

# Dillon by Mail, Swayne by Rail: A Glimpse of a Kansas Mining Town

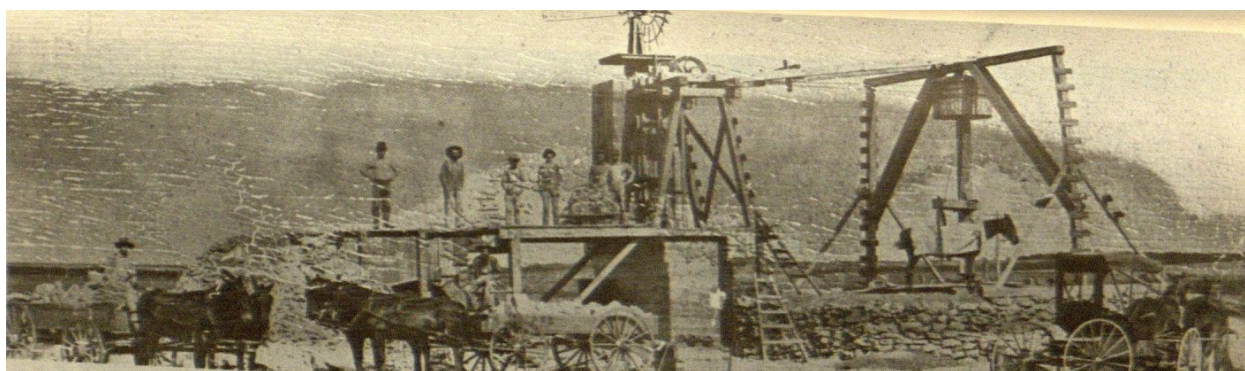


Figure 1. Gypsum mine on the T.J. Cook Farm in 1894. Photo courtesy of *A Century of Hope 1886-1986* by Eva L. Miller.

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Driving west over the hill and farther down 700 Avenue in Dickinson County than I normally venture from my grandma's farm, I headed toward Dillon. My grandma, Marilyn Stroda, who owns a farm just north of Hope, Kansas, not far from Dillon, came with me on the five-minute trip. As we drove along 700 Avenue, we hit a stop sign at the intersection with Key Road, and Grandma turned to me and said, "You've just hit the middle of what used to be the town of Dillon, Kansas."

Today at what used to be the center of the town of Dillon are three houses and south up the hill sits the Dillon Elevator—part of the North Central Kansas Cooperative. Down the hill to the northwest runs Turkey Creek which cuts through Dickinson County until it hits the Smoky Hill River south of Abilene. The elevator sits one mile north of Highway 4 and four miles east of Kansas Highway 15. This is what is left of the town of Dillon—a once thriving community with a population of over 1,000.<sup>1</sup>

The center of Dillon, the intersection of 700 Avenue and Key Road, sits at the corner of four townships. The northeast corner of the town was in Ridge Township. The southeast corner of Dillon was in the Hope Township. The southwest corner of town was located in Banner Township, and the northwest corner of Dillon sat in the Jefferson Township.

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<sup>1</sup> "Dozen or More County Towns Today Live Mostly as Memory," *Abilene Reflector Chronicle*, ca. August 1961.

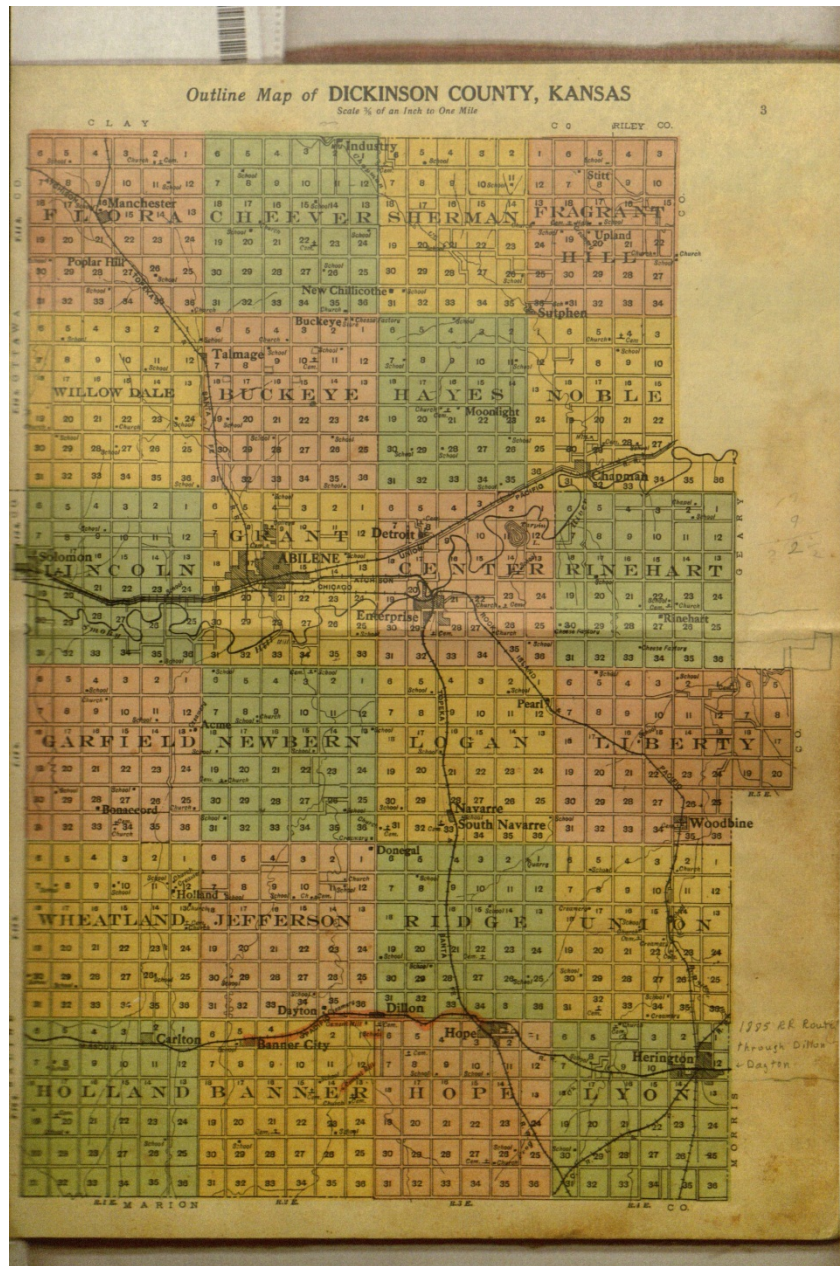


Figure 2. Township Map of Dickinson County. The meeting place of Jefferson, Ridge, Banner, and Hope Townships is the location of Dillon. Image from the private collection of Edna Polston.

Nathan Dillon, an Ohioan by birth, came from Illinois to the Hope Township in 1871.

Dillon, who was a larger landowner in Illinois, bought a large tract of land, but did not move onto it until 1879.<sup>2</sup> His three sons Charley, Albert, and George moved to the township in 1876,

<sup>2</sup> Eva L. Miller, *A Century of Hope: 1886-1986*, (n.p.: n.p., 1986), A9.

taking up land of their own nearby.<sup>3</sup> Together the family owned a substantial portion of the land in the Hope Township. In 1872 the Star Mail route out of Abilene ran through the village. The stop on the route and later the post office was designated “Dillon” after Nathan Dillon.<sup>4</sup>

In 1872 William E. A. Meek and Alonzo L. Evers led a colony of about 40 Tennessee pioneers to the Dillon area along Turkey Creek.<sup>5</sup> These two men rose to become leaders of the community. William Meek secured an initial eighty acres through the Homestead Act and then another eighty through the Timber Culture Act, and steadily built his farm to 560 acres.<sup>6</sup> This was a very religious community and one of the first things the settlement did was build a church. Meek helped found the Presbyterian Church of Dillon in 1872 and was a highly regarded individual by the community.<sup>7</sup>

Alonzo L. Evers was a distinguished Union Soldier during the Civil War. Evers was involved in numerous battles. He was wounded and discharged in April of 1863.<sup>8</sup> In 1872 Evers moved to the Dillon area and started a sheep and cattle farm which slowly grew from a single homestead to over 1,580 acres of land in Dickinson and Morris counties.<sup>9</sup> He also built the biggest house in the area—a large two-story house and inn. A leader of the community, Evers became one of the first two Justices of the Peace in 1872.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Dingler, *Past and Present Towns of Dickinson County Kansas*, (Abilene, KS: Dickinson Country Historical Society, 1999), 87.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>6</sup> Sheryl McClure, “Portrait and Biographical record of Dickinson, Saline, McPherson, Marion Counties: William E.A. Meek,” *Dickinson County KS AHGP*, 2009, <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ksdickin/1893bios/1893meekwilliamea.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Sheryl McClure. “Portrait and Biographical record of Dickinson, Saline, McPherson, Marion Counties: Alonzo L. Evers.” *Dickinson County KS AHGP*, 2009, <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ksdickin/1893bios/1893eversalonzol.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

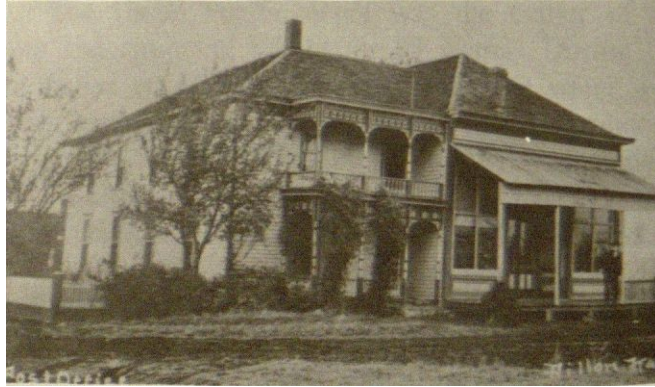


Figure 3. Image of the Evers House ca. 1880s. Photo courtesy of *Past and Present Towns of Dickinson County Kansas* by Helen Dingler.

Dillon was fortunate to get a railroad to run through town. The Topeka, Saline, and Western Railroad intersected Dillon. The railroad was later named the Missouri Pacific. I had the opportunity to interview Dan Cook who lives next to the original railroad line. Cook said that the farmers in the community actually did the work to make the railroad line. It was cheaper for the railroad to hire draft teams locally than to bring them in off site.<sup>11</sup> The Missouri Pacific made stops heading west from Council Grove to Wilsey, Kings Siding, Herington, Hope, Dillon, Elmo, Carlton, Chico, and then headed back east in the evening.<sup>12</sup> The Missouri Pacific named the railroad station Swayne, which brought about the saying “Dillon by mail and Swayne by rail.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Dan Cook, interview by Jacob Stroda, Southern Dickinson County, December 2, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, *A Century of Hope*, C1.

<sup>13</sup> Dingler, *Past and Present Towns*, 92.





Figure 4. Photo of the old Railroad path. The level area between the two rises is where the tracks once lay. Photo by Jacob Stroda, December 2, 2012.

The town of Dillon slowly grew as an agrarian community. This was evident early in the town's history when the Dillon Roller Mill, or flour mill, was built. In 1885 a man named Gustano V. Kuhn bought four acres on Turkey Creek, 1 ½ miles from Dillon.<sup>14</sup> This ground became the site of the roller mill for the next 35 years. The flour mill had several operators; it is believed by historians that Kuhn, along with the help of two Hoffman brothers, built the roller mill.<sup>15</sup> The mill ran off of water power built up by a small dam running across Turkey Creek; pieces of the dam can still be seen today. In 1908 the mill was upgraded with a steam engine for use during droughts, and was upgraded again in 1913 to a 25-horsepower gasoline engine.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> Harvey Brunner, *The Dillon Roller Mill*, n.p.: n.p., 1976), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 2.

Dillon roller mill closed in 1920 due to the declining population of the town and the ease at which mass-produced flour could be obtained at a cheaper price.

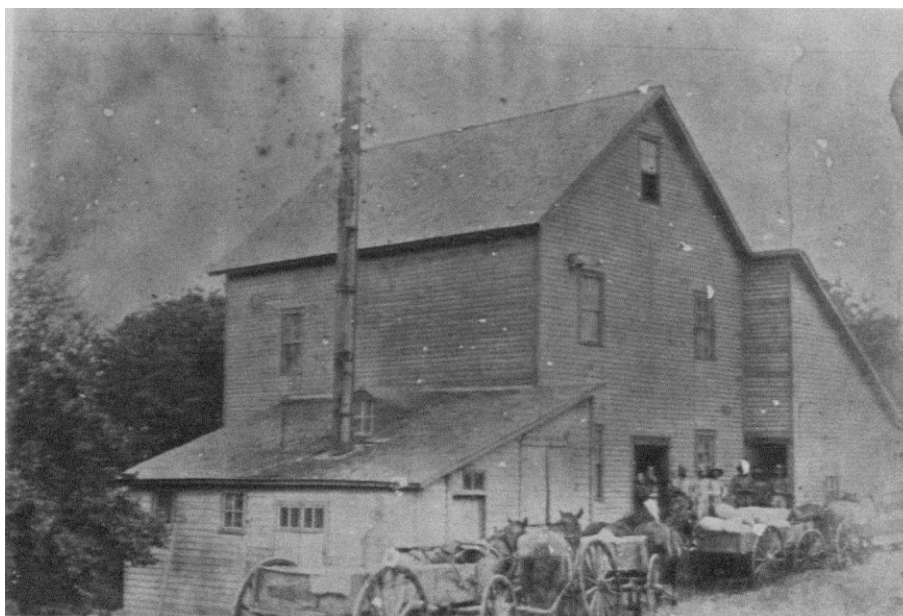


Figure 5. Image of the alfalfa mill in Dillon operated very shortly before becoming the condensery ca. 1900.  
Courtesy *A Century of Hope 1886-1986* by Eva L. Miller

The town of Dillon quickly grew with the discovery of Gypsum in southern Dickinson County in the 1890s. Gypsum is a mineral that can be used for a fertilizer on crops, and a compound that is used to control the drying time in plasters and cement mixtures. Gypsum was important during this period because the majority of houses were built using the lathe and plaster method to finish household walls and ceilings.



Figure 6. Image of Gypsum ore on the T.J. Cook mine site. Photo by Jacob Stroda, December 2, 2012.

There were four gypsum mine sites in Dickinson County. The Kohman mine was three miles south and a mile west of Dillon, and the Klinberg mine was a mile south of town; there was a strip mine that later became the Hope city dump two to three miles from Dillon, and the T.J. Cook mine straight east of town. I went to two of the T.J. Cook mine sites.

Three of the four mines in the Dillon area were strip mines. Strip mines, or above ground mines, are similar to gravel quarries today. The strip mines took everything off of the surface until miners reached the veins of gypsum, which were then removed and sent to the mill. The only mine with a shaft was on the T.J. Cook farm.

As I mentioned earlier, Dan Cook afforded me the opportunity to interview him and take my grandma and I on a tour of his family farm. The first mine site that Cook showed us was the strip mine east of Dillon. This strip mine was the first operation of its kind in the Dillon and Hope area. Gypsum was mined and then carted to a gypsum mill refinery in Hope, which became too expensive to operate as the veins became deeper. The later mines were profitable enough that railroad branch lines were built to the mines that had their mills on site. This mine site was used



as the Hope city dump for years. The Cook family bulldozed the area and restored it to a hay field today.



Figure 7. Image of the T.J. Cook Mine in 1908. Photo courtesy of *A Century of Hope 1886-1986* by Eva L. Miller.

Cook next took us to see the site of what was his great-grandfather T.J. Cook's farm mine. This was the site of the only underground gypsum mine in the Dillon area. This eighty-foot deep shaft was opened in 1894, and the vein was estimated by the United States Gypsum Company to be fourteen feet thick.<sup>17</sup> During the lifetime operation of this mine, it is estimated to have produced 285,000 tons of gypsum, which is roughly twelve acres of area underground that was mined out from under the Cook farm.<sup>18</sup> At peak production there were as many as twenty-five men working in the mine, who worked ten-hour shifts for twenty-one cents per hour six days a week.<sup>19</sup> This was the most dangerous of the mines around Dillon.<sup>20</sup> This mine claimed two lives while in operation; one man accidentally ignited a charge of dynamite, and the other was hit by a large falling rock.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Miller, *A Century of Hope*, D10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, D11.

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

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

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, D12.



Figure 8. Image of miners in the T.J. Cook Mine ca. 1900. Photo courtesy of *A Century of Hope 1886-1986* by Eva L. Miller.

The mine shafts left after production caused issues that Cook has to deal with today. After Cook showed us where the shaft site had been, he took us out to where his farm ground shows the scars of its mining history. All across his ground fifty to one hundred yards from the site of the filled shaft were perfectly round holes. These holes are cave-in sinkholes from where the mine shafts have collapsed. The cave-ins are anywhere from twenty to forty feet deep. Cook explained how the sinkholes form. “As the ceiling of the mine starts to fall in, it creates a conical shape pointing up,” he said. “When the point of this collapsing cone reaches the ceiling it makes a small hole. Once there is an opening to the surface the elements and gravity continue to work on these sinkholes until the walls are straight up and down and the hole has reached its final circumference.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Cook, interview.



Figure 9. Photo of the beginning of the cave-in process. As the hole gets deeper, the walls start to form a conical shape. Photo by Jacob Stroda December 2, 2012.

The sinkholes create unstable and unsafe farming conditions. The mine can cave in at any time. The cave-ins can take anywhere from a week to a couple of years to get to their final circumference.<sup>23</sup> There was one case where Cook warned a hired spray rig operator about the start of a small hole. One week later, the operator noticed that the sinkhole was large enough for his entire spray rig to fall in (see Figure 10)<sup>24</sup> Cook has opted to abandon the ground because of the unsafe conditions left from Dillon's mining days.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.





Figure 10. Dan Cook and Marilyn Stroda observe a sinkhole on the T.J. Cook Farm. Photo by Jacob Stroda December 2, 2012.

During its heyday, Dillon had numerous businesses, including two blacksmith shops, two grocery stores, a two-teacher school, a grain elevator, a flour mill, a hardware store, two churches (the Ashton Presbyterian Church and the Dillon Methodist Episcopal Church), a newspaper, a farm implement store, a train depot, a town paper, a cheese factory, and a town band.<sup>25</sup> According to the town newspaper, the *Dillon Republican*, the town supported a jeweler, a barber, a building contractor, a hat maker, and a livery stable as well.<sup>26</sup>

The schoolhouse for the Dillon School District 120 was one of the largest around. The school was organized in 1885 in a two-story two-classroom building with five feeder grade

<sup>25</sup> Dingler, *Past and Present Towns*, 89.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph W. Murray, *The Dillon Republican*. Vol. 2, no. 51, 4.



schools in the district outside of town.<sup>27</sup> In 1920 the district built a new schoolhouse. In the 1950s Dillon School District 120 dissolved, merging with Hope District 100. In 1966 the area schools became USD 481 Hope–White City.<sup>28</sup>

The town paper was named the *Dillon Republican*. The editor and publisher was a young man by the name of Joseph W. Murray.<sup>29</sup> The paper covered elections, school announcements, local sports, and business reports, as well as national announcements like Groundhog Day. Murray convinced many businesses to advertise in his paper, including the jeweler, the McCormick harvester, and binder agent to run ads. The last issue was on April 22, 1898. Murray continued to run the paper until the Spanish-American War when he joined the army and served until the end of the war; after Murray's discharge he went on to be an editor of a newspaper in Lawrence, KS.<sup>30</sup>

The town of Dillon slowly declined when the mines started to become less productive. As the mining industry left, so did the main customers. Once the main population started moving to places like Herington, Hope, Enterprise, and Abilene looking for work, the shops started to close one by one.<sup>31</sup> Church attendance dwindled; the Presbyterian Church closed in the 1920s and the Methodist church closed in the mid-1930s.<sup>32</sup> The post office closed in 1944, and today the Dillon area is serviced by the Hope Post Office.<sup>33</sup>

Today very little remains on the land to prove there was once a booming little mining town. One of the only structures left is the original elevator, which was moved to its present location when the railroad tracks were moved. The scars of the strip mines and underground

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<sup>27</sup> Dingler, *Past and Present Towns*, 89.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>30</sup> Marilyn Stroda, interview by Jacob Stroda, Southern Dickinson County, December 2, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Dingler, *Past and Present Towns*, 93.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

cave-ins along with some old bricks scattered here and there is all that is left to see of the mines. The one thing that is still in the Dillon region is the people. Descendants of the original settlers from Tennessee continue to live in the region as the Hope community.



Figure 11. Present-day Dillon elevator owned by the North Central Kansas Coop. The original grain elevator moved to the present-day location at the Dillon Elevator. The Dillon Elevator is the tall corrugated tin building used today for mixing livestock feed.

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