

Sherman, Clay County, Kansas:  
Early Industrial Center in an Agricultural County

Albert Vincent

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Although a town might be considered lost in the present day does not mean that it did not serve a purpose and thrive at some point in time. This holds true for the old, vanished town of Sherman in the northern part of Clay County, Kansas. Playing a major role in the railroad industry throughout the middle portion of the country, Sherman was a community inhabited by a wide range of ethnic groups. It saw a boom in economic activity but unfortunately, fell victim to a common die out of a town located too near the Republican River. Nevertheless, there was a time when Sherman was a lovely place to settle and live in.

Sherman was part of Sherman Township in Clay County, one of the first three towns created once Clay County was established.<sup>1</sup> Northwest of the county seat of Clay Center, the initial settlement area was in the rich floodplain of the Republican River where a timber belt provided wood and the rolling bluestem prairies stretched out in every direction.<sup>2</sup> At its peak before 1900, the town population grew to as many as 1,073 people. Sherman is named after the military hero of a Civil War event called "The March From Atlanta to the Sea": General William T Sherman. Many Civil War Union veterans arrived in Clay County in a wave in the late 1860s. However, the first homestead was established in 1858 by a man named William Silver who found the Republican River to be a dynamic resource. With this, Sherman's first commodity economically was irrigation. He drew water off the river and sold irrigating rights to the rush of

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<sup>1</sup> Historical Plat Book, Clay County, Kansas (Chicago, Illinois: the Bird and Mickle Map Company, 1881).

<sup>2</sup> Homer Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, second edition. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988). See Map # 3.

settlers looking for land for farming and cultivating. As the town developed and the railroads began to move through Kansas, irrigation would take a back seat to the shipping industry.<sup>3</sup>

As settlers moved west, Sherman found itself becoming home to many different ethnic groups such as Swedes, Germans, English, Irish, and Swiss. The local Republican River Native Americans, the Pawnee, never made much of an impact on the town. However, there was a documented raid by other Native Americans on a farm near Sherman in 1863. This raid was still recounted in newspapers decades later and sent fear throughout the community. A family named the Chesters owned property near the local creek called Pete's Creek. On a night when Mr. Chester was gone, a group of Cheyenne Indians crossed the creek and kidnapped Mrs. Chester. Upon Mr. Chester's return, he discovered his wife missing and organized a militia group to hunt down the Cheyenne raiding party. When they found the Indians, Mr. Chester and his militia won a series of small battles and Mrs. Chester was returned to him.<sup>4</sup>

Before the Civil War, Sherman's population had included settlers coming from areas that were pro-slavery, such as Missouri. After the war, when Union veterans arrived, social and political conflict continued. Eventually, the Republican party dominated and its proponents began to take hold of the economic side of Sherman. This is the point when the town began its transition from the irrigation economy to widespread agriculture. Agricultural crops that dominated Sherman's production were wheat, corn, milo, soybean, oats, and alfalfa. Many farmers also developed into livestock breeders and shippers once railways arrived. Schooling was also important in the town: the first school house operated through private subscription. The

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<sup>3</sup> "Clay County History," (Clay County Historical Museum Archives, 1990), 99-102.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

first official teacher was D. Seabury who later became the first school superintendent of Clay County.<sup>5</sup> The first post office for farmers and residents living near Pete's Creek was the Clifton Post Office, founded and kept up by James P. Fox. It was originally created in Washington County, Kansas, but was moved when Fox decided to buy land in the newly developed Sherman town site.

What drove the state of Kansas and hundreds of its small towns was the railroad industry. Sherman is not an exception to this, as the Junction City, Fort Kearney, and Rock Island railroads all ran through Sherman. These first rails reached the town in 1876, causing another boom in the population and an industrial and business pick up. While many towns used rail lines solely to ship crops and stock, Sherman had other industries tied to the railroads. A spike in Sherman's population came when a deposit of oil was discovered just outside of the town near Morganville, another settlement located in Sherman Township; Morganville served as almost a sister town to Sherman and may have represented the town founding phenomenon known as "twin towns." The Enron Natural Gas Pumping Station was established just outside of these two communities, and this opened the door for many people throughout Clay County to have a steady job. As more people began to move in, more innovations appeared. The aircraft industry had a stake in Sherman, led by Henry Young who owned the Young Aviation Company, founded in 1911. His pilot A.K. Longren landed Young's first plane in the same year. Henry Young and his business manufactured through Topeka, which was important for Sherman, because it gave business a gateway into a large city and the state capitol.<sup>6</sup> Young and his aviation company are just one example of how the railroads increased the efficiency of local businesses to

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See "Clay County History," Clay County Museum and Historical Society.

bring in not only equipment and supplies, but workers as well.<sup>7</sup>

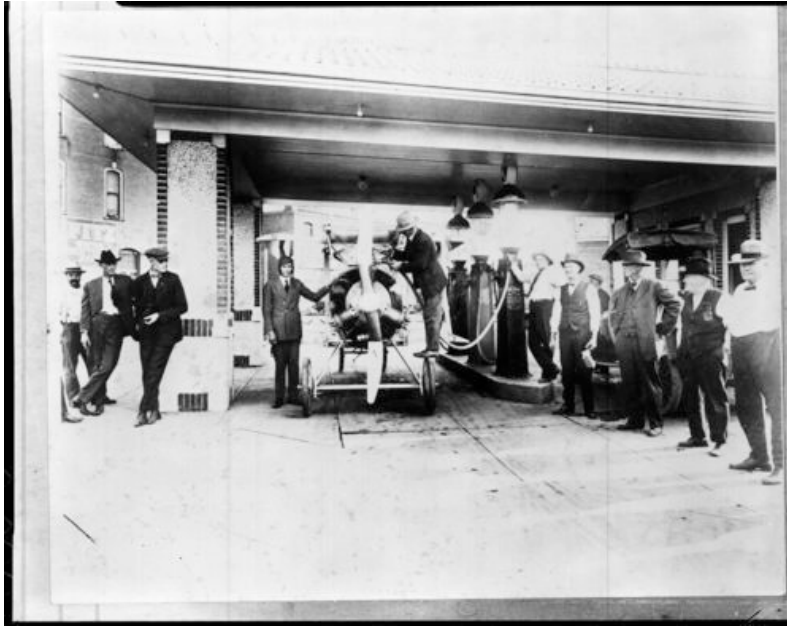


Figure 1: A.K. Longren having airplane refueled in Clay County, 1922. Source: [www.kansasmemory.org](http://www.kansasmemory.org)

The Republican River played the strongest factor in the eventual decline and disappearance of Sherman. Yes, the Great Depression and economic decline in the 1930s diminished Sherman as well as many surrounding small towns, but the continual flooding of the Republican rocked the river towns especially. The most notable flood was the Great Flood of 1935.<sup>8</sup> This is the defining moment of the eventual wipeout of Sherman, as water from the Republican reached upwards of over 15 feet above flood stage. Services such as the post office, schools, and small business were completely knocked out. The municipal plant which was pivotal in electricity production was crippled as water entered the boiler room. The most turmoil for the town came as the waters destroyed small bridges and almost every inch of train track

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Clay Center Dispatch, May 3, 1935.

from the three major railroads running through Sherman.<sup>9</sup> As of 1990, a smaller railroad service called the Kyle Railroad managed to keep operations going, but only to Morganville. The Junction City, Fort Kearney, and Rock Island railroads were completely wiped out of the Sherman area.<sup>10</sup> The flood covered an area of 13 blocks east and west of the city limits. Old local newspaper articles described the damage as just a horrific sight as reports rolled in about different bridges being torn away or flooded over. Railroad cars and engines sat under water.



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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 2: Photos demonstrating damage from the repeatedly flooding Republican River which caused the eventual undoing of Sherman. It was not economically feasible to keep rebuilding every time the river folded. Circa 1930s.**

If the floods of the early 1900s had never occurred, or at least not to the extent to which they did, Sherman could still have been a town that thrived and grew through industrialization. As of 1990, it was reported that only 37 families resided in what was Sherman, a major decline from its peak population in 1884 of over a thousand.<sup>11</sup> Twenty years later, there are likely even fewer people left.

One of the most important landmarks of Sherman is the Sherman Cemetery, organized in 1877 by members of the community named James J. Law, J.S. Miller, A.N. Crawford, Grant Gardner, and W.M. Kiser. These are the names of early Sherman settlers, and many gravestones to these families tell the story of persistence: the Gardner and Law families each have over 14 burials. The cemetery was always kept in good condition, and the

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<sup>11</sup> David Hogan, "Republican River Flood of 1935." <http://www.crh.noaa.gov/gld/?n=1935flood-flood>, (11, October, 2011).

board members who were also the founders had most of the control over where people would be buried. The cemetery is still cared for today by long-time area residents.

Although Sherman is now a lost town, this does not diminish its importance to the state of Kansas, as people such as Henry Silver, Henry Young, or the early Chester family shaped a major portion of Clay County's history. Clay County, filled with many lost communities, can yet brag about the successive industries of Sherman and the employment opportunities it gave to so many. As tiny agricultural villages failed, Sherman held on until a natural disaster sealed its fate.

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