

The Town that Never Could: Buckeye, Kansas



Figure 1. Photo of Buckeye store, taken by Kaitlyn Harlow, November 9, 2012.

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It was a Tuesday, April 5, 1870, when a group of approximately two hundred people from Ohio emigrated toward Abilene, Kansas.¹ The land, which was located northwest of Abilene, was soon known as “Buckeye Township.” This type of movement was ordinary for that era due to the passing of what some call, “the most important piece of Legislation in the history of the United States.”² Signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, the Homestead Act gave much of the public land to private citizens with a few stipulations. Often, a group of people would venture ahead, survey the area, and make a claim on land before bringing the “company” of people from the east. That was the story and history of a small town, north of Abilene, Kansas, that hoped and prayed for prosperity: Buckeye, Kansas.

This is a common story of how people in the east followed the dream attached to the Homestead Act and perhaps listened to another opinion by President Lincoln, who said while campaigning in 1859, “If I went West, I think I would go to Kansas.”³ The Civil War was over, and the slaves were free; railroads were expanding, as were the people of the United States. It was mid-October, 1869, according to journalist Vear Porter Wilson in the Wednesday August 8, 1923, article from the Abilene Family Reflector, when he and Joseph Wilson of Walnut, Bureau County, Illinois, traveled west to hopefully select a site for the colony.

¹ Carrie Kugler, Letter to Dickinson County, ca. 1920.

² “About the Homestead Act,” *National Park Service*, accessed December 20, 2012, <http://www.nps.gov/home/historyculture/abouthomesteadactlaw.htm>.

³ “Abraham Lincoln in Kansas,” *Kansas Historical Society*, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://www.kshs.org/p/abraham-lincoln-in-kansas/11529>.

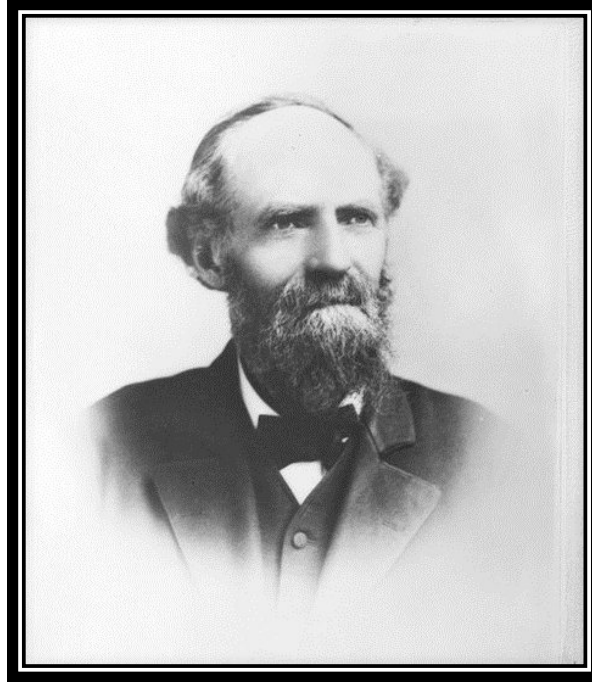


Figure 2. Photograph of Vear Porter Wilson from kansasmemory.com.

The colony was a group of people from New Pennsylvania, Ohio, that V.P. Wilson would eventually and successfully relocate to Kansas. After stopping in Lawrence, Kansas, he and Joseph Wilson boarded the newly-finished Kansas Pacific railway and headed to Abilene, Kansas, where they would examine land and decide upon a plot located eight miles north of Abilene. This area is near the county seat, which is near a convenient railroad station for mail and supplies, and just far enough north not to be affected by the cattlemen's shenanigans. V.P. Wilson would return to Tuscarawas County, Ohio, and organize the "Buckeye Colony" and head west to Dickinson County, Kansas.

Although the number of people is not exact, V.P. Wilson guesses some two hundred people, including fifteen families, were "adherents of the Church of the Brethren," (German

Baptist) the first American denomination that was not transplanted from Europe.⁴ These people left behind friends and possessions and headed into this windswept bare prairie country. As they traveled the eight miles north of Abilene, they cut their own roads and trails, with little to use as landmarks but “perhaps a pile of buffalo or cattle bones.”⁵ Settling in three townships that were formed in the early 1870s, the colony would live in their wagons as their town developed, each family playing an important role in the colony’s survival, we can assume, growing gardens, tending to livestock, and supporting each other.⁶ In July of 1870, the community began what would be known as the “Buckeye Reunion” at Lafferty Springs. Although the food they brought was not hearty, due to the hot and dry conditions, there were bountiful friendships as they worked together to make their community a reality.

In the fall of 1870, the Buckeye School was built, and would be used to educate people of all ages.⁷ The school would have writing and reading sessions that could become light-hearted and funny, as well as thought-provoking. In the winter of 1870-71, the Church of the Brethren group organized, and their services were held at the school. Church and school seem to have a variety of identities. Many of the local people of the colony taught at the school and helped with the church. It would seem that the community and their faith would keep this new colony safe and prosperous. Although Buckeye was never plotted or incorporated, there were elections for the municipal townships, and in 1873 there were 243 people and fifty-five legal voters in the township.

⁴ V. P. Wilson, “Annals of the Buckeye Colony: How Ohio Settlers Established Homes in Dickinson Co.,” *Abilene Daily Reflector*, August 4, 1923, Sec. A: Carrie Tipton née Simmers, Letter, August 1, 1940; Our History,” *Church of the Brethren in Christ, USA*, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://ub.org/about/history/>.

⁵ Wilson, “Annals of the Buckeye Colony.”

⁶ Harold Correll, Letter to Dickinson County Historical Society, ca. 1992.; Helen Dingler, *Past and Present Towns of Dickinson County Kansas*, (Enterprise, KS: Dickinson County Historical Society, 1999), 36.

⁷ Tipton, Letter.

There was continued growth in the area as more men encouraged people to head to the west to stake claim in property; some were even promised half-price train tickets. What the men did not warn people about was the devastation of drought, flood, or even grasshoppers. In the year 1874, a disaster occurred when there was an invasion of Rocky Mountain grasshoppers. They ate everything in their path, even the fuzz off the cottonwood boards and netting from farmhouse windows. The only thing that the grasshoppers did not destroy was a small patch of tobacco.⁸ There were stories of how hoards of grasshoppers gnawed through rake handles, destroyed a peach crop, and did devastating destruction in a wheat field. Stories describe how the grasshoppers came in groves and looked like dark clouds moving across the sky. Although they were gone in a couple of days, the devastation was left behind.



Figure 3. A photograph of the Buckeye Church of the Brethren, which is still used and maintained by members of the church. Photo taken by Kaitlyn Harlow, November 9th 2012.

⁸ "History of Chapman," *City of Chapman, Kansas Information Portal*, accessed December 1, 2012, http://www.cityofchapman.org/Historical_Society/Doc/Chapman_History.htm.

In 1880, until a local worship place could be established, the members of the Church of the Brethren organized the Chapman Creek Church at the Demming School north of Abilene. Around this time, a road extended north from Abilene to what is now Kansas Highway 18 and cut diagonally to what is now the center of the Buckeye community at the intersection of Jeep Road and 3100 Avenue.⁹ The Chapman Creek Church gained its own four acres in April 1883 at the northwest intersection of Jeep and 3100 and continued to grow and actually obtained an organ in 1889.¹⁰ The prosperity was on the rise.



Figure 4. The original location of the cheese factory. Photo taken by Kaitlyn Harlow on November 9, 2012.

A cheese factory was built in 1899, occupying the southeast corner and putting Buckeye on the map.¹¹ In 1901, a general store was built for local dairy products. Jesse Perry kept his goods in his wagon and then moved them to the front of his home until the store was built in

⁹ Nicole Printz, "The Road to Buckeye," 2011, http://abilene.uber.matchbin.net/printer_friendly/15153263.

¹⁰ Printz, "The Road to Buckeye."

¹¹ Ray Livingston, Letter to Dickinson Historical Society, October 29, 1954.

1904.¹² In fact, the post office was located in his store where Perry was the Buckeye postmaster, only lasting a short four years from 1900 to 1904.¹³ It became the local place for neighbors to meet. Buckeye started to bloom in 1900 with a factory, store, and church. J.H. Moran came and a blacksmith shop was built. It was more than just a shop; it also offered hardware and tin ware. The blacksmith shop was a place for young men to wrestle and box. The store had several owners and grew as the community's needs grew.¹⁴



Figure 5. Photo of J.D. Freed in his Buckeye store from the *Abilene Reflector-Chronicle*.

In 1908, the Buckeye store gained a new owner: J.D. Freed. He was frugal with his money and did not allow farmers to trade cream and eggs for groceries in the store. He kept a variety of things in the store such as seeds for five cents a packet, brooms, Ball canning jars, Jap Rose soap, coffee, baking supplies, candy, and Sunshine biscuit products. He also sold horse

¹² Correll, Letter.

¹³ "Kansas Post Offices, 1828-1961," *Kansas Historical Society*, accessed December 1, 2012, http://kshs.org/geog/geog_postoffices/search/placename:/county:DK/begyr:/endyr:/submit:SEARCH.

¹⁴ Printz, "The Road to Buckeye."

harnesses and hardware out of his back room. In 1936, Frank Whiteley bought the store from Freed. Whiteley turned the store into more of a social center. On a typical Saturday night, ladies would shop while the men would be outside visiting on the front porch, and the kids would be running around. There would be up to seventy people at the store at one time. The store closed in 1959 when Whiteley moved to Nebraska to be closer to his daughter.¹⁵

It was 1904 when the Farmer Mutual Telephone company moved into the store until their own building could be erected. The phone system was party lines through a switchboard, and each party had their own “ring” and rules for use. There were only thirty-six lines and neighbors were considerate of each other.¹⁶ Electricity stretched to Buckeye around 1918, and the country seemed to boom during World War I. But as the war ended, so did the prosperity in the country. This was shown in Buckeye with the 1920 closing of the cheese factory. The factory could not keep running without any dairy products. The cheese factory was closed, converted into a home, and the building was moved two miles north.¹⁷ The economic situation in 1920 was grim, and by that year unemployment had jumped from 4 percent to nearly 12 percent, while the GNP declined by 17 percent.¹⁸ Depression hit.

Local residents had hopes for a railroad going through Buckeye around 1910, but this was never accomplished. Although the closing of the cheese factory had a large impact on Buckeye, there were people still going to school, church, and work. Gas was piped up to the area in the 1940s. The road that leads to Buckeye was asphalted in the 1960s after the completion of Interstate 70, just a year after the closing of the landmark Buckeye Store. There was never a

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Thomas E. Woods, Jr., “The Forgotten Depression,” *Mises Institute*, November, 27, 2009, <http://mises.org/daily/3788>.

school close to Buckeye. The children were taken to Dickinson County Community High School in Abilene on Monday through Friday, and then taken back to Buckeye for the weekends.¹⁹



Figure 6. Present-day photo of the Mutual Aid Association Insurance Company building. Photo taken by Kaitlyn Harlow on November 9, 2012.

In 1973, the Mutual Aid Association Insurance Company opened its doors to area residents at Jeep Road and 3100 Avenue. This is a fine example of how we return to the strength of the church. The northwest corner of Jeep and 3100 Avenue still had the only other active organization in town. Behind it was the cemetery, filled with those who had lived and helped build the town of Buckeye, Kansas.²⁰

During the American Civil War, the first land-grant college was founded under the Morrill Act: Kansas State Agricultural College, now known as Kansas State University. This

¹⁹ Printz, "The Road to Buckeye."

²⁰ Ibid.

university would help teach the new settlers how to successfully farm, and keep up on the new techniques as they emerged from farmers in the east.²¹ Some communities that began in the area, like Buckeye, are now nothing more now than windswept bare prairie country.

It was a very warm Friday afternoon, November 9, 2012. I was headed just north of Abilene, Kansas. My GPS, Global Positioning Satellite, led me to what is now Kansas Highway 18 and cut diagonally to what is now the center of the Buckeye community at the intersection of Jeep Road and 3100 Avenue. I started by heading north out of Abilene; the black top was ending and there was a dirt road ahead of me. As the dirt road began, I realized that I had just passed Buckeye, Kansas, in a blink of an eye. The GPS did not recognize the church and a rundown building as being my destination. There were no piles of buffalo or cow bones to mark my path. I had been traveling 60 mph, rather than eight miles in a day. For a town that had been originally founded in 1870, the last known subdivision of this small town once known as Buckeye is a cemetery. That's all that is left of the history of a small town, north of Abilene, Kansas, that hoped and prayed for prosperity: Buckeye, Kansas.

²¹ "Primary Documents in American History: Morrill Act," *The Library of Congress*, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/Morrill.html>.

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