

Colony, Kansas: Little Town, Big Dreams



Figure 1. Colony, Kansas as seen from Birdseye view, ca. 1911. Photo courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives – Wichita State University Libraries.

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When you drive through the town of Colony, Kansas, you would never think that at one time this town was full of life and agricultural success. According to Charlene “Rose” Tinsley, “It was impossible to drive down the street and not be able to see someone that you knew, and wasn’t uncommon to just stand there and talk. Eventually, there would be a crowd there talking about what was going on in politics and the newest things they were trying in their fields or with their cattle.”¹ Charlene was born just outside of Colony and has lived in the Colony area all of her life, except for a short time in high school when her family moved to Colorado, where she graduated from high school. A short time after graduation, her boyfriend Charles Tinsley drove out to Colorado, brought her back, and married her.

In order for there to be a Colony for Charles and Charlene to grow up in, there had to be a start to the town, and Colony had a very interesting start. While most towns in Kansas were founded on the fact that there was a church constructed there, that was not the case for Colony.

Town History

The mail route was laid out in 1858 from Lawrence to Humboldt, and the passengers aboard the stagecoaches would get tired on that long stretch. Soon, a tavern was built in what would become Colony called the “Halfway House.” The bar is now owned by Rick Horn and is named Rick’s Halfway House Saloon.²

¹ Charlene “Rose” Tinsley, interview by Amber Tinsley, 2012.

² “Colony Information,” *Anderson County Historical Society*, accessed 2012, http://www.historyandersoncoks.org/Colony_Kansas.html.



Figure 2. Rick's Halfway House Saloon, which was re-established in 1981. Photograph by Amber Tinsley, 2012.

In 1870, the Leavenworth, Lawrence, and Galveston railroad built a depot in a spot that was known either as the High Divide or Ozark Ridge, as it divides the waters of the Arkansas and Missouri rivers. This spot is the highest point on the railroad from Kansas City to the Gulf of Mexico.³ The first Post Office was built in the depot also in 1870 and was run by the Divide station agent Mr. Wyman.

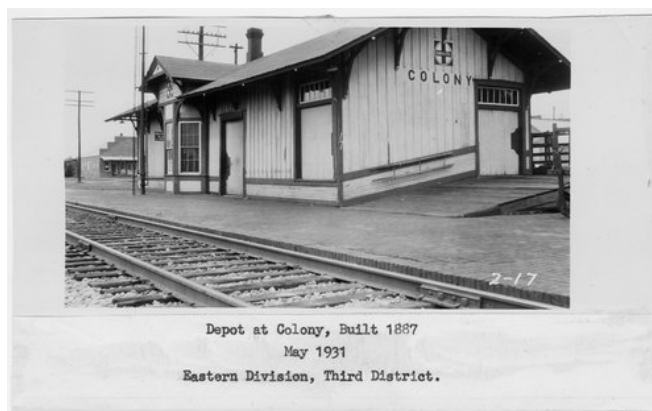


Figure 3. This black-and-white photograph shows the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe Railway Company depot at Colony, Kansas, ca. 1931. The depot was built in 1887 and located on the Eastern Division, Third District. Photograph courtesy of www.kansasmemory.com.

³ Ibid.



Figure 4. Photograph of the Santa Fe Depot, date unknown. Photograph courtesy of “Penny Postcards from Kansas” at usgwararchives.net.

As mentioned, Colony, which was originally named Divide, was not established due to a church; instead it was established on a tavern and a train depot. Due to the fact that it was hard to secure water, there were very few improvements made to Divide for almost two years. However, in 1872, a group of approximately 100 colonists came to the Divide area from Ohio and Indiana. It was at this time that the name of the town was changed to Colony, although the official application to change the name was not actually submitted until May 4, 1885. The first elected President of Colony was J.J. Fairbanks; he was also the first person to build a dwelling in Colony. Most of the colonists that came to Colony in the group of 100 left, but that did not stop the town. By 1877, the town had about eighty-five residents and many aspects of a town, such as a store, a blacksmith shop, a wagon shop, a hotel, a real-estate office, and a post office. In 1881, a large fire destroyed most of the buildings in Colony. However, not too long after they were burnt down, they were rebuilt. This is around the time when people realized that the blood that ran through the veins of the people of Colony was that of survivors and fighters.⁴

⁴ Norma Jean Ballard et al., *Colony Centennial: Memories of Colony 1885-1985*, (Colony, Kansas: History Book Committee and Workers, n.d.), n.p.

Railroad

The Leavenworth, Lawrence, and Galveston Railroad is the company that completed the railroad track through Colony, still called Divide at the time, but the track was later purchased by the Santa Fe Railroad. The railroad brought many opportunities to Colony that other towns were very unfortunate to miss out on. People could come to Colony for the day and spend their money at the numerous stores and other businesses, including the Farmers Union Cooperative Creamery in the early 1930s. The creamery was absolutely famous for their sweet creamery butter. The finest hotels and restaurants in the city of New York would pay a shiny penny to get the “sweet creamery butter made in Colony.”⁵ Another great aspect that the railroad brought with it would be the fact that it ran daily to towns with colleges and higher learning. This gave students a greater chance to get out of Colony and continue their education.

Schools

The very first public grade school in Colony was opened in 1876, as a one-room schoolhouse. After going through three other schoolhouses, John B. White was put in charge of organizing a three-year high school in 1898. In 1901, Colony had their first two graduates from their high school, Carrie Martin and Kennard Chatten. It was not until 1907 that a four-year course was established, and the high school officially became accredited as a second-class school. In 1920 a new school was built during the school year, so students had to attend school in the four churches in town, as well as on the second story of what is now the Colony Diner in town.⁶

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.



Figure 5. The one-room schoolhouse built in 1900. Picture courtesy of Allene Luedke.

Agriculture

A lot of people overlook Colony due to the fact that it is now just a small farming community that usually does not have a lot going on. George Stever, a resident of Colony since 1952 when he moved there at the age of nine, described Colony to me in an interview. “Colony has always just been a little sleepy town, with a lot of farmers. Which is why the population as far as I know has never been above 450 people; everyone lived in rural Colony and would travel to town when they needed something. The only thing that is continuing to keep Colony alive today is the farmers.”⁷

One of the most significant things Stever said was that the only thing continuing to keep Colony alive today is its farmers. The reason it stuck out is because that is really what has always been there for Colony. When the first colonist got there from Ohio and Indiana the prairie land around Colony was virgin land, and was full of all the natural nutrients.

From 1900 to about 1930, Colony was known as “The Hay Capital of the World;” there were more carloads of No. 1 pea green blue stem prairie hay hauled out of Colony on a train in

⁷ George Stever, interview by Amber Tinsley, November 30, 2012.

one month than any other town in the world.⁸ According to *Colony Centennial*, Colony got its reputation as “The Hay Capital of the World” from railroad records and the hay-buyers that visited the town daily. Due to the fact that Colony was such a large producer of hay, a lot of citizens of Colony considered that to be the main source of income for the area. Almost everyone in the Colony area was producing hay, and at a fast rate. The early settlers would store their hay loose in their barns, but soon the hay press made its way to Colony. The prairie hay was baled from July until September, and almost any man that could work could find a job in the hay fields. A very interesting fact about Colony is that there was actually a hay bailer invented in Colony. Ed Shreck made his own rendition of a hay bailer, and used it not only his fields, but he would also help his neighbors out when he had time.⁹ After the hay bailer the next new invention that made its way to Colony would be the hay thresher. Threshing crews would make their way around Kansas and some crews stopped through Colony. After the threshers came the oh-so-famous combines.

Natural Gas

In southeast Kansas there was a huge natural gas boom in 1921 and 1922. This natural gas boom brought in many new people and many new drilling companies, and Colony was nothing less than a thriving town. The wells around Colony were drilled with Star Drilling Machines. These machines used manila rope and they dug 900 feet into the ground. While drilling for gas, they also found oil at about 820 feet; however, in 1950, the oil companies capped off the oil wells. At this time the Cities Service Gas Company leased the wells. Iola, Kansas, is only ten miles from Colony, and there was a huge storage facility of natural gas there. Somehow

⁸ Ballard, *Colony Centennial*.

⁹ Kansas Historical Society, “Anderson County, Kansas,” *Kansapedia*, last modified January 2014, <http://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/anderson-county-kansas/15258>.

the site caught on fire, and the company needed somewhere to store their natural gas, and it just so happens that there are caves underneath Colony.¹⁰ In 1950, the gas company made a deal with the city council to store the natural gas underneath Colony, and in return the citizens of Colony would enjoy cheap gas rates for 99 years.¹¹ Colony still enjoys the cheap gas at 30 cents Mcf, and has the lowest natural gas bills in the state of Kansas. “My gas bill has never been more than \$16 a month,” Cindy “Stever” Tinsley stated, as a member of the Colony community most of her life.¹²

Facts about Colony

Some of the local clubs that the community enjoyed would have been the following: The Forget-Me-Not Club, The Kensington-Priscilla, The Prairie View Helpmates EHU, Pleasant Workers EHU, Olive Branch No. 212 A F & A M, and the Myra Chapter Oes No. 51.¹³

One of the most interesting artifacts that I was able to find about Colony would definitely be what I thought originally to be a song about Colony, however after asking around to many of the elder people in Colony I was informed that it was actually a promotional poem. See Appendix A for the poem.

There is a story told around Colony about how it is illegal to have a whale in the city limits, as a train once brought a dead whale through in a car and stayed for three days. After the train left it is said that they made a city ordinance outlawing it; unfortunately, I was unable to find this city ordinance.

¹⁰ Stever, interview.

¹¹ K. David Newell, “Oil and Gas History, Trends, and Potential in Kansas,” *Kansas Geological Survey*, accessed 2012, http://www.kwo.org/about_us/BACs/KWIF/ppt_Newell_KGS_Oil_Gas_Kansas_022912.pdf.

¹² Cindy “Stever” Tinsley, interview by Amber Tinsley, 2012.

¹³ Kansas Historical Society, “Anderson County Kansas.”

Colony Today

Today there is not much left of Colony, but the strong and fighting blood still pumps in the veins of its citizens. There is a Colony Diner, a doctor's office, the Halfway House Saloon, the bank, the school, and the city hall. Colony is just as much as ever a farming community, and I can only predict that it will stick around, as all of the inhabitants of Colony are just as strong-willed as ever.



Figure 6. Colony, Kansas today. Photograph taken by Amber Tinsley, 2012.

Appendix A

Colony, Kansas Promotional Poem; Author Unknown

If you're traveling through Kansas, with a view to settle down.

Get off at Colony depot, and look at our little town.

A lovelier site cannot be found.

In it's broad high elevation, it is seen for miles around.

Just come with me and I'll show you, up through principal street, of course the first thing that a traveler wants, is something good to eat.

So we'll cross the street to the northward, just to the left of you is Charlie Osborne's hotel, the popular "Grand View."

Next is a doctor's office, P.T. Fisher, M.D. He'll furnish you pills and powders for a very trifling fee.

Next comes the "Palace Hotel," as bright and neat as a pin. And Dr. P. Young, the proprietor is waiting to welcome you in.

We've now reached the printing office, our village's strength and pride. 'Twill doubtless do more to build up the town, than anything else besides.

The enterprising editors of the Colony Free Press, are C.T. Richardson and J.J. Burke- just give them your address.

Next to the furniture building, P.P. Hozapfel is the man who will sell you chairs and tables as cheap as anyone can.

J.F. Walkers lumber yard is just at the end of the street. He will furnish you building material at prices that cannot be beat.

Now we'll cross the street to the southward right on the corner stands the office of C.P. Walker, agent for Kansas Lands.

Of course you will want to settle- He can show you where are found all the choicest "eighties and quarters" for miles and miles around.

The next door west of this office is a large and well stocked store, Our new and popular merchant Mr. Elliot, stands at the door.

The next name on the signboards is another man of pills- The well known Dr. Thomas a healer of human ills.

And now comes J.W. Durlier, the solid hardware man, he will show you anything in his line from a stove to a new tin pan.

Next to this is the sore room of Mr. Robert Caut, He will furnish you the “staff of life” as cheap as it can be bought.

The next place to the westward, is a well-filled grocery store, with the name of Milt Carmicheal suspended over the door.

Mr. George White, The strawberry man comes next upon the scene, who sells the famous “crown” organ and the model sewing machine.

A harness and saddle shop is immediately at hand, if you’re wanting anything in that line John Thompson is yours to command.

Now J.B. Rhode’s emporium looms up before the eye, He has good of all styles and prices you will certainly wish to buy.

Dr. J.H. Pinegar’s drug store is the next upon the way, his stock of drugs is good and cheap that’s what the people say.

And now while we are calling on the different firms in town, We had better call on Matthews and Day, who will sell us goods way down.

Here are Martin and Sater in their store so bright and new with their temptingly laden shelves displayed to the public view.

Next come Varner’s restaurant and Robert’s market for meat, These are the places to stop if you’re wanting something to eat.

Now we are back to the depot, we won’t have time you see to visit Varner’s lumber yard and our fine livery.

Then there are the two hay presses and Perkins blacksmith shop and other places of interest if you only had to stop.

There’s a neat little Methodist Church with a parsonage standing high, and the Baptists are raising a handsome fund to build by and by.

A nice new grade school house already has been planned and numerous cozy dwellings are rising on every hand.

You are coming back again, are you? And then you are going to stay. The cars are just ready to start so I’ll have to wish you a good day.

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