

Oakhill, Clay County, Kansas:
The Atypical History of a Typical Kansas Town



Figure 1: Chartier Repair shop bearing the name of Oak Hill. This building once housed a filling station and repair shop. Source: photo taken by Chloe Schnee.

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Oakhill, Kansas, located in Oakland Township in southwest Clay County, may appear to be just another Kansas town. However, the history of this little place paints a unique picture that is unlike other vanishing communities in Kansas. Many Kansas towns can be categorized into one of the several settlement patterns that have characterized the history of Kansas. Oakhill fits almost all of them. It is easily qualified as a frontier town, a paper town, and a railroad town; this diverse history of settlement in Oakhill is quite unusual and creates a rare and interesting town history.

On April 30, 1866, A.J. Gabhart became the first person to stake a claim in Oakland Township.¹ Within a couple of years, there were at least five other families living in the area near Chapman's Creek.² Locals remember that this area was originally called Red Rock, but that name was short lived.³ A.F. Schaeber, an original settler, opened a little store and post office in his mud brick home. The natural features of his homestead inspired Schaeber to name the place "Oakhill"; his home was located atop a small hill near the creek, and at the foot of the hill grew several large oak trees.

The town of Oakhill (or Oak Hill⁴, as it has also been called) has had three locations throughout its history. The original town site was located on the Schaeber homestead (SE ¼ Sec. 18⁵) near the head of Chapman's Creek. In 1872, A.J. Gabhart became the postmaster and

¹ Marie Blake, Inez Burt, and Pat Trickle, *Oakhill-A Treasury of Memories*, (Oakhill, KS: Oakhill E.H.U., 1985), 1.

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Robert Baughman. Kansas State Historical Society, "Kansas Post Offices, 1828-1961." Accessed March 25, 2012. http://www.kshs.org/geog/geog_postoffices/search/placename:/county:CY/begyr:/endyr:/submit:SEARCH.

⁵ 1881 Clay County Atlas. www.kansasmemory.org

the post office was moved to the “Dieter’s Hill” on the Dieter farm,⁶ which is a ½ mile east of the current location.

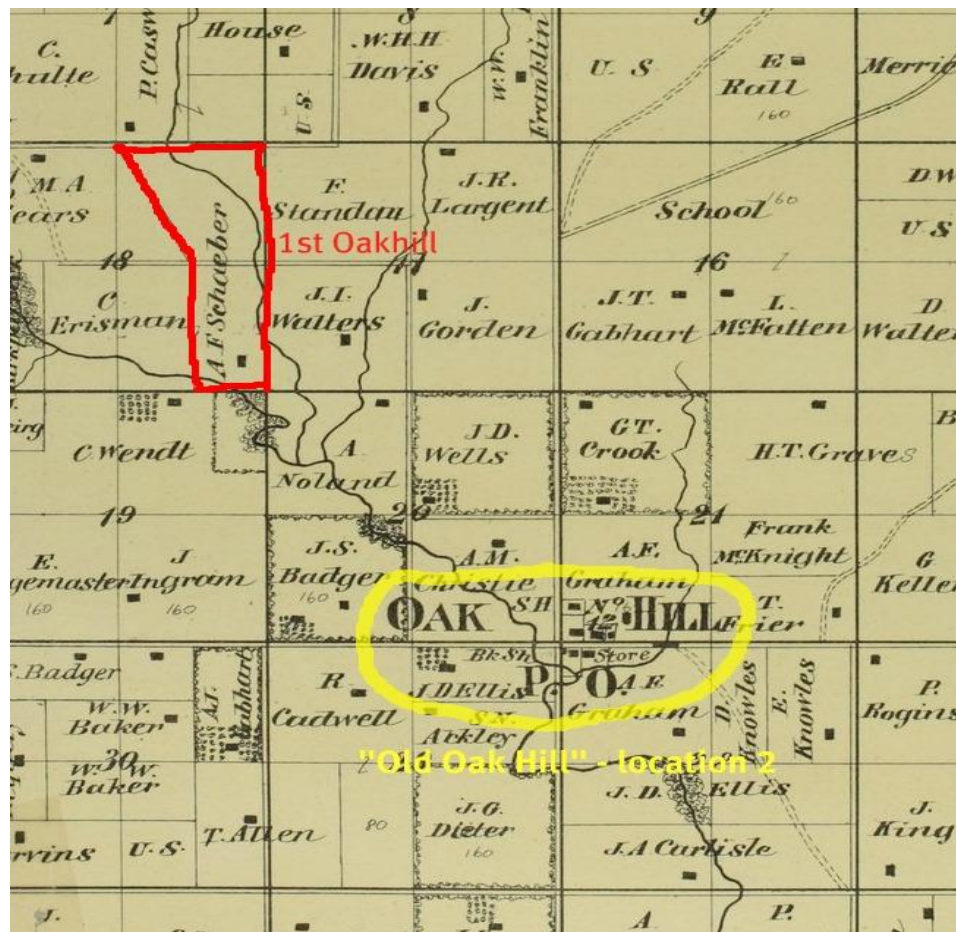


Figure 2: Edited version of 1881 Atlas of Clay County. The first location of Oakhill is labeled in red. Notice the second location of Oak Hill in yellow. The town appears to have several businesses including a blacksmith shop, a store, a school, and several other, unlabeled buildings. Source: 1881 map available at www.kansasmemory.org. Edits created by author.

Mr. Gabhart also opened a small general store, and other businesses soon followed and quickly blossomed into a little village. This location is now referred to as “Old Oak Hill”.⁷ Records from “Old Oak Hill” are somewhat contradictory, and some assumptions have to be made. It appears that Gabhart and John Dieters were business partners or at least had some sort of business

⁶ Marie Blake, Inez Burt, and Pat Trickle, *Oakhill-A Treasury of Memories*, (Oakhill, KS: Oakhill E.H.U., 1985),6.

⁷ *Ibid.* 2

arrangement. This would explain why Dieter would allow Gabhart to open a store and post office on his farm. By 1881, John Dieter was the postmaster and also ran Dieter's Store.^{8 9} By that time, it was recorded that the town had a blacksmith shop, a livery, a harness and shoe shop, J.S. Badger's Store, Dieter's Store, and a schoolhouse which was also used as a church.

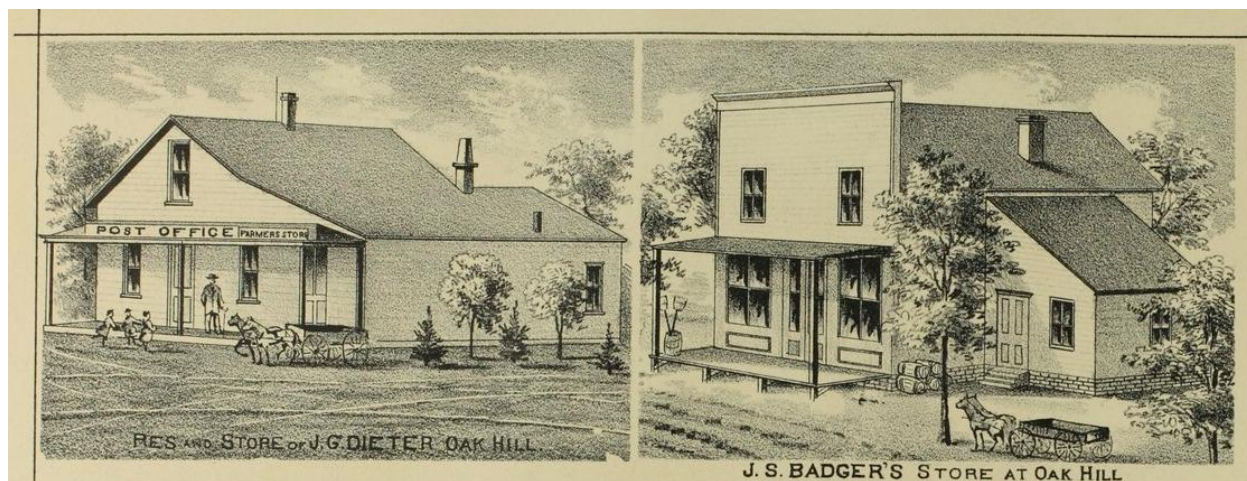


Figure 3: These two sketches are from the 1881 Clay County Atlas. The first is Dieter's Store and the post office. It appears that this was also his residence. The second is Badger's Store. Notice the store front of Badger's is a style that was very common on main streets in frontier Kansas. Source: www.kansasmemory.org.

The little hamlet of Oakhill was starting to take shape, but within a few years the town would be facing yet another move. Toward the end of the 1880s, railroads were entering the county. The residents of Oakhill wanted a line through their town, as access to a national grid of transportation would boost their local economy. The Chicago, Kansas and Western Railroad was building a line in the area, but could not be persuaded to bring the line the ½ mile east through Oakhill. Since the railway would not come to them, the residents of Oakhill decided to come to it. Oakhill residents moved the location of their town in order to become a “railroad

⁸ Atlas of Clay County, Kansas. www.kansasmemory.org

⁹ Marie Blake, Inez Burt, and Pat Trickle, *Oakhill-A Treasury of Memories*, (Oakhill, KS: Oakhill E.H.U., 1985), 2.

town". This new Oakhill was a paper town which was platted onto paper in Boston by Aldon Speare. It is doubtful that Mr. Speare ever came to Oakhill and likely had an arrangement with the railroad to entice easterners to settle in the newly platted town.

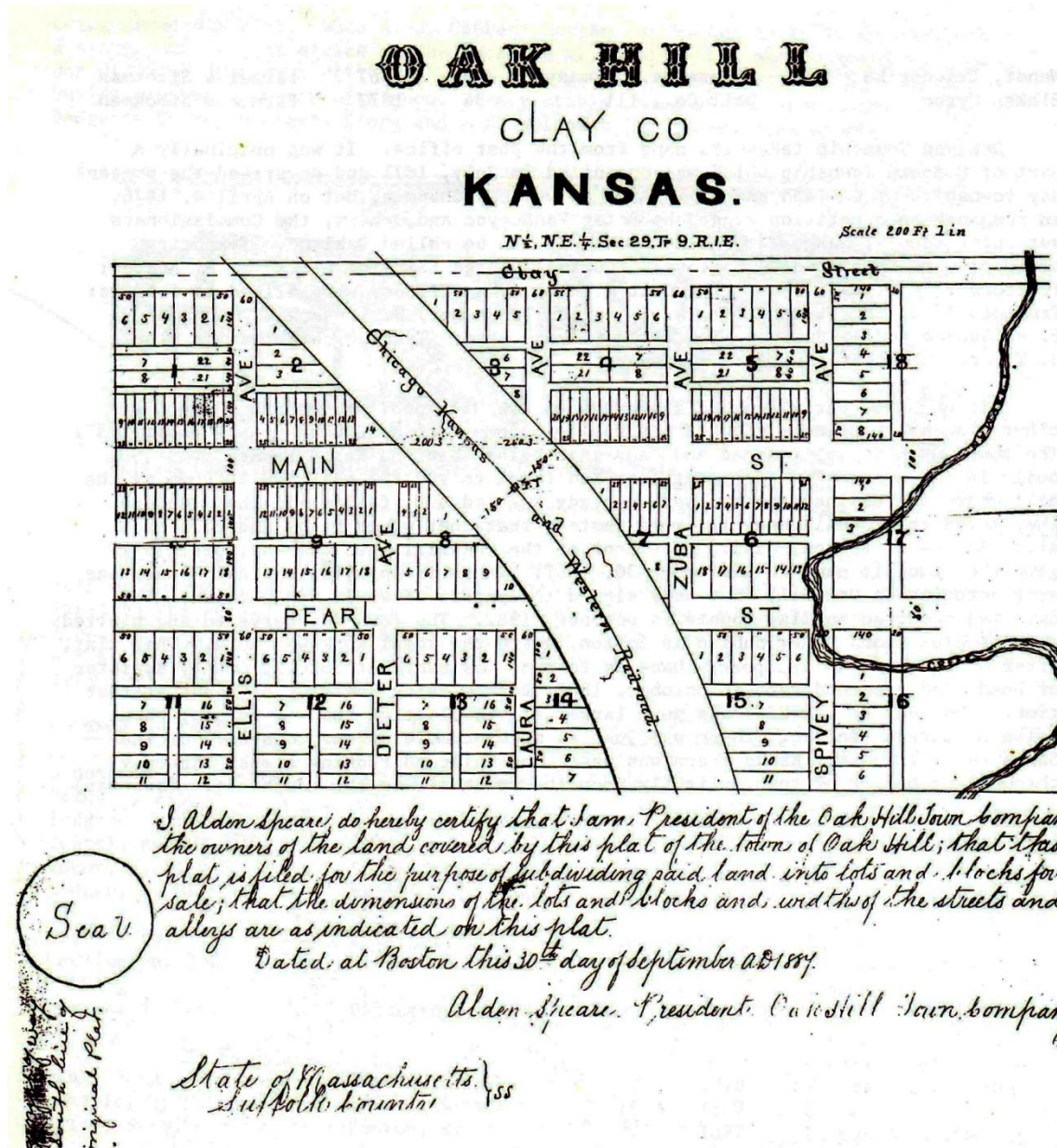
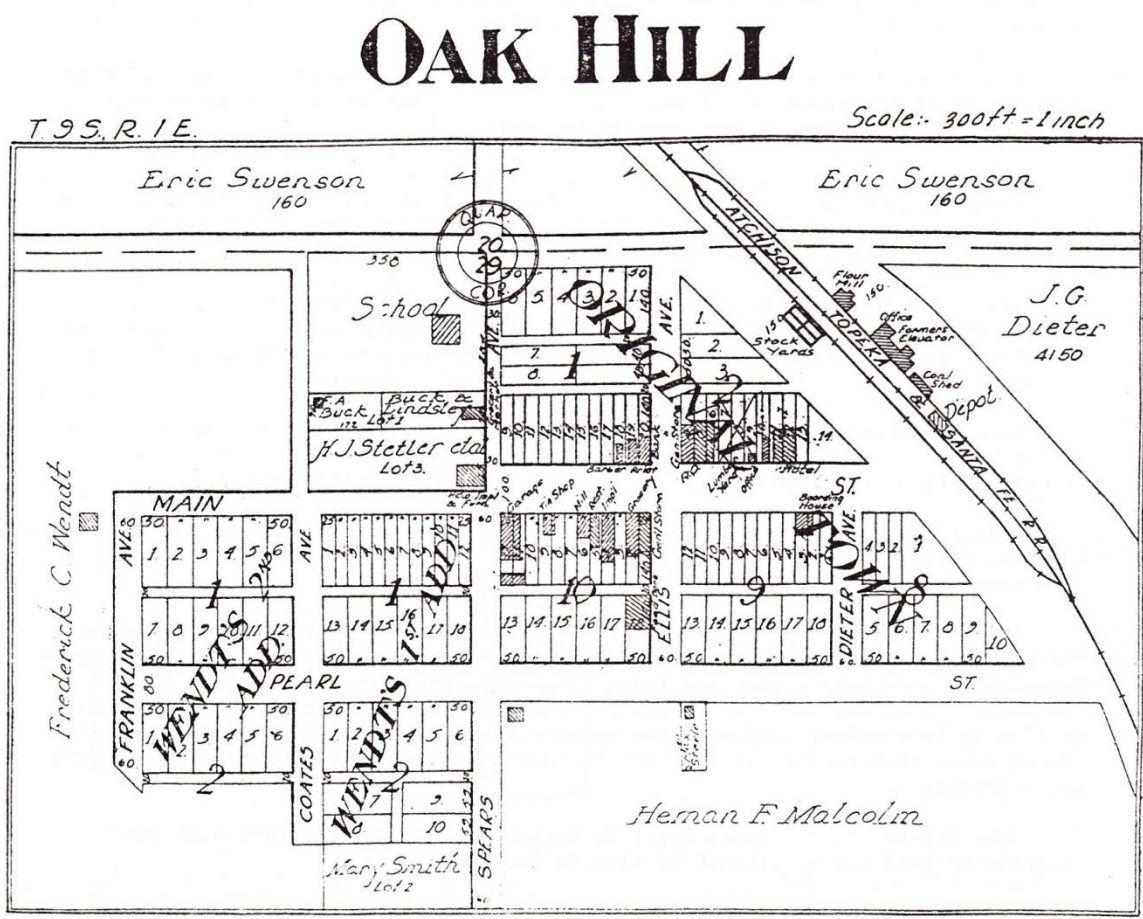


Figure 4: This was the original plat of Oak Hill, notice the change in the spelling of the name. This is also what made it a paper town. The plat was laid out in Boston by Mr. Aldon Speare who never visited the area. This original plat lays out a fairly large town. Oakhill never grew to this extent. Source: Oakhill: A treasury of Memories. Located at Clay County Historical Museum.

With the news of the railroad and a "New Oak Hill" the people of "Old Oakhill" moved buildings and all to the new town site. Like most railroad towns Oak Hill grew quickly. It never reached the heights originally envisioned but it still proved to be a thriving little village. The Figure below shows the plat of the town as it actually existed.



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Figure 5: Plat of Oak Hill after 1900, shows the town as it actually existed. There are approximately 26 businesses labeled on this map. Source: Oakhill: A Treasury of Memories. Available at Clay County Historical Museum.

Oak Hill never grew to the heights anticipated, but it did eventually become a bustling railway center with many businesses and entertainments for the people of the township.

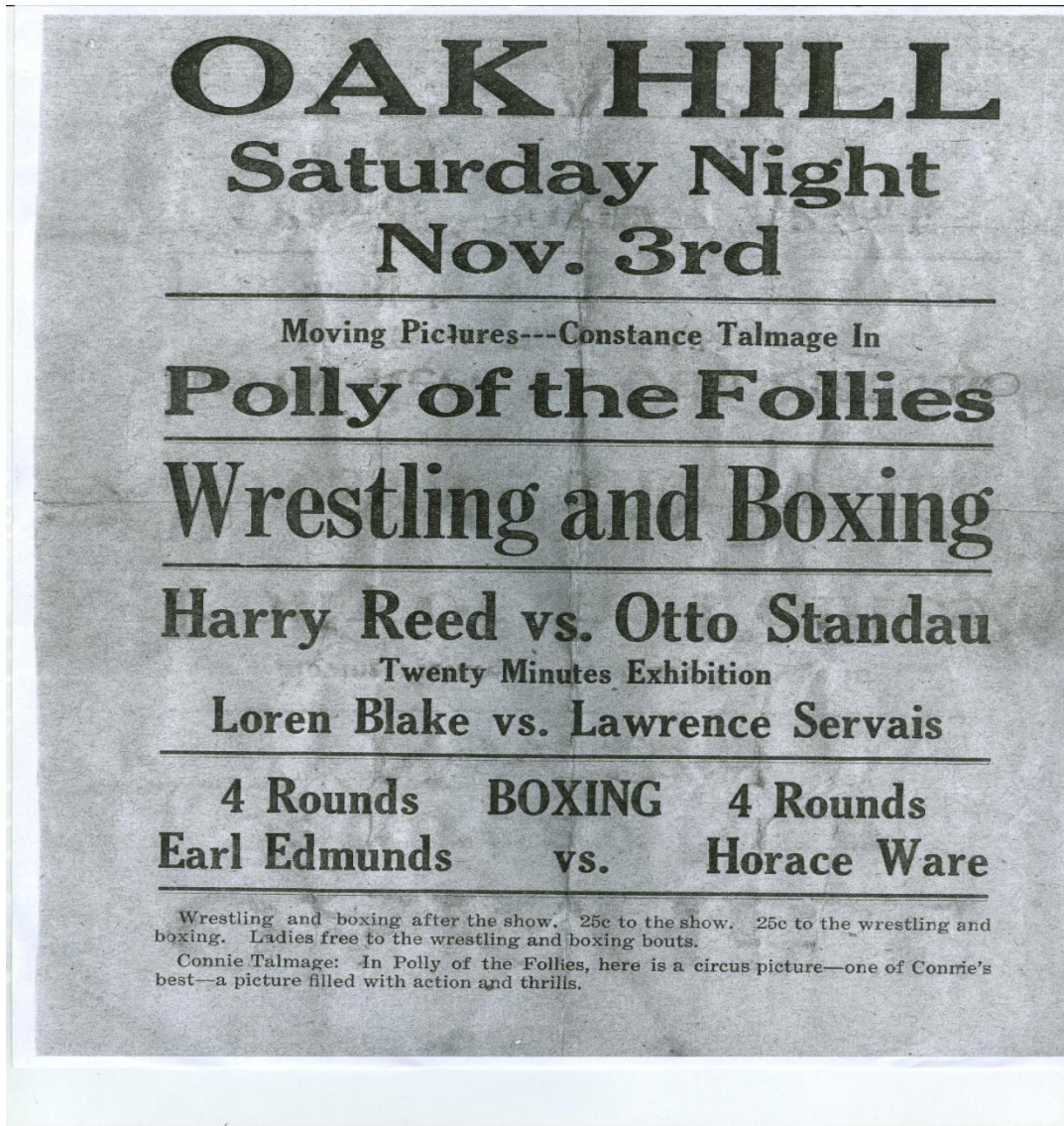


Figure 6: Poster announcing event in Oakhill circa 1920. Events such as this were common in Oakhill, people would come from all over the township for entertainment. Source: Clay County Historical Museum.

Like many rural towns the advent of the automobile was the cause of Oakhill's decline. The economy depended heavily on the railroad and when the railroad went, the town slowly began to fade as well. Although Oakhill is no longer what it once was, at one point in history it played a vital role for the rural farming area surrounding the town.

Today the school is a private residence and pottery business. The Oak Hill Presbyterian Church still holds services every Sunday, and there are a handful of families that call the little berg home.¹⁰ The town is fondly remembered by former residents in several books that contain personal anecdotes of life in Oakhill. They can be found at the Clay County Historical Museum.

Frontier towns, paper towns, and railroad towns were all common types of settlements in Kansas. Oakhill stands out because it existed as all three. The three locations of the town show the dedication of the community to make a life for themselves on the fertile plains of Chapman's Creek.

¹⁰ 2010 U.S. Census. <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/data/>

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