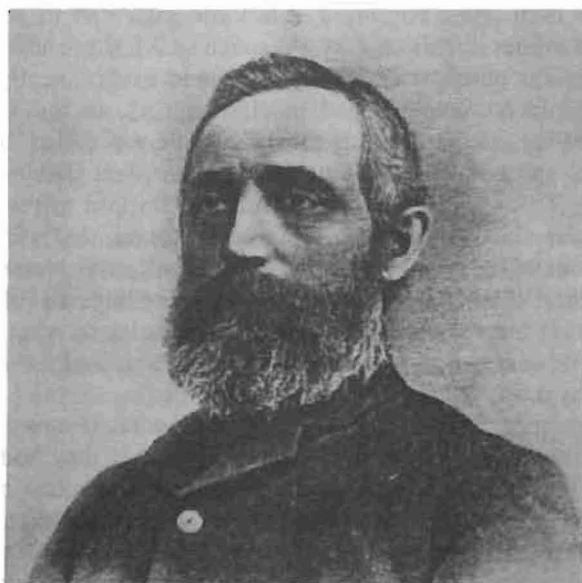


# Charles Pilla, A Pillar of Eudora

by  
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**I**n every small town, there is one prominent citizen whose contributions to that town are acknowledged by all. In Eudora, that man was Charles Pilla, owner of what was once the largest mercantile store in Douglas County. "Few, if any other individuals, had as much influence on the growth and prosperity of Eudora as Charles Pilla," stated the historical society's nomination form to the National Register when his house was selected for the National Register of historic places as a landmark. The store, located at the corner of 7th and Main is known today as Howard's Super Saver; but the sign painted on the north side of the two story brick building still proclaims to the town that it is Charles Pilla's store. The twenty-two room mansion, atop a hill overlooking the Kaw River Valley, gives mute testimony to the wealth of the man who once wielded considerable power in the community.



Chas. Pilla

Born in Rhenish Bavaria, Germany, on February 19, 1830, Charles Pilla was educated in German schools. At the age of nineteen, he came to the United States, arriving in New York on March 26, 1849. He lived in the vicinity of that city for fourteen years and during ten of which he was employed as clerk and bookkeeper in the publishing house of E. Walker and Sons.

Perhaps it was because of this early training in business that his brother Fred invited Charles to enter into business with him in the new community of Eudora, Kansas, in 1862. So Charles, with his new bride, the former Alice B. Smith of Staten Island, traveled to Kansas in 1865 to accept Fred's invitation. The "Pilla Brothers" sign on the building announced to the community that Fred's brother had joined him in the business. In 1871, after Fred's death, Charles changed the name to "Charles Pilla's."

Charles Pilla's store sold everything from machinery to household necessities. Having experienced poverty himself, he helped dozens of newcomers to the growing town of Eudora get their start with his generous business policies. For years, the store issued a small, ruled book to each of its customers. On the credit side was entered the price paid by Mr. Pilla to the farmer for his eggs, butter, or other produce, and on the other side was recorded the items purchased by the customer. Once or twice a year, usually after harvest, the account was balanced.

About 1910, Pilla employed a fulltime salesman to sell butter directly to families in Kansas City. As much as 2,500 pounds of homemade butter was purchased each Thursday and Friday, neatly packed in wooden buckets, and shipped to Kansas City on the 8:30 a.m. train—The Plug, as the morning local Santa Fe was called. Mr. Pilla bought even the poor quality butter, so poor in fact that it was unmarketable. This was poured into barrels and shipped to the packing house. It was this cooperation with the customer that showed the acumen of one of the greatest merchants in early Kansas history.

Though still retaining its original walls, ceiling, and floor, the store on Main Street bears little resemblance inside to what it formerly was. Today it is a modern grocery store, contained on one level. In Pilla's day it was a three story mercantile store.

The basement had a back entrance from what is now the alley, where farmers could deliver produce and eggs that they had sold to Mr. Pilla. This bottom level is where the early construction can most clearly be seen. The walls are made of mortar and brick, ranging in thickness from one foot to eighteen inches. The front part of the basement has a cement floor where customers used to shop for dry goods and bulky items. The back portion of the basement has a dirt floor

and several small rooms resembling potato cellars. Since it is cool and dry, produce was probably stored here. Jim Wilson, son of the present owner, gave me an hour tour through the store, and we did a lot of speculation on what an old cistern, complete with a rusty pulley had been used for, finally deciding that it was the source of the water used to wash dusty fruits and vegetables before sale.

Climbing up the original wooden steps, one goes through a trap door and finds himself on the main floor. This main floor is where hardware items were sold; the present office is where Pilla's employees used to candle eggs. At the back of the main floor is a beautiful spiral staircase made of walnut with a handcarved rail. At the first curve is now an open storage room, but it was once the accountant's office. From this vantage point, Mr. Pilla could watch the bustling activity of his business. It was to this office that Carl Lotz, a clerk, used to attract crowds of small boys who came to watch him light and smoke a readymade cigarette in the days when cigarettes were a novelty. It was also a good place to watch for shoplifters, who, while probably not as big a problem as today, did exist. It seems that one of the local professional men was a kleptomaniac. When he entered the store for his weekly shopping, the bookkeeper sat at this desk in the office and carefully recorded everything the man slipped into his pockets. Then it was all added to his bill which was settled up every month without comment.

If one continues to follow the stairs to the top floor, one reaches the section where dry goods and bolts of cloth were sold. Part of this floor was also home for the Pilla family in its early years of business. Later it was converted into rooms for the overnight lodging of out-of-town traders. Still later, around the time of World War I, one of the rooms was used regularly as a gambling parlor for ten to twelve local patrons.

The store had over eight thousand square feet of utilized floor space, but this housed only the smaller items. Mr. Pilla also owned the whole block behind his store. Here he displayed farm machinery of all types, and later, automobiles for sale. Pilla supplied Eudora from a stock of goods valued at between twenty and fifty thousand dollars, an enormous sum in those days.

Mr. Pilla, as some rich men tend to be, was eccentric. Perhaps because he was eccentric, people loved to fantasize about his life. One of the biggest tales concerning him was about his money. Because of the large size of his store, he undoubtedly took in several hundred dollars a day and supposedly was afraid to walk the block from his store to his home at night after closing time for fear of being robbed on the way. Although it has never been uncovered, some people still

believe that he had built a tunnel that ran underground from the basement of his store, under Main Street, and into the basement of his home. This also provided him protection from the elements of weather. However, the only proven safeguard for his money is a vault in the wall on the main floor of the store, covered now by some remodeling.

Besides his mercantile interests, Pilla was also engaged in farming in Douglas and Johnson counties. These large tracts of farm land were operated by tenants, but he maintained an active supervision of the land and directed its management.

The store and his farming were not his only business interests. In 1883, Mr. Pilla was one of the principal stockholders and contributors of the sweet corn factory, a member of the firm of Pilla and Statler, a brick manufacturing business, and a stockholder in the Leis chemical works in Lawrence. He was also a principle stockholder as well as the director of the Eudora Creamery Company. Upon its organization in 1893, Mr. Pilla was elected president of the State Bank of Eudora, a position he filled with great efficiency. In fact, the only recorded business venture failure in which he was involved was the Kimball plow factory that was founded in Lawrence. His vast controlling power was a major factor in the development of Eudora.

Pilla's name could easily have been "Pillar" because that was his position in the community. Besides his personal business ventures, he was also extremely active in community service. From 1865 to 1871, Mr. Pilla was assistant postmaster, practically running the entire office. In 1871, he was appointed Postmaster, a position he filled until 1885. He was also mayor of Eudora, a member of the city council, and a school director.

In addition to all these outside interests, he was a benevolent boss and active family man. Each year, the store employees were entertained at a picnic in "Pilla's Grove," a tract of land south of the Wakarusa River. Mr. Pilla had a cabin on this same site where many relaxing weekends were spent with his family, fishing the well-stocked river.

As befit his social and economic status, Mr. Pilla lived in the largest, most elaborate, and best constructed house in Eudora. Located on a hill overlooking the fertile Kaw Valley, the construction of the impressive Victorian house began in early March of 1894. The building of this mansion was important enough to warrant inclusion in *The Eudora News* of May 31, 1894, which announced, "Mayor Pilla's new residence is progressing rapidly under the supervision of Mr. Nadelhoffer of Lawrence. When completed, it will be the largest

house in the township. It will cost \$10,000 or more when completed."

During a tour conducted by Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Snyder, present owners of the house, I noticed such things as the solid oak window frames and the eight foot tall, 2½ inch thick door of solid, hand-carved walnut. Bought at the June auction of 1963, the Snyders have not remodeled, but rather, restored the house to its former grandeur.

The house was built from lumber cut from tracts of timber on Pilla's farms. Then the roughly sawed boards of walnut, oak, cherry, and fruitwood were taken to the planing mill in Lawrence for finishing and thorough curing. Under the entire house is a basement of perfectly laid stone, giving tribute to the efficient craftsmanship of the day.



The house as it is today, minus the pyramidal tower.



Parlor Fireplace

Mrs. Snyder commented on how hard it was to arrange furniture in the rooms because of the many doors and the tall, narrow windows on every wall. Very few rooms had more than six feet of wall space that was uninterrupted by doors or windows. Although most of the furniture is not originally from the house, it is all furniture from the same period, so when one enters the Snyder's home, it is like stepping back eighty years in time. The Snyders spent a long time in the selection of the wallpaper, and even it blends well with the decor.

There are three fireplaces in the house; one in the living room, one in the parlor, and one in the master bedroom. Each fireplace has a frame and hearth of imported Italian marble with a floral pattern. The parlor fireplace still has the old front guard on it, featuring the North Wind's blustery face cast in iron. As Mrs. Snyder pointed out to me, these three fireplaces could in no way have heated the enormous house, but Mr. Pilla had this problem solved.

In the basement was a pot-bellied stove with heating pipes leading to all the rooms in the house. A forced air furnace has replaced this old stove, but the original wall grates are still used.

One of the Snyder's most prized possessions has a place of honor in the parlor. It is a hymnbook, printed in German, with the name of Charles Pilla engraved on the front cover in gold lettering. This was not in the house at the time of purchase, but was found by a friend at the city dump and given to the Snyders some time later.

As a child, I had often heard rumors that Mr. Pilla had a room in his basement in which escaping slaves were hidden. Supposedly, after being given food and lodging, the slaves followed a tunnel from this room to an opening on the banks of the Kaw River. In answer to my query, Mr. Snyder affirmed the fact that there was a tunnel under the house, but said it was a very short one that led to a storm cellar where the Pillas could take refuge in case of tornadoes. It is caved in now, but as Mr. Snyder said, the slaves had been freed by Lincoln some thirty years earlier, and while news may have been slower reaching Kansas, it was not that slow. It sure made a good story while I was growing up, though.

All of the ceilings and floors in the house are original, although the Snyders did lower a ten foot ceiling in the kitchen to nine feet in order to conceal some ugly pipes. The kitchen is one of the most interesting rooms in the house. It contains a large pantry, several cabinets, a dumbwaiter, and the door to both the cellar and the back stairs. On the wall is also an intercom system, consisting of what looks like three mouthpieces from old telephones. These are connected by pipes to three of the bedrooms on the second floor so that the Pilla family could call down to the maid in the kitchen when they wanted anything. Then the maid could put food or coffee on the dumbwaiter, go up the back stairs to her room, get the food out of the dumbwaiter, and deliver it to the persons on the second floor. The Snyders nailed the dumbwaiter shut after they found, during a tour, a four year old girl on their table peering down the shaft.

Another door in the kitchen opens into a large storeroom. Under this storeroom floor, the Snyders discovered a wine cellar, complete with old jugs of dried up wine. Four tiny steps lead down to the four by eight room, the door of which the Snyders had covered with linoleum because they do not drink. They did not nail it shut or board it up in any way, so that the next owners of the house, if they desire, can remove the linoleum and still have access to the wine cellar.

A solid oak, open staircase with a handcarved rail leads to the second floor. The second floor has three bedrooms plus the maid's room, each equipped with the intercom. The bathroom is furnished

with the original Victorian bathtub, six feet long, its claw-footed body rimmed in mahogany. There is also a corner lavatory of marble.

The third floor has five large rooms, one of which contains the pyramidal tower that used to be on top of one section of the house. Damage to it by woodpeckers necessitated its removal for fear of it toppling from the house, and it is stored, intact, in the third floor.

The outside of the house is almost exactly as it was except for the removal of the tower and old, green shutters. Two hitching posts and wide, sandstone steps still lead to the front porch which starts at the front door (one of five entrances) and wraps around the west and south sides of the house. Mr. and Mrs. Snyder found and uncovered the original brick sidewalk and patio. A large, two-seater privy still stands in the backyard, complete with its fancy top. Mrs. Snyder said that when Mrs. Pilla was alive, there was glass in the windows of it, with lace curtains providing an elegant touch.



An eight foot tall built-in cabinet in the dining room. Note the small door behind the dishes on the right side. This opens and enables the passing through of food without a trip through the kitchen.



The privy, complete with its fancy top, still stands in the backyard. The Snyders plan to restore this.

Mrs. Pilla only lived in this house for four years, dying on January 15, 1899. Two of the daughters, Alvena and Louisa, married and left home. A third daughter, Molvia, did not marry, and lived with her father in the mansion until his death in 1916 at the age of 86. Miss Molvia continued her life as the sole resident of the huge, empty house. Her life during those later lonely years could have served as a model for William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily."

As a young woman, Miss Molvia was a proud person who liked to have things no one else had, and an oft repeated story tells how, when a bolt of cloth that she liked came to her father's store, she

took the whole bolt home so that no one else in town could have a dress like hers.

Perhaps the cause for her eccentricity can be traced to her mother. Gossip has it that Mrs. Pilla left Eudora and went to Chicago before the house was built. Mr. Pilla then wrote her a letter telling her that he had built a mansion on a hill for her. Perhaps she also expected a magical transformation of the town, but when she returned, that was all it was—a mansion on a hill. The dirt streets, lack of social life, and the rest of the farming community had not changed. It is said that she spent her final four years as a near recluse in her house.

As time passed, Miss Molvia got more and more eccentric. After her father's death, she closed off the master bedroom and it was never used again. She didn't trust her relatives and was convinced they were stealing from her when they came to visit, so she closed off room after room. After a few years, the relatives never got beyond the living room, so mistrustful was she of them.

For years the people of Eudora watched the turreted house on the hill gradually darken as Miss Molvia lived out her 87 years in the increasing gloom of the house. When she was moved to a rest home in Osage City in 1963, she was living only in the kitchen and the store-room. She died in the rest home in 1964.

Mrs. Snyder told me that a few years ago, four little girls knocked on her door, requesting a tour of the house. They asked her if she was frightened when Miss Molvia walked down the stairs every night at midnight. Such were the stories told by the "big kids" of the old spinster. Mr. Snyder, not to be topped by his wife's storytelling, then brought out an eight foot long broom used to clean the high ceilings of the house. He tried to convince me that this was her old witch's broom, on which she used to ride through the house.

It is said that when Miss Pilla wrote her will, she specified that she wanted the house and all in it burned to the ground, because she didn't want anybody else to ever use her things or live in the house. She was proved incompetent, though, and that part of the will was never carried out. Before the auction, however, when relatives went through her things, they burned old letters, clothes, bolts of cloth, and other personal things that would have been very useful in writing the Pilla history.

The population of Eudora has grown, the faces are different, and progress has struck, but still the Pilla house remains, looking over the town, a remnant of another age and a landmark for people who never knew who lived there.

Eudora, Kansas