

The Fiery History of Hiattville Bourbon County, Kansas 1870-1986

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Figure 1: A booster poster from 1887 advertising the Paint Creek Stock Farm near Hiattville
Source: Kansasmemory.org

This brief history of Hiattville uncovers its struggles to recover from a series of devastating fires, especially the fires of 1905 and 1913. Although a promising railroad town in Bourbon County in 1890s, by the 1920s, Hiattville was in a long, slow decline. This study relies on a county history, historical maps, and many newspaper articles.

“There was sticky flypaper in the front windows stuck full of flies. There were a few glass display cases for women’s accessories, but very little attempt to be glamorous. Women’s straw hats were placed on the front counter. They had a wonderful exciting “strawy” smell. There were a few ladies’ dresses on hangers, all gingham and none costing more than two dollars.”¹

This quotation is taken from an article written in 1972 by Bernice Coleman Tye for the *Fort Scott Tribune*. This section of the article is describing the Routh store in Hiattville during the 1920s. Bernice Coleman Tye was the daughter of the depot agent for the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad in the 1920s. Although it boasted a general store yet in the 1920s, Hiattville today is almost gone. It is located in southeast Kansas, thirteen miles southwest of Fort Scott in Pawnee Township of Bourbon County, a border county with Missouri.² Hiattville began in 1870 and lasted a little over 100 years, to 1986. The original town was located on a rolling prairie, described in the 1880s as surrounded by a healthy land full of trees, with a good water supply; Pawnee Creek flowed a few miles to the east.³ Hiattville was a thriving town located on a rail line until a disaster struck and the town began to decline. In fact, Hiattville had a fiery history, beginning with a booming economy and religious background but ultimately ending in ashes and torn down buildings.

In 1870, Hiattville actually began as a small town called Pawnee when the post office was opened. The first postmaster was Hezekiah Harryman. Hiattville became the town’s name in April of 1872, when it was changed to honor James M. Hiatt who owned the land the town was built on. The Missouri Kansas and Texas Railroad (KATY) laid tracks through the town and

¹ Fred Campbell and Don Miller, "Pawnee Township." In *Historic Reflections of Bourbon County, Kansas* (Virginia Beach, Va.: Donning, 2005) p. 183.

² Campbell and Miller, "Pawnee Township," p. 181.

³ William G. Cutler, "BOURBON COUNTY, Part 19," in *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883).

opened a depot in 1872.⁴ An article in the *Fort Scott Daily Monitor* from 1875 described the countryside as “Densely covered with the garb of nature. Not a single bare field was seen in the whole journey.”⁵ It was also noted in the *Fort Scott Daily Monitor* on February 20, 1879, that Hiattville was still located on the south side of the KATY railroad tracks and was prospering.⁶

Hiattville was home to many citizens. E.B. Randall was the first citizen and there are many different newspaper accounts of the land he purchased in and around Hiattville. The first Hiattville child was born in 1874 and the first marriage ceremony was in 1876.⁷ In 1879 it was noted that Saturday night dances were now popular.⁸ Hiattville had a variety of businesses including a long list: blacksmiths, physicians, hotels, churches, general stores, shoemakers, meat markets, a pool hall, livery stables, lumber and farm implement shop, furniture store, barbers, insurance agent, and contractors.⁹ Hiattville was an active and thriving town with many citizens showcasing their talents in their particular area of expertise. The people of Hiattville had even organized a debate society and were planning on publishing a newspaper. They were careful to note that it would “probably not interfere with the circulation of the *Monitor*.”¹⁰ While Hiattville did attempt to run a newspaper on two different occasions, the attempts only lasted a short while before the newspapers ultimately failed. The *Hiattville Weekly Optic* ran for less than a year beginning in June 16, 1892 and ceasing on May 6, 1893. The *Hiattville News* lasted slightly longer, starting on February 21, 1908 and ending on February 25, 1910.¹¹ The *Fort Scott Weekly*

⁴ Campbell and Miller, "Pawnee Township," p. 181.

⁵ "Special Correspondence of the Monitor." *Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, June 24, 1875.

⁶ "Letter from Hiattville." *Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, February 20, 1879.

⁷ Campbell and Miller, "Pawnee Township," p 181.

⁸ "Letter from Hiattville." *Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, February 20, 1879.

⁹ Campbell and Miller, "Pawnee Township," 181-183.

¹⁰ "Notes From Hiattville." *Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, December 20, 1876.

¹¹ "Kansas Newspaper Database (Microfilm and Electronic)." - Kansas Historical Society. 2015. Accessed December 15, 2015. <http://www.kshs.org/library/search.php?page=8&county=BB&state=KS>.

attendance stayed steady and an addition to the church was constructed in 1968.¹⁴ The Hiattville United Methodist Church is the only active church remaining in the community today, as shown in Figure 2 below.



Figure 3. Present Day Hiattville
United Methodist Church
Source: Fiveriversdistrict.com

Hiattville was a happy and promising town until disaster struck in 1905. In early March, several newspapers reported a fire that burned through Hiattville. This fire wiped out a large portion of the town's business block. Seven buildings were destroyed. The fire started in the town's drug store, owned by Charley Yeager. Since there were no firefighting facilities in town, the residents could do little other than watch their precious businesses burn to the ground. The origin of the fire is said to have come from a gasoline explosion. Mr. Yeager wasn't able to save anything from his drug store or his adjoining restaurant. His total loss was approximately \$3,000. Across the street was a store owned by A.M. Routh. This is where the post office was located. It was the largest building in town, and the building along with its entire stock was destroyed. Mr. Routh's building was also the site of the town's meeting hall which housed

¹⁴ Campbell and Miller, "Pawnee Township," p. 187.

various paraphernalia, all of which was destroyed. Mr. Routh's stock was valued at \$5,000 and his building at \$2,000. Mr. Yeager's and Mr. Routh's damages would only partially be covered by insurance. The fire also destroyed a barbershop, a feed and meal mill, and the Arlington hotel. Part of the furniture in the hotel was saved so losses to the hotel were around \$2,000. The livery stable was burned down along with a large amount of hay and corn; however, the horses and buggies were saved. Overall, the damages were estimated to have been as high as \$30,000.¹⁵

This fire was of such a large magnitude that it caught the attention of those across Kansas. This story was reported in local newspapers such as those in Fort Scott, Chanute, Iola, Bronson, and Pittsburg. It was even reported in cities such as Concordia, Leavenworth, Kansas City, and Valley Falls, and even as far west as Meade, Larned and Dighton. About two months after the fire, the *Pittsburg Daily Headlight* ran a follow-up story which stated that all of the businesses were preparing to rebuild in the same spots except for the hotel which was going to be relocated.¹⁶

Sadly, the 1905 fire was not the only fire that would strike Hiattville. In 1913 the familiar force struck again. This time it was Mr. Yeager's hotel where the fire began. The flames were discovered early, and a bucket brigade was able to keep the fire under control before men finally put the fire out. This fire started in a closet which was home to a large number of bed clothing and feather beds. Mr. Yeager thought it was possible that cause was spontaneous combustion among the feathers stored in the small, stuffy room. The building was damaged and walls between the corridor and rooms were burned out.¹⁷

¹⁵ "Hiattville Conflagration." *Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, March 1, 1905.

¹⁶ "Recovering from the Fire." *The Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, April 25, 1905.

¹⁷ "Fire at Hiattville." *Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, August 4, 1913.

Fire also struck the holy places of Hiattville. In the 1930s the Baptist church burned to the ground and was never rebuilt. The Methodist church was also reduced to ashes in 1955.¹⁸ It was a Saturday afternoon in August when the church and all of its contents inside went up in flames. The Fire Department at Helper, approximately 10 miles away, arrived too late. The fire appeared to have started in the upper part of the structure. New flooring had just been laid in the building. There was no estimate on how much the damages were but it was guessed that it would only be partially be covered by insurance.¹⁹ Luckily a new church building was constructed, and the dedication took place in 1956.²⁰

The fires throughout the history of Hiattville took their toll on the population, but other factors also hurt the town. Hiattville was lucky enough to have a bank, organized in the 1920s and named the Hiattville State Bank. However, like so many other banks across America, Hiattville State Bank closed its doors in the 1930s due to the Depression and the collapsing economy.²¹ Before the closing of the bank, a robbery took place in Hiattville. The president of the bank, Mr. Thompson told a stranger that he could not cash a check for him. The stranger drew a revolver while ordering Mr. Thompson to the back of the room. He made Mr. Thompson stand there while he helped himself to a small sum of money. The other robber drove the getaway car. Sadly, it was the third robbery at the small hometown bank in six years.²²

Also contributing to the decline of Hiattville was the closing of the KATY railroad depot. In 1938 business was slow and the depot was closed for a short time before being reopened in 1942 when more shipping business was created by the operations of a ranch and an elevator.

¹⁸ Campbell and Miller, "Pawnee Township, p. 187.

¹⁹"Hiattville Church a Total Fire Loss." *The Fort Scott Tribune*, August 17, 1955.

²⁰ Campbell and Miller, "Pawnee Township," p. 187.

²¹ Campbell and Miller, "Pawnee Township," p. 186.

²² "Bourbon Bank Held Up Early This Morning." *The Iola Register*, October 18, 1930.

However, when business slowed again in 1956, the KATY depot was closed for good.²³ The school was shut down in the late 1960s due to the Kansas School Unification Act. The post office that had begun the town closed in 1986.²⁴ In the late 1970s, the KATY railroad suspended operations through Hiattville; the rails and ties were removed in the summer of 1990.²⁵ When comparing Figure 2 on page three to Figure 4 below, it is easy to tell where the KATY railroad tracks left their mark. The red pin is highlighting the Hiattville United Methodist Church.



Figure 4. A present-day aerial photograph of Hiattville, Kansas. Source: Google Maps.

Hiattville was a booming railroad town during its prosperous years in the late 1800s. However, the population began to decline after a peak of 500 people in 1891. In 1910, just five years after the fire that destroyed the business block, the population was down to 250. By 1920,

²³ Campbell and Miller, "Pawnee Township," p. 186.

²⁴ "Kansas Post Offices, 1828-1961." Kansas Historical Society. 2015. Accessed December 16, 2015. https://www.kshs.org/geog/geog_postoffices/search/placename:Hiattville.

²⁵ Campbell and Miller, "Pawnee Township," p. 187.

the population had further decreased to 180 people.²⁶ Like many other small towns across the state, Hiattville likely felt the impact of the automobile, which allowed many residents to drive elsewhere for business, medical care, and education. By 2005, only thirty residents called Hiattville home.²⁷ After more than a century, this once thriving community has seen all of its abandoned buildings torn down. Even the KATY railroad tracks and depot that formed the original, key part of this town's economy were removed from the town site. Fire is a damaging force for any town and unluckily, Hiattville experienced this unfriendly force many times. Although the Routh grocery store, once burned to the ground, was rebuilt, and former residents such as Bernice Coleman Tye recalled the straw hats sold there in the 1920s, Hiattville could not seem to recover from its fiery past.

²⁶ Campbell and Miller, "Pawnee Township," p. 183.

²⁷ Campbell and Miller, "Pawnee Township," p. 189.

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