

Bodarc (Bois D' Arc) – A Town with a Dream

Butler County, Kansas 1875 – 1951
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Figure 1. Photograph of Ralph Kennedy and Alma Kennedy standing in front of their general store, c. 1946.
SOURCE: Personal Collection of Ralph Kennedy.
The couple lived upstairs while the downstairs served as the general store, post office, and meeting area.

This document provides a comprehensive history of the lost community of Bodarc (Bois D' Arc) from the time that the Osage Indians settled the land to present day. Bodarc was unofficially founded in 1875 and included a mill, general store, schoolhouse, church, and cemetery. This study includes newspaper clippings, personal records, photographs, interviews, and information obtained from the Butler County Historical Society.

~ Dedicated to my grandfather, Ralph Wilbur Kennedy ~

Nestled within the rolling Flint Hills of Kansas lies a once prosperous community that was founded on hard work, determination, and respect for the common man, but all that now persists is a desolate land that remains in the shadows as society progresses. Bodarc, Kansas, is located within the Bloomington Township in Butler County, about five miles southeast of Augusta. The town experienced major economic growth from its location on the Little Walnut River, as I'll discuss further in this article. Fertile farmlands, plentiful food sources, and a general availability of groundwater¹ blessed the small community from the time it was unofficially founded in 1875 until it started to regress in 1951. Bodarc's inhabitants realized the value of advancement and invested in many new technologies that drew in tourists from all over the lands of Kansas and beyond. With many of these factors aiding in the town's persistence, Bodarc quickly transformed into a thriving community fueled by a successful mill, ample jobs, tremendous opportunities, and a convenient location on the river.

Before the White Man

Many years before Bodarc was officially founded, the Osage Indians realized the value and fertility of the land and established a settlement just east of the Little Walnut River. As the Indians were being forced off their land further south, an Osage Indian reservation was sanctioned in the southeast section of Kansas.² The particular tribal community located in Bodarc was settled in 1863 and the people thrived for seven years before they sold their land to the

¹Socolofsky, H. E., & Self, H. (1988). *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. Oklahoma: Publishing Division of the University of Oklahoma.

²Socolofsky, H. E., & Self, H. (1988). *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. Oklahoma: Publishing Division of the University of Oklahoma.

United States government.³ Various treaties signed by the Osage Indians slowly diminished their land as the years progressed, but they always received fair compensation. On July 15, 1870, the Drum Creek Treaty was signed, relinquishing the rest of their land to be sold for \$1.25 to new settlers arriving in Kansas. The tribe was anxious to sell their lands in the state, partly because white men were trying to settle on their reservation without permission before it was sold. The tribe purchased 640,000 acres of land in the Cherokee Outlet in Oklahoma shortly after the treaty was signed. The Osage Indians were one of the few Indian nations to have purchased their own reservation.⁴

Bois D' Arc – The Beginning

Shortly after the vast tract of land was made available for settlers to purchase in 1870, towns and townships began to take form around the area. A petition was presented to establish Bloomington Township in Butler County on April 1, 1872, just two short years after people were allowed to settle the land. Twenty days later, the petition was granted, paving the way for a future of thriving communities.⁵ Samuel Rankin was documented in 1867 as the first white settler in the Bloomington Township, even though he was living there illegally since the land still belonged to the Osage Nation.⁶ As pioneers continued to settle the land, the small town of Bodarc was unofficially established in 1875, and it was described as “a well-watered township

³ Kennedy, Ralph W. "Personal Archives of Ralph Kennedy." 1994.

⁴ Chapman, Berlin B. "Kansas Historical Quarterly - Removal of the Osages from Kansas, 1 (Digitized with permission of the Kansas Historical Society) pg 287 - 305." *Kansas Historical Society*. August 1938. <http://www.kshs.org/p/kansas-historical-quarterly-removal-of-the-osages-from-kansas-1/12753> (accessed May 2, 2013).

⁵ Mooney, Vol. P. *History of Butler County Kansas*. Lawrence: Standard Publishing Company, 1916.

⁶ Kennedy, Ralph W. "Personal Archives of Ralph Kennedy." 1994.

[and] much live stock is raised handled and fed from the products of the farms.”⁷ The first settlers arrived from Kentucky and Tennessee, as did most of the settlers that inhabited the town at a later date.⁸

When Bodarc was established, the new community still didn’t have a name. Much debate ensued among the people of what to call the town, but the community soon came to an agreement. The original name of the town was known as Bois D’ Arc, named after the Osage Indians that settled the land just years before. The Osage Orange Tree is closely tied to the Osage nation, partly because the tribe originally settled close to the native location of the tree. The people utilized this tree by making bows out of the wood, as well as other objects. Bois D’ Arc is a literal translation of “Wood of the Bow” in the French language.⁹ Shortly after, the town name was shortened to Bodarc because it was easier to spell, although it was pronounced the same way. The original settlers knew the importance of incorporating history into the town name, and it was named in homage and respect to the indigenous people who settled before.

Picking Up Steam

As the colonists were beginning to profit from their fertile farmland, they came together as a community to build the first public building, the Cumberland Church. The church was built by several religious groups in Bodarc and the surrounding areas in 1883, drawing more people to the town, thus aiding economic development.¹⁰ Since many diverse religious groups aided in

⁷ Mooney, Vol. P. *History of Butler County Kansas*. Lawrence: Standard Publishing Company, 1916.

⁸ Douglass Tribune. "History in the Making - Where is Bodarc??" *Douglass Tribune*, February 18, 1971.

⁹ Mason, Jim. *Osage Orange, Great Plains Nature Center*. n.d. <http://www.gpnc.org/osage.htm> (accessed April 22, 2013).

¹⁰ Unknown Author, Edited by Ralph Kennedy. *History of Bodarc*. El Dorado Historical Society, n.d.

constructing the building, it was agreed that the separate groups would conduct services by taking turns. The people soon found it difficult to cooperate with each other in sharing the building, and a permanent pastor was soon chosen to conduct the services. The church was built just across the street from the cemetery, which was established in 1876. The original land was donated by Marian Taylor, but the cemetery was soon expanded to accommodate more plots.¹¹

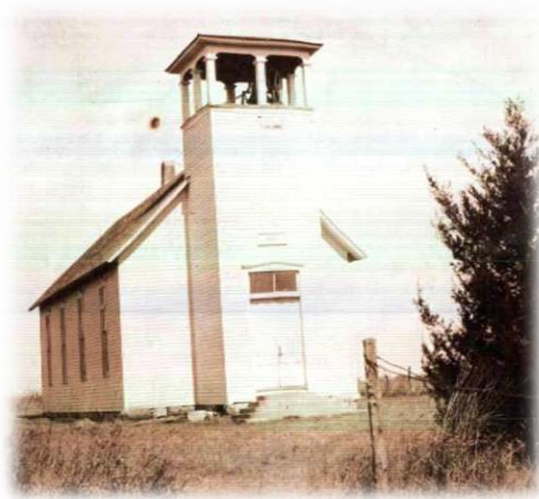


Figure 2. Photograph of the original Cumberland Church, c. 1883

SOURCE: Personal collection of Walden Family.

Notice the architecture and size of the bell tower.

Note: The church burned down in 1928 and a new church was constructed out of brick in the same location.

Two years after Cumberland Church was built, a bridge was proposed so people could easily cross the river by horse and buggy. The main factor pushing the construction of the bridge was to accommodate people living on the east side of the river who wanted to bury their family members in the new cemetery on the west side of the river. It was commissioned in 1885 by the Kansas City Bridge & Iron Company, and it has been in use ever since.¹² As more people were

¹¹ Unknown Author, Edited by Ralph Kennedy. *History of Bodarc*. El Dorado Historical Society, n.d.

¹² Kennedy, Ralph W. "Personal Archives of Ralph Kennedy." 1994.

beginning to move to the town, the settlers soon realized the need for a general store and meeting place. Up until this point, settlers were forced to travel to Douglass or Augusta to buy supplies and send mail. The two story store was constructed completely by volunteers and officially opened in 1890.¹³



Figure 3. Photograph of the Bodarc General Store, c. 1928

SOURCE: Personal collection of Ralph Kennedy.

Notice the gas pump in front of the store. The store owners invested in a pump ten years after the store opened to further accommodate the automobile era.

The general store served as a post office, meeting area, and eventually a gas station when the automobile gained popularity in the state. This store quickly became the spot where people would gather. It was a common tradition to carve your name in the stone if you visited the store, even if you were considered a foreigner to the area.¹⁴

¹³ Kennedy, Ralph W. "Personal Archives of Ralph Kennedy." 1994.

¹⁴ Kennedy, Ralph W. "Personal Archives of Ralph Kennedy." 1994.



Figure 4. Photograph of multiple names carved in the stone on the side of the general store, c. 2013
SOURCE: Personal collection of Evan Voth.
An estimated 300 names were visible in the stone surrounding the store.

Leonard Carr, a local man who currently lives next door to the general store, recalls stories from people he talked to who lived in the town in the era of its glory days. An underground cellar is located underneath the store where huge ice blocks were stored, and people were constantly amazed at how they would not thaw throughout the entire summer months.¹⁵ As stated earlier, the people of Bodarc were advocates in the advancement of technology, as evidenced by the installation of a telephone in the general store. Bodarc was the first town to have a telephone in the entire county.¹⁶ This was possible because most members of the community each contributed five dollars to have the phone line installed. The post office was officially established in the store on December 21, 1892, but was discontinued in 1904 because it was more economical to deliver mail from Douglass. Bodarc's first postman was William Vilos.¹⁷

At the turn of the twentieth century, a water powered mill was constructed along the river¹⁸ to grind up flour and corn.¹⁹ It was known as the Bradford Mill and brought many jobs to the area. Virgil E. Bottom, a former resident of Bodarc, recalls seeing the mill as a small child. "The building which housed the mill shook as the big water wheel turned the wheels that drove the equipment of the mill. A bridge across the river just a few yards below the dam afforded an

¹⁵ Carr, Leonard Jean, interview by Evan Voth. (April 25, 2013).

¹⁶ *Douglass Tribune*. "History in the Making - Where is Bodarc??" *Douglass Tribune*, February 18, 1971.

¹⁷ Unknown Author, Edited by Ralph Kennedy. *History of Bodarc*. El Dorado Historical Society, n.d.

¹⁸ Bottom, Virgil E. *I - Genesis* (1991).

¹⁹ Unknown Author, Edited by Ralph Kennedy. *History of Bodarc*. El Dorado Historical Society, n.d.

excellent view of the dam and the water wheel and I never tired of standing on the bridge watching the wheel rotate.”²⁰

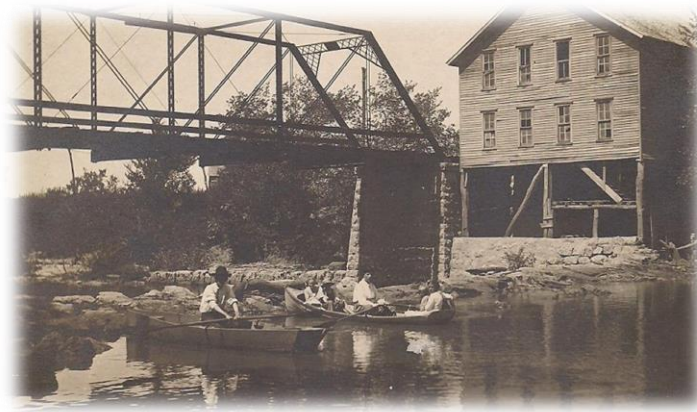


Figure 5. Photograph of the Bodarc Bridge and Bradford Mill, c. 1916
SOURCE: Personal collection of Ralph Kennedy.
Notice the close proximity of the bridge to the mill.

Bodarc was finally chartered and became an official town on November 25, 1899, just as the mill was being built.²¹ Although the mill brought jobs and economic growth to the community, it was torn down in 1918²² after Frank Martin purchased the land so he could build a house close to that spot. The town also constructed a one room school house one half mile southwest from the church.²³ Not much is known about the school, partially because of its short life-span and low attendance. The only documented picture of the school was taken in 1919 with the graduating eighth grade class standing in front.

²⁰ Bottom, Virgil E. *I - Genesis* (1991).

²¹ Kennedy, Ralph W. "Personal Archives of Ralph Kennedy." 1994.

²² Kennedy, Ralph W. "Personal Archives of Ralph Kennedy." 1994.

²³ Douglass Tribune. "History in the Making - Where is Bodarc??" *Douglass Tribune*, February 18, 1971.

Bodarc's Second Chance

As the mill was torn down, the school closed, and the post office discontinued, it seemed as though Bodarc's future was uncertain. However, the town's luck was going to continue. In 1910, a dam was constructed by the Empire Gas and Oil Company about a quarter mile upstream from the bridge. This became a great fishing spot for the locals, and tourists started to realize this as well. An article published by The Wichita Eagle, in 1927, praised the town of Bodarc and recommended it to anyone looking to "get away from it all." It was titled, "SHORT TRIP DOWN WALNUT TO BODARC – Camp Out All Day and Come Home with an Unusually Big Fish Story – Fine Roads to Travel."²⁴ After this article was published, families came by the carload to camp out in the town along the river and fish.



Figure 6. Photograph of Alma Kennedy holding a fish she caught, c. 1950
SOURCE: Personal collection of Ralph Kennedy.
The catfish weighed over 21 pounds.

²⁴ Tramp., The Eagle Auto. "Short Trip Down Walnut to Bodarc." *The Wichita Eagle*, June 26, 1927.

People began to come from all over the state to camp for even a week. One dollar per day was charged to campers who chose to stay overnight.²⁵ Other amenities that brought people to the area included a scout camp located one mile south of town and a car wash. It was the first of its kind in Butler County, and the car wash was what typically brought people from Augusta into the town.²⁶

The End of an Era

For unknown reasons, the dam was destroyed in 1944,²⁷ indirectly resulting in worse fishing conditions. Family visits to the town became more sporadic because parks and fishing areas were beginning to gain popularity in Wichita at this time. After tourists began to leave, the town's effort to persist became futile. Ralph Kennedy was the sixth and final owner of the general store. He leased it in 1946 but was forced to shut it down in 1951 because of low revenues.²⁸ After the store closed, many residents left the town to move to larger cities for convenience, but most of the families who previously owned farmland close to the town continued to work it, even though they were not living there. Although Bodarc never had an urban community of houses in close quarters with each other, rural farm families aided the economic development when the store was open.²⁹

Today, the remains of the town's glory days are easily present to the curious onlooker passing through. The bridge, constructed in 1885, is still in use today.

²⁵ Tramp., The Eagle Auto. "Short Trip Down Walnut to Bodarc." *The Wichita Eagle*, June 26, 1927.

²⁶ Kennedy, Ralph W. "Personal Archives of Ralph Kennedy." 1994.

²⁷ Kennedy, Ralph W. "Personal Archives of Ralph Kennedy." 1994.

²⁸ Kennedy, Ralph W. "Personal Archives of Ralph Kennedy." 1994.

²⁹ Geo. A. Ogle & Co. *Standard Atlas of Butler County Kansas (Plat Map)*. Chicago: Geo. A. Ogle & Co., 1905.



Figure 6. Photograph of the current condition of the Bodarc bridge, c. 2013
SOURCE: Personal collection of Evan Voth
Notice the durability of the iron 128 years later.

The Cumberland Community Church and Cumberland Cemetery still persist as well. Although a few people have lived in the top story of the previous general store since it closed, it has remained abandoned for about the last ten years.



Figure 7. Photograph of the current condition of the general store, c. 2013. SOURCE: Personal collection of Evan Voth .



Figure 8. Photograph of the inside of the general store, c. 2013. SOURCE: Personal collection of Evan Voth. Notice the original shelving and front counter.

According to Leonard Carr, a man named Jim Zodka purchased the property at an auction and had dreams of renovating it and turning it into a bed and breakfast, but no work has been done since he purchased it in 2003.³⁰ Currently, seven to ten homesteads are located close to the town,

³⁰ Carr, Leonard Jean, interview by Evan Voth. (April 25, 2013).

some of which have relatively modern houses. The people of Bodarc succeeded in building a thriving community based on hard work and some luck as well, but all that remains are empty buildings and quiet waters, telling the silent story of a time that will forever live in history.

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