

Kansas Ghost Towns

by Lissa McQuin

The myths, the legends, and the unknown connected with the famed Kansas ghost town have sparked the interest of many.

Many people are led to believe that ghost towns contain sinister spirits of old gun-slingers which will possess the body and spirit of the visitors and destroy them or drive them insane. In reality, however, ghost towns are nothing more than dried up little towns or cities that failed to expand for some reason.

During the early and mid 1800's the virgin plains of Kansas were being broken. Pioneers brought with them the concepts of industrialization from the East. Thus development began. The need for transportation was inevitable and this laid the foundation for the construction for the railroad. Along these tracks small communities were built. Some expanded and became larger cities and metropolises and some died and became ghost towns.

The towns that were missed by the railroads were destined to fold because of lack of communication and lack of transportation for the farmers' produce. Other towns' fates were sealed by fires or ill winds that whipped across the flat plains.

Later on in the century, when government came to Kansas, Kansans felt that they had the right to govern themselves. Hence the state was broken up into counties, which caused competition for the county seat of each district. Much blood was shed during these fights and many towns lost all hopes of expansion. Upon losing the county seat battle, numerous towns found their populations decreasing, while the county seat developed into a prosperous city. With nothing to offer newcomers immigrating into the state, these towns were forgotten or ignored until eventually they died out.

Some ghost towns never existed except on paper and others died because of the failure of the main industry of the town. But no matter what the cause, ghost towns, stereotyped into romantic cow towns, are in reality quiet villages that live in the past.

Violence is one major reason towns died. But most towns died much less melodramatically. In fact, some towns died even before they got started. Many counties, such as Dickinson county, were sparsely populated at first. Because of this, newcomers could settle anywhere in the county they wished and start a town in which they were the only residents. Many towns were established in just this way, though most were "paper towns" (a paper town is a town that exists only as plans or charts).

London Falls, Centreville, Arapaho, Sand Spring, Bruce City, White Cloud, and Aroma are all examples of such nonexistent towns. A group of immigrants from New York were passing through Dickinson county and, on passing through, named the town of Sand Spring. A farmer named the town of Aroma, which was to be located on his private ground, because he wanted a town to be named something beautiful. Most of these towns were no more than names and spots on farmers' privately-owned land.

Violence was common during the settlement of Kansas, and opinions about government differed. This brought on disputes between towns as to where the county seat was to be placed. Towns, realizing the need for the county seat for prosperity, sometimes got desperate and did things that later were regretted. For example, in Finney county on section 10, T. 22S, R. 28W.¹, there lies the remains of the once powerful and booming town of Ravanna. Only a few stone piles remain of the store, which mark the spot of one of the bloodiest county seat battles ever fought in the Western territory.

Ravanna was originally set up as an outfitting place for cattle traders in 1882.² In the beginning, Ravanna was named "Bulltown," after the late John Bull, who was responsible for the establishment of the town. John Bull started this town to take advantage of the cattlemen's needs. He built a sod house and set up his own post office. The town grew and prospered within a few years. People flocked to town, for they saw that Bulltown was going to be very powerful and influential town in the near future. In a year's time, the population of Bulltown went from 600 to 2,600.³ The merchants and businessmen set up various types of stores and shops at the height of its prosperity, for example, Bulltown had the following businesses:

2 banks	3 newspapers	1 harness shop
2 dry good stores	1 book store	1 laundry
4 boarding houses	2 blacksmith shops	7 real estate firms
1 feed store	1 wagon shop	5 lawyers
2 meat markets	1 jewelry store	4 doctors
3 millinery stores	4 hotels	1 lumber yard

People eventually grew tired of the name Bulltown and wanted a change, so Bulltown became "Cowland."⁴ The cattlemen were

1. Finney County Clippings, *Ravanna's Glory Long Faded*. Kansas Historical Society Collections.

2. *Ibid*.

3. Lanon, Sara C., *Lost Towns Of Finney County*. Kansas Historical Society Collections.

4. *Ravanna's Glory Long Faded*.

pleased with the new name, but the merchants said the name made the town sound dirty. After much debate and discussion, the merchants won and Cowland was changed to Ravanna, a much more respectable name, so said the merchants. The new Ravanna continued to expand and there seemed no end to its growth. Everyone was happy until a series of events took place which destroyed the town and marked an end to its prosperity.

About the time Ravanna was being established, so was another town, Eminence. It was built for different reasons than Ravanna. The founders of Eminence were more conservative and took longer to make decisions on the fate of the community. Therefore, progress was slower in Eminence than in Ravanna. Because of this slow expansion, Ravanna grew faster, but after a few years, Eminence caught up with Ravanna. Eminence had basically the same types of businesses that Ravanna had, except that Eminence was not as carefree as Ravanna. Eminence was more soundly-based than Ravanna and this was an overwhelming advantage for Eminence. This advantage was put to the test within the next few months.

Garfield county, which is now a township in Finney county, was seeking status as a county. This happened at the height of both Ravanna's and Eminence's prosperity and power. Both towns felt that they should be the county seat. Many disputes and fights went on between the two towns. Ravanna was so sure it would become the county seat that it constructed a \$12,000⁵ court house which was nicknamed the "Great White Elephant." The debates continued and the hatred mounted until the day for voting arrived. As the polls closed and the ballots were tallied, the people of both communities were at a stand-off. All stores were closed and all businesses and mills were shut down, for this was to be the most important vote ever held in the area. Then, along toward late evening, the final results were posted. Ravanna had won the county seat by a margin of about 34 votes.⁶ The people of Eminence ordered a recount, but the tally was still the same. The elders of Eminence said there was unfair voting in Ravanna's favor, but they couldn't prove it. Eminence had lost the vote, but the people were not defeated yet. The county records were moved into the "Great White Elephant," where they were to be housed forever, or so it was thought. Eminence started an investigation into the voting done by Ravanna citizens. After much work and investigation, it was discovered that the construction crew that had been working on the court house was allowed to vote in the election.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

None of the men were citizens of Ravanna, and so through an order from the Attorney General's office, 60 votes were deducted from Ravanna, which gave the county seat to Eminence. The people of Ravanna were furious and refused to hand over the county records. This caused the citizens of Eminence to explode. They had no alternative but to go to Ravanna and take the records by force.

The men of Eminence marched to Ravanna with guns, or whatever else they could find, in hand. Axes, rakes, clubs and other objects were to be used in the battle. Blood was going to be shed that day and no one was going to stop it. The Eminence men split up into two groups. The first group would march into Ravanna the front way and the second group would circle around and enter from behind. When they reached Ravanna, the first group entered the town and the men of Ravanna were there to meet them. While the first group was fighting, the second group stole around from behind and took the county records, hitting one or two men who were guarding them. As they left the "Great White Elephant," they set it on fire, totally destroying it on the inside. The fire broke up the fight between the first group of Eminence men and the Ravanna men, because they had to put out the fire and try to save the court house, which had hardly been used. The Eminence men went back to their town and started new records and established their county seat. The men of Ravanna never attempted to take back the records. Many men were injured in the battle and a few were killed. This was a horrid price to pay to become the county seat.

Shortly after the county seat fight, Ravanna received another blow from which it would never recover. A group of men from Chicago, the owners of the Kansas Pacific Railroad, had told the community of Ravanna that they were considering connecting Dodge City and Ravanna with a branch of the railroad. Ravanna was counting heavily upon the branch connection, especially after losing the county seat. But as fate would have it, the businessmen from Chicago decided not to build the branch office because Ravanna had lost its power. These two losses caused the merchants of the community to board up their shops and move elsewhere, hoping business might be better. With the merchants of Ravanna almost gone, the farmers had trouble getting supplies to keep their farms running smoothly. This fact, plus a serious drought, caused the farmers to sell their land and move on. As a final blow, the county of Garfield, which Eminence and Ravanna had been fighting over, was surveyed and found 432⁷ square miles short of the requirements needed to be

7. Lanon.

a county. Thus the towns became part of Finney county with Garden City as the county seat. The residents viewed the whole bloody ordeal as having been in vain, and soon left in an attempt to forget all the bloodshed and hatred.

Natural causes were another major reason why towns folded. Weather, fires and insects played a big part in whether the primary residents, the farmers, lived or died. Thus, if the farmers could not survive, the town died along with the farmer. Many towns could have tolerated one downfall. But misfortunes seemed to strike one right after the other until the towns were completely wiped out.

For example, prosperous Sumner, located 3 miles south of Atchinson on the Missouri River thrived until 1860 when things took a turn for the worse. The founder was John P. Wheeler, and the town was named for George Sumner, one of the major stockholders in the town.

Sumner was built for two main reasons. The major reason was Sumner was advantageously located for overland freight. Prosperity for the town came with the business. But there was also another reason why Sumner came into being. Atchinson was controlled by southern sympathizers, and because of this, abolitionists were not welcome in the town at all. John Wheeler, being a strong abolitionist, wanted a town where abolitionists would be welcome. Consequently, Wheeler laid out the plans for the town in 1856. When the civil war broke out, southern supporters were driven out of Atchinson by John Brown and others. This attracted more abolitionist citizens who had not been accepted before. Sumner was then threatened because of the growing population of Atchinson. But Sumner still had the overland freight income on which it was thriving. This was its main income for a while after that, plus the farmers' small contribution. Even so, things seemed to be going downhill for Sumner.

Sumner's doom came in June of 1860 in the form of a tornado which almost completely flattened the town. Every house was either damaged or destroyed.⁸ After this, many of Sumner's citizens left for Denver, then still a part of Kansas territory, to start anew in the freight business there. All that was left in Sumner were the farmers who had rejuvenated their farms and planted again. The fall looked promising, and hope was restored until late in September when swarms of grasshoppers covered the farmers' fields. Nothing was left for the farmers to work with, and consequently they moved to different, more fertile land. With nothing left in the town except fields, Sumner declined into nothing but stories.

8. Atchinson County Clippings, *Old Atchinson County Towns*, Kansas Historical Society Collections.

One such story was remembered by Kate Covert. South of Sumner, a deep ravine still exists called Ghost Hollow. The ravine has a stream emptying into a deep black pool at the lower embankment. An early day legend tells of two well-known and highly-respected Atchinson men who killed a man for his money on the edge of a ravine and dropped his body into the pool. Kate Covert remembers going for the cows and hearing a big splash, although nothing had fallen in. The splash was frequently heard by others and only the brave dared venture into Ghost Hollow at night. Several young people ventured there and saw a white dog drop, apparently from the sky, and break in two at their feet and disappear as quickly as it had come. Still another incident tells of a man passing through Ghost Hollow who felt a cold breath in his neck. When he turned to look, he saw a dead man walking by his side.⁹

Iowa Point is another town that was a victim of a mishap over which the populace had no control. The first possessors of the Point were the Iowa Indians. After the Kansas-Nebraska bill was passed, the governor and the Indians made a treaty in which the latter sold most of their land and moved into a diminished reserve. The land acquired by the government was referred to as the "Iowa Trust Lands," and was sold to the highest bidder, with the exception of 480 acres for the Indian reserve; S. M. Irvin acquired the land upon which Iowa Point was built. Early in 1855, three men bought land around Mr. Irvin's at the Point, commenced to lay out the town, and began erection of buildings. The following year, many businesses were opened and residences built. A hotel was opened the same season. In 1856 the town, now two years old, took a decided start. Improvements of the previous year were finished, and the erection of a drug store, a meat market, and medical practice by Dr. J. Leigh, a saw mill and the First Methodist Church were among them. Iowa Point boomed until war broke out in Kansas, and the town came to a standstill. Finally in 1862, a great fire destroyed the most prosperous part of town, and the town's fate was sealed.

Most small towns in the 19th century had one major industry that the town lived on and survived by. If the industry failed, or labor moved away, the town suffered. This is what happened to five small communities called Donega, Moonlight, Dayton, Acme, and Rinehart,¹⁰ which depended heavily on a most unusual industry to survive. The creamery business became of a major importance in the towns. The five towns were all located in Dickinson county, which was ideal

9. Kate Covert, "Superstitions in Summer," *Atchinson Daily Globe*, March 13, 1908.

10. A. R. Ryan, *Early Days in Dickinson County*, Kansas Historical Society Collections.

for such an industry. Dickinson was a poorly established county with a vast amount of open land excellent for cattle grazing. In the 851 square miles which Dickinson county contained, only 378 people lived in 1861.¹¹ This gave the creamery men plenty of room to graze their cattle and build creameries. As these five small towns began to grow larger, industries began to move into the open territory. Farmers began to fence off their land, doing away with open range and thus ruining open pasture land. As the county became more populated, the creameries were taken over by larger and better creameries. The five towns folded up because of these larger businesses engulfing them.

Just like the creamery men, who had a dream to build creameries, men in another town called Paradee also built their town on a dream. A group of men and women decided to build a community in which there was only one church, the ideal church. They felt that if their town was based on the basic teachings of their church, their community would be drawn closer and the brotherhood image would become implanted in everyone's mind and that the community would set an example for future towns. This dream was the reason Paradee came into existence.

This group of people traveled to Kansas, where they chose a lot of ground along the Kansas Pacific Railroad. They felt that that the railroad would bring them added business, and it did. This group of dedicated people built themselves a town that was well-located, well-established, and well-governed. The first and only church of Paradee was the Christian Church. For many months the community grew in strength and Paradee was slowly gaining recognition. People started moving to Paradee in hopes of building themselves a livelihood. As more and more settlers came to Paradee, new ideas began to develop. Some people began to want a different church. Not everyone was contented with the Christian church; so after much discussion, a second church was constructed. The Methodist Episcopal Church came into existence, with the entire membership consisting of 46 people. The dream was broken and hartreds developed between the new and old settlers. The conflict grew so intense that fighting broke out among the people and the town of Paradee slowly died away.

As government started to develop over the Kansas plains, aggravated disputes sprang up often involving the placement for each county's seat. Because the free staters in Kansas were a majority over pro-slavery residents, the abolitionists had pretty much their own

11. *Ibid.*

way in terms of elections. The town of LeCompton was overruled by the free staters as being a satisfactory capital because of the number of pro-slavery people living there. The town of Minneola was then introduced into the legislature. Now known as "the Minneola Swindle," the event created quite a sensation in Kansas. In effect, the location of Minneola as a state capital and county seat was a scheme to further the personal fortunes of members of the legislature. The placement of the town was good, central, and well-adapted to take on the responsibilities of a capital city.

At once, nine quarter sections of land were purchased at a cost of \$3131.¹² Money was raised by taxes, assessment and mortgages. Inside of six weeks a hotel costing \$8,000 to complete was built, as well as a large hall used for legislative purposes, and a governor's mansion. The Mansion was the most elaborate, with 14 rooms on the ground floor alone,¹³ and acres of grounds, with a windmill and other buildings. Now only a pile of bricks and debris lay where the mansion was, and on the estate only the windmill is left standing to tell the story of the struggle Minneola encountered.

The same legislature, still with dreams of Minneola's success, made provisions for a number of railroads, centering at Minneola. Maps and bird's-eye views of the hopeful city were drawn up, and made Minneola appear as a great railroad center. Town lots at choice locations in the town were sold at phenomenal figures. Many more buildings went up, and soon the town had a population of several hundred.

Even after the scandal, Minneola became the county seat for a brief period. But Minneola's downfall came at the territorial convention in March of 1858. The territorial convention convened first at Centropolis, one mile west of Minneola, then moved to Minneola itself. Public judgement was severe, and condemned the swindle to such a degree that many of the delegates that were elected to the constitutional convention were instructed by their constituents to vote for an immediate adjournment from Minneola to some other place in the territory. Thus, it came about that Minneola had no sooner completed the organization of the convention, than a motion was made to adjourn. This motion gave rise to many arguments and debates that lasted into the night, and early the next morning. About 5:30 a.m. on the 24th of March, 1858, the motion was passed to adjourn and fix the next meeting at Leavenworth. Later the same morning, the members took their departure, leaving the capital-for-

12. Franklin County Clippings, vol. II, *Legends of Franklin County*, Kansas Historical Society Collections.

13. Bill Clark, Personal Interview, May 5, 1975.



The ruins of the governor's mansion of Minneola.



On the estate of the governor's mansion, this windmill is the only thing left standing.

a-day, Minneola, to revert to its original condition of Franklin county prairie. Below can be seen the old Minneola schoolhouse, now used by a private farmer to store his fertilizer and other equipment in.



Facing the road, the sign on the Minneola school house is faded, but still legible.

A good location is essential for a town's existence. Many towns, because of lack of transportation for their farmers' produce, have died away. Chapman, a small town located along the Kansas Pacific Railroad in Dickinson county, existed for 11 years. It was established in a beautiful and well settled area, but from a business point of view, the location was terrible. Chapman lay dead center between Abilene, the county seat of Dickinson county, 12 miles west, and Junction City, the county seat of Davis county 12 miles east.

Because Chapman was located along the railroad, it was first established because of the attempt to find coal along the Chapman creek. It was figured that the coal could be easily transported by rail to any part of Kansas with little expense. The attempt failed because no coal was found, but the founders refused to give up. Because there was much farm ground around the area, they built a grain mill called Jackson Mill in 1868.¹⁴ The idea seemed to work. The mill received a lot of business and the town began to grow. Other competitive businesses came into existence and traded as if Chapman was well under way to becoming prosperous. The flour and corn meal could be easily transported because the railroad was just outside of town and the need for flour was great. But this young city was about to be overrun by the two towns to its side. The mills in Abilene and Junction City started offering lower rates than the Jackson Mill could match without going bankrupt. Business began to dwindle and eventually Chapman was smothered and absorbed by its rival towns. The people moved to the two larger towns and Chapman no longer exists except for the remains of the once great Jackson Mill.



Silkville: A Kansas attempt in the history of Fourieristic utopias 1869-1892.

14. Dickinson County Clippings, vol. IV, *Diminished Ghost Towns of Dickinson County*, Kansas Historical Society Collections.

Usually when a small town had one main industry for income, everybody in the community was involved in the processing or developing of some way of the product. Such was the case at Silkville, Kansas. A commune type village was established by a Frenchman, Ernest de Boissiere, who had come to America and conveyed the idea of manufacturing silk on the Kansas prairie. In 1867 he traveled throughout the Mississippi River Valley in search of a suitable location for his idealistic community. Satisfied with Franklin County, de Boissiere decided to establish it there. De Boissiere believed that a communistic community was ideal, with everyone in the town working to better the silk and the village.

Early in 1869 de Boissiere and a friend, Mr. Grant, completed the purchase of 3,500 acres of prairie land in the southwest corner of the state. One more colleague, Brisbane, joined the two on the underdeveloped land. de Boissiere exhibited a great deal of stamina, being 59 years of age. Hardship was frequent, and lasted for months while the town was still getting on its feet. In June, hardship became worse when his two partners, Grant, and Brisbane, returned to the East. Many familiar with the town believe that it was because of the hardships that the two men left.

Things began to look up when settlers moved into the surrounding area to supply de Boissiere with labor for his silk factory. Railroads were expanding and Ottawa stores were better stocked. Another 100 acres were to be added on to the 40 acres already cultivated. Improvements, such as a vegetable garden and the purchase of a number of head of cattle, were planned. Large workshops were being built to aid the manufacture of silk, and a reeling machine from France was ordered. Two families came from France, with some coaxing by de Boissiere. After that, four more families came, along with several American families. Other French families came until there were about 40 French people in the community at one time, all experts in the manufacturing of silk. Things were going well, until a setback came that disappointed de Boissiere. As his French laborers got to know the English language enough to speak to their neighbors, they would leave Silkville discovering that higher wages awaited them elsewhere. With de Boissiere's beginning industry, he could not afford to compete with the wages. Also many French labor girls went off to marry nearby farmers. Other industries were tried on the side but to no avail. Finally in the fall of 1873, a severe economic panic shook the nation, leaving no money to pay wages. Factories were shut down and industries suffered a depression which was to last for almost six years. This meant little work for the new residents, and shortly afterwards people didn't even enter Silkville.

Many things were involved in Silkville's demise, bad luck being the primary cause. With the nation's depression, and competing wages elsewhere, de Boissiere's two main needs, money and labor, faded. Because of the panic of 1873, the silk industry was forgotten and the factory at Silkville closed, ending de Boissiere's co-operative utopia. The picture seen below is the only building left standing in the community. The rest is now a privately owned ranch.



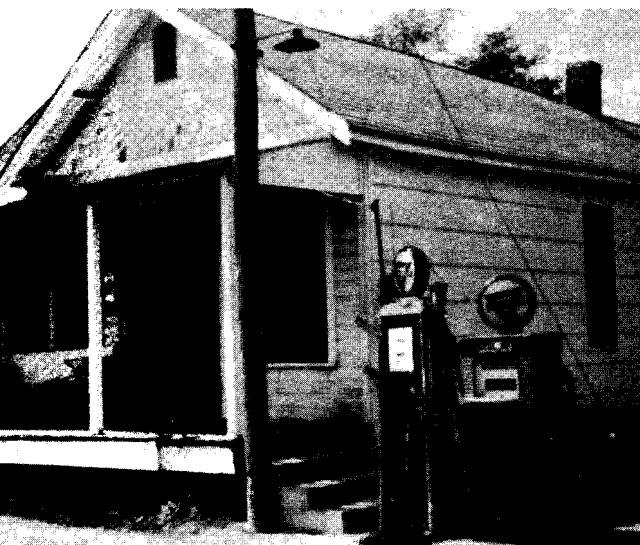
All ghost towns talked about in this paper so far are defunct; some having not a trace left of the once booming town. But it is shown in the following example that a town can be alive, with stores and people, and still be classified as a ghost town.

Centropolis, with its population at about 60, has two gas pumps, a general store, vacant bank, machinery repair shop, and telephone office. The first settlement on the Centropolis site was made by Perry Fuller, who set up a trading post with the Indians. A very large business was immediately established. About this time the Centropolis Town Company was founded. The design of the Town Company was to make the new town they were building not only the county seat, but also the territorial capital, and the future capital of

Kansas. Hence the name Centropolis, suggested by Joel K. Goodin. While such hopes were entertained, the town grew quite rapidly, and lots were sold at exorbitant prices. This was in 1857, and not long before the commencement of a similar mushrooming of Minneola.

The main tradition, as told by Bill Clark, of Centropolis, was the annual picnic on August 20. When asked what kids did for amusement in Centropolis when Bill was a boy (he is 69 years of age now) he replied that croquet, baseball, and both church and school activities were prominent. It was a close-knit community according to Bill; the townspeople were together constantly, whether it was building a house, or at a social gathering, or to help each other with the harvest. When asked about main crops of Centropolis when he was young, he said oats, corn and wheat. The price of corn, he remembered, was 27¢ a bushel as compared to \$2.75 a bushel on today's market. Racing the harvest wagons kept harvest lively said Bill as he told that merely being passed by another cart was enough to provoke a race.

Olga Simmons, worker at the general store, the Farmers Union Store, states that the Clarks, the Ferisses and the Lewises were among the first settlers. In 1917 she remembers a printer, barbershop, blacksmith shop, telephone company, state bank, drug store, three grocery stores, and a post office. The paper at that time was the *Centropolis Booster*.



The Farmers Union Store (grocery store, gas station, and general store).



Olga Simmons of the Farmers Union Store.

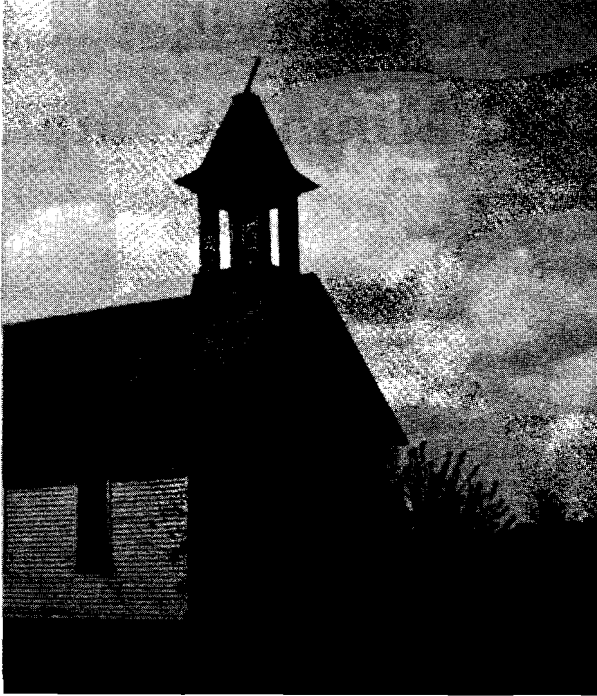
Having kept some records, she stated that in 1893 Centropolis had a population of 150 people as opposed to its current 60. Miss Simmons blames it on the fact that there is nothing for the young people to come back to. With this, added to the fact that most skilled employees, doctors, and businesses left upon finding better offers elsewhere, Centropolis is slowly losing ground. Miss Simmons stated that it has never been a wealthy community, and looking back to the time when she was young, she can remember going over to the shoe repair shop every Saturday night and standing in her bare feet while her shoes were fixed and shined. According to Miss Simmons, most kids only owned one pair of shoes, and they were always shined for Sunday morning.

On talking to Bill Clark and Olga Simmons one discovers that the town mainly consists of older people, who live in the past among their fading memories. With no younger people coming back to keep Centropolis alive. The future is seldom pondered, and the little town of Centropolis seems certain to become just a memory.

The majority of the ghost towns explored within the context of this essay are no longer in existence. In fact the only evidence that these towns ever existed is in the history books, for most of these towns have been destroyed. Ghost towns are said to have been mistakes, failures which caused bloodshed and hatred, but one must keep in mind that these towns were not mistakes but a step in the right direction. If it hadn't been for these failures, the country would never have developed. Ghost towns should be remembered as stepping stones, the backbone behind the basic philosophies of most successful towns. People generally learn from these mistakes; therefore, ghost towns were a learning experience for which they should be remembered, not as a mistake but a success.



Centropolis graveyard. (Stone on the left is one of the founders, "Clark" can be seen on the base.)



The old Centropolis Baptist church.

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