

**Remnants of German Culture in Kansas:**  
**Clearfield, Douglas County, Kansas, 1858 – 2013**



Clearfield Church

SOURCE: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clearfield,\\_Kansas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clearfield,_Kansas)

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Chapman Center for Rural Studies, Fall 2013

This study overviews a collection of photographs, maps, and documents detailing the history of the Clearfield Community in Palmyra Township, Douglas County, Kansas.

## **Remnants of German Culture in Kansas: Clearfield, Douglas County, Kansas, 1858 – 2013**

It is 1854 and Kansas has recently been organized into a territory. Migrants from all over Europe and America are on the move. Farmland is cheap and guaranteed to be profitable. Men and women from many countries make the trip to start anew. Many emigrants seek out familiar culture and settle with others hailing from their former countries. Such was the case for a group of German settlers in Douglas County. These men and women founded a community around their commonalities, language, and religion being primary bonds. These German families brought with them their Evangelical beliefs. In 1858 a circuit rider, Reverend G. Fleisher, started a class in the Captain's Creek area of what would become Palmyra Township in Douglas County.<sup>1</sup> This stop on the circuit rider's route marks the beginning of the Clearfield community. The Clearfield community, formed around the church, has survived throughout one hundred and fifty years and still carries traditions passed down from the original German settlers. In Fig. 1 on page 2, you can see a sketched map detailing the layout of Clearfield at its peak size; today, only the church building and cemetery remain.

Several families descended from original settlers are active within the church, now Clearfield United Methodist, which hosts a local farmers market and an annual Christmas celebration. I am one such descendent, having grown up attending the church with my family. George Sturm created the wire frame used to support the candles hung from the Christmas tree in 1929. He wrote:

As nearly all the families that settled in the Clearfield community came from Germany, Christmas was celebrated very much the same as the country they left, much the same as now but everything was in the German language... The first two

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Reynolds, Irene Brecheisen, and E.J. Selzer, *Clearfield History 1858-1976*, 3.

men I remember was David Schendel and William Selzer – they got a nice tree and decorated it with a lot of ornaments and a lot of popcorn strung around the tree like a rope. The candles were small and were first lighted with the program was half over...<sup>2</sup>

Our family still continues the tradition of cutting a tree and assembling the frame for the candlelit services. Figures 2 and 3 show the 2013 tree and the wire framework.

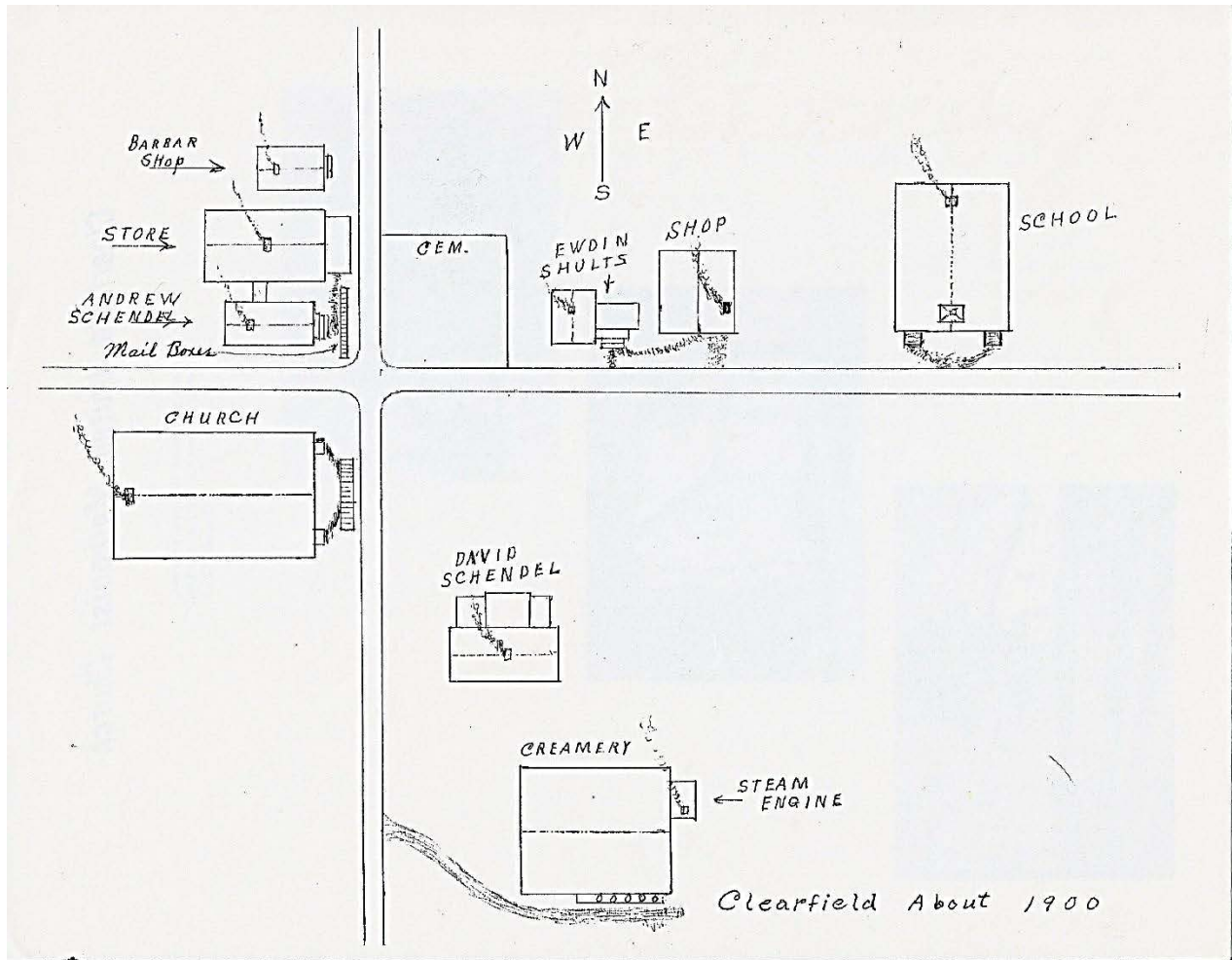


Figure 1: A scan of the map compiled for the church history detailing the layout of Clearfield around 1900. ca. 1976  
SOURCE: *Clearfield History 1858-1976*, pg. 1

The nearby Captain's Creek winds its way northeast, eventually connecting with the Kansas River east of Eudora, after briefly jogging into Johnson County. The low undulating hills of this area, a far cry from the sweeping Flint Hills found farther west, provide ample room for fields and pastures for grazing. Corn, beans, and wheat are all common crops of the area. Before

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, *Clearfield History 1858-1976*, 6.

Kansas was open to settlement, the Shawnee tribe was given this land south of the Kansas River stretching out west to the Manhattan area.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2: A photograph of the Clearfield Community Christmas tree. ca. 2013  
SOURCE: Author

When Kansas was organized as a territory in 1854, the settlers were quick to move in. The Clearfield community grew around two facets: the religious community, being served by a circuit rider, and the school house, known by several names, but ultimately Clearfield Dist. No. 58.<sup>4</sup> The school was built around 1860 and located on the Rodewald farm just east of the crossroads. Religious services were held in local homes until the school house, originally called Union, was constructed. Then the school house was used for church services until 1880 when the church building was added. These two institutions helped establish what the community cared about most: their religious values and their children's education. Classes were taught in German

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<sup>3</sup> Homer Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), Map 13.

<sup>4</sup> Goldie Daniels, *Rural Schools of Douglas County* (1975), 16.

until the mid 1900s when a switch to English was made. The church services were in German up until World War I, when again English was adopted.



Figure 3: A photograph of the Christmas tree focused on the German-tradition wire candle fram. ca. 2013  
In the past, the tinsel for the tree was collected to be reused every year.  
SOURCE: Author

In the 1870s, a national recession left many in dire straits. Rapid expansion of railroads had left Douglas County in excess of \$850,000 debt.<sup>5</sup> This recession caused several of the banks in nearby Lawrence to close. However, by 1880 things were improving. The debt problem was settled, relieving strain on taxpayers. Also wheat production in Kansas boomed, increasing by a factor of ten from 1870 to 1880; farmers produced twenty-five million bushels in 1880.<sup>6</sup> Thus by 1880, population of this part of Kansas began to increase. In 1880, the Clearfield community constructed a church building on land donated by George Hausman. The original pews and the railing around the pulpit were hand-carved.<sup>7</sup> The railing still remains, although it has been

<sup>5</sup> Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000* (University Press of Kansas, 2002), 142.

<sup>6</sup> Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000*, 140.

<sup>7</sup> Reynolds, *Clearfield History 1858-1976*, 4.

changed from the original arrangement, as shown in Figs. 4 and 5 (page 7). The pews were divided in the middle with men and women sitting on opposite sides.<sup>8</sup> The building has had many renovations throughout the years, adding a balcony, updating the lighting systems, and installing heating and cooling systems to make the church more comfortable.



Figure 4: A photograph of the hand-carved railing in Clearfield Church, decorated for Christmas. ca. 2013. The railing now opens in the center of the sanctuary. This was modified in 1972 when the sanctuary was remodded.<sup>9</sup> SOURCE: Author.

In 1885, the general store was opened by John Glaser.<sup>10</sup> Mr. Glaser also ran the post office out of the store until 1900, when the post office was closed. Mail was originally delivered by horse from Vinland, which had train access through the Lawrence, Lecompton, and Galveston railroad.<sup>11</sup> Additional buildings were added between 1880 and 1900. These included: cooperative creamery, Shultz's blacksmith shop, and Andrew Wissman's barbershop. The barbershop opened in the evening to accommodate work schedules and acted as a gathering place for the men in the evenings. Saturdays could see as many as thirty men at the barber.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Reynolds, *Clearfield History 1858-1976*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Reynolds, *Clearfield History 1858-1976*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Reynolds, *Clearfield History 1858-1976*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Socolofsky and Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, Map 30.

<sup>12</sup> Reynolds, *Clearfield History 1858-1976*, 9.

The late nineteenth century was the high point for Clearfield. By 1910, the population of the town was less than twenty.<sup>13</sup> In 1908, the school house was moved one mile west. It continued to be used as a school house until the mid-1940s when the district was unified with the Baldwin School.<sup>14</sup> The school house continued use as the meeting place for the local Grange, formed in 1907.<sup>15</sup> The Grange disbanded in 1990 and the school house was left for several years. Recently receiving a grant, the Clearfield School is being renovated to become a historical site in Douglas County, as shown in Fig. 6 (page 8).



Figure 5: A vintage photograph of the Clearfield Church Christmas tree. ca. 1915.  
SOURCE: Clearfield United Methodist Church

<sup>13</sup> Frank Blackmar, *Kansas: A Cyclopedia of State History* (Standard Publishing Company, Chicago, 1912), 366.

<sup>14</sup> Goldie Daniels, *Rural Schools of Douglas County* (1975), 18.

<sup>15</sup> Heritage Conservation Council of Douglas County, *Target Project Grant Application 2011 Clearfield School*, 5.

Persistence of a town is defined as ten percent of families remaining after fifty years.<sup>16</sup> Early family names found within my research include Breacheisen, Meeder, Kramer, and Hausman. Later additions to the community are the families Sturm, Schendel, Selzer, Rohe, Breithaupt, Dechwa, and Klein.<sup>17</sup> Looking at the 1980 community directory, one hundred years after the church building was constructed, many of those names remain. There were 26 Brecheisens registered, 17 of whom were members of the church; five Hausmans, three Meeders, five Rodewalds, a Schendel family, three Selzers, and nine Sturm members.<sup>18</sup> The number of families still found in the area is a significant part of what keeps this community strong. They keep traditions going, like the annual Christmas tree and German celebration, as well as preserving many heirlooms from the community's past.



Figure 6: The Clearfield School which is currently under renovations. ca. 2013  
SOURCE: Author

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<sup>16</sup> M.J. Morgan, “*Lost Kansas Communities*” (presentation, History 533, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, August 29, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Reynolds, *Clearfield History 1858-1976*, 3, 5, and 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Clearfield United Methodist Church Directory* (1980), 9-11.





Figure 7: Clearfield Church sanctuary decorated for Christmas. ca. 2013  
SOURCE: Author



Figure 8: Scanned photograph of the Clearfield general store and post office. ca. 1900  
SOURCE: *Clearfield History 1858-1976*, 13.

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