

## THE RIVER SHAPED OUR LIVES

by  
Sally Neill Bridge

I first became acquainted with Saffordville when I started dating Mike Bridge in the late 1960s. On my first trip there to meet his family, we drove about ten miles west of Emporia on highway 50 and turned south at the road sign, "Saffordville." A "town" could not be seen from the highway, but the road sign indicated that one was located just across the railroad tracks. At this point, old highway 50 ran parallel to new highway 50, both adjacent to the main line of the Santa Fe railroad. A grain elevator was sandwiched between old highway 50 and the railroad tracks, and there was part of an old gas station--cement pillars and a concrete slab adorned with a variety of weeds and underbrush. Nothing of the town was visible from the highway because the railroad tracks were quite elevated there.

Crossing up and over the three railroad tracks we descended into Saffordville. I could see no town--just the remnants of one. Immediately to the east there was a two-story white frame house which must have been handsome in its prime. It was occupied but not well maintained. On the west side of the road there were old house foundations, brick chimneys, cement stairs, pieces of sidewalks, abandoned toilets, bathtubs, and even a kitchen appliance or two. There were also hints of landscaping--spirea bushes, evergreen shrubs, and trees, spaced around nonexistent houses.

In the distance stood an old train depot and a dilapidated frame house. Mike informed me that his family used the depot as a hay barn and the house for storage. We continued south on the

gravel road and came to the place the Bridge family called home. It was a grand and dignified red brick house with a red tile roof and white trim. It had a matching red brick three-car garage and red chicken house, also trimmed in white. Stately maple and elm trees framed the property. Certainly whoever had built this home had spared no expense.

Just across the road to the south of the Bridge home was a two-story red brick school and garage. Mike informed me that this was where his younger sister Tammy attended elementary school.<sup>1</sup> It had been a high school at one point and now served as an elementary school. Across the road to the east from the school was a lovely two-story white frame house surrounded by trees, shrubs and a shelter belt. The home, owned by Dean and Edith McGregor, was the beneficiary of wonderful care and upkeep.

That was Saffordville in 1970. The Bridges owned most of the town and the McGregors lived just beyond the "city" limits. When I asked what had happened to the town the response was three words--*the 1951 flood*.

Everyone in the outlying community was surprised when the Bridges arrived in 1966. Many had been through the 1951 flood, and a decade earlier had moved to higher ground. Many warned the Bridges not to move there, and several showed them the high water marks in the home they wished to purchase. Undaunted, the Bridges bought the home. Thus began the Bridges' relationship with Saffordville, the land, and the Cottonwood River.

Another of the vivid memories of

my early association with the Bridge family was preparing for a flood.<sup>2</sup> By this time Mike and I had married and were students at Kansas State University in Manhattan. A flood was coming, and we came home to help the family move stored items out of the basement, disconnect electrical appliances and wiring, elevate furniture, roll up carpets, and move books high on shelves. Preparations had just ended when the river began to fill the valley. The Bridges invited me to stay with them during the flood, telling me it was really a unique experience to be surrounded by flood waters, completely cut off from the outside world. They said that it was quiet--very quiet; to them, it was a chance to relax, read a good book, and do needlework. I'm afraid my pioneer spirit was overwhelmed by my fear of the unknown. I could only picture being "trapped," surrounded by an endless sea of rushing, swirling, muddy water, with no way out. My worst fantasy was finding myself on a rooftop, peering out into a pitch-black night at distant helicopter lights, anxiously waiting to be rescued. I gracefully declined and returned to Manhattan.

As I study the history of Saffordville, I wonder if things have really changed that much in the last one hundred years. Certainly there have been industrial and technological developments, but when men and women live in communion with nature there are many things that cannot be changed; instead, people must accept and adapt. To live in Saffordville, one must be resigned to cycles of droughts and floods.

In the 1860s when Chase County, Kansas was settled, pioneers searched for fertile cropland, and this the Cottonwood River valley had in abundance. But there was one major flaw--the valley often flooded. Indians

who had seen the flood plain totally submerged warned settlers not to build homes there. In the biography of James J. Holmes, for example, Indians reportedly told Ed Holmes, when he built his log cabin on a high spot near the river in 1861, "No! Build on hill. Heap water, swim horse bluff to bluff."<sup>3</sup> But because he and other settlers were bottomland farmers, timber was close at hand, they needed water, and at the time, no white man had seen the Cottonwood's destructive floods, few of them heeded the Indians' warnings.

In the 1850s, a small group of Quakers settled near the future Saffordville townsite, and six years later they named the settlement Toledo. The first business was a grocery and dry goods store which was built in 1859, the first school district was formed in 1862,<sup>4</sup> and the first church was built in 1863.<sup>5</sup> Toledo settlers apparently believed the Indians' reports of flooding, and built their village well above the flood line. When the railroad made plans to cut across Kansas, Toledo citizens lobbied hard for it to pass through their town, but the railroad decided to build the tracks two miles south and one mile to the west, through lowlands only a mile north of the river. This was the first step in Saffordville's water-logged future.<sup>6</sup>

The Santa Fe railroad graded land for the first track in 1871, steel rails were laid in 1872, and the first work train came through later that year. In 1872 a small depot was also built, and three men constructed the settlement's first store. The owners found no merchants who were interested in the store, so they rented part of it to a railroad section hand and his family for a dwelling. It was destroyed by a cyclone, however, and another store was established in the freight room of the depot.<sup>7</sup>

The town was originally named Safford after Judge Safford, a Supreme Court judge whose efforts at passing the Homestead Act were well-known and appreciated by many Kansans.<sup>8</sup> However, the name caused problems. Safford's mail kept getting mixed with mail going to a community farther west called Stafford, so settlers decided to change the name to Kanyon. Unfortunately, mail then went to Canyon City, Colorado, so the name was changed back to Safford. Later, railroad painters came through and painted the name "Saffordville" on the depot, and rather than argue, locals grudgingly accepted the new name, and in time became fond of it.

Saffordville was a farming and ranching community and the town reflected these interests. A flour mill, constructed on the Cottonwood River, was later used as a saw mill to provide timber for the village as it grew. A blacksmith shop, stockyard, general store, lumberyard, hardware store, implement store, grain elevator, hotel, creamery, butcher shop, barber shop, and restaurant were eventually built. A post office was established in 1873, the Saffordville Methodist Church and a community building were built in 1902, and the Saffordville State Bank was founded in 1904.<sup>9</sup> Over the years several doctors chose to locate their practices in Saffordville. Saffordville's main street bordered old highway 50, and the businesses were joined by a boardwalk which lifted shoppers above the dust and mud.<sup>10</sup>

Saffordville's first school was built in 1876, and in 1896 a second larger school was added to accommodate the growing numbers of children. Prior to 1916, when the first high school was constructed, classes were held on the second floor above Saffordville's restaurant. Then in 1936, a two-story

brick high school--the pride of the community--was built.

Intermingled with poignant stories about life in Saffordville are stories and references to the Cottonwood River. Most tell of people's ambivalent relationship with the river; sometimes they enjoyed its refreshing waters, but on other occasions, it filled them with despair as they helplessly watched its rushing, swirling, destructive waters. The first written account of a flood in the Cottonwood River valley was on June 4, 1879. Water rose to the second stair of pioneer James Holmes' cabin--so high that the bow of his boat entered the front hallway steps of his home--and several of his cattle drowned.<sup>11</sup> Two weeks later the river overflowed its banks again.

Another account reported that during one early flood the river rose so fast that it marooned a party of new settlers. A good samaritan on one side of the river promptly chopped down a walnut tree, fashioned it into a dugout canoe, and ferried the stranded travelers across the river to safety and their new home.<sup>12</sup>

Some say that no floods occurred over the next twenty to twenty-five years.<sup>13</sup> Others, however, believe that there were many floods during this time, but most were small ones that never became part of the residents' collective memory. The next written references to floods were in 1903 and 1904, when Rev. M. G. McKenzie (minister at the Saffordville Methodist Church from 1901-1904) wrote that the Cottonwood River flooded the whole valley from Strong City to Emporia.<sup>14</sup> According to McKenzie's diary, this happened two or three times while he was there. One flood he remembered vividly--the river overflowed into Saffordville to a depth of four feet in the stores and five feet in the post office, and many families

had to be evacuated by boat. Fortunately, there was no loss of life.<sup>15</sup>

During this same flood, 200 acres of a German farmer's wheat crop were totally submerged, and Rev. McKenzie "extended his sympathies." The farmer replied, "Ah--that's all right--she all come back again some day."<sup>16</sup> The river finally receded, leaving about three inches of sediment covering the wheat. The German farmer plowed it under, and the following year he again sowed it to wheat, which yielded fifty bushels to the acre. When he attended church after the harvest, the farmer arrived with a generous check and told Rev. McKenzie, "I told you she all come back again some day."<sup>17</sup>

The next memorable flood was in 1923, and between 1923 and 1929, the river flooded Saffordville on eight separate occasions.<sup>18</sup> The river's destructive force was mighty; even the railroad grade was washed out on numerous occasions,<sup>19</sup> and only by raising it could it be kept from being completely washed away. This strategy, however, had mixed results. While it worked to the railroad's benefit, it was disastrous for Saffordville, for the grade acted like a dam--backing the water up and over the village and its surrounding homes.

Prior to the flood in 1929, it had been very dry--fields were parched and the corn crop was barely alive. That year the North family planted corn on the south side of the river, and when it was almost dead, Stanley North's mother decided that divine intervention was required. With all her might she prayed for rain, requesting that the river overflow its banks and run directly through her corn field.<sup>20</sup> Her prayers were answered and the rains came--but they were so bountiful that they swept the entire corn crop away.

There were usually five to six hours

of warning before a flood struck. At the first warning, neighbors typically traveled to the elevator and worked all night emptying the warehouses and moving goods to higher ground. No leaders were required and no one had to ask for help. They just came--"they were neighbors!"<sup>21</sup>

Attempts were made to prevent the most destructive floods. For example, there was a loop in the river two to three miles east of Saffordville where the water backed up. Farmers took their teams of horses and cut a new course to allow flood waters to continue down stream.<sup>22</sup> This tactic failed.

After the flood of 1923, townspeople raised the level of their houses by building higher foundations. People also modified their wells by pouring raised concrete foundations, and placing pumps well above the ground. Wooden walks were installed across low places downtown, and a more solidly built bridge replaced the old low-water one that regularly washed out. Even the railroad took action. It raised a third track above the flood waters, which allowed its trains to get through. But the track acted as a dam and kept Saffordville submerged in flood water.<sup>23</sup>

People were trying their best to adapt to flooding in 1929 when they were hit with a severe drought. Then the stock market crashed. With the mechanization of agriculture, more and more acreage was required to support a family, and families began to move to Emporia and Wichita to find jobs. An active town remained for a while, and even as late as 1951 more than 100 people lived there. But Saffordville, like most rural communities, never recovered.<sup>24</sup>

The final blow came in 1951. Massive floods hit Saffordville and completely devastated the town. There were four floods that spring: one in

May, two in June, and the final and most destructive one on July 11, 1951. On July 11, the *Emporia Gazette* headline read "Kansas Faces Major Disaster...Emporia is Isolated by a Record Flood."<sup>25</sup> The weekly issue of the *Chase County Leader* reported, "This county has been stunned since early Tuesday morning when the greatest, most destructive flood in all its history hit hard on every creek and the whole river bottom...Rains of over three inches Sunday night, followed by another of over six inches Monday night, have made all former flood marks seem as nothing up and down river bottoms in this part of the state."<sup>26</sup> On July 18, the *Chase County Leader* declared, "Townspople and farmers along the river and all creeks of this county have just undergone their 'Korea.' They well know now what our fighting men mean when they write of the mud and slush of a Korean rainy season. They know, first hand, what a city or countryside could look like after an invasion, for they have the ghastly evidence before their eyes. The only thing lacking was the gunfire or the bombing, everything else they have experienced."<sup>27</sup>

The flood of 1951 was a catastrophe, even for people familiar with floods. Several people drowned, although none were from Saffordville. A reporter who visited Saffordville after the July flood wrote, "Monday evening we drove to Saffordville and what we saw there three years ago was but a preview of this flood. Buildings of every nature deposited in the most improbable places. A hay barn, from goodness knows where left stranded as it tried vainly to cross the Santa Fe tracks. Huge logs, gas tank, chairs, stoves just where the current dropped them. Everything that had gone to furnish the comfortable homes at

Saffordville had been dragged out of the sodden homes, so that the cleaning might start. Words cannot describe the sodden masses in the yards. Buildings lurching like drunken men against each other and more solid buildings porches and garages swept completely away."<sup>28</sup>

The reporter continued, "At the beautiful home of William ImMasche we saw Julia and Ora ImMasche helping and much seemed to have been accomplished. Things were drying on the roof and the porch was full. But at the home of Ella Lyles the only word for it was complete chaos. The garage lurched against the back porch, with everything from the house outside until things could be viewed by the owner who was to arrive Monday evening from Oklahoma. We do not mean that one place suffered more than another but these we knew. It would take a paper the size of the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* to chronicle all the things in Saffordville."<sup>29</sup>

It was reported, "Someone was telling that the water lacked but a few inches of being on the stage in the high school auditorium and added, 'I never thought to ask if it got into the basement.'"<sup>30</sup>

The reporter commented, "Before leaving Saffordville we saw the equipment from the kitchen, refrigerators, electric stoves, etc., being washed off outside the building with water being pumped from the basement, the only way to get the use of hose."<sup>31</sup> The report continued, "Frank Garrisons had at least 71 inches of water in their home. L. V. Caruthers had four and a half feet. The Minnie Miller farm home reported fifty one inches."<sup>32</sup>

Newspapers reported that the Red Cross organized emergency relief and requested food, clothing and bedding. The Salvation Army appealed for

furniture and household items. The *Emporia Gazette* offered free ads for lost livestock--though they could do nothing for the hundreds of dead animals that littered the countryside.<sup>33</sup>

In interviews with Francis Staedtler, Stanley North, and Edith McGregor, all of whom remained in Saffordville during the '51 flood, they related humorous and heartwarming experiences. One account mentioned a young couple that had come out from Emporia with a boat atop their car to help their parents at Cottonwood Falls. They couldn't get through because their motor boat threw a rod. They were paddling back to Emporia when they were rescued at Saffordville and spent the night in the station.<sup>34</sup> Mr. North told of ferrying some section hands stranded at the railroad station over to the high school where they stayed in the home economics room on the second floor.<sup>35</sup>

Bill ImMasche, the banker, had stayed in his lovely brick home (later the Bridge home) in a sunroom on the second floor of the house. Mr. North and Mr. Nevitt visited him by boat and docked at the window of the sunroom. They brought bread and milk to Mr. ImMasche, and had to take the screen off the window to deliver the food. When Mr. Nevitt was ready to put the screen back, Mr. ImMasche told him, "No, don't put it back on. I've got a fly swatter here and it will give me something to do..."<sup>36</sup> Several reported that the ImMasches were very proud of their brick home, and for years they had maintained that they never got water in their home during any of the previous floods. While there was some evidence to the contrary, the 1951 flood left no doubt in anyone's mind--the banker's house was all but submerged.<sup>37</sup>

Mrs. Staedtler's parents had just completed a new foundation under their house and clean-up from the previous flood when the "big one" came. They

put their cars up on the highway, brought in a kerosene lamp, got a tub of fresh water, anchored the propane tank, purchased supplies at the grocery store, and moved to the second floor of their home. Mr. and Mrs. Staedtler and her parents had all planned to leave, but by the time they had finished preparing for the flood, they were unable to contact Mr. North because the phone lines were down. A wall of water soon engulfed them. The electrical line had to be cut. They watched two rooms on the back of the house rise and fall. As conditions worsened, Mrs. Staedtler's mother decided to retrieve her ironing board to be used as a raft, if needed. The family spent three days and nights in the house, and finally the water receded.<sup>38</sup>

The Staedtlers' ordeal included another valued member of the household--the family pet. Their dog was stranded in a railroad car filled with chemicals, and they could hear him barking as the river rose. However, there was no way he could be rescued. After a day or so he finally stopped barking, and everyone thought he was dead. Then Mr. North was able to reach the railroad car, found the dog, and carried him to the house. There was a joyful reunion--until the dog proceeded to drink the family's diminishing fresh water supply. The whole family then became so angry with him that "they wished he had died!"<sup>39</sup>

Recalling the aftermath of the flood, Mrs. Staedtler said, "We were all in despair; it was a disaster and then there were streams of cars coming and people looking at us and we hated it!"<sup>40</sup> She shuddered as she spoke of it nearly forty years later. She declared that she would never go and stare at others in the midst of a disaster.<sup>41</sup>

Edith McGregor's story was much the same as the Staedtlers'. During the flood, she was alone in her home with

her two children, ages fourteen and sixteen, because her husband Dean, a Santa Fe railroad worker, was working in Emporia. She and the children were marooned from Wednesday until Sunday, but they were never afraid, because she had arranged a signal with her husband. If everything was okay, she would keep an oil lamp burning in the window. Every night, Mrs. McGregor's sister drove to a hilltop south of Saffordville to make certain the oil lamp burned brightly--and it did until the waters finally receded.<sup>42</sup>

Reactions to the flood changed quickly from shock to despair. Many salvaged what they could and then left Saffordville, never to return. Some moved their houses to Strong City, Cottonwood Falls, Emporia, or Lake Kahola. Others moved only a few miles away to higher ground in the surrounding countryside. Even Saffordville's most vocal supporters finally gave up. Mrs. Staedtler's father, Guy Crook, who loved the river, said he would never go through a flood again, and he moved to a hill south of Saffordville.<sup>43</sup> Al and Francis Staedtler moved into Mr. Crook's farm home one-quarter mile outside Saffordville, and the Norths moved their home one mile north to higher ground. The McGregors remained, for as Mrs. McGregor put it, there was no need; their house had the least amount of water--*only* 33 inches.<sup>44</sup>

The September 4, 1952, issue of the *Emporia Gazette* reported, "Exodus Continues at Saffordville. Methodist Church, Flooded in 1951, Moved to Toledo. Saffordville slowly is being abandoned...Many of the residents have already moved to higher ground and three more families have contracted with house movers to move their houses now that the church is gone. Some of the people will stay with the hope that the floods will never come again, and

the schools will remain in Saffordville. Last year both schools were severely damaged by the high water, but the people of the area voted on the project of moving them and the proposal was defeated."<sup>45</sup>

Saffordville's exodus continued over the next few years. The Saffordville mail route was terminated on June 29, 1957, the high school was closed in 1964, and the grade school, which had been relocated to the old high school building, was closed in 1979.<sup>46</sup> (The building was given to Toledo Township to be used as a community building.) By the time the Bridge family moved to Saffordville in 1966, there were only seven houses left in town, and only three of them were inhabited.<sup>47</sup>

Little remains--physically--of the once vibrant village. Today, there is a road sign, a grain elevator, two occupied homes (one belonging to the Bridges) and a brick community building. Yet a new entity has emerged from the destruction of Saffordville. Residents affectionately refer to it as "our community." It can be seen at the grain elevator busily serving area farmers, at youth activities such as 4-H, and in the worship and fellowship at the Methodist Church, which now ministers to the communities of Saffordville, Toledo, Plymouth and Grandview.

I am glad Saffordville's road sign still stands on highway 50. Some call it an epitaph for a dead town. To me, it is a monument to a thriving "community"--one that survived against the worst that nature had to offer. The river shaped the lives of Saffordville residents, but it did not destroy them. The Bridges and others continue the vision of the hardy pioneer--to build a home and future whether nature cooperates or not. Such dreams have always and will always serve as bridges to the future.

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Personal interview with Tom and Syble Bridge, by Sally N. Bridge, June 10, 1989, Strong City, Kansas. The Bridge family moved to Saffordville in 1966 seeking a rural setting in which to raise their four children. Dr. Bridge commutes to Emporia State University where he is a professor of geology. Syble Bridge, a former home economics teacher, is now a school bus driver and homemaker. Their children are grown and living away from home.
- <sup>2</sup>Personal Interview with Tom and Syble Bridge, by Sally N. Bridge, June 10, 1989, Strong City, Kansas. Since the Bridges moved to Saffordville in 1966 there have been numerous floods that have filled their basement. However, they cheerfully comment that water reached the floorboards on the main level in 1973 and it has been in their house just once--in 1985--to a depth of six inches. As this article is being written they are building a dike around their house to impede future flood waters. They believe that preserving their way of life in "Saffordville" is worth the effort.
- <sup>3</sup>James J. Holmes," *Chase County Historical Sketches*, Vol. III, Chase County Historical Society, 1966, 108.
- <sup>4</sup>"History of Schools," *Chase County Historical Sketches*, Vol. III, Chase County Historical Society, 1966, 359.
- <sup>5</sup>"Emphasizing Some Firsts in Chase County," from First Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture to the Legislature of the State of Kansas 1877-78, Third Edition, *Chase County Historical Sketches*, Vol. III, Chase County Historical Society, 1966, 309-312.
- <sup>6</sup>Personal interview with Frances Crook Staedtler, by Sally N. Bridge, June 10, 1989, Rt. 1, Strong City, Kansas.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup>James J. Holmes," *Chase County Historical Sketches*, Vol. III, Chase County Historical Society, 1966, 111.
- <sup>12</sup>Helen P. Austin, "Grandview or The Jacobs Creek Neighborhood," *Chase County Historical Sketches*, Vol. II, Chase County Historical Society, 1948, 255.
- <sup>13</sup>Personal interview with Frances Crook Staedtler, by Sally N. Bridge, June 10, 1989, Rt. 1, Strong City, Kansas.



<sup>14</sup>Hazel McKenzie Dutton Bowersox, "Excerpts from The Life and Ministry of Reverend M. G. McKenzie," *Chase County Historical Sketches*, Vol. IV, Chase County Historical Society, 1984, 355.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Personal interview with Frances Crook Staedtler, by Sally N. Bridge, June 10, 1989, Rt. 1, Strong City, Kansas.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Personal interview with Stanley and Mildred North, by Sally N. Bridge, June 11, 1989, Rt. 1, Strong City, Kansas.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>Personal interview with Frances Crook Staedtler, by Sally N. Bridge, June 10, 1989, Rt. 1, Strong City, Kansas.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>*The Emporia Gazette*, Emporia, Kansas, July 11, 1951, pg. 1.

<sup>26</sup>*Chase County Leader*, Cottonwood Falls, Kansas, July 11, 1951, pg. 1.

<sup>27</sup>*Chase County Leader*, Cottonwood Falls, Kansas, July 18, 1951, pg. 1.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>*The Emporia Gazette*, July 19, 1951.

<sup>34</sup>Personal interview with Stanley and Mildred North, by Sally N. Bridge, June 11, 1989, Rt. 1, Strong City, Kansas.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Personal interview with Edith McGregor, by Sally N. Bridge, June 11, 1989, Rt. 1, Strong City, Kansas.

<sup>38</sup>Personal interview with Frances Crook Staedtler, by Sally N. Bridge, June 10, 1989, Rt. 1, Strong City, Kansas.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Personal interview with Edith McGregor, by Sally N. Bridge, June 11, 1989, Rt. 1, Strong City, Kansas.

<sup>43</sup>Personal interview with Frances Crook Staedtler, by Sally N. Bridge, June 10, 1989, Rt. 1, Strong City, Kansas.

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<sup>45</sup>*The Emporia Gazette*, September 4, 1952.

<sup>46</sup>Personal interview with Tom and Syble Bridge, by Sally N. Bridge, June 10, 1989, Rt. 1, Strong City, Kansas.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.