

The Not-So-Promised Land: Landscapes and Relationships of Early Communities in Clark County, Kansas



Figure 1. The landscape of the Red Hills in central Clark County. Photograph from Ashland Chamber of Commerce website. Settler Expectations concerning the geography of this region of Kansas played a key role in determining the persistence of several early communities.

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This study discusses the relationship of early communities of Clark County, Kansas. The author uses various sources to weave together a narrative of communal interconnections and relationships in reference to the overarching landscape of the region. The communities discussed are Cash City, Ashland, and Sitka.

The hills of this landscape blaze with a fiery hue. Spring rains issue vibrant contrasts between the red gypsum bluffs and the sharp greens of prairie grasses, while howling winter blizzards subside to reveal a masked landscape hiding both stone and stem in tranquil slumber until the onset of the coming thaw. The Cimarron bends back into Kansas from Oklahoma before winding south into the fabled No Man's Land of the Oklahoma Panhandle.¹ Atop this primordial expanse ruled the buffalo, a relic of America's frontier history which is still retained in the region today as bison continue to graze in natural basins.² This is the Red Hills region of southwestern Kansas. It was this unique landscape in what was to become Clark County that saw the arrival of several clustered early settler communities in the closing decades of the 19th century. Ashland, incorporated in 1884, would ultimately become the county seat and most populous and successful town of the county. Cash City was established a year later twelve miles to the west. Its history was brief, lasting only a handful of years. Sitka, the smallest of the three towns, is located six miles east of Ashland and endured from 1886 until it garnered its unincorporated status in 1964 with the loss of its post office. Yet, interestingly enough, several original families still persist in the farmland around Sitka. The history of the interactions of these three communities show a particularly interesting settlement case in which the strong relationships and interconnectedness with the county seat virtually transformed the adjacent towns into satellite communities, or communities that seemingly depended on the goods and/or services of the county governmental center. What factors of Ashland's location allowed it to persist as Cash City rapidly declined; and, how did Sitka's location facilitate a relationship with Ashland that allowed the persistence of its early families upon their farms? This study

¹ Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (2nd Edition, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), .

² "Big Basin & St. Jacob's Well." Natural Kansas.

attempts to satisfy those questions through an analysis of landscape and relationship histories of three communities in Clark County, Kansas.

First European Contact

The lore on the playground of the Ashland Elementary School holds that in his 1541 trek Francisco Coronado marched directly through the basketball courts and past the monkey bars during his route to found his cities of gold. While this juvenile assertion is certainly open to debate and interpretation, Coronado's expedition did travel through southwest Kansas, as seen in Figure 2.³ Other argued routes place Coronado's journey slightly to the west of Clark County through Meade County instead.⁴ Regardless of the deviation, Coronado's battalions of Spanish *Conquistadores* were the first white explorers to gaze upon the landscape offered by the Red Hills region.

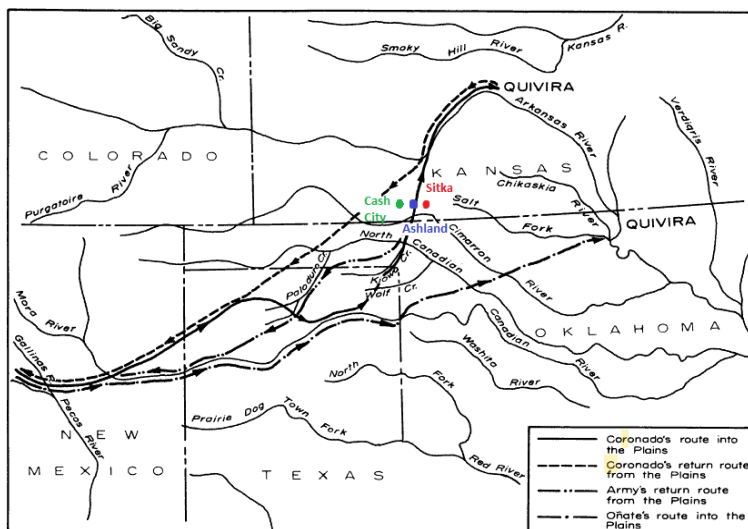


Figure 2. One hypothesis of Coronado's route through the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles extended into the communities' vicinity. SOURCE: Albert H. Schroeder. "A Re-Analysis of the Routes of Coronado and Onate into the Plains in 1541 and 1601." *Plains Anthropologist* 7 (1962): 2. Locations of the future communities added by Adam York.

³ Waldo R. Wedel, "Coronado's Route to Quivira 1541," *Plains Anthropologist* 15 (1970): 162.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

Early Catholic influence around the Ashland area was evident to established residents of the communities. In 1876, three Brothers of the Order of Saint Benedictine relocated from Atchison, Kansas, to Monte Casino, a slight hill just north of Ashland, with designs to build a monastic farm and mission.⁵ The very eldest of Ashland residents in the 1930s recalled the buildings of the farm, which was later branded *Bueffel Au*, or place for Buffaloes, observable in Figure 3.⁶ Such an early Catholic presence in the area a decade before Ashland, Cash City, and Sitka communities were founded certainly would have stamped the area with a heavy Catholic influence. Among other early endeavors into the Red Hills included military routes and installations, with which the Benedictine brothers were surely familiar.

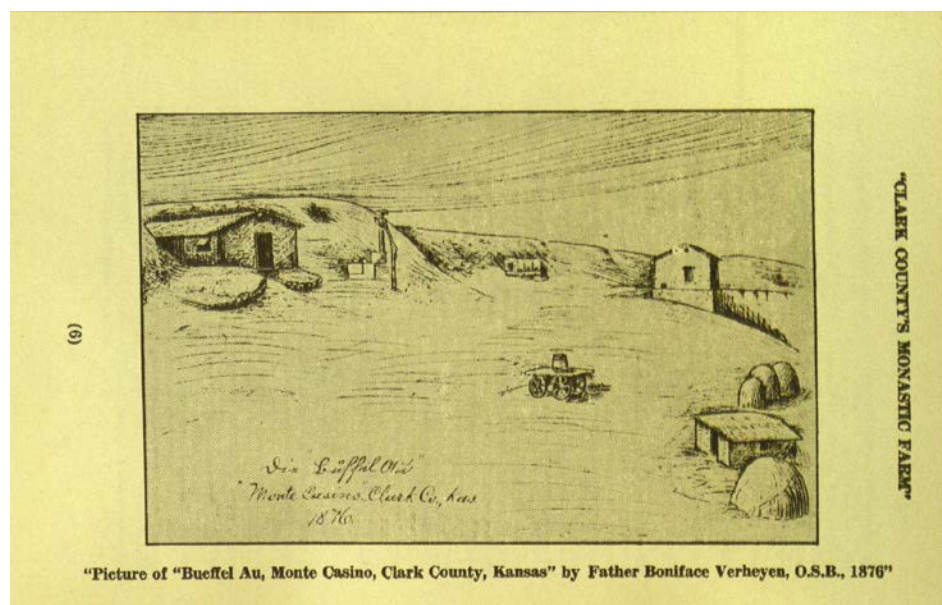


Figure 3. Monte Casino, or *Bueffel Au*, as it would have resembled in 1876. SOURCE: Clark County Historical Society. “Clark County’s Monastic Farm. *Notes on Early Clark County, Kansas*, 1940: 6. A stone marker visible from the nearby dirt road is all that remains of this early Benedictine mission and farm.

⁵ Clark County Historical Society, “Clark County’s Monastic Farm *Notes on Early Clark County, Kansas*, (1940): 7. Reprinted from *Clark Counter Clipper*

⁶ *Ibid*, 8-11

The confluence of trails and military routes created a distinct carrying trade environment which town companies enthusiastically harnessed. The Fort Dodge and Camp Supply, Oklahoma, Trail ran north and south between the two forts and was a main supply line into Indian Territory.⁷ The route already consisted of installations, or redoubts, along the trail, and a telegraph line linked the two terminus forts.⁸ This infrastructure made for an expedited choice in surveying for new towns as traffic on the trail promoted business, and communication was easily rendered with the availability of the telegraph line. Those towns which arose shared an intricate relationship during their formative years that is telling of their persistence as well as their decline.

Infants of the Plains

Ashland enjoyed a strong increase in its population trends during the early decades of its formation. Properly situated on cattle and military trails leading south, and in 1887 enjoying the benefits of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe, Ashland was able to increase in population.⁹ The arrival of the rails came with much enthusiasm as the mayor of Ashland mandated that all businesses be closed and the construction crews treated to fine commodities such as cigars and lemonade.¹⁰ It was this railroad that began tensions between Ashland and Cash City.

Cash City began with as much promise as any other community on the frontier. Cash or Cash Henderson is credited with the undertaking of founding the community in 1886.¹¹ The

⁷ Alice Breit et al, *Ashland, Kansas: The Story of its First 100 Years*, History Book Committee (1984): 24

⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

⁹ *Ashland, Kansas: The Story of its First 100 Years*, 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 45.

¹¹ *Cash City Cashier*, Article chronicling the establishment of Cash City, Oct. 29, 1886, Microfilm available at the Ashland Public Library.

Cash City Cashier was created to advertise across the nation the “Infant of the Plains” now situated in western Clark County.¹² Businesses “of every kind” are documented in the *Cashier* from the beginning of circulation in Cash City, including a hotel, a blacksmith, general stores, and stables.¹³ Cattle ranching grew as cattlemen harnessed the natural springs found among the hills, such as St. Jacob’s Well.¹⁴ For Cash City, securing a rail meant continuing its existence. That rail never came and its decline subsequently followed. If Cash City could defend itself today, it might argue that its location was too isolated to prosper; Sitka, however, sprang up almost on top of Ashland.

Sitka never experienced phenomenal success in its formative years like Ashland. Founded in the Day Creek Valley in 1886, Sitka did, however, enjoy a few years of steady settlement.¹⁵ Several years of drought then dissuaded prospective settlers from staying in the region even as census records show a discernible shift in agriculture from corn to the more adaptive winter wheat: in 1905 only 1,622 acres were in wheat production; by 1925 that number shot up to 18,085 acres in the county producing wheat.¹⁶ This decrease in population while increasing grain input is indicative of the success which came from the ATSF railroad as it bisected through Sitka on its journey to Ashland.

The Phantom Rails

Animosity quickly developed between the communities of Cash City and the new county seat of Ashland by 1887. The earlier editions of the *Cash City Cashier* attempt to signal warm relations with Ashland in reprinting well-wishes in startup from the *Clark County*

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Natural Well Discovered,” *Cash City Cashier*, Dec. 17,

¹⁵ Eldora McMinimy, *Sitka, Kansas*, Clark County Historical Society (2010): 1-3.

¹⁶ Ibid, 10.

Clipper, Ashland's main newspaper.¹⁷ Residents of Cash City would congratulate Ashland on its new found county status while in the same breath chastise Ashland for assumed railroad manipulations.¹⁸ The *Cash City Cashier* further recognizes other towns within its relative proximity, Englewood or Meade [Center], for example, and can be observed as drawing battle lines in the sand to demarcate a certain "Us versus Ashland" mentality.¹⁹ The failure of Cash City to secure a railroad as it had promised its denizens that it would, coupled with the vitriolic attitude now fostered toward Ashland, accelerated the demise of the community; logistical transportation of people and goods simply could not exist in the hilly expanses surrounding the town without the appropriate infrastructure.

The rapid descent into obscurity was seemingly observable by citizens of Cash City itself. An article in the *Cashier* entitled "Not in Mourning" appears to address the growing skepticism around the town's potential by recognizing the lack of advertisements compared to previous years, a definite sign of fleeting business.²⁰ "The Proper Spirit" encouraged harmonious living between neighbors and even admonished two unnamed cynical individuals.²¹ Spreads in the local paper eventually began running advertisements for fully furnished farm properties recently added to the local market.²² The documenting of declining business recorded by the local newspaper which so eagerly and earnestly advertised the town's

¹⁷ *Cash City Cashier*, Article explaining Ashland's warm sentiment towards the people of Cash City, November 19, 1886. Reprinted from *Clark County Clipper*,

¹⁸ "County Seat," *Cash City Cashier*, January 21, 1887.

¹⁹ *Cash City Cashier*, Article warning about rival town of Ashland, January 21, 1887. It can be derived that neither Englewood to the south of Cash City nor Meade to the direct west shared this vitriolic mentality as the ATSF rail from Ashland, for which Cash City desperately petitioned, ultimately set its terminus in Englewood by angling away from Cash City altogether.

²⁰ "Not in Mourning," *Cash City Cashier*, July 26, 1886.

²¹ "The Proper Spirit," *Cash City Cashier*, July 26, 1886.

²² *Cash City Cashier*, List of property for sale, March 4, 1887.

(often exaggerated) success must have been disheartening to the fledgling settler who expected vibrant streams surrounded by lush forests as previously advertised; Cash City's power to advertise itself through print was slowly dwindling, and with that, so too its future. By the end of the 19th century, Cash City had completed its decline. Today no discernible features remain of the community.

Multiple Community Identifications

Sitka, on the other hand, could be characterized as sharing a congenial relationship with Ashland. In the middle decades of the 20th century, baseball games would be held in Sitka or Ashland between teams of the two communities, and much joy was celebrated when Sitka would defeat Ashland.²³ With the introduction of the automobile in the 1920s and 30s, social weekends for Sitka youth could be spent cruising down Ashland's Main Street.²⁴ Although Sitka had a community school for primary grades as well as country schools in proximity, such as Opal Armstrong's first and second grade classroom, teenagers of Sitka in the 20th century commuted to Ashland for high school.²⁵ Town events remained scheduled in Sitka, including the 1981 "Sitka Day" in which the mayor of Ashland and, in Sitka's unincorporated case, the "mayor" of Sitka symbolically exchanged keys to the cities.²⁶ Residents of Sitka certainly felt their main loyalty to Sitka, but there is little doubt a shared identity with residents of Ashland began developing. It is concurrently important to observe the actuators and factors behind this community relationship from an earlier era.

²³ Ruth York and Sibyl York-Mauk, interview by Adam York, Wichita, KS, Nov. 24, 2012.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ McMinimy, 154-155

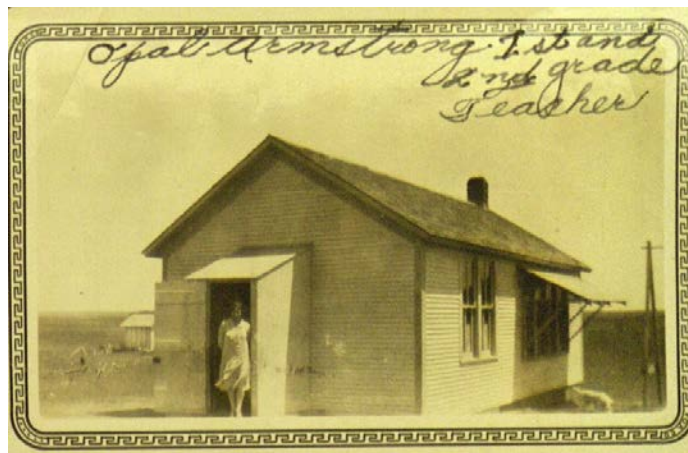


Figure 4. Opal Armstrong's country school house. Photograph courtesy of Sibyl York-Mauk. Both first and second grades were taught here. Circa 1930s.

The precedents of this community interconnection can be discerned through simple shared community possessions. The Chicago, Kansas and Western line, a subsidiary of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe, was laid in 1887 through Sitka in connecting Ashland with Wichita, meaning the modus of transportation itself was a shared commodity between the two towns.²⁷ The depot station in Sitka was even moved to Ashland before finally residing in 1977 as a local tourist attraction on Boot Hill in Dodge City, although it had been closed since before leaving Sitka in 1961.²⁸ St. Joseph's Catholic Church of Ashland, one of the oldest churches in the county harkening back to early Catholic influence, shared a sister congregation with Sitka and upheld a leading role in outreach to the community.²⁹ Through these shared experiences and identities, Ashland and Sitka continued a warm relationship. The persisting families of the area today consider themselves residents of Ashland.

²⁷ Ibid, 25.

²⁸ Ibid, 26-27.

²⁹ Ibid, 109.

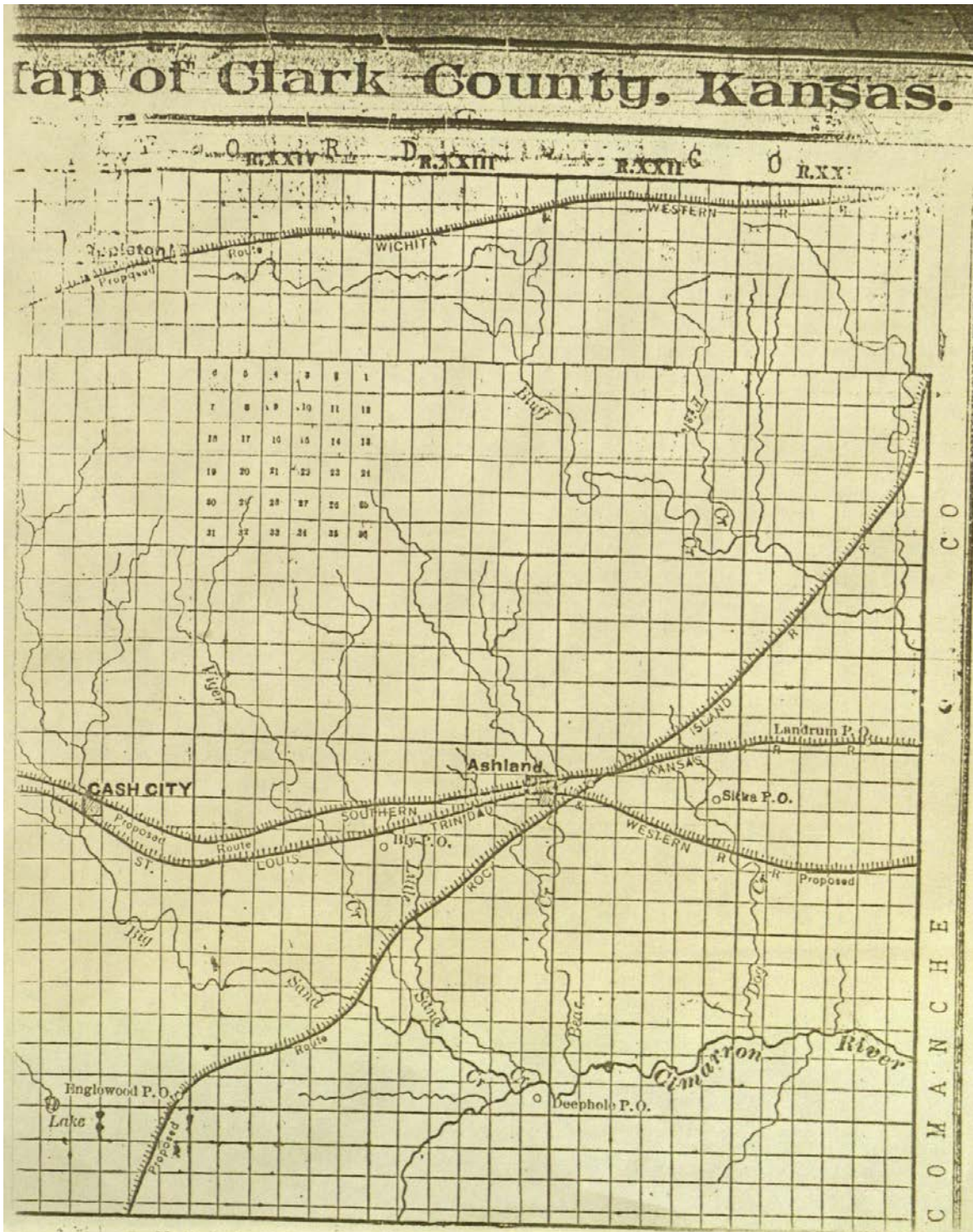


Figure 5. Mayor Frank Reed of Ashland and Bill McMinimy of Sitka exchange keys to their cities. SOURCE: Eldora McMinimy. *Sitka, Kansas*. Clark County Historical Society (2012): 155.

The relationships shared among auxiliary communities around their county seat tell fascinating narratives of the histories of those towns. Cash City harbored negative perceptions of Ashland, failed to secure a rail of any kind, and ultimately vanished in under a decade. Sitka never boomed but experienced slow, cumulative growth until the middle of the 20th century when the population dwindled. Even today, being the sole community to persist, Ashland's population has begun a multi-decade decline as did its satellite communities a century prior. Only the landscape of the Red Hills itself, harnessed by the rancher, transformed by the farmer, and tamed by the rails, seems to be the only true fixture of the region capable of weathering the test of time.

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Attachment 1. Early map of Clark County showing Cash City, Ashland, and Sitka Post Office locations, proximity and *proposed* railroads, that is, this map was promotional in that these rail routes did not actually exist. SOURCE: *Clark County Cashier*, October 29, 1886. Cash City never obtained a railroad and the ATSF ran through Sitka and Ashland before terminating in the extreme southwest where Englewood Post Office is shown.