

The Story of Aqua Pura

by

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People who write about Kansas, as a rule, write ignorantly, and speak of the state as a finished product. Kansas, like Gaul of old, is divided into three parts, differing as widely, each from the other, as any three countries in the same latitude upon the globe. It would be as untrue to classify together the Egyptian, the Indian and the Central American, as to speak of the Kansas man without distinguishing between the Eastern Kansas, the Central Kansas, and the Western Kansas. Eastern Kansas is a finished community like New York or Pennsylvania. Central Kansas is finished, but not quite paid for; and Western Kansas, the only place where there is any suffering from drouth or crop failures, is a new country—old only in the pluck which is slowly conquering the desert.

Aqua Pura was a western Kansas town, set high up, far out on the prairie. It was founded nine years ago, at the beginning of the boom, not by cow-boys and ruffians, but by honest, ambitious men and women. Of the six men who staked out the town site, two—Johnson and Barringer—were Harvard men; and Nichols was from Princeton; and the other three, Bemis, Bradley and Hicks, had come from inland state universities. When their wives came west there was a Vassar reunion, and the first mail that arrived after the postoffice had been established brought the New York magazines. The town was like dozens of others that sprang up far out in the treacherous wilderness in that fresh, green spring of 1886.

They called it Aqua Pura, choosing a Latin name to proclaim to the world that it was not a rowdy town. The new yellow pine of the little village gleamed in the clear sunlight. It could be seen for miles on a clear, warm day, as it stood upon a rise of ground; and over in Maize, six miles away, the electric lights of Aqua Pura, which flashed out in the evening before the town was six months old, could be seen distinctly. A school

house that cost twenty thousand dollars was built before the town had seen its first winter; and the first Christmas ball in Aqua Pura was held in an opera house that cost ten thousand. Money was plentiful; two and three story buildings rose on each side of the main street of the little place. The farmers who had taken homesteads in the country around the town had prospered. The sod had yielded handsomely for the first breaking. Those who had come too late to put in crops found it easy to borrow money. There was an epidemic of hope in the air. Everyone breathed the contagion. The public library association raised a thousand dollars for books during the winter, and in the spring a syndicate was formed to erect a library building. Aqua Pura could not afford to be behind other towns, and the railroad train that passed the place threw off packages of the newest books as fast as mails could come from New York. The sheet iron tower of the Aqua Pura waterworks rose early in the spring of '87, and far out in the high grass the hydrants were scattered. Living water came bountifully from the wells that were sunk from fifty to one hundred feet in the ground.

Barringer was elected mayor at the municipal election in the spring of '87, and he platted out Barringer's Addition, and built a house there with borrowed money in June. There were two thousand people in Aqua Pura then. Hacks rolled prosperously over the smooth, hard, prairie streets; two banks opened; and the newspaper, which was printed the day the town was laid off, became a daily. Society grew gay, and people from all corners of the globe met in the booming village.

There was no lawless element. There was not a saloon in the town. A billiard hall, and a dark room, wherein cards might be played surreptitiously, were the only institutions which made the people of Aqua Pura blush, when they took the innumerable "eastern capitalists" over the town who visited Western Kansas that year. These "capitalists" were entertained at a three-story brick hotel, equipped with electricity and modern plumbing in order to excel Maize, where the hotel was an indifferent frame affair. There were throngs of well-dressed people on the streets, and sleek fat horses were hitched in front of the stores wherein the farmers traded.

This is the story of the rise. Barringer has told it a thousand times. Barringer believed in the town to the last. When the terrible drouth of 1887, with its furnace-like breath singed the town and the farmer in Fountain county, Barringer lead the majority which proudly claimed that the country was all right; and as chairman of the board of county commissioners, he sent a scathing message to the Governor, refusing aid; Barringer's own bank loaned money on land, whereon the crop failed, to tide the farmers over the winter. Barringer's signature guaranteed loans from the east upon everything negotiable, and Aqua Pura thrived for a time upon promises. Here and there, in the spring of 1888, there was an empty building. One room of the opera house block was vacant. Barringer started

a man in business, selling notions, who occupied the room. Barringer went east and pleaded with the men who had invested in the town to be easy on their debtors. Then came the hot winds of July, blowing out of the southwest, scorching the grass, shrivelling the grain, and drying up the streams that had filled in the spring. During the fall of that year the hotel, which had been open only in the lower story, closed. The opera house began to be used for "aid" meetings, and when the winter wind blew dust-blackened snow through the desolate streets of the little town, it rattled a hundred windows in vacant houses, and sometimes blew sun-warped boards from the high sidewalk that led across the gully to the big red grade of the unfinished "Chicago Air Line."

Barringer did not go east that year. He could not. But he wrote—wrote regularly and bravely to the eastern capitalists who were concerned in his bank and loan company; and they grew colder and colder as the winter deepened and the interests on defaulted loans came not. Barringer's failure was announced in the spring of '89. Nickols had left. Johnson had left. The other founders of Aqua Pura had died in '87-'88, and their families had gone, and with them went the culture and the ambition of the town. But Barringer held on and lived, rent free, in the two front rooms of the barn of a hotel. His daughter, Mary, frail, tanned, hollow-eyed, and withered by drouths, lived with him.

In 1890 the hot winds came again in the summer, and long and steadily they blew, blighting everything. There were only five hundred people in Fountain county that year, and they lived on the taxes from the railroad that crossed the county. Families were put on the poor list without disgrace—it was almost a mark of political distinction—and in the little town many devices were in vogue to distribute the county funds during the winter.

There was no rain that winter and the snow was hard and dry. Cattle on the range suffered for water and died by thousands. A procession from the little town started eastward early in the spring. White-canopied wagons, and wagons covered with oil table-cloths of various hues, or clad in patch-work, sought the rising sun.

Barringer grew thin, unkempt and gray. Every evening, when the wind rattled in the deserted rooms of the old hotel, and made the faded signs up and down the dreary street creak, the old man and his daughter went over their books, balancing, accounting interest, figuring on mythical problems that the world had long since forgotten.

Christmas eve, 1891, the entire village, fifteen souls in all, assembled at Barringer's house. He was hopeful, even cheerful, and talked blithely of what "one good crop" would do for the country; although there were no farmers left to plant it, even if nature had been harboring a smile for the dreary land. The year that followed that Christmas promised much.

There were spring rains, and in May, the brown grass and the scattered patches of wheat grew green and fair to see. Barringer freshened up perceptibly. He sent an account of his indebtedness—on home-ruled manila paper—to his creditors in the east, and faithfully assured them that he would remit all he owed in the fall. A few wanderers straggled into Fountain county, lured by the green fields and running brooks. The gray prairie wolf gave up the dug-out to human occupants. Lights in the prairie cabins twinkled back hope to the stars. Before June there were a thousand people in Fountain county. Aqua Pura's business-houses seemed to liven up. There was a Fourth-of-July celebration in town. But the rain that spoiled the advertised "fire-works in the evening" was the last that fell until winter. A car load of aid from Central Kansas saved a hundred lives in Fountain county that year.

When the spring of 1893 opened, Barringer looked ten years older than he looked the spring before. The grass on the range was sere, and great cracks were in the earth. The winter had been dry. The spring opened dry, with high winds blowing through May. There were but five people on the townsite that summer, Barringer, his daughter, and the postmaster's family. Supplies came overland from Maize. A bloody county-seat war had given the rival town the prize in 1890. Barringer had plenty of money to buy food, for the county commissioners distributed the taxes which the railroad paid.

It was his habit to sit on the front porch of the deserted hotel and look across the prairies to the southwest and watch the breaking clouds scatter into the blue of the twilight. He could see the empty water tower silhouetted against the sky. The frame buildings that rose in the boom days had all been moved away, the line of the horizon was guarded at regular intervals by the iron hydrants far out on the prairie, that stood like sentinels hemming in the past. The dying wind seethed through the short, brown grass. Heat lightning winked devilishly in the distance, and the dissolving clouds that gathered every afternoon laughed in derisive thunder at the hopes of the worn old man sitting on the warped boards of the hotel porch. Night after night he sat there, waiting, with his daughter by his side. There had been a time when he was too proud to go to the east, where his name was a by-word. Now he was too poor in purse and in spirit. So he sat and waited, hoping fondly for the realization of a dream which he feared could never come true.

There were days when the postmaster's four-year-old child sat with him. The old man and the child sat thus one evening when the old man sighed: "If it would only rain, there would be half a crop yet! If it would only rain!" The child heard him and sighed imitatively: "Yes, if it would only rain—what is rain, Mr. Barringer?" He looked at the child blankly and sat for a long time in silence. When he arose he did not even have a pretence of hope. He grew despondent from that hour, and a sort of

hypochondria seized him. It was his fancy to exaggerate the phenomena of the drouth.

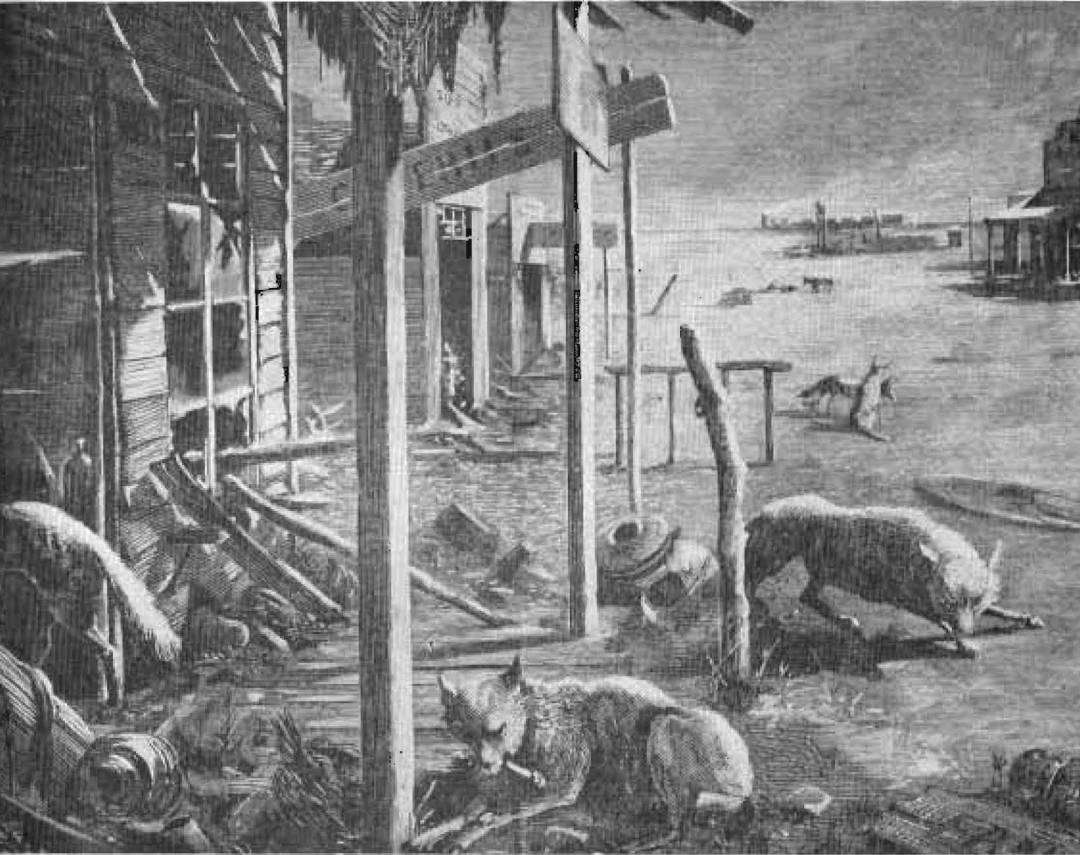
That fall when the winds piled the sand in the railroad "cuts" and the prairie was as hard and barren as the ground around a cabin door, Barringer's daughter died of fever. The old man seemed little moved by sorrow. But as he rode back from the bleak graveyard, through the sand cloud, in the carriage with the dry rattling spokes, he could only mutter to the sympathizing friends who came from Maize to mourn with him, "And we laid her in the hot and dusty tomb." He recalled an old song which fitted these words, and for days kept crooning: "Oh, we laid her in the hot and dusty tomb."

That winter the postmaster left. The office was discontinued. The county commissioners tried to get Barringer to leave. He would not be persuaded to go. The county commissioners were not insistent. It gave one of them an excuse for drawing four dollars a day from the county treasury; he rode from Maize to Aqua Pura every day with supplies for Barringer.

The old man cooked, ate, and slept in the office of the hotel. Day after day he put on his overcoat in the winter and made the rounds of the vacant store buildings. He walked up and down in the little paths through the brown weeds in the deserted streets, all day long, talking to himself. At night, when the prairie wind rattled through the empty building, blowing snow and sand down the halls, and in little drifts upon the broken stairs, the old man's lamp was seen by stragglers burning far into the night. He told his daily visitor that he was keeping his books.

Thus the winter passed. The grass came with the light mists of March. By May it had lost its color. By June it was brown, and the hot winds came again in August, curving the warped boards a little deeper on the floor of the hotel porch. Herders and travellers, straggling back to the green country, saw him sitting there at twilight, looking toward the southwest,—a grizzled, unkempt old man, with a shifting light in his eye. To such as spoke to him he always made the same speech: "Yes, it looks like rain, but it can't rain. The rain has gone dry out here. They say it rained at Hutchinson,—maybe so, I doubt it. There is no God west of Newton. He died up in '90. They talk irrigation. That's an old story in hell. Where's Johnson? Not here! Where's Nickols? Not here! Bemis? Not here! Bradley? Not here! Hicks? Not here! Where's handsome Dick Barringer, Hon. Richard Barringer? Here! Here he is, holding down a hot brick in a cooling room of hell! Yes, it does look like rain, doesn't it?"

Then he would go over it all again, and finally cross the trembling threshold of the hotel, slamming the crooked, sun-steamed door behind him. There he stayed, summer and winter, looking out across the burned horizon, peering at the long, low, black line of clouds in the southwest, longing for the never-coming rain.



"Busted," a copy of a painting by Frenzeny and Tavernier, depicts a deserted Kansas town.

Cattle roamed the streets in the early spring, but the stumbling of the animals upon the broken walks, did not disturb him, and the winds and the drouth soon drove them away. The messenger with provisions came every morning. The summer, with its awful heat, began to glow. The lightning and the thunder joked insolently in the distance at noon; and the stars in the deep, dry blue looked down and mocked the old man's prayers as he sat, at night, on his rickety sentry box. He tottered through the deserted stores calling his roll. Night after night he walked to the red clay grade of the uncompleted "Air Line" and looked over the dead level stretches of prairie. He would have gone away, but something held him to the town. Here he had risked all. Here, perhaps, in his warped fancy, he hoped to regain all. He had written so often, "Times will be

better in the spring," that it was part of his confession of faith—that and "One good crop will bring the country around all right." This was written with red clay in the old man's nervous hand on the side of the hotel, on the faded signs, on the deserted inner walls of the stores,—in fact, everywhere in Aqua Pura.

The wind told on him; it withered him, sapped his energy, and hobbled his feet.

One morning he awoke and a strange sound greeted his ears. There was a gentle tapping in the building and a roar that was not the guffaw of the wind. He rushed for the door. He saw the rain, and bareheaded he ran to the middle of the streets where it was pouring down. The messenger from Maize with the day's supplies found him standing there, vacantly, almost thoughtfully, looking up, the rain dripping from his grizzled head, and rivulets of water trickling about his shoes.

"Hello, Uncle Dick," said the messenger. "Enjoying the prospect? River's raisin'; better come back with me."

But the old man only answered, "Johnson? Not here! Nickols? Not here! Bemis? Not here! Bradley? Not here! Hicks? Not here! And Barringer? Here! And now God's moved the rain belt west. Moved it so far that there's hope for Lazarus to get irrigation from Abraham."

And with this the old man went into the house. There, when the five days' rain had ceased, and when the great river that flooded the barren plain had shrunk, the rescuing party, coming from Maize, found him. Besides his bed were his balanced books and his legal papers. In his dead eyes were a thousand dreams.