

Three Strikes and You're Out:

Under El Dorado Lake, Chelsea, Butler County, Kansas, 1857-1978

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Chelsea was located in Chelsea Township, Butler County from 1857-1978. This study includes early maps of the county, information provided by the Butler County Historical Society, and some photographs of the town before it was gone. This analysis shows the persistence that the people of this small community had to save their beloved town.

Chelsea: Three Strikes You're Out!

Imagine it is 1857 in unorganized Kansas. You are surrounded by the rolling Flint Hills with miles and miles to see in the distance. How do you choose where to settle? You have made it the distance, traveled for days, months, possibly years, but only half your journey is over. You have left behind what you know and headed for the unknown with hope in your eyes. In the late 1850s and 1860s thousands of people did this exact thing, moving west to uncharted territory. Some traveled in colonies, others only traveled with their families. Settlers came from all over including the eastern colonies and from Europe. Out of all the places to settle in America why choose Kansas? A number of reasons come to mind; it had fertile land, access to water along rivers, streams, and creeks and by 1857, Eastern Kansas had little to no problem with Indians. Stories of the great lands of Kansas had made it all the way back to the coast. These stories inspired young hopeful men to pack their bags and head for the wondrous land. This story is not different from the one told of the small hamlet of Chelsea that was once located in Butler County. What drew people to the Chelsea Township in Southeast Kansas and what kind of people chose to settle there? The scenery of the Flint Hills in one's back yard is breathtaking. With the rolling hills for miles to see, like waves from an ocean, it's no wonder why settlers were drawn. Yet what would you do if the town that you had grown to love was not going to last? The people of Chelsea provide a unique story about their determination to keep their beloved town alive.

Kansas was settled by many different people. Choosing a location was often just a matter of luck. Settlers would look to see if a place had a good source of water, trees for buildings and homes, and if the land was fertile. The men who founded Chelsea in soon to be Butler County were able to find all of these things. Butler County is part of the Bluestem Prairie on the western slope of the Flint Hills. To this area came a high percentage of North Midland settlers, mainly people from Illinois and Indiana.

Land was cheaper in Kansas, only \$1.25 an acre compared to \$5 or \$6 in Illinois.¹ In 1857 a group of pioneers was traveling through Kansas looking for a place to set down their roots. Joseph C. Lambdin, Prince Gorum Davis, “Pegleg” Morton, L.M. Pratt, and George T. Donaldson, after going through Emporia, discovered the area known today as Chelsea.² This town was the legacy of these four men, lasting one hundred and thirty-three years. This small hamlet was the first in Butler County, so naturally Chelsea had the first county store, post office, court house, marriage, birth and death records, and school.³ Chelsea Township had the first school in the county. Below is a drawing of the school when it was first built.



Figure 1: Drawing of the first school house in Butler County located in Chelsea. SOURCE: Milbourn, John D. *Chelsea: The Town, Township, Community and Cemetery*. Butler County Historical Society. Butler County, Kansas. c. 1860s. Note that the school would eventually close and children would be transferred to surrounding towns.

¹ Shortridge, James R. *Peopling the Plains: Who went where in Frontier Kansas*. Lawrence Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995. 133.

² Fitzgerald, Daniel. *Chelsea, Butler County*. Butler County Historical Society. 1979, 82

³ Milbourn, John D. *Chelsea: The Town, Township, Community and Cemetery*. 1990, Butler County Historical Society, 20.

The founders of Chelsea were lucky enough to stumble upon an area that had a good water supply. The Walnut River was Chelsea's main source of water, but Cole Creek and Durachen Creek also passed through it.⁴ The story of Chelsea is unique because there were actually three Chelsea town sites: Old Chelsea, New Chelsea, and South Chelsea. All three of these versions contributed to the story of Chelsea. After Butler County was officially established, Chelsea became the county seat and had 320 acres.⁵ Chelsea had its fair share of struggles in the beginning of its time. Events like the Civil War impacted it greatly because in a time when the town was in its infancy, it should have focused on development; but instead, many men in the community chose to enlist in the war.⁶ With men off to war, the town progress mostly stopped. Then the boundaries of Butler County were redrawn. In the 1860s Butler County boundaries were reshaped to include El Dorado, and by 1864, won the county seat from Chelsea.⁷ The two towns were only about four miles apart with the Walnut River separating them, as seen below. Chelsea was already struggling, and by then a larger town won the county seat competition. Without the courthouse and its business Chelsea had little hope to survive.

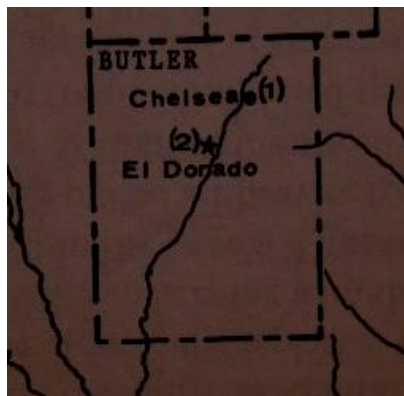


Figure 2: Photograph of portion of Kansas map of Butler County showing county seats.
SOURCE: Socolofsky, Homer and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, 1992.
Note that Butler County was organized before Kansas statehood.

⁴ Milbourn, John D. *Chelsea: The Town, Township, Community and Cemetery*. 1990, Butler County Historical Society, 34.

⁵ Milbourn, 23.

⁶ Milbourn, 90.

⁷ Milbourn, 93.

In order for Chelsea to survive, residents were going to have to make changes. In 1868, George T. Donaldson, one of the founders, decided to move Chelsea $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile to the southwest of Old Chelsea. This new town site was referred to as New Chelsea.⁸ New Chelsea's location was better for business, more convenient for people to stop there. This new site was closer to the federal road coming from Emporia.⁹ Yet in 1870 the population for Chelsea was 277, while the population of El Dorado was 797 and rising.¹⁰ Even with the move to New Chelsea, the town was still failing, but then came the drought and the grasshoppers. In 1874 it stopped raining, causing a major drought, and then what little food that was left was eaten by large numbers of grasshoppers. This caused many people throughout Kansas, including Chelsea, to leave. Two thirds of the area was out of food for the winter.¹¹ This caused a major downfall in an already failing community.

The residents of Chelsea knew that in order for them to survive and keep up with the ever growing town of El Dorado, they were going to need a railroad to be constructed through their town. The townspeople wanted to see the railroad built from Fall River in Greenwood County and have Chelsea be the first stop in Butler County. Even after the town fought endlessly with petitions and bonds, the railroad was built along the fifth parallel, benefitting El Dorado.¹² This battle for the railroad would continue for many years. In 1876 Chelsea again petitioned for a depot to be built, but because Chelsea was founded as an inland town, their petitioned failed.¹³ The people of Chelsea already held resentment toward El Dorado because residents had taken the county seat from them, and now El Dorado kept taking railroads and any potential for Chelsea to survive. The people of Chelsea started to become a little bit angry with their lack of success; on May 10, 1877, the *Chelsea Times* was quoted as saying, "First, remove the County seat to Augusta. Second, kill El Dorado. Third, divide the county in

⁸ Milbourn, John D. *Chelsea: The Town, Township, Community and Cemetery*. 1990, Butler County Historical Society, 93.

⁹ Milbourn, 95.

¹⁰ Cutler, William G. *History of the State of Kansas*. Chicago, IL: A. T. Andreas, 1883.

¹¹ Milbourn, John D. *Chelsea: The Town, Township, Community and Cemetery*. 1990, Butler County Historical Society, 100.

¹² Milbourn, 135.

¹³ Milbourn, 136.

such a way to make Chelsea a County seat. Fourth, vote bonds for two railroads crossing at Chelsea.”¹⁴ The townspeople clearly felt that they were not being given a chance to survive. So again, it was time for a change. South Chelsea was born.

South Chelsea is the town site more remembered by people today because it lasted as a small community for almost one hundred years. In 1880, Chelsea's population had risen to 340, not as high as the population was in Old Chelsea, and El Dorado's population had risen to 2,268.¹⁵ Before Chelsea was moved to South Chelsea a plat map was drawn (1905) showing South Chelsea's potential if it moved. This is pictured below. The new town site was located in the west corner of section four, south range six, in Butler County. The move was made in the hopes that the railroad would then run through Chelsea.



Figure 3: Photograph of plat map drawing of South Chelsea. SOURCE: Milbourn, John D. *Chelsea: The Town, Township, Community and Cemetery*. Pg.143. Butler County Historical Society, Butler County Kansas. 1905. Note that the town envisioned in the plat map never reached this potential.

South Chelsea did finally attract a railroad. on May 5, 1924, a line was built by the El Dorado and

¹⁴ Milbourn, John D. *Chelsea: The Town, Township, Community and Cemetery*. 1990, Butler County Historical Society, 140.

¹⁵ Cutler, William G. *History of the State of Kansas*. Chicago, IL: A. T. Andreas, 1883.

Santa Fe Construction Company that was used until 1939.¹⁶ By this time, South Chelsea was nothing more than a few clusters of houses, two of which were the homes of railroad workers and their families. After the church and the school closed, there was no doubt that the once beloved town was no longer a town. Below is a photograph of the First Methodist Church that was built in 1905 in South Chelsea.



Figure 4: Photograph of First Methodist Church located in South Chelsea. SOURCE: Milbourn, John D. *Chelsea: The Town, Township, Community and Cemetery*. pg. 120, Butler county Historical Society, Butler County, Kansas. 1905.

Note that after the church closed it was used as storage but was later burned down in a fire.

Chelsea had struggled for survival for quite some time, and just when the few residents left in the area thought they could catch a break, El Dorado dominated what little they had left. In 1978, the El

¹⁶ Milbourn, John D. *Chelsea: The Town, Township, Community and Cemetery*. 1990, Butler County Historical Society, 145.

Dorado Lake Project began. This project was designed for El Dorado to build a new dam and destroy the one that was present.¹⁷ This was bad news for the remaining Chelseaites as the new lake project required that the families living in the area sell their homes and move out of their beloved town. Part of El Dorado Lake was now going to cover Chelsea town site. This once dear community is now completely under water. The only reminders of Chelsea are Chelsea Cemetery and the Chelsea Bridge that crosses over the lake.

The town of Chelsea, although no longer there, is still remembered by the people of the surrounding area. Children can be seen doing back flips off of Chelsea Bridge into El Dorado Lake during the summer, and Chelsea Cemetery is often used to tell ghost stories if people are not too scared to go into it at night. The story of Chelsea is one of determination and the people's commitment to their town. The residents of Chelsea would have done anything to make their town last, including moving it twice, and it was a hard pill to swallow when they realized that it was not going to happen. Yet Chelsea persisted over one hundred and thirty years, far longer than many frontier towns. Without great leadership and the will to survive, it would have not lasted past the life span of Old Chelsea.

¹⁷ Milbourn, John D. *Chelsea: The Town, Township, Community and Cemetery*. 1990, Butler County Historical Society, 125.

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Figures

Figure 1: Drawing of the first school house in Butler County located in Chelsea. Milbourn, John D. *Chelsea: The Town, Township, Community and Cemetery*. 1990. pg. 198. Butler County Historical Society. c. 1860s.

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