

Men and Hopes

These are the stories of eight Kansas towns that no longer exist—representative of a hundred times that many. And for each of these towns there were at one time people . . . people with ambitions, with worries, with desires and dislikes, with honest intentions or dishonest. There were people who got red noses and ears in the winter cold and who sweated, complaining of the Kansas heat, and swatted flies and mosquitoes in the summer . . . people with ideals who worked hard to make them successful, and people with ideas who “worked the suckers” hard. They were all part of Kansas — temporarily then perhaps, but permanently now. The people, too, are representative of hundreds, just as their towns are representative of hundreds.

There was the founder of Silkville, for example. Ernest Valetton de Boissiere was quite a fellow. A wealthy aristocrat, a Frenchman by birth, Boissiere, when he was in Kansas, was described as a courtly old gentleman with a flowing beard, a fondness for music, good books, and underprivileged people, and a good head for business affairs.

In 1869, he initiated the experimental colony at Silkville. In 1872, he was able to make the following report to the Secretary of the Franklin County Agricultural Society, who had requested a statement of his operations:

SILKVILLE, NEAR WILLIAMSBURG,
FRANKLIN, CO., October 26, 1872

A. M. BLAIR, Esq.:

Dear Sir:—In compliance with your request, I report my experience in manufacturing and raising silk at this place.

I commenced the weaving of silk velvet ribbons in 1869, but with very inadequate accommodations. In the following year I erected a factory, 28 by 85 feet, one story high, with walls of stone, which gave me ample room. I have now two looms, constantly employed; one capable of turning out 112 yards of ribbon one half inch wide per day; the other, 72 yards, one inch wide. These looms employ two men and three women, and part

of the time, a young girl. I shall soon have a third loom completed and set up, for weaving ribbons 3 inches wide, which will be capable of turning out 40 yards per day.

Sales of my silk fabrics through commission men, have not met my expectations; they have contributed liberally, as I judge, to the profit of the agents, but very little to mine.

In the spring of 1870, I planted a quantity of White Mulberry seeds procured from France, for the sole purpose of rearing silk worms. They produced an abundance of trees. I have ten thousand, which have made a remarkable luxuriant growth. The past season I attempted to produce cocoons from silk worms eggs of different varieties, obtained from France, but my success was far from satisfactory. The violent thunder storms which occurred while they were growing, (in May and June) were unfavorable, but I suspect the intense heat of Kansas summers, so different from the more moderate summers of France, to be a more serious and permanent difficulty. I intend, however, to repeat the experiment next year, with eggs produced this year from these French worms, which may gradually improve as they become acclimated. I hope, also, to obtain some Japanese eggs, which I think likely to be better adapted to our Kansas climate.

Yours respectfully,
E. V. BOISSIERE

Within a year or two, a prospectus of the Silkville community (which was probably written by Boissiere) was circulated. In illustration of the practical nature of the old gentleman, a few points have been extracted:

. . . The apprehension that our experiment might be greatly embarrassed by admitting the totally destitute to participate in it, compels us to say that such can not at present be received. The means applicable to our purpose, considerable as they are, might become inadequate if subjected to the burden of maintaining objects of charity; while but few could be thus relieved, even if all the means at command were devoted to that single object. Our system, if we do not misapprehend it, will, in its maturity, provide abundantly for all.

But though we insist that the first participators in our enterprise shall not be pecuniarily destitute, the amount insisted upon is not large. So much, however, as is required must be amply secured by the following cash advances:

First: rent of rooms and board paid two months in advance for each person admitted to reside on the domain

Second: each person so admitted will be required to deposit, as may be directed, the sum of one hundred dollars for himself, and an equal sum for every other person admitted with him at his request, on which interest will be allowed at the rate of six per cent. per annum. This deposit is expected to be kept unimpaired until the projectors think it may safely be dispensed with, but will be repaid, or so much thereof as is subject to no charges or offsets, whenever the person on whose account it was made withdraws from the enterprise and ceases to reside on the domain

This deposit, besides furnishing a guarantee against the destitution of the person making it, is recommended by another consideration not less important—it secures him, in case he wishes to retire from the enterprise, because he can find no satisfactory position in it, or for any other reason, against retiring empty-handed, or remaining longer than he wishes for want of means to go elsewhere.

In addition to these cash advances, each person admitted as an associate or candidate will be required to provide furniture for his room, and all other articles needed for his personal use, including, generally, the hand-tools with which he works

It is hoped and expected that the style of living, at least in the early stages of the experiment, will be frugal and inexpensive. Neatness and good taste, and even modest elegance, will be approved and encouraged; but the projectors disapprove of superfluous personal decorations, and of all expense incurred for mere show without utility, and in this sentiment they hope to be sustained by the associates. . . .

Despite Boissiere's hopes for founding a successful communitarian colony and despite his sincere attempts to promote a new industry in this country, Silkville ran a life span of only twenty years and then died.

An interesting side light on the demise of Santa Fe appeared in The Sublette Monitor on December 17, 1936, under the headline "An Englishman Would Collect on Santa Fe's Bonds":

Haskell County's former county seat, one of the Southwest's most famous ghost towns, cropped into the news again recently when an Associated Press dispatch from Topeka told of an inquiry from an Englishman concerning the status of two \$500 bonds he had held sixteen years against Santa Fe. The Englishman, W. Dobson of York, was informed the bonds were worthless. Santa Fe was officially abandoned in 1926 when the county commissioners passed an order vacating the land.

In reality the abandonment of Santa Fe, once an ambitious prairie capital of 1,800 residents, was started in 1913 when the Santa Fe built a line from Dodge City to Elkhart, missing Santa Fe by seven miles. Today there is nothing at Santa Fe as surety for the Englishman's bonds—and perhaps those of many others—excepting a few dim ruts in the wheat fields, the crumbling foundation of the old courthouse and bank building and a filling station which, like the wheat fields, is out of place in the picture of old Santa Fe.

Interest Paid in 1896

Dobson wrote to the state attorney general interest on the coupons of his bonds had been paid up to July 1, 1896. His bonds are 6 per cent refunding issues, dated August 23, 1890, and matured July 1, 1920. He was advised that even if Santa Fe still existed the bonds were worthless because the statute of limitations had run on them.

Santa Fe came into being in 1886 in the hopes it would become headquarters of a new county to be carved out of southern Finney County. After Haskell County was organized, Santa Fe and Ivanhoe waged a fight for the county seat, Santa Fe winning October 13, 1887, when it received 647 votes to Ivanhoe's 381.

Incorporated in 1888

January 2, 1888, Santa Fe was incorporated. It waxed prosperous while Ivanhoe did not long survive the disappointment of not getting the court house. Good crops and bad crops were raised, drouths attacked the prairies. The Oklahoma land openings attracted many homesteaders—and with every economic change the population of Santa Fe rose and fell. But it dreamed of that happy day when a railroad would be built through it and its future assured.

Everything depended upon a railroad. The main contact with the outside world was a treacherous, boggy road through the sandhills to Garden City. Plains was another convenient point of contact. Motor cars were rare and uncertain in Santa Fe's heyday, and the trips to Garden City and Plains were matters of days instead of hours.

Many Bonds Issued

As in the case of all promising, developing towns, many bonds were issued by Santa Fe. Western Kansas then was in the nation's speculative eye, and the bonds usually had ready markets in financial centers of the east and, it now develops, even found their way to England.

When a railroad finally came, in 1912, Santa Fe found itself worse off than before, because two new towns—Sublette and Satanta—sprang up on the railroad, and the first thing Santa Fe knew its buildings were being moved away to its competitors. [Santa Fe], having seen the Dodge City-Montezuma railroad go awry after the right-of-way had been graded,

placed its faith in a north-south railroad instead of an east-west line which materialized. Sublette was voted the county seat October 30, 1920. Santa Fe went the way of Ivanhoe.

Many Other "Ghosts"

The Englishman's inquiry called up the many ghost towns of western Kansas—communities which once flourished with faith and loud talk and now have only holes that were cellars or even nothing to show they once had the makings of cities and, in some cases, sent armed boosters and hired gunmen out on the prairie trails to bring in the county records.

Practically every county has its ghosts, some with blood-splotted histories, others with calm, civic zeal that could not triumph over the dispensations of time—and the advent of railroads. There was Woodsdale in Stevens County, Veteran in Stanton, Appomatox in Grant, Carthage and Meade Center in Meade, Springfield in Seward, Ravanna in Finney. Old Ulysses decided to move bodily for the expressed purpose of escaping a top-heavy bond issue.

And speaking of Old Ulysses, the first column on the editorial page of the first newspaper published there certainly reveals the high hopes and high spirits of the publishers over the town and the county. From the Grant County Register ("Published Every Tuesday at Ulysses, Grant County, Kansas . . . \$1.50 Per Annum, In Advance") Tuesday, July 21, 1885:

OUR BOW

Here we are. For our appearance we have no apology to make. Ulysses wanted a paper, we wanted a location, and finding Grant with greater natural advantages than any un-organized county in the state, and sure to become one of the foremost, we have cast our lot here. We may be a few days or weeks, or even a few months ahead of the times—in advance of the settlement—but we are willing to wait.

The REGISTER will be neither a personal or a political organ, but devoted solely, wholly and entirely to Ulysses and Grant county. For the upbuilding and advancement of Ulysses and Grant county we offer our services, our labor, willing to cast our fortunes among a people and in a settlement that our judgment tells us will soon be one of the most prosperous, as it is now the most intelligent in the state.

Six weeks ago hardly a claim was taken in Grant county. Now there are over 500 actual settlers and they still come in swarms, and all who come locate. If the rush continues there will not be a vacant piece of land in the county.

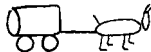
Come! Come! While there is yet time. Come and join us!

—C. D. Majors [Manager]

As a last example of actions and reactions of people in relation to the old ghost towns, a short account of his search for Minneola by an "outsider" seems quite enlightening about the town and about people. A young man, John Conover, went on a bill-collecting trip for his employer in 1858, and reported his search for Minneola as follows:

Even as late as '58 capitals were scattered promiscuously throughout the state. I started horseback from Leavenworth in '58 while clerking for Reisinger & Fenlon, who had a hardware store on Main street, between Shawnee and Delaware, to find the capital of Kansas. I had a note for \$97.50 for a set of chafing dishes and table appurtenances for the eating department of the new capitol, which was located on the first floor of the capitol building. The note was made and signed by Dr. J. B. Davis, Cyrus Fitz Currier, of Leavenworth; O. A. Bassett and Joel K. Goodlin, of Lawrence; E. C. K. Garvey and a lawyer by the name of Blackwell, of Topeka, but none of them had means enough to pay, at least that is what they said. The capital I was looking for was Minneola, Kan. I stopped at Lawrence over night and the next day started south. I met a farmer and his wife in a wagon at the crossing of the Wakarusa, and inquired where Minneola was. They said they had never heard of it. I rode about three miles further, met another couple in a wagon, and they stated they did not know of any town of that name. Riding three or four miles further, I met a man coming up horseback, who said he had heard some talk about the capital but did not know where it was. About three miles further on I met a carpenter riding an old mare, bareback, with blind bridle. I inquired if he knew where the new capital of Kansas was. He said: "Yes, siree." He had been working on the capitol building. "You go one and one-half miles further and you can see it about a mile off to the right." I found it. The legislature had met there one morning about a week before and adjourned that afternoon to meet at some future time at Leavenworth. I was on a collecting tour, so I rode to Topeka and then to Manhattan, and then back to Leavenworth.

These are only a few of the many "stories" attached to each of the Kansas ghost towns. The feelings of the people, the success or failure of our Kansas towns, all have contributed to the state as it is today.



REFERENCES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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