



From Dust to Gold: The Resilience of Cimarron County

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Introduction and Significance

The purpose of this undergraduate student field-based project is to look at the past, the present and future trends of Cimarron County concerning the effects of the Dust Bowl. This research uses Agricultural Census Data, content analysis of Boise City Newspapers, repeat photography, and mapping of tourism points of interest to display the past, present and future of Cimarron County community and way of life. In visiting the museum today, it is important to remember the Dust Bowl's effect on the county and to acknowledge and honor the resilience of the communities impacted by the Dust Bowl. In this poster, we look at how the people of Cimarron County have turned dust to gold. This project explores how the community that remained in Cimarron County after the Dust Bowl has preserved their history and landscape. In particular, residents have supplemented their economic needs and shifting livelihoods by preserving their history and in turn generating tourism through museums, agritourism hotels and lodges, and protecting natural and historical areas.

In the years leading up to the 1930's, people in the southern great plains were plowing up the grasslands and planting crops. There was an increased demand for wheat during WWI which encouraged millions of acres to be converted to wheat production (Kansas Historical Society). In 1931, the area fell under drought conditions and the crops, which held the soil in place, withered (American Experience). Winds picked up the dry soil and created dust storms that were unavoidable and coated the land and everything in it with dust (Modern American Poetry). The region became known as the Dust Bowl and the devastating drought lasted until 1939 (American Experience). In response to the terrible events happening in the Dust Bowl, the Soil Conservation Service was created in 1935 to help farmers protect their land (Foner and Garraty). The new agency helped give farmers incentives to use sustainable practices to help with the effects of the Dust Bowl (The Nature Conservancy).

We hope visitors leave the museum with a better understanding of the impacts and effects the Dust Bowl had on Cimarron County and its people. We hope this poster serves as a visual display to complement the Dust Bowl Exhibit. This project addresses and honors the resiliency of the communities that were impacted by the Dust Bowl and the shift in Cimarron County's economy towards tourism. "But the story of the Dust Bowl is also the story of heroic perseverance -- of a resilient people who against all odds, somehow managed to endure one unimaginable hardship after another to hold onto their lives, their land, and the ones they loved" (Duncan and Burns 2012, viii).

Results

In order to gain a better understanding of topics of public interest in Cimarron County during the Dust Bowl, we analyzed the oldest collections available of the Boise City Newspaper: 1937 to 1942. We looked at front-page articles and reported only information relevant to the Dust Bowl and the people of Cimarron County. Considering our research, we chose to code the newspaper articles and assign them to three thematic categories: environmental, social, and economic. The frequencies of the three themes in the front-page of the newspaper throughout the six year period are as follows:

- Environmental topics appeared 71 times.
- Social topics appeared 25 times.
- Economic topics appeared 37 times.

We have created a word cloud visualization (Figure 4) consisting of the front-page headlines that we collected from the Boise City Newspapers. The word cloud counts the frequencies of each word that was found in the titles during the six year period. Those words that were most frequent are the largest, with those that were least frequent being the smallest. The frequency of the top ten words can be found in Table 1 below.

We also analyzed the tourism locations in Cimarron County and created a map (Figure 5). This map displays the many different tourist attractions across the county, including lodging, natural and historical locations, as well as populated areas.

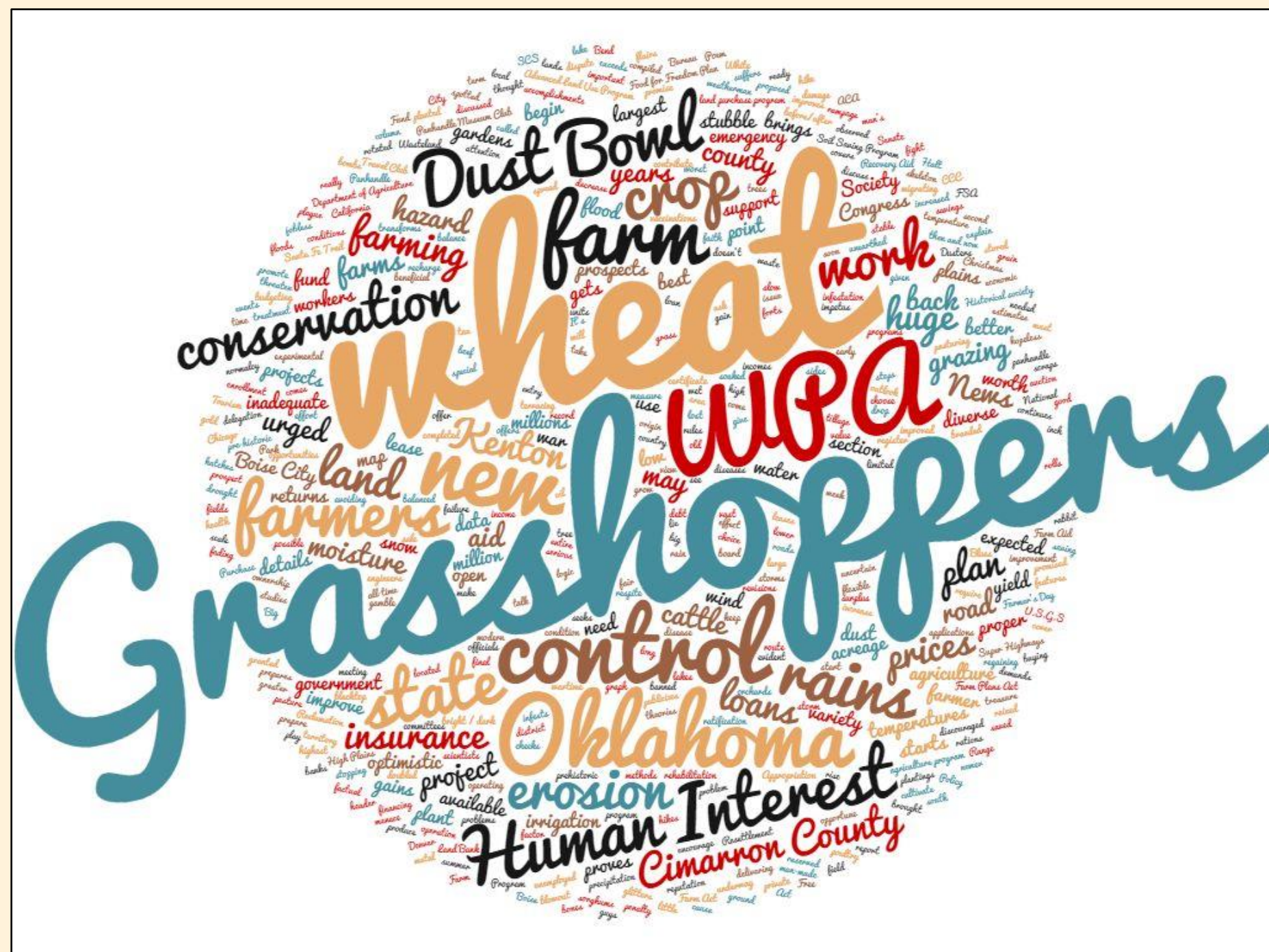


Figure 4: Word Cloud of Boise City Newspaper headline frequencies

Frequency of Words in Newspaper		
Rank	Word	Frequency
1	Grasshoppers	24
2	Wheat	24
3	WPA	11
4	Control	10
5	New	10
6	Oklahoma	9
7	Farm	9
8	Human	7
9	Dust Bowl	7
10	Farmers	7

Table 1: Boise City Newspaper headline frequency counts



Figure 1a: Kenton, OK in 1914 from the Oklahoma State University Library Archives



Figure 2a: Boise City Courthouse c. 1930s from Oklahoma State University Library Archives



Figure 3a: Tri State Marker c. early 1900s from Oklahoma State University Library Archives

Repeat Photography: Figure 3 photographs are of the Tri-State marker. In the 2016 photograph the marker is different and there is now a fence behind it. The Tri-State marker itself, was replaced sometime in between when the original photograph was taken and when the 2016 photograph was taken. The ground surrounding the marker is clear and smoothed in the 2016 photograph. In the original photograph the girls are in period dress, while in the 2016 photograph, the girls are in modern dress.

Dust Bowl Blues

*A drouthy time with little rains
A wind swept across the western plains
The dust arose in the darkest clouds,
Blanketing all in blackened shrouds.*

*Another came, and many more,
Next year same as the year before;
Dust filled the air, it filled the soul
And thus was born the famed Dust Bowl.*

*Hardened farmers of many a year
Took up the fight with naught a fear;
Federal men worked hand in hand
With farmers to stop the drifting sand.*

*Hardened farmers of many a year
Took up the fight with naught a fear;
Federal men worked hand in hand
With farmers to stop the drifting sand.*

*Laws were passed and programs made
To aid in the fight 'till the storms were stayed;
Each year experience new things learned
To aid in the fight 'till rains returned.*

*Farmers, Conservation, and Triple A
Worked together and won the day,
Rains finally came and all went well
And the Dust Bowl didn't go to h--.*

*-Bill Baker (15 years experience as county agent in the center of the famed Dust Bowl)
Excerpted from The Boise City News 8/12/1937*

Agricultural Census Data for Cimarron County			
Year	Population	Number of Farms	Average Size of Farm (acres)
1920	3,436	298	525
1930	5,408	887	2,047
1940	3,054	605	1,536
1950	4,589	616	1,788
1959	4,496	505	2,000
1974	4,145	475	2,178
1982	3,648	458	2,358
1992	3,301	446	2,321
2002	3,148	545	2,058
2012	2,475	554	2,089

Table 2: Agriculture Census data for Cimarron County, OK
(Adapted from: USDA-NASS 1920-2012)

Changing Demographics

As illustrated in Table 2, the overall trend in the number of farms in Cimarron County has decreased while the average size of the farms has increased since the 1930s. There was a peak in the population, number of farms, and the size of farms in 1930. The trends in the average size of farms has been increasing since 1940 until it decreased in 2002 and then slightly increased again in 2012. The population decreased from 1930 to 1940 and then experienced growth in 1950, until returning to a downward trend. The number of farms hit a peak in 1930 and then continually declined until 2002 when the trend started to rise again. These changes illustrate that although population is decreasing, the number of farms is on the rise. Furthermore, the average farm size remains high (2,089 acres).



Figure 1b: Kenton, OK in 2016 taken by Oklahoma State University students



Figure 2b: Boise City Courthouse 2016 taken by Oklahoma State University students



Figure 3b: Tri State Marker 2016 taken by Oklahoma State University students

Repeat Photography: Figure 2 photographs are of the Boise City Courthouse. The original 1930s photograph shows a dust storm coming in while the repeat is a clear sunny day. The 2016 photograph shows antennas on top of the courthouse and powerlines running in front of it. There is also a new road sign in front of the courthouse in the 2016 photograph and the courthouse is surrounded by parking for vehicles.

The map in Figure 5 represents tourist attractions and accommodations available for travelers. The map has 19 points of interest denoting the main towns and populated areas, as well as various places to visit and stay overnight. This map also displays the main roads to the points of interest with callouts for the populated areas. Additionally, there is an inset of the northwestern Cimarron County area allowing clarification of the area. Lastly, there is a locator map displaying the location of Cimarron County in reference to the state of Oklahoma. As you can see, Cimarron County has much to offer visitors!

Cimarron County Points of Interest

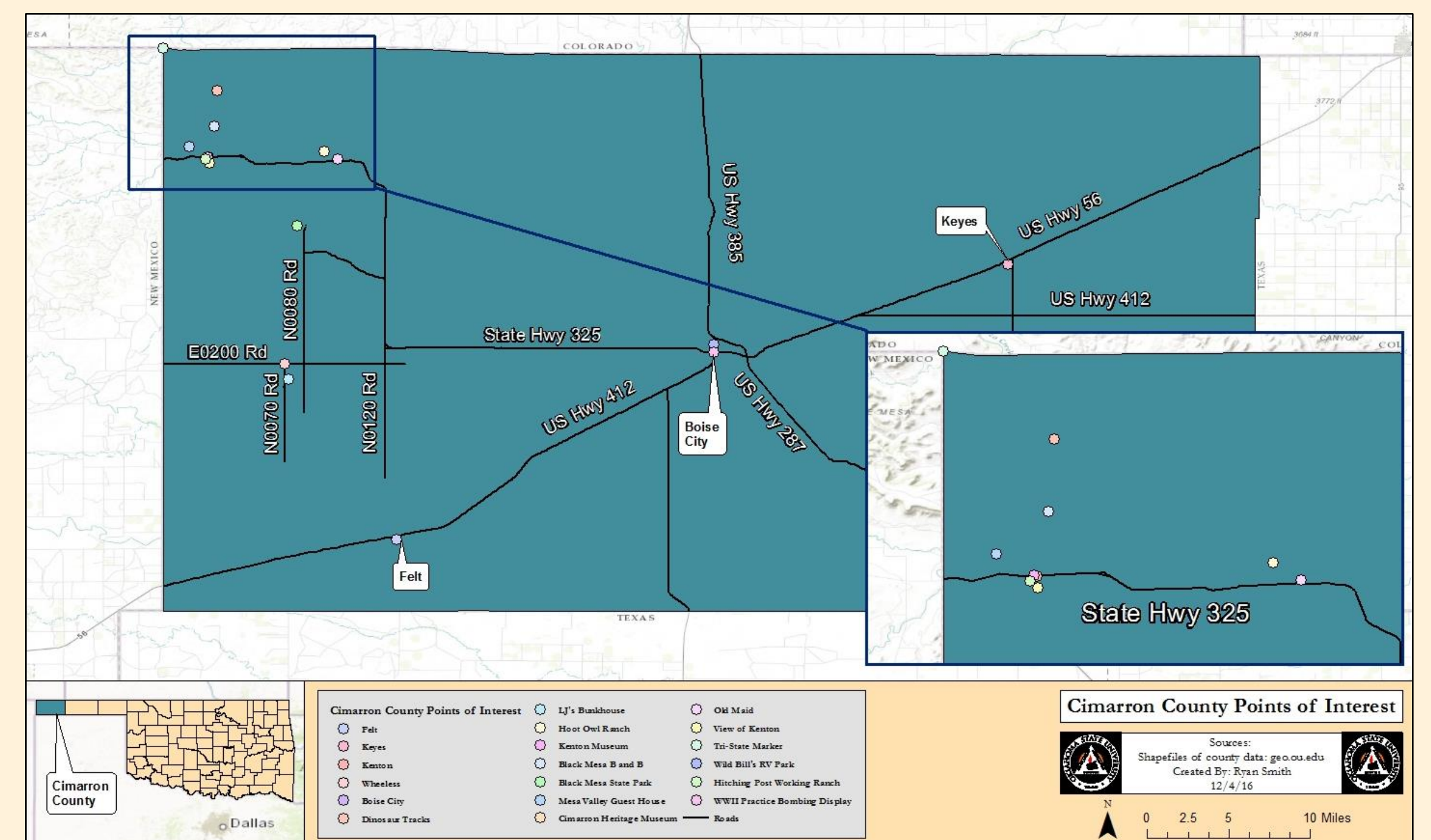


Figure 5: Map of Cimarron County points of interest

Acknowledgements

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Figure 6: Sign welcoming people entering Boise City, OK



Figure 7: Giant metal dinosaur named "Cimmy" at the Cimarron Heritage Center in Boise City, OK

Conclusions

Cimarron County experienced tremendous pressures during the Dust Bowl, but emerged stronger because of it. When asked to describe the people of Cimarron County, local residents use phrases such as "the people are of harder stock than most" and "[that they] find a way to endure through hardships." During the 1930s and 1940s, the Boise City Newspaper served as a platform for keeping the community connected. By looking for key words in the titles of newspaper articles, you can gain a sense of what the people of Cimarron County were most concerned with in the 1930s and 1940s. Grasshoppers and wheat were the most common words used in all the articles we analyzed. Residents were concerned with how the grasshoppers were eating the wheat and affecting crop yields. It became a community wide effort to try and stop the grasshoppers and protect the wheat. Community continues to be of importance to the people of Cimarron County. Despite a dwindling population (Table 2), the strength of the community survives.

The use of repeat photography shows that the landscape itself has experienced little change in Cimarron County. The infrastructure has been modernized with new roads and technology, but much has stayed the same. During the Dust Bowl, families were almost entirely dependent upon income from agriculture and ranching. While this is still true today, tourism has increasingly evolved as a new source of revenue for the community in recent years. The people of Cimarron County have used the unique Dust Bowl history of the community to bring in tourists from around the world. According to local residents, the scope and location of tourism across the county supports and encourages greater tourism in the county overall. In sum, the people of Cimarron County have survived many adversities and managed to turn their dust into gold.