into the local community. In the case of settler-speculators, the profit from the sales of their claims or surplus land was not the ultimate goal but a means to establish or expand their farms. No doubt, there were "the chronic settlers" who followed the taking up of public land as a habit, "the pseudo-settlers" who never would be successful farmers, and "ne'er-do-wells forever shifting westward."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the contemporary observations on the activities of settler-speculators often suggest that their profits were utilized for productive purposes sooner or later. The famous passage of Peck's *New Guide to the West* describing three waves of settlers show that those in the second wave would accumulate capital by selling their land to those in the third class.⁴⁶ James Flint also wrote about three classes of people migrating to the West. His second class of farmer was "only able to bring a small portion of his land into cultivation," and his success did "not so much depend on the quantity of [his] produce. . . as on the gradual increase in the value of his property." When other settlers came in, he could sell his land at a high price and remove to a new settlement to begin farming on a larger scale than formerly.⁴⁷ It is therefore possible to consider the waves of settlers as constituting "the pioneer ladder" and their speculation as a means to climb the ladder and expand their farming operation.

It is well known that the Homestead Act was abused by speculators to build up huge estates through the use of hirelings. Petty speculators misusing this act were, however, not always dummy entrymen controlled by timber companies or cattle ranchers. Bona-fide homesteaders also speculated under this measure in order to accumulate enough capital to establish their farms and obtain the patents for their land. Though the Homestead Act gave free land, raw land did not constitute a farm, and there was no provision in the act for getting settlers to start farm-making. Moreover, it was not possible for

⁴⁵ Seth K. Humphrey, *Following the Prairie Frontier* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931), pp. 79-80.

⁴⁶ Cited in Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), pp. 19-21.

⁴⁷ James Flint, *Letters from America* (Edinburgh, 1822), in *Early Western Travels*, ed. Reuben G. Thwaites, Vol. IX, pp. 232-6.

homesteaders to mortgage their claims and borrow money during the five-year period of settlement required under the law. Therefore, homesteaders' speculation mainly through the sales of relinquishments might have been the only way for poor settlers to obtain free land under the Homestead Law.⁴⁸

Paul Gates wrote: "The principal difference between the settler-speculator operating in a small way and the absentee, capitalist-speculator was that the former was making a farm and contributing to the development of the community."⁴⁹ It is important to note that land speculation by settlers was often the integral part of, and sometimes the prerequisite for, farm making and agricultural production. The difference is quite clear when one thinks of the fact that the profits from large-scale speculation were usually invested in another speculative scheme and did not flow into production. Unless one makes distinction between these two types of speculation, it is impossible to understand the nature of antagonism against "speculators" in the West. The pioneer settlers detested professional speculators not because they were competitors in land business, but because settlers regarded professionals as unproductive parasites adding nothing to the real wealth of the community. To the settlers in the West, "speculators" were unmistakably professional operators distinct from their own breed.

This is not to say that we should go back to the traditional position concerning settler-speculators. All we have tried to show is the dual character of settlers' speculation which makes it difficult to analyze the speculative tendency among pioneer farmers. At the same time, it is necessary to mention that the Malin-LeDuc thesis fails to distinguish large-scale speculation from the one by small settlers. We should, however, hasten to add that this neglect of difference between two types of speculation is one of the major points in Malin's argument. While we viewed settlers' speculation as a part of their farm development and expansion, Malin considers it otherwise. According to Malin, settlers' agricultural operation was simply a part of their speculative activities, just as the improvements made by large-scale speculators were a part of their project to enhance the land value. Since settlers did not regard their land as a lifelong investment, they merely exploited the soil paying little attention to conservative practices. To put it differently, it is Malin's contention that the mobility and speculative tendency of the frontier population resulted in poor farming. It is, therefore, time to proceed to the examination of poor farming on the frontier.

⁴⁸ Yasuo Okada, *Public Lands and Pioneer Farmers: Gage County, Nebraska, 1850-1900* (Tokyo: Keio University, 1971), pp. 42-65.

⁴⁹ Gates, *Public Land Law Development*, p. 211.

III

Poor farming was the rule rather than the exception on the frontier. Though agricultural journals of the period were filled with accounts of ruinous effects of soil exhaustion, farm operators in early Kansas continued to follow the exploitative practices as elsewhere.⁵⁰ The question to be answered in this section is whether this situation was the result of speculative tendency among pioneer settlers. If farm operation had been subsidiary to speculative activities, it would have been inevitable that farmers made little effort to maintain the fertility of the soil.

Let us first look for probable causes of poor farming other than mobility and land speculation by settlers. One can immediately produce a long list of suspects such as the lack of capital, skill, knowledge, education, and so on. The lack of capital, however, could have been a result of land speculation. As pointed out by LeDuc, the scant capital in the West was too fully absorbed in land purchase. There is no doubt that the tendency among settlers to take up more land than they could use reduced the amount of capital to be invested in farm development. When settlers did not possess enough capital to purchase livestock and agricultural implements, it is hardly expected that the quality of their farming operations was affected favorably. Poor farming was an unavoidable result.⁵¹ As a rough measure to attain better allocation of capital, a writer in the report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture suggested investing one-half of capital in land, and the rest in tools, machinery, and livestock.⁵²

It was, however, not always the case that settlers' empty purse had been the result of their speculative activities. LeDuc argued that settlers had beggared themselves trying to control more land than they could farm as a consequence of the existence of cheap land.⁵³ True, those who could obtain public land, especially under the Homestead Act, might well have exulted at their success in acquiring cheap or free land. But there were many people who had to buy land at high prices from railroad companies or large-scale speculators. In the case of Kansas, it should be remembered that around twenty million acres—more than a third of the state—were barred to homesteaders

⁵⁰ KSBA, *Annual Report* (1874), pp. 88-9.

⁵¹ An immigrant in Kansas wrote in his letter: "Because they have bought so much, they have to pay out all their money for the first payment on the land and large interest on the remainder. They are thus too poor to have animals on their land and what use is the land without animals or without a plow?" Alan Conway, ed. *The Welsh in America: Letters from the Immigrants* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), p. 141.

⁵² L. M. Pickering, "Farming for Profit," KSBA, *Quarterly Report* (December, 1885), pp. 175-6.

⁵³ LeDuc, "Public Policy, Private Investment, and Land Use," p. 5.

from the beginning. Much of the land was either sold as Indian reserves or was granted to the state and railroads.⁵⁴ One may remind us of the fact that there were still much vacant public lands in western Kansas in the 1870s and 1880s. However, most of the vacant lands were far from transportation facilities. Even in western Kansas, the land in the vicinity of railroads and towns was taken up quickly.⁵⁵ Moreover, railroad companies held much land for sale in Kansas. For instance, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad had 2,556,000 acres of unsold land in 1874, and the Kansas Pacific had 2,589,000 acres in the same year. The average land price of the former company was about \$5.00 an acre, and of the latter from \$2.00 to \$6.00. When a settler wanted to buy 160 acres of the Kansas Pacific land at \$4.00 per acre on eleven years' credit, he would pay \$104 at the time of purchase, and \$838 in eleven years.⁵⁶

There is no doubt that the amount of capital a settler can invest in farming must have been greatly decreased when he had to buy land instead of making a homestead entry. It should also be remembered that there was much well-meant advice against homesteading. An immigrant wrote to his fellow countrymen: "One can have 160 acres as a homestead. . . . But it is raw prairie without house, hut, or fence and one would have to forego human society and religion for many years."⁵⁷ Even in the case of homesteaders, they should bear the costs of breaking prairie and supporting their families until their farms came into production. If they did not have enough money for obtaining farm implements and work animals, their farming would be not only inefficient but unprofitable. A settler in Osborn County, Kansas, wrote in 1878 that he had had no team and cut grain by cradle.⁵⁸ Such an old-fashioned and inefficient method would undoubtedly hinder the rise of productivity and farm income, which would certainly result in the lack of capital accumulation on the farm. Under the circumstances, land speculation might have been the only means for poor settlers to obtain capital for establishing profitable farms.

The lack of skill is closely associated with the lack of capital, knowledge, and experience. As late as 1889, it was said that the average farmer in Kansas could not be called a practical farmer because of the lack of knowledge and experience in farming. There was no calling that required a more thorough study than farming, especially in a new country. The person who expressed

⁵⁴ Paul Wallace Gates, *Fifty Million Acres: Conflicts over Kansas Land Policy, 1854-1890* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954), pp. 231-2.

⁵⁵ See the land maps in KSBA, *Annual Report* (1876), pp. 5-74.

⁵⁶ KSBA, *Annual Report* (1874), pp. 324-330; KSBA, *Biennial Report* (1881-1882), pp. 671-3.

⁵⁷ Conway, *The Welsh in America*, p. 126.

⁵⁸ Ise, *Sod-House Days*, p. 233.

the above opinion at a meeting of the State Board of Agriculture concluded, "What we need is more agricultural literature."⁵⁹ It is, however, unlikely that this conclusion was accepted with enthusiasm among actual farm operators. The publications of the State Board repeatedly advocated the preservation of soil fertility, the use of manure, and the practice of better farming, which only shows that the average farmer in Kansas seldom followed the advice of the Board. It might be that he simply ignored the advice, or perhaps did not have the energy, time, and equipment to do so.⁶⁰

The pioneer farmers in Kansas believed in the inexhaustibility of the soil fertility. Even when the thought ever came to them that the richness might be exhausted, they were certain that "just beyond was an unlimited expanse only waiting for" them "to take possession and occupy."⁶¹ Of course, there were warnings against it. "When the farmer moved from the New England States to Wabash or Illinois bottom lands, he left a land which...lost the first richness of the soil for new regions with new soil. A few years of corn after corn and wheat after wheat robbed this soil of its first fruits, and then Ho for Kansas! But after Kansas, whither?"⁶²

The belief in the inexhaustibility of the soil fertility and the unlimited resources was collateral to the mobility and speculative tendency of the frontier population. It should be noticed, however, that there were reasons for the persistence of this belief and exploitative farming practice. As pointed out by Danhof, "fertility declined slowly, and evidence of reduced productivity was easily missed or misunderstood in the normal vagaries of farming." At the same time, it was not always profitable to employ progressive methods in farming. "Among those who did attempt to apply fertility conservation and renovating techniques, many found returns inadequate, so that they too joined the search for new lands."⁶³

Mobility and speculative tendency certainly sowed the seeds of poor farming. When a settler was always willing to sell his farm, better farming could hardly be expected. It is nevertheless too hasty to conclude that these two factors were the dominant causes of poor farming. If they were the major factors lowering the quality of farm operations, the elimination of mobility and speculation would bring about better farming. To put it differently, the stability of farm population should result in a better practice of soil

⁵⁹ N. Mullin, "Agricultural Literature," KSBA, *Proceedings of the 18th Annual Meeting* (1889), p. 10.

⁶⁰ KSBA, *Annual Report* (1874), pp. 88-9; *Biennial Report* (1881-1882), pp. 620-625; *Quarterly Report* (March, 1887), pp. 29-30; *Proceedings* (1889), pp. 26-7. See also Mildred Throne, "Book Farming in Iowa, 1840-1870," *Iowa Journal of History*, IL (1951), 117-142.

⁶¹ KSBA, *Proceedings* (1889), p. 84.

⁶² I. D. Graham, "Science and Sense," KSBA, *Quarterly Report* (December, 1887), pp. 94-7.

⁶³ Danhof, *Change in Agriculture*, pp. 252-3.

utilization. There is an interesting evidence which contradicts this assumption.

In the *Report* for the years 1901–1902, the State Board of Agriculture published “Reports of Kansas Wheat-Growing Experience and Practice.”⁶⁴ Ninety-seven wheat growers representing 52 counties contributed the accounts of their farming operations, which provide useful information not easily available elsewhere. First, let us look at the length of their experience in wheat growing in Kansas.

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| Less than 9 years | 9 |
| 10–19 years | 31 |
| 20–29 years | 42 |
| More than 30 years | 13 |
| Not available | 2 |

Considering the length of their experience in Kansas, we do not hesitate to call them stable farmers. They are certainly not among those migratory settlers on whom we have dwelt at length in this paper. Can we, then, regard the way they grew wheat as a model of good farming practice? Now, let us examine the number of crops grown on the same land in succession.

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| Less than 4 crops | 17 |
| 5–9 crops | 30 |
| 10–14 crops | 15 |
| More than 15 crops | 15 |
| Not available | 20 |

It is disillusioning to find the prevalence of long-continued cropping of wheat on the same land so characteristic of exploitative farming even among these veterans. A farmer in Harper County reported proudly, “Some of this land has grown wheat for fifteen years in succession without showing the slightest loss. I have never used fertilizers of any kind.”⁶⁵ It was the amazing fertility of the soil and the high yield which tolerated such a practices among stable farmers. The average yield per acre was reported as follows:

| | |
|----------------------|----|
| Less than 9 bushels | 2 |
| 10–14 bushels | 15 |
| 15–19 bushels | 32 |
| More than 20 bushels | 39 |
| Not available | 9 |

Among the 97 wheat growers, only 22 reported the signs of deterioration of the soil, and 50 reported that there was no evidence of declining productivity. Twenty-five farmers did not mention it. There were 60 farmers who

⁶⁴ KSBA, *Biennial Report* (1901–1902), pp. 573–632.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 590.

had grown more than five crops on the same ground. In spite of the continuous cropping often without the use of fertilizers, only 15 among the 60 growers noticed the signs of reduced fertility. "Have grown wheat on the same ground for ten years in succession. I use no fertilizers, and my 1901 crop yielded an average of thirty bushels per acre, indicating that there is no deterioration of the soil."⁶⁶ This was a typical answer to the question of the soil fertility among 39 who did not report deterioration, and 9 who did not mention it. It is not to say that these 97 farmers paid no attention to the maintenance of the soil. Although fertilizers were rarely used, the stubble was usually plowed under or burnt after the harvest. A limited number of farmers mentioned crop rotations, though the method was often the alteration of a few crops such as wheat and corn, which can hardly be called a rotation in the real sense of the word as the practice does not preserve the soil fertility. The number of those who have used stable manure was 31, but a farmer in Neosho County wrote, "I have used a little barn-yard manure spread over the ground and plowed under, which failed to increase the yield; in fact, wheat nearly always fails here, more or less, following the application of barn-yard manure."⁶⁷ The most popular practice was the frequent change of seed, which was reported by 40 farmers.

As far as we may judge from the above information, the stability of farm operators did not always result in a better farming practice. Contrary to the expectation, there was even a tendency among stable farmers to strengthen their belief in the inexhaustible soil fertility and their reliance upon the exploitative method as they continued to mine their land. It seems unnecessary to add that they were not only stable farmers but highly successful operators. Twenty-four of them reported their wheat acreage to have been more than 500 acres. At the same time, it is quite likely that their farming operations were far better than those of their neighbours; a farmer in the *Report* criticized poor farming practice of his neighbours.⁶⁸ But, the fact that rich, stable farmers as well as petty, speculative settlers continued the exploitative routines lends little support to the Malin-LeDuc thesis.

IV

One cannot deny the attractiveness of the Malin-LeDuc thesis. The starting point of Malin's argument, the mobility of the frontier population, is a familiar phenomenon to every student in the western history. Contemporary observers, whether they were men of letters or illiterate foreign immigrants,

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 595.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 607.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 617

invariably noticed the migratory habit which characterized the people. A writer even went so far as to say, "The American people may almost be said to be nomadic in their habits, and figuratively to live like the Arabs in tent."⁶⁹ Poor farming was also a familiar feature of the frontier, which occasioned incessant scoldings by agricultural writers. It is the Malin-LeDuc thesis which integrates these facts into an explanatory model centering upon land speculation by settlers—a well known activity, but "strangely missing from much written history," to borrow LeDuc's phrase.⁷⁰ At the same time, the hypothesis tries to clarify the myth of the actual settler, who was supposedly the beneficiary of liberal land policies culminating in the Homestead Act.

The first point we have examined in this paper was the relation between mobility and land speculation. Undeniably, the insatiable desire for speculative profits among settlers raised the turnover rate of farm operators. However, the influence of external factors should not be left out, which often explains the differences in turnover rates among various groups of settlers. The Malin-LeDuc thesis might lead us to forget the hardships of frontier life in Kansas. The second point was the nature of land speculation by settlers, which had supposedly produced a wide gap between the process of land disposal and the pace of actual development. It is not necessary to quarrel with the Malin-LeDuc thesis on the ubiquity of settler-speculators. But it would be a mistake to suppose that they repeated the speculative cycle of migration till doomsday. As was noticed by contemporary observers, many of them hoped to start a real farm on the proceeds of the sales of their claims or surplus land. It is true that this aspect of settlers' speculation is not completely ignored by the Malin-LeDuc thesis. But the emphasis is put not so much on the productive side as on the undesirable effect of land speculation by settlers. The third point is the cause of poor farming. It is the contention of the Malin-LeDuc thesis that only as migrant, speculative settlers left the scene and land moved into the hands of stable farmers would there be better farming. However, the practice of stable wheat farmers in Kansas was as exploitative as that of poor squatters.

It is not the purpose of this paper to demolish the Malin-LeDuc interpretation, which certainly deserves wider attention.⁷¹ Malin and LeDuc recognized the significance of the settler-speculator in western development, and put him into the limelight. The petty speculator, who had been receded into the

⁶⁹ I. C. Sloan, "Farming as an Occupation," *Transactions*, Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, XVII (1878-1879), 253.

⁷⁰ LeDuc, "Public Policy, Private Investment, and Land Use," p. 6.

⁷¹ As is pointed out by Robert Bell, "James C. Malin has never received the recognition he merits." ("James C. Malin," p. 424.) The reason why his ideas have been denied the circulation is aptly explained by Bell and LeDuc. See LeDuc, "An Ecological Interpretation."

shade in the frontier historiography for a long time, might well have been grateful to these historians for their effort, had he been treated less severely. It seems unfair to slight the positive contribution of settler-speculators to the development of the West, even in the case of those who continued to sell out and move on. True, they were not real farm-makers. But it does not negate their important role as specialists in a division of labor which is revealed by successive stages of frontier development. As mentioned before, the waves of settlers can be interpreted as a kind of pioneer ladder that enabled poor squatters to accumulate capital. At the same time, these waves were possibly a form of specialization that overcame the lack of aptitudes and skills fitted for pioneering among many farmers, especially immigrant farmers.⁷² We do not deny that settlers often invested too much capital in land, and the deficiency of capital as a result of this speculative habit hampered the development and optimum use of land. More often than not, however, the lack of capital was the cause rather than the result of settlers' speculation. The willingness of squatters to pay high interest rates indicates the dearth of capital rather than the expectation of quick profits, and the thriving time-entry business on the frontier testifies that many settlers were forced to take desperate steps to protect their claims which had often been the only source of development capital.

Finally, we should point out a pitfall in the Malin-LeDuc interpretation of western development. The image of the frontier society implied in the Malin-LeDuc thesis is essentially a homogeneous society, just as the one pictured by Turner though with a considerably different texture. The Turnerian frontier was a simple, democratic society where sturdy pioneers built their cabins and raised corn in the clearings. Historians in the following generations, especially those who studied land problems, found that the frontier society was not so simple and unified as the Turnerian tradition has led us to imagine. Thus, Robbins clearly saw the constant friction between the squatter and the speculator as the center of public land history, though he was true to the Frontier thesis. Malin and LeDuc, while criticizing Turner, tries to make the frontier society homogeneous again. Making a wholesale assault on the frontier population and stamping everyone as a speculator, Malin virtually wiped away the diversity of interests in the frontier society, and made it a community without any essential discord among its people. Compared with the Turnerian frontier, the pioneer society of Malin and LeDuc is a gloomy place where all the inhabitants are speculators and no one has a stake in the community except for the expectation of speculative profits. However dismal it may be, the frontier of the Malin-LeDuc thesis is a unified society. The failure of the thesis to clarify the nature of small speculation, and its neglect of the fundamental

⁷² Hansen, *Immigrant*, p. 63; Danhof, *Change in Agriculture*, p. 126.

difference between settler-speculators and professional, large-scale speculators have inevitably produced a totally distorted version of the frontier society.

The petty speculator was rescued from oblivion, and assigned a prominent role in the history of the West by the works of Malin and LeDuc. Unfortunately, his faults were criticized too severely and his contributions altogether forgotten. He might have been better off, had he remained in the shade of obscurity.

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