

# Longford, Chapman Township, Clay County, Kansas: City of Plains 1888-2013

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This is a study of the currently viable small town of Longford, Kansas, in Clay County. It traces the history of the town from its founding as a railroad community on the ATSF line heading west through its survival today. Sources include interviews with current residents and a town historian as well as maps, early photographs, and site visits.

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## Longford, Clay County, Chapman Township, Kansas: City of Plains 1888- 2013

In west central Clay County today, there is a sign that resembles any other town or street sign in Kansas. It says Longford. The interesting thing about this sign is that it does not actually point you to a road. It points you to the middle of a field. Another block down is an existing town named Longford. A town that was established around 1870,<sup>1</sup> once known for being the richest farm land in the United States and nicknamed “The City of Plains” is now a close knit village with a unique history.<sup>2</sup> Longford has common small town characteristics such as the railroad, school, and church but it also has rare characteristics such as the natural pure water, rodeo, and other businesses. These characteristics, both common and rare, shape Longford’s history that dates back to 1888 and continues through today’s life.

Longford’s population mainly consisted of Civil War veterans in the early years of its life.<sup>3</sup> After the Civil War, Clay County had a flood of war veterans who emigrated there. Yet it was not until the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railway was finished in November of 1887 that a steady population lived in Longford. Before the railroad, there was a single post office named New Grant Post Office that opened in the area in 1872, but it was only running for eight months before it was closed down. However, once the railroad arrived, a steady mail route was conducted in Longford at a post office named Longford. The name Longford comes from an Irish immigrant who had lived in a county named Longford in Ireland.<sup>4</sup> This post office was built

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<sup>1</sup> Socolofsky, Homer and Self, Huber. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. Second edition. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> *Clay County, Kansas, Heritage Book 1990*. Clay Center, Kan.: Heritage Committee, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with William McKale, April 6, 2013. Wakefield, Kansas.

<sup>4</sup> *Clay County, Kansas, Heritage Book, 1990*.

in 1875 but if it were not for the railroad, Longford Post office may have never existed. This shows how important the railroad was to Longford, Kansas in its early days.<sup>5</sup>

As the population of Longford continued to grow, the demand for a church was beginning to rise. "...the church was a focal point for community fellowship."<sup>6</sup> In 1899 an Evangelical church was established and by 1900, an actual church building was completed.<sup>7</sup> This church went through several changes throughout the years. A basement was added on, and in 1948, the community held a celebration of the church's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. A fund for a new church building was also established in the same year. By 1956 the Evangelical Church and the United Methodist Church combined to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church.<sup>8</sup> The photos below display the first church in Longford and the church in the 1970s. This shows just how fast the church formed in Longford due to the value people placed on it.



Figure 1: photo of the first Evangelical Church in Longford, Kansas circa 1890. Source: *Longford Centennial 1875-1975 A Short History*.



Figure 2: Photo of the Longford Church in Longford, Kansas. Circa 1970s. Source: *Longford Centennial 1875-1975 A Short History*.

With this new rush of people living in Longford, an education system was soon becoming essential. In 1900 the first school was built inside the town. This school changed and grew over the years, much like the church. During the first six years of Clay County's life, sixty-six school districts were established.<sup>9</sup> This was during the time that Longford's first school was built, before 1900. That school was just a primary school, one room and taught by one teacher. The figure below shows the larger school in Longford, built in 1900.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Interview with William McKale, April 6, 2013.

<sup>6-8</sup> *Clay County Heritage Book*, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> McKale, William. Clipping from *Chapman Creek Soundings*. 1978-1985.

<sup>10</sup> McKale, William. *Longford Centennial 1875-1975 A Short History*. 1975.



Figure 3: Photograph of a larger schoolhouse in Longford, Kansas, circa early 1900s. Located on the site of the present Community Building. Source: *Longford Centennial 1875-1975 A Short History*.

The school year began after Labor Day and ran through the end of April. As time went on, residents started wanting their children to attend more local schools.<sup>11</sup> By 1910, Longford had a two year high school with classes being held in the second floor of city hall. A different idea of secondary education started to rise, though. Parents wanted their children to actually graduate from a high school, so this inspired the construction of a four year high school. By 1914 there was a district high school; it was not until 1917, however, that students were actually able to graduate from Longford High School. The high school consisted of four rooms with a library on the second floor. The first floor was used for the primary grades while the second floor was the high school. A gymnasium was constructed in 1921.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11-12</sup> McKale, William. *Longford Centennial 1875-1975 A Short History*. 1975.

According to William McKale, students who graduated from Longford High School and other high schools back then were often different from students today. Students in the 1920s attended school because an education was hard to get and seen as valuable. Students such as Mary Anne (Simpson) Rush, 1921 Longford graduate, and Inez (Van Scoyoc) Burt, 1925, Longford graduate, both struggled with transportation to school. Classes in the early days of Longford High School were taught by only two teachers, and it was not until 1923 that a third teacher was hired as enrollment increased. By fall of 1925, enrollment stood at 74 and classes were held in the gymnasium and the basement of the church.<sup>13</sup>

Because the population of the students outgrew the school, Longford decided to build a new school that would cost 35,000 dollars.<sup>14</sup> It was completed in 1929, and Longford believed that “A good school brings people to the town and community in which it is located, increases that value of the property and paves the way for other improvements.”<sup>15</sup> However, that saying did not stay true forever. After the school’s enrollment started to decrease in the 1960s, the school closed in 1970. The last year the school operated, only 36 students attended, and the graduating class consisted of only five young people. Many residents were concerned about how the school closing would affect the community. The Longford High School is now home to a K-9 training facility.

<sup>13</sup> McKale, William. Interview, April 6, 2013, and Clipping from *Chapman Creek Soundings*. 1978-1985.

<sup>14</sup> McKale, William. *Longford Centennial 1875-1975 A Short History*. 1975.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

As Longford became more of a town with a church and a school, other businesses started to establish themselves. The Stucco Mill was established in 1894. “The most important business to locate in Longford was the Salina Cement and Plaster Company (the stucco mill).”<sup>16</sup> It was located three fourths of a mile south of Longford. Gypsite was used for making plaster. In the early years, wagons were used to transport the material from the site to the mill and then the railroad assisted with this task.<sup>17</sup> This shows another example of how essential the railroad was to Longford. The photo below is a picture of the Stucco Train, depicting the horses and the wagons that were used in the mill’s earlier days.

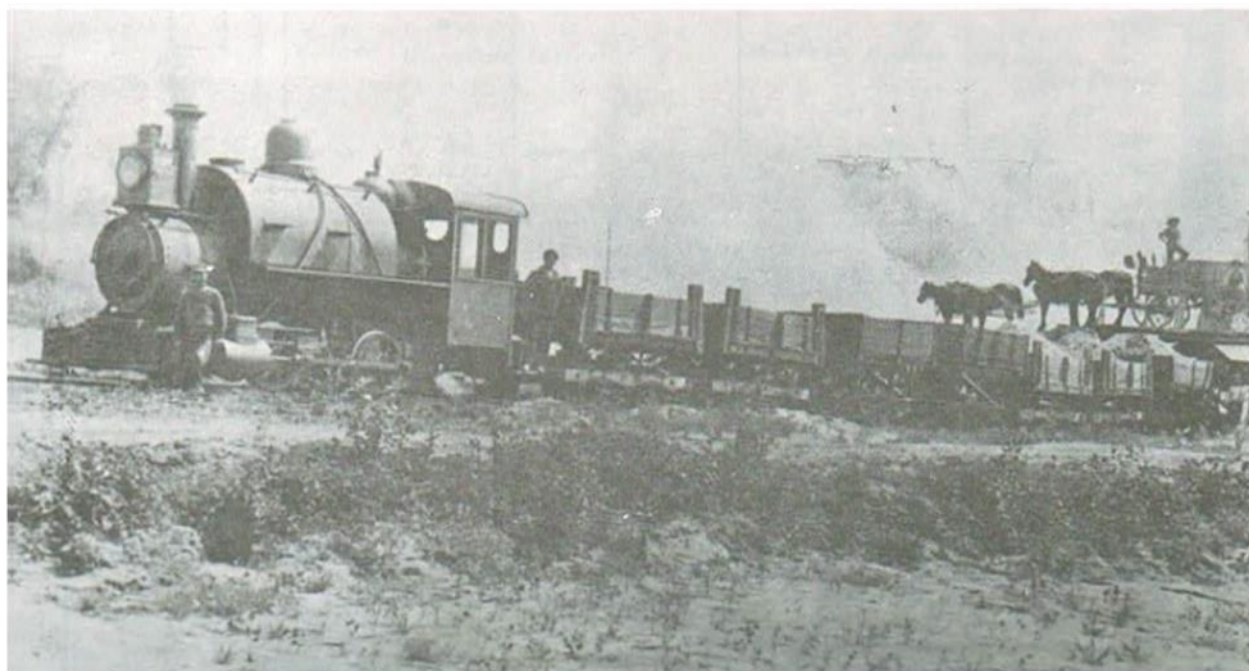


Figure 4: Photograph of Stucco Train in Longford, Kansas circa early 1900s. Located on the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. Source: *Longford Centennial 1875-1975 A Short History*.

The mill employed forty men while it was in production continuously until a section of it burned down in the early 1900s.<sup>18</sup> Obviously the Stucco Mill was important to Longford's economy in its early days. It brought employment and trains to the area. The mill was repaired and continued production until a better area for gypsite was found and the business was moved.

Today businesses in Longford are not hard to find. Another business that calls Longford its home is the Coachlight Restaurant, built in 1975. This restaurant stands where the old Longford Hotel once stood off of Weda Street. Volunteers got together and made the hotel into a restaurant that is still in operation today. "...the effort symbolized the community's belief in its self and future."<sup>19</sup> Many other businesses have started in Longford. Some of these include the Longford Grocery built in 1972, McIntyre Welding built in 1977, Lazy Acres Ceramics built in 1970, the Red Barn Tavern built in 1979, and Gloria's Shear Delight Beauty Shop also built in 1979.<sup>20</sup> Over the years businesses in Longford have survived, with a large number of new businesses appearing in the 1970s.

In 1955 Longford started its longest and most valued tradition today, the Rodeo. The Rodeo represents a time for the community to get together and celebrate pride for Longford. This tradition still holds on today and is essential, as it helps keep families and friends together. It is commonly held on the first Friday and Saturday in September and is known for the free roast beef bar-be-cue on the first night. According to Mrs. Ross Blake, the rodeo is a result of Longford's long history with cows and cattle. The early settlers brought at least one cow with them as it followed their covered wagons. The cream and milk from the cows

<sup>16-18</sup> *Longford Centennial 1875-1975 A Short History.*

<sup>19-20</sup> *Ibid.*



were an obvious necessity for the families in those days. In the 1890s the dairy business was a popular industry. However, the cream separator soon ended that industry. Beef cattle also grazed for a while in Longford with the early settler from Texas and Abilene. A well-known cattleman in Longford was Fred Bowen. By 1965, the Bowen ranch was run by Sherman Lyes, a nephew of the original owner and chief organizer of the Longford Rodeo. For Mrs. Ross Blake, the Rodeo represents a time when Longford acknowledged the first settlers of Longford and all of Eastern Kansas.<sup>21</sup>

As time went by Longford started being known for the pure water that is naturally produced in the area. This fresh water was discovered in the 1930s and was described as the best water in Kansas. A document from the Clay County Museum stated “Naturally filtered by distinctive underground formations in that area, the rocks near Longford form a distinctive part of the Kiowa Formation and include siltstone, relative scarce sandstone, minor lignite, and abundant clay rocks.”<sup>22</sup> This is the reason why Longford has water that does not need to be purified with chemicals. There had long been talk of Longford bottling the water and selling it, but it was not actually started until 2005. The people of Longford who were responsible for starting the business were Don Conard, Brad Cyre, Erik and Ted Hartenstein, Kim and Wava Kramer, and Jerry Patterson. The water was immediately being sold at local places such as Tip Top Dairies which provides goods to other stores in a sixty mile radius around Longford. The bottling company held its grand opening in May of 2005 and is still running today.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Blake, Mrs. Ross. “Longford Area is Still Mighty Good Cow Country.” *Clay Center Dispatch*, 1965. Clipping from Clay County Museum and Historical Society, Clay Center, Kansas. 1965.

<sup>22</sup> “Longford Water Co. - Private Labeling.” Longford Water Co. - Private Labeling. N.p., n.d. 13 May 2013. Copy at Clay County Museum and Historical Society, Clay Center, Kansas.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

With all of these businesses in Longford you would think that the little community would have no problem with becoming a popular place to live. However this is not the case. As I stated earlier, Longford has a unique history that has affected its status today. There are several factors that can explain why Longford's population has slowly declined over the years. The first factor is the arrival of the automobile around World War I. Cars are a valued part of our society today, but when they were first invented, they separated small towns and slowed the use of the railroad. The automobile is not the only factor that hurt Longford. The Dust Bowl and Great Depression also played a large part in Longford's hardships. The Dust Bowl devastated Longford farmers, much like any other agricultural town in central and western Kansas. Farmers struggled with mortgage payments, and many were forced to give up their land. Longford faced terrible financial years in the Great Depression. However, surprisingly, despite all of these struggles, the 1930s show Longford's highest population rate. This is because people were moving to rural areas because of the self-sufficiency that was being offered in places like Longford.<sup>24</sup> After all of these events, however, the event that hurt Longford the most was school consolidation. Longford High School closed in 1970 after having a graduating class of only 25 in 1967.<sup>25</sup>

It is apparent that Longford has lived through many ups and downs. The church and school were the focal points of the community, but loss of the high school forced families to move closer to the county consolidated high school in Clay Center. By 1955, the Rodeo arrived to

<sup>24</sup> William McKale, Interview by author, April 6, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> *Longford Centennial 1875-1975 A Short History*. 1975.

keep the spirit of Longford alive, and fortunately, it still continues today. Also continuing, and one of the most unique aspects about Longford, is its naturally pure water. The bottling company still produces bottled water today, and just like the church, school, and Rodeo, this institution helps keep the community together and gives the town pride.

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