

Kincaid, Kansas 1885-2017:

A Small Town Comes to Life Once a Year

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Figure 1. A road sign marks the city limits going east into Kincaid. Photograph by Emily Starkey.

Kincaid, in Rich Township, Anderson County, Kansas had less than 200 people as of the 2010 U.S. Census. Once a year this number does a 100-fold increase because of the town's annual

"World's Fair."

It's a Saturday in September. You're at a fair. The "World's Fair." The air smells like fall—crisp, with hints of fried food and cigarette smoke. A parade lines the street and wraps around the corner, out of sight, seeming to go on forever. The shrill screams of little children on carnival rides fill the air. Thousands of people swirl around the fairgrounds, smiling, hugging, catching up, and reminiscing. Looking around, you would never guess that the town you're standing in the middle of is on the brink of extinction, but it is.



Figure 2. The railway runs out of town in the western part of Kincaid. Photograph by Emily Starkey

Kincaid, Kansas sits seemingly off the beaten path, surrounded by farmland, in Rich Township, in the southeastern part of Anderson County. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Kincaid had 56 households made up of 122 individuals, but with only 30 families residing in the city. However, once a year for three days, the number of people swells to nearly two thousand. The "World's Fair" has been a family tradition in the small community since 1908. ¹

¹ "Kincaid Information," *Anderson County Historical Society*, <http://historyandersoncoks.org/Kincaid.html>.

The Dreamers

Kincaid was founded in 1885 in the prosperous farmlands of southeastern Anderson County. It was named for Robert Kincaid, an influential banker of Mound City, who played a significant role in the founding of this new town. Kincaid pushed for the St. Louis and Emporia Railroad line to be laid across the southern part of Anderson County. Once the routes were established, towns were built along the line. Kincaid was on the perfect spot, located near the crossing of the M.K. & T. and Mo. Pac. R.R., near oil and gas lands and good farmland. According to the Anderson County Historical Society, Kincaid became the first town of importance in Rich Township. Five months after the town plat was filed, on May 11, 1885, Kincaid had two lumber yards, two livery stables, and a drug store. Within those first few months, the population grew to an estimated 300. The Mont Van Buskirk furniture store, the A.M. Parsons grocery store, the Kincaid Roller Mills, a hotel, a weekly newspaper called the *Dispatch* and a private school with 30 students were quickly established in the town. Kincaid seemed to be very prosperous, and the neighboring towns began to notice.

An article titled, "Kincaid at the Front," in the July 10th, 1903 issue of the *Garnett Journal* explains Kincaid has "[o]il and gas lands, progressive merchants, churches and schools. A dew of the men who know a good thing."² The article continues to describe Kincaid as the ideal place to live: "Kincaid is located in a rich and beautiful valley; the soil reminds one of the great state of Iowa... In this country there is timber sufficient for fencing and fuel, and an exhaustless supply of bituminous coal... Kincaid has good schools and churches and is a moral community,

² "Kincaid at the Front," *Garnett Journal*, Garnett, KS, July 10, 1903.

therefore a good place to live.”³ An advertisement below the article, “Why Come to Kincaid?”, answers with the obvious: “Because, we have a railroad center, the richest soil in Kansas, Valley or Upland, in all size farms from 40 acres up. The price is yet low, many soft snaps from \$25 to \$40 per acre.”⁴ The advertisement continues, appealing to the chance of striking luck when buying land. “Gas has been found near Kincaid with 200 lbs pressure affording heat and light...When you buy a farm you have Natural Gas chances.”⁵ Kincaid was the epitome of a small town with big dreams, and the promised land for the family farmer.

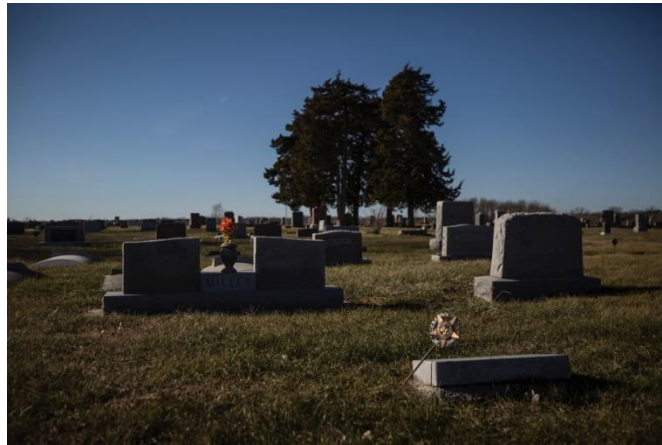


Figure 3. Headstones in Mount Zion cemetery in Kincaid, Kansas on November 10, 2017. Photograph by Emily Starkey

But who were these dreamers? Many of them were farmers from Scotland who immigrated to the United States in the late 1840s and early 1850s due to economic depression there. In the 1880s, migration from Scotland to America exploded again. Between 1881 and 1890, over five million Scottish immigrants came to the United States to escape poverty and

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Why Come to Kincaid?” *Garnett Journal*, Garnett, KS, July 10, 1903.

⁵ Ibid.

start a new life.⁶ An analysis of the names on the graves in Kincaid’s Mount Zion cemetery reflects this Scottish heritage. A large portion of last names in the cemetery, such as Anderson, Ewing, Ferguson, Gunn, Henderson, Irwin, McAdam, McDowell, McNall, Mills, Snodgrass, and even Kincaid, have Scottish origins.



Figure 4. Kincaid High School sits vacant at the north end of Centennial Street. Photograph by Emily Starkey.

Ester Ruth (Henderson) Church, has lived in or near Kincaid all of her life. She was the fourth generation of Hendersons in the area. “The wagon probably broke down there,” Church jokingly said when asked why she thought the Henderson family settled down in Kincaid. They were farmers. “When I was a little kid the thing to do was go to town,” Church said, where “mom would buy groceries and the kids would run all over town because everyone knew everyone. There were two groceries stores, a filling station, a meat locker, and a furniture store that sold everything you ever wanted.”⁷ Church graduated from Kincaid High School in 1964

⁶ “Scottish Immigration to America Timeline,” <http://www.datesandevents.org/us-immigration-timelines/scottish-immigration-america-timeline.htm>.

⁷ Ruth Church, interview by Emily Starkey, November 30, 2017.

and got married in 1965 Her younger sister graduated high school that year. At that time, “most all of that stuff was still there. But after 1965, things started to go out one by one,” Church said. Her sister was a part of Kincaid’s last high school class, before it consolidated with Colony’s Crest High School for the 1965-66 school year. Afterward, stores closed. Then, the people left.⁸



Figure 5. The Kincaid Fair office sits empty on Centennial Street during the off-season. Photograph by Emily Starkey.

The Downfall

The automobile had a significant impact on rural Kansas communities. In the short term, it provided people with more choice in where they wanted to shop or where they wanted to go to church. It allowed them to travel to other towns easily and conveniently. In the long term, this ease of transportation was a significant force in killing Kincaid. “I think a lot of these little

⁸ Ibid.

towns died because they were too close together,” Church said. “Back when Kincaid was established, there was a town about every five to ten miles from it. Kincaid couldn’t compete.”⁹

Church now lives in Colony, Kansas, about 20 miles from her hometown. “I moved to Colony for work. People left to get better jobs,” Church said. “When I graduated, land was getting expensive and a young person couldn’t buy land and machinery so most got a job off the farm doing something. Those somethings were in other towns—Garnett, Iola, Chanute, Kansas City, or Wichita—any town that had any kind of industry.”¹⁰ Ultimately, the location of Kincaid, transportation and competition with neighboring towns lead to the downfall of the once prosperous town. However, there is one thing that keeps the town alive: “The World’s Fair.”

A Family Reunion

The World’s Fair began in 1908 and has since become a tradition in the area. In an article published in the *Iola Register* in 1954, the author talks about just how important the fair has become to the small town. “Kincaid, Stunned by Fire, Going on With Fair Plans,” tells of a fire that destroyed a nursing home and took several lives during the fair. But the town continued with the event, when such a tragedy elsewhere would be cause to cancel a festival. “So today, as the Fair goes on, people gather in little groups to discuss the disaster... so the Kincaid Nursing Home is no more but the city is slowly settling back into the routine task of daily living.”¹¹ This daily living included spending time with the community at the fair.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Kincaid Stunned by Fire, Going on With Fair Plans,” *Iola Registry*, Iola, KS, September 18, 1954.

On Saturday, September 29, 2017, Church gathered up her grandkids and took them to the fair. She smelled fall in the air and the carnival food. She watched the parade go down Commercial Street and smiled as children gathered candy from the floats, just as she used to do when she was younger. She listened to the screams of her grandchildren on the carnival rides. She milled around the fairgrounds and visited with old friends.



Figure 6. Looking South down Centennial Street. Photograph by Emily Starkey.

“It’s a family reunion,” Church said in between hugs from old classmates. “A lot of the people my age or a little older plan their whole year around coming to the Kincaid Fair. It’s a family reunion kind of thing,” Church reiterated. “All of the people that used to live here, well besides me, have moved away, moved across the state or across the country. They moved away and they come back to see who’s left.” Church said that they began calling it the World’s Fair because it was the only major fair in the area. And it still is.¹²

¹² Ruth Church, interview by Emily Starkey, November 30, 2017.

Going Forward

All that is left in the small community is a bank, a liquor store, and a feed store. Centennial Street remains empty besides a few trucks here and there, stray dogs, and the families that remain. Mostly, Church says, the town has turned into a place for criminal activity. In 2013, there was an attempted bank robbery at the Citizens Bank in Kincaid that ended in a shootout.¹³ “I don’t know how the bank can keep anyone working there,” Church said. “Once the bank closes there will be nothing left in Kincaid. Even though there’s not much left of the small community, there’s still the fair. “As long as the fair continues to happen, Kincaid will still be around,” Church said.¹⁴

¹³ “Two suspects in custody after attempted bank robbery, shootout,” *KCTV News*, March 6, 2013, <http://www.kctv5.com/story/21535474/two-suspects-in-custody-after-attempted-bank-robbery-shootout>.

¹⁴ Ruth Church, interview by Emily Starkey, November 30, 2017.

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