

Sibley, Kansas: Faded But Not Forgotten



Figure 1: Portion of 1885 Atlas of Cloud County. The community of Sibley was located near Lake Sibley. It never appears as a platted town. Source: www.kansasmemory.org

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From 1854 onward, thousands of settlers came to Kansas Territory in search of a better life. Numerous towns were established which, for various reasons, are no longer thriving. While some of these lost communities had longer, livelier, or more prominent histories than others, each of them played an important and unique role in the history of Kansas. Such was the case of the now abandoned town of Sibley in Cloud County, KS.

Sibley Township, primarily settled by homesteaders from Sweden, Norway, and England, was formally organized in 1866.¹ However, the first settlements in the area date back to 1860 at Lake Sibley. In the spring of that year, John Allen, Thomas Heffington, Jacob Schaefer and their families settled along the lake near the road connecting Fort Kearny in Nebraska to Fort Riley in Kansas. During this time, Otoe and Pawnee Native American tribes also inhabited the area. Encounters with the Indians were frequent and, on occasion, dangerous. In 1863 a fight ensued between the Otoe/Pawnee and the Cheyenne. As a result of this battle, Mr. Schaefer's cabin near the lake was burned down.²

Despite these first discouraging events, the town of Sibley developed rapidly. By 1867 settlers had established the town of Sibley near Lake Sibley. During the height of its prosperity the community included a church, general store, blacksmith shop, hotel, law office, saloon, stagecoach station, post office and schoolhouse. The blacksmith shop, located on the south side of the town, was one of the best in the country at that time. Located in the back of the shop was an area for shoeing cattle and oxen.³ Later, Fort Sibley was established nearby on the north bank of the Republican River. Containing sixteen log houses, it served to protect the settlers from Indian raids. None of the original

structures remain today, with the exception of the schoolhouse. The town slowly began to dwindle when nearby Concordia was chosen as the county seat in 1870 and businesses migrated to that locale. The original town site is now private farmland and Lake Sibley has since been absorbed by the changing boundaries of the existing Republican River.⁴

Most of what is known about Sibley and the surrounding area comes from the accounts of various local historians and newspapers. In 1935, a reporter from the Concordia Blade Empire conducted an interview with Mrs. E. M. Kenyon, a former Sibley resident, about pioneer life in those days. Mrs. Kenyon recalled that when she and her husband arrived in 1870 they built the only framed house in the area at that time because of their fear of the snakes that seemed to infest the sod houses. When asked what they did for recreation, Mrs. Kenyon recalled attending dances and various church activities, in addition to having “good times just knowing each other.”⁵ Former residents also passed down more exciting anecdotes from Sibley’s past.

Inhabitants of Sibley and the surrounding area had many encounters with Indians over the years. Perhaps the most documented account is that of Ezra Adkins, an eleven-year-old boy who was killed by the Indians. Homer Adkins and his family settled in the Sibley area in December of 1867. They homesteaded 320 acres west of the lake. During the summer of 1869, Ezra headed out on his pony to borrow flour from their neighbor, Nels Nelson, and to fetch cattle that had gone astray. A band of approximately thirty Indians attacked him as he was herding the cattle home along the west bank of the Republican River. The Indians shot Ezra twice in the head and stole his pony. Some members of the Nelson family witnessed the incident and, unable to help, abandoned

their cabin for the Adkins' home. The Indians later raided the Nelson cabin and stole almost everything. Ezra Adkins was the last person killed by Indians in Cloud County. Today, not far from Sibley town site, there is a stone to commemorate Ezra's death, although his actual remains lay buried somewhere on the Adkins' original homestead. The marker reads, "EZRA CAMP THE SON OF HOMER AND HANNAH ADKINS KILLED BY THE INDIANS JUNE 2ND 1869, AGED 11 YEARS 8 MO. 1 DAY." This tombstone and the remains of the schoolhouse are the only remaining Sibley landmarks.⁶

Another well remembered incident in Sibley's history is the suicide drowning of the two spinster sisters, Adell and Hannie Poore. Retired schoolteachers, the sisters settled in Sibley in 1889. They were well liked, even though they were reclusive, avoided men and limited their social activities. Fearing death from tuberculosis, Adell and Hannie left their wills in an empty cracker box, walked hand in hand into the lake and drowned. They are now memorialized in Sibley history as the "Ladies of the Lake".⁷

Sibley, like other lost communities in Kansas, has its own unique story to tell. From Indian raids to suicide by drowning, the historical accounts passed down through the generations not only play a pivotal role in preserving local history, but state history as well. Like other Kansas towns, Sibley was established with optimistic dreams for a prosperous future, but those dreams were dashed by a fateful decision favoring the town of Concordia over Sibley. It is important to carry Sibley's past into the future by continuing to tell its stories in order to honor the optimism of Kansas's early settlers.

Endnotes

1. Marilyn Johnston, Oral Report, Cloud County Historical Museum, 1972.
2. Chester Dutton, "History of Sibley Township," 1967, Cloud County Historical Museum pg.1.
3. "Lake Sibley," *Belleville Telescope*, 24 December 1870.
4. Johnston, Oral Report.
5. "Country Schoolhouse is Only Marker For Once-Thriving Sibley Community," *Concordia Blade Empire*, 9 July 1935.
6. Mary Thoman, "Ezra Adkins," Lesson Plan, Concordia Elementary School, February 2000.
7. Clarence Paulsen, "Trivial History of Concordia and Environs," *Concordia Blade Empire*, October 27, 1978.

Sources

“Country Schoolhouse is Only Marker For Once-Thriving Sibley

Community.” *Concordia Blade Empire*, 9 July 1935.

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Johnston, Marilyn. Oral Report, Cloud County Historical Museum, 1972.

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Paulsen, Clarence, “Trivial History of Concordia and Environs,” *Concordia Blade*

Empire, 27 October 1978.

Thoman, Mary. “Ezra Adkins.” Lesson Plan, Concordia Elementary School, February

2000.

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