



# Rock Solid: A Small Town Study of Rock, Kansas

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“Hey everybody get ready! We are about to drive through Rock. You have to hold your breath when we drive through! Ready...set... NOW!” About 30 seconds later the white van with USD 402 painted on the side carrying the Augusta High School Wrestling cheer squad erupted in laughter, music, and conversation again as they left the tiny town of Rock, Kansas in their dust. This is the extent of most people’s knowledge of Rock: a tiny, half deserted town you drive through on the way to wrestling tournaments and football games in Winfield. To those who have grown up in the area, sleepy little towns such as Rock are nothing new. Most people never bother to take a second glance at this place nestled in Cowley County or wonder how it came to be the mysterious little place it is today. Though only 20 minutes from the bustle of Wichita and just up the road from Douglas, Rock seems to fly under the radar of modern Kansas life. This was once a thriving, growing Kansas town and a lively social scene. Their history shows that Rock is a place where families come to dig deep roots and build their lives on a solid foundation of community, camaraderie, and compassion.



*Figure 1 An early map of Rock. The map includes locations of specific properties and their owners as well as the few buildings in town. Map scan courtesy of the Cowley County Historical Society.*

Cowley County, as much of Kansas, was once Native American reservation. This portion was specifically part of the Osage Reservation. Later the land was claimed owned by the U.S. government once again and in the year 1867 Euro American settlers were allowed to move in and make it their home. The town of Rock, Kansas was officially established two years later in 1869. The first settlers included the families of James B. Wall, E.A. Houser and Martin Martindale. The year 1870 is when the town began to take shape starting with the establishment of the Methodist church founded by George Woners, J.M. Horcort, Josiah Houser, and George H. Williams. Also, in that year, the post office was established with Oliver Ross as the first postmaster. At this time Rock had a population of 160 people including women and children.<sup>1</sup>

Rock began to grow as time rolled on. In 1882 there were five businesses recorded to set up shop in Rock. One of those was the post office which was located in various mercantile stores until 1960 when a permanent post office building was finally built. In addition, there was a blacksmith shop, wagon shop, grocery store, and a stone quarry. At this time the first school was also opened. The school was built about half a mile from where the town is standing today. In 1885 a new two-story brick school building was built on a new site. A third, larger school with a gymnasium was built on the same site as the second school in 1960. In 1885 the railroad made its way to Cowley County. The end of the track was about 20 miles away from Rock in Douglas. A resident of Rock named Theodore Dode Parsons took mail from Douglas to Rock every day by horseback.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Goodman, John. "History of Rock, KS." *ksgenweb.org*. Accessed February 4, 2019.

<http://www.ksgenweb.org/cowley/towns/Rock/rock.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> Goodman, "History of Rock, KS." Web.



*Figure 2 All that remains of the town school is the gymnasium building and playground. Today, it is still used to hold town dinners and father-daughter dances. While neither have been renovated since the 1950s, there are plans to do so soon. Photo by author.*

The town continued to grow as more businesses opened to serve the people of Rock. A hardware store was opened in a private home. Another Christian church was added to the town. At this time Rock also experienced the additions of an implement company, creamery, produce house and another grocery store. Later a stockyard, butcher shop, and cafe opened in Rock. Another notable addition to the town was the Long Bell Lumber Yard which was a staple in the community for many years. The Santa Fe Railroad laid down track in late 1885 which made it possible for Rock Grain Company to be opened by Quenton Waples and Henry McDaniel. The grain elevator was built in 1900 by the Bartlett Grain Company owned by F.R. Starkey. Rock's growth can also be seen in their population. In 1887 Rock had a population of 933 which was the third highest in Cowley County. In addition, a number of various service stations were built in

the town over the years starting in 1900. The last service station is still standing today at the North East corner of town.<sup>3</sup>

In 1901 an Encyclopedia described Rock as “small village in Cowley County situated east of the Walnut River and Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad 15 miles north of Winfield. Has Telegraph and Express office and Money Order Post Office and other Businesses.”<sup>4</sup> The Daily Winfield Courier also shared its interpretation of the town as “an important trading point on the Florence Branch of the Santa Fe in a township which bears its name.”<sup>5</sup> As the 1900s progressed the community founded an amateur band to play at various town events and for the enjoyment of the residents. The Rock State Bank was open from 1911-1933. The closing of the bank was shrouded in mystery when \$11,200 went missing. Patrons of the bank only received \$00.80 on the dollar in reimbursement of their own money. The Palace Hotel was open from 1915 through 1920. A flood surrounded the town in 1923. Sadly, the last few events received virtually no mention from outside sources thus signifying Rock’s decline.<sup>6</sup>

Rock did publish its own newspaper called The Rock Reporter. Readers could purchase a year’s subscription to the paper for \$1.00, paid in advance.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately it only ran from August to October of 1913. There was no mention of customers receiving a refund for the months in which they did not receive a paper. However, during the time that it was open, editor

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Wickens, C.A. “Published Every Friday.” *The Rock Reporter* (Rock, KS), October 17,1913. Pg

and sole reporter, C.A. Wickens, wrote about the social and business events of the town. For example, town picnics, big sales, and the daily comings and goings of the towns people.<sup>8</sup>

The people of Rock are the reason it has survived as long as it has despite the current lack of population. The strong families who built the town created a foundation of comradery and community. Most of these founding families were from the east and a few were first generation immigrants. Though there was little mention of the women of the town, a look into the men's lives will help develop a sense of the town.

James B. Wall lived in dwelling number 11-97 with his wife Satina E. Wall and their five children. The Wall family was one of the first in the area and helped found the town. James Wall was half Irish, from his father's side, and his mother was from Kentucky which is where he and his family came from when they moved to Cowley County.<sup>9</sup> As a farmer, his estimated personal value was \$300, and he had \$500 worth of land outside of Rock in 1870.<sup>10</sup> Another similar success story was Martin Martindale who was a staple among the early founding Rock families. After moving from Indiana, he and his wife Dolly Martindale ran a prosperous cattle business and owned the majority of the land in the Rock area. J.B. Holmes, his wife S. Thompson, and their 10 children made their life a success after moving to Rock in 1872 after moving from Indiana.<sup>11</sup> Holmes was a recorded to be a farmer and stock raiser and apparently a very good one. He was reported to be "one of the most extensive stock-men of Cowley County."<sup>12</sup> J.L. Holmes

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<sup>8</sup> Wickens, C.A. "Local News." *The Rock Reporter* (Rock, KS), August 8, 1913. Pg 1. Accessed on Newspapers.com, Feb 26, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> United States, Census Bureau, 1880 Federal Census. Rock Creek, Cowley KS. 1880.

<sup>10</sup> Goodman, "History of Rock, KS." Web.

<sup>11</sup> United States, Census Bureau, 1885 Kansas Territory Census. Topeka, KS. Kansas State Historical Society. 1885.

<sup>12</sup> Cutler, William G. William G. Cutler's History of Kansas. Cowley County Part 15 Chicago, IL: A.T. Andeas, 1883.

has no recorded relation to J.B. Holmes although they did both move to Kansas from Indiana only a few years apart. J.L. Holmes moved to Kansas in 1879 and moved to Rock in 1883. He was also recorded as a Farmer and stock raiser. He is recorded to have seven children but no wife.<sup>13</sup> A busy man indeed. J.R. Richards was a Farmer and Stock raiser who moved to Rock in 1871 with his wife E. Hoover and made a life for their five children. He is referred to as a dedicated to town growth as well as “identified with educational interests of the district, and local offices of the township. He is (was) a member of the I.O.O.F.”<sup>14</sup>

At the time, most families moving to Kansas, including the Rock area, were in search of a better life. They were drawn to the area by the promise of cheap land through the Homestead Act and hopes of a farm. The picture of Rock’s early years comes further into focus when we take a closer look at a few of the early settlers. Including Mr. E.A. Houser who moved from Virginia with his wife V.E. Houser and their two children.<sup>15</sup> George Woners moved from Kentucky with his wife Mary and their two children.<sup>16</sup> J.M. Harcourt was born in Indiana and his wife, N.R. Harcourt, was from Illinois.<sup>17</sup> “In 1862, he enlisted in the One Hundred and Sixth Illinois Volunteer Infantry, Company E, serving in the western Department until 1865, when he was honorably discharged. The spring of 1870, he came to Kansas, locating where he now resides,

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<sup>13</sup> United States, Census Bureau, 1885 Kansas Territory Census. Topeka, KS. Kansas State Historical Society. 1885.

<sup>14</sup> Cutler, William G. William G. Cutler’s History of Kansas. Cowley County Part 15 Chicago, IL: A.T. Andeas, 1883.

<sup>15</sup> United States, Census Bureau, 1885 Kansas Territory Census. Topeka, KS. Kansas State Historical Society. 1885.

<sup>16</sup> United States, Census Bureau, 1885 Kansas Territory Census. Topeka, KS. Kansas State Historical Society. 1885.

<sup>17</sup> United States, Census Bureau, 1910 Federal Census Rock Creek. Rock Creek, Cowley, KS.



being among the pioneers in this part.” They had five children they raised here in Kansas with the living made from farming and stock raising.<sup>18</sup>

George Williams seems to have had strong roots in Rock. His birth place is unclear as it was recorded as Kansas and Michigan on two separate sources. His father’s birthplace was Ohio and his mother’s birthplace was Kentucky. His wife, Florence Williams and their one child lived at 1121 South Manning. He is listed as a postmaster in Rock in 1874 but also worked other various odd jobs. “Mr. Williams made his advent into Kansas in 1855, at which time his father located in Douglas County, and which was the home of George H. for several years. In July, 1870, he came to Cowley County. In 1874, he was appointed Postmaster, an office he held in connection with his extensive merchandising business. He was also Notary Public and has been Justice of the Peace and Township Trustee.”<sup>19</sup>

Theodore Dode Parsons (Carsons) was born in Indiana. His story is different than the others in the fact that he is recorded in the census as a servant, most likely a field hand. He was single and was recorded to have moved around a lot in Kansas. His history is intriguing because we see more of a mysterious figure, possibly a drifter appear in the story of Rock that has been otherwise unmatched in the records. It can be reasonably assessed that he likely came to Kansas as a teen and traveled the state looking for work along with room and board. Another possible scenario is that he moved here as some form of indentured servant with a family from Indiana. The family could have had a difficult time making their new start here in Kansas, thus explaining the movement through the state. Eventually Parsons (Carsons) was drafted into WWI like so

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<sup>18</sup> Cutler, William G. William G. Cutler’s History of Kansas. Cowley County Part 15 Chicago, IL: A.T. Andeas, 1883.

<sup>19</sup> United States, Census Bureau, 1910 Federal Census Winfield Ward 3. Winfield, Cowley, KS. 1910.

many others. He survived his time in the service and came to settle in Berlin, Kansas.<sup>20</sup> Another life affected by WWI was that of Joshua Houser. Land records show that Houser owned land in the Rock area in 1905. He was drafted into WWI and thankfully, survived. He returned to his home in Rock after his deployment was finished. He later moved to the town of Maple which is located in Cowley County Kansas.<sup>21</sup>

Quinton Thomson is one of the few immigrants documented in Rock. He was born in Scotland and came to the U.S. in 1818. He lived in Ohio for a short time and then moved to Michigan, and later moved to Indiana in 1860. He is recorded to have been a baker by trade and apparently had a well-established bakery in Indianapolis. He moved to Kansas and settled in Rock in 1881 and underwent a drastic career change. While in Rock he founded Quinton Thomson and Son, Wool Growers. It was later written of him that “His estate embraces 910 acres. Mr. Thomson is one of the most extensive wool growers in Southern Kansas.” While a success in his various professional lives, he also married Charlotte Cathart at an unspecified date and they raised three children. John Statler was also a wool grower. He came to Rock with his wife Jane Bryant in 1871. “...Mr. S. Came to Cowley County and at once engaged in wool growing, being the first in this industry in Southern Kansas. He handles each year from 1,500 to 2,000 sheep, being one of the most extensive wool growers in the Southwest. His Landed domain embraces 1,240 acres and is admirably adapted for sheep husbandry.” Originally from Ohio, Statler moved to Franklin County, Kansas in 1858. “During the war, he was in the State militia,

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<sup>20</sup> United States, Census Bureau, 1910 Federal Census Rock Creek. Rock Creek, Cowley, KS.  
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<sup>21</sup> Goodman, “History of Rock, KS.” Web.

and participated in the chase of Gen. Price.”<sup>22</sup> He was also a Member of the Masonic Order at the Winfield Lodge. Mr. and Mrs. Statler had 14 children, only eight survived to midlife.<sup>23</sup>

These examples of the early people of Rock shed some light on the type of folks that settled there. Most of these townspeople were Americans who moved to Kansas from another state. Of those, almost all were born in the east and Kansas was their first Midwestern home and the farthest west they had ever lived. Some were native Kansans who chose Rock as their home. Very few were immigrants from another country. For those that were born in another country had previous American homes before moving to Kansas or Rock. Some of these early settlers found great success in Rock and were happy to live out their lives there digging deep, long lasting roots in the town. Others were still able to put food on the table which was enough for them and so decided to stay in Rock. Still others decided Rock was not the place for them and moved elsewhere but usually still remained in Kansas. Farming, Stock raising, and wool growers seemed to be the most successful ventures one could partake in to stake their claim in Rock in the early years. Despite its humble beginnings and modest size, Rock achieved an atmosphere of comfort, vibrancy, and safety that was appealing to many families.

Since those days of old, Rock and its people have evolved beyond recognition. The growth of the town and its businesses were mentioned earlier, and this did have an effect on the people of Rock. The later history of Rock was revealed by Jo Ball and Ednamerle Cody in a personal interview. These two women grew up in Rock and know what it means to have deep roots there. They spoke of knowing nothing else growing up but the safety of their small town.

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<sup>22</sup> Cutler, “William G. Cutler’s History of Kansas,” Web.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

They were allowed to go anywhere they wished within the town when they were young because both they and their parents knew literally everyone in the town.<sup>24</sup>

Mrs. Ball's father owned a filling station in town, the only one still standing today. Though she attended school in another town, she was still very connected to her home town all through her childhood and young adult life. She attended the Christian church in Rock though a friend of hers attended the Methodist church just 100 yards away. She told a story of how people in the town DID NOT church hop. You either went to the Christian Church or the Methodist church but just once her parents allowed her to go to the Methodist church with her friend. She remembers feeling very out of place though she had known everyone in that church her whole life. Aside from that, she shared countless warm-hearted memories of spending her life in Rock surrounded by the wonderful people.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ball, Jo and Cody, Ednamerle. Interview by Goldenstein, Katie. Personal Interview. Winfield, KS, March 14, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid



*Figure 3 What remains of the old filling station. Jo Ball's father built and owned this filling station and the filling station that once stood in its place. The tower of the Methodist Church can be seen in the background. Photo by author.*

Mrs. Cody was the latest postmaster of Rock and likely the last ever according to her. After she retired from the position in the early 2000s, the post office closed. She also shared her fond memories of growing up roaming freely around their little slice of heaven. Mrs. Cody also shared the story of how the town all came together with the Air Force when the missile silo just outside of Rock exploded, killing a few employees, in August of 1978. The Air Force came into Rock immediately to begin evacuating the town to assess the damage, safety, and begin cleanup. After about a week the townspeople were allowed back into the town and the Air Force stuck around to continue monitoring the sight and ensure the safe removal and clean-up of debris. Mrs. Cody spoke fondly of how much a part of daily life the kind military men had become in those months following the accident. When the cleanup was finally complete at the end of September, the Air Force hosted a cook out and dance to thank the town for their hospitality and to say

farewell. A plaque from the Air Force was given to the town in gratitude for their service and to commemorate the ordeal they underwent. When Mrs. Cody retired from the post office she took the plaque home with her to preserve it for future generations.<sup>26</sup>

Both ladies also shared stories of the second stage of their life which was romance and child rearing in the town of Rock. Mrs. Ball met her husband when she was only five years old. She explained how nice it was to have known him virtually her whole life. He was 20 years older than her and the two were married in her late teens. Soon after they began having children and expanded their family enterprises in horse racing. This industry kept both Mrs. Ball and her husband away in Kentucky a lot, but their children remained in Rock for school unless it was summer. Mrs. Cody did not share much about her husband but did look back favorably upon raising her children in Rock. She was able to take piece of mind in the security of the town and felt comfortable with her children exploring their independence in such a harmless place. Both women mentioned that there were several social groups in town that all adults, especially women, were expected to participate in. For the women there was the Friendly Club and the Social Club. They remembered being forced to join one club or the other by their aunts or mothers when they were young teens. The women recalled these clubs as just a gossip fest on the town where not much was really accomplished.<sup>27</sup>

As for the gossip of the town, it was apparently lacking in juice. No rivalries, feuds, or lasting quarrels remained in the minds of these two ladies through their time of adulthood in Rock. They said if there was ever an issue the people of Rock had enough respect for one another to settle it right away, face to face. The only exception was disagreements between sister

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

or other family members. Even those were unmemorable however because they were so menial and short lived.<sup>28</sup>

Today both women still live in Rock though their children and grandchildren have moved to larger communities. Mrs. Ball owns family property in Rock where she resides about half the year. The rest of the year she spends traveling between various other homes across the country. Mrs. Cody Lives just a mile outside of Rock in her grandmother's old home that she has renovated. The house was one of the early homes in Rock that has been renovated periodically and passed down from generation to generation. The original foundation and bottom half of the house are built from local stone which is truly quite symbolic.<sup>29</sup>



*Figure 4 The Solid Rock Café where Teresa Ward works as a waitress. Various restraints have previously been in business here including AJ's Dinner. It is a small, one room, open kitchen café displaying Rock memorabilia as decor. The café also doubles as a gift s shop with locally crafted jewelry and trinkets as well as a public bulletin board to post printed ads. In addition, they make a great chicken fried steak. Photo by author.*

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

The decline of Rock happened slowly, and then all at once according to these two ladies. Rock used to be a picture perfect, American postcard, Mayberry type town. Major travesties were rare, town disputes were non-existent, and parents felt free to let their children explore unsupervised from sun up to sun down. This all began to change, however, according to Teresa Ward, a waitress at the Solid Rock Cafe. Mrs. Ball and Mrs. Cody's testimonies to the decline of Rock corroborate that of Ms. Ward that as Rock got older, so did its towns people.<sup>30</sup> There came a time when the younger generations were lured away from Rock by the bright lights of bigger opportunities than the small town could offer. Starting in about the 1980's, running the family filling station was no longer enough of a future for the bright-eyed youth of Rock. They were off to explore their own destiny. As a result, Rock was left with an aging population and a very limited supply of young blood. Therefore, when the elderly began to pass away, so did the strong traditions that made Rock so special. Businesses began to close down, and property became very cheap in the town. According to the Ms. Ward, "With cheap housing comes alike tenets."<sup>31</sup> Rock began to fall into disrepair as the town pride passed with its elderly residents.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ward, Teresa. Interview by Goldenstein, Katie. Personal Interview. Rock, KS, March 14, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid





*Figure 5 A photo shot down Winfield Street, otherwise known as the main drag. Homes as well as the filling station (middle left) and café (middle right) are visible. The town does not extend much past that.*

Today Rock is a bit of a ghost town. While it is still evident that the town is inhabited, it is seriously lacking the general appeals it once had. The only living component of Rock to the passerby would be the Solid Rock Cafe which sits across the only intersection in town from the old, abandoned filling station. The two churches in town are still in use every Sunday and although most of the school is torn down, the gymnasium still stands and is used for town social functions. Rock is clearly a bedroom community at this point. There are very limited employment opportunities in Rock, only the Cafe and the auto store (which is most often closed) so residents must find work elsewhere and commute. This added strain to life leaves little time for property maintenance and sadly the town has clearly seen better days. While the town definitely lacks the inviting charm it once held everyone encountered there on a Thursday morning in March is friendly and polite. Not very willing to talk to strangers but a social

connection can still be seen between older residents. Most of the relics of Rock's glory days are unseen or non-existent today. The bank, hotel, general stores, and just about any other sign of commercial life has disappeared to make a semi-truck parking lot for the cafe. However, the remnants of the old grain elevator on the train tracks still stands just west of town. Although abandoned and in danger of collapse, this last surviving piece of Rock history reminds one of the life and prosperity Rock once represented.

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