

Dutch Butter in Dickinson County



Figure 1. Photograph of Holland Mercantile Co., ca. 1950. At this point, the general store contained parts from three different buildings: the original store, a church, and the former creamery were all been combined to make what is shown in the picture. Photo courtesy of *Past and Present Towns of Dickinson County* by Helen Dingler.

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It may surprise some to learn about the thriving communities that dotted the Great Plains in the past. Today, many of these locations are just plowed fields or large tracts of grazing land. However, at a time when there was another family on almost every quarter section, it is not so hard to imagine the inhabitants from many of these homesteads coming together to form a more cohesive unit. These families sought to form a community that could provide a social structure that included education for their children, respite from the continuous toil the soil required, and, eventually, a structure to create some economic security. This is what happened in Holland, Kansas, a Dickinson County town seven miles south of Abilene and three miles west of Kansas Highway 15.

Some of Holland's first settlers came from a troop of Civil War veterans in 1871 and '72.¹ Clem Bell, an influential figure in the town's development, is listed among these early settlers, but it is not clear if he was actually a veteran of the war or was just in the company of those who were. In 1885, a local school was organized; not only does this indicate some permanency, but it denotes an investment from the surrounding farms. Government aid was usually insufficient in such areas, and it is likely that the local settler's labor, time, and money had to be invested for the school to function. Schools of the time also provided a venue for social functions and political discussions. The later decades of the nineteenth century were a time when farmers formed organizations and bonded together to protect themselves. This school is likely the place where several of the local farmers agreed upon the establishment of the Holland Creamery in 1888.

¹ Trudy Meserve, "Holland Was Homestead by Veterans of the Civil War," *Abilene Reflector Chronicle*, ca. 1950.

Not long after the creamery came S.W. French's General Store, followed by the Holland Telephone Company in 1903. A band was formed in 1905, and after seven years it had its own band hall. The band provided dances and entertainment that enhanced the community. In 1910, the Farmer's State Bank of Holland was organized and was successfully maintained for twenty-six years despite financial crisis and an attempted robbery in 1921.² These are simply a few highlights of Holland's vivacious development; there were many other businesses and establishments that added to the vitality and growth of the town. And while the town may not have been featured in the textbooks relating the history of Kansas, this town has a tie to Kansas-raised President Dwight D. Eisenhower, as well as the independent telephony and farmer cooperative efforts that provide a lot of definition for the period. The creamery and the Bell Family are landmarks in the story of Holland, and this brief survey should add some color to what once was such a vibrant town.

Creamery

The Holland Creamery opened up July 30, 1888; it was a joint venture of several farmers in the area. This was a time in American history that farmers faced a commercial type of agriculture they never had to worry about before. It was increasingly more important for the business of farming to remain liquid. By turning agricultural products into cash, a farmer gained access to goods and services previously out of his reach, but also became dependent on credit, brokers, and consumers in the cities. By uniting in these cooperative business ventures, farmers hoped to escape excessive debt and the expanding credit system, the sinking prices of the market, and the "middle men" who bought from the farmer and sold to the consumer or manufacturer,

² "Who Handles The Farmer's Cash," (newspaper article from unknown paper, Dickinson County Historical Society, ca. 1922); Meserve, "Holland Was Homesteaded by Veterans of the Civil War."

increasing the profit margin as much as possible.³ Also, this was only four years before the advent of the Populist Party and many farmers around the nation were looking for opportunities to have greater political representation. All these culminating factors likely influenced the farmers who organized the creamery under the direction of W. T. W. Sterling.⁴

Like many similar ventures of the time, the creamery was not profitable and was sold to the Belle Springs Creamery in 1894. Belle Springs had just “begun its corporate life” and no doubt the increase of butter production by almost five times was aided by such purchases.⁵ This development adds two significant things to our understanding of Holland. First, the Belle Springs Creamery is the short connection to Ike. President Dwight D. Eisenhower worked for Belle Springs in their ice department; there is a record of his paychecks from the company from June 1906 to December 1910.⁶ The other benefit was in 1905 when Fred Bross was moved to Holland by Belle Springs to manage their recently acquired dairy. It might seem that a new man in town might not be well received, especially if he was sent by the company that essentially bought out the local co-op, but it appears that Fred was accepted. He was the first president of the Holland band; this suggests that he was a leader in organizing it and, due to the popularity and importance of the band, the town accepted Fred Bross into their midst.⁷

³ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 252-253.

⁴ County Historical Record, “Rise and Fall of Holland Town,” *Abilene Reflector Chronicle*, November 1957.

⁵ Paul D. Hoffman, *Chronicle of Belle Springs Creamery Company* (Abilene, KS: Abilene Printing Co., 1975), 9.

⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

⁷ County Historical Record, “Rise and Fall of Holland Town;” Meserve, “Holland Was Homesteaded by Veterans of the Civil War.”



Figure 2. This photograph of Belle Springs Creamery in 1889 is from about five years before it went corporate; this is the precursor to the prominent company where President Eisenhower worked. Newspaper clipping courtesy of Dickinson County Historical Society.

Current residents suggest that the creamery was only another business passing through Holland, but it appears to have been an essential building block. The town name is even supposed to indicate that the quality of butter produced here compared and rivaled that of the Holland across the Atlantic.⁸ Also, it was only after its establishment that Mr. French took the risk to open the general store in Holland,⁹ which became a hot spot for cards, dominoes, political discussion,¹⁰ and stories.¹¹ While the creamery itself did not produce a town, the early cooperative efforts that established it surely led to the development of the cohesiveness that the town later displayed. It also provided an economic pull for people to invest in Holland, as several businessmen courageously did over the years.

⁸ Helen Dingler, *Past and Present Towns of Dickinson County* (Enterprise, KS: Dickinson County Historical Society, 1999), 137.

⁹ *Ibid*, 138.

¹⁰ Meserve, "Holland Was Homesteaded by Veterans of the Civil War."

¹¹ "Two Country Stores Are Still Active in County," *Abilene Reflector Chronicle*, March 3, 1956.

The Bell of the Town

When you look at the county map showing Holland in 1909, you see that the town seems to converge on the corner of four properties belonging to B.A. Myers, E.A. Myers, G.E. Robinson, and C. Bell. As you look closer, you notice that, of the six buildings indicated, three are on C. Bell's land: a church, a creamery, and one un-designated building that is presumably the general store. There is a school across the street from Mr. Bell's property and a little reading into the matter will reveal that it is Bell Valley School, District 117 and was named after an early settler by the name of Clem Bell.¹²

The Bell family was a very influential family in Holland, Kansas; they seemed to be involved somehow in many of the developments that happened there. Clem Bell came to the Holland area in 1871 in the company of Civil War veterans.¹³ He took advantage of the opportunities development afforded and ended up with the creamery on his land. He also rented out a pasture to S.W. French for the general store and had more than one church on his property (one of the churches was south of Holland). When the bank was organized in 1910, Clem had the standing to be the vice president. Two years later, his daughter Sue took over management of the bank after the first cashier ran out, and that alone might look like an obvious case of nepotism. However, Clem was the only one of the directors that did not vote to have Sue instated as the officer of the bank.

¹² Dingle, *Past and Present Towns of Dickinson County*, 139.

¹³ Ibid.



Figure 3. Newspaper clipping announcing that Sue Bell is taking over the bank, ca. 1922. Note the celebratory caption: “Miss Sue Bell and the bank of which she has had active charge the last ten years.” The author notes in the article that they are proud to have a woman in charge of the bank. Newspaper clipping courtesy of Dickinson County Historical Society.

According to a newspaper article written in 1922, Sue got the majority vote to take over the bank. Originally, one of the directors extended the position, and she refused on the grounds of her lack of experience. To this the director replied, “Your father said the same thing.”¹⁴ It appears Sue Bell was a very independent and strong woman; she became a school teacher at the age of 16 (not too irregular at the time), she managed “the telephone exchange of Oklahoma City” at age 20,¹⁵ and there is no indication that she ever got married.¹⁶ While there are many potential reasons for not marrying, a woman of the early twentieth century with such a determined career and independence indicates a strong-willed woman. Also, Sue steered the

¹⁴ “Who Handles The Farmer’s Cash.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ She was still referred to as Ms. Bell and though her dad worried about her at the bank there is no indication of a husband worrying, also marriage at a time when contraceptives were limited in the US usually meant children which would not likely allow the career she had.

bank through some very difficult times in the financial history of America. The bank made it past the 1929 market crash and was not liquidated till 1936. Thousands of banks across the nation had been dissolved by 1933; another three years of security is really an amazing feat.

Winding Down

As farm sizes increased and improved transportation made the miles to larger towns like Abilene shorter, little towns like Holland lost much of the support that had made them so successful.¹⁷ In 1936, one year after the bank was liquidated, the Holland Telephone Company was sold to the Acme Telephone Company. The Holland Company was still intact enough to substantially increase the number of stockholders for Acme. However, the movement indicates a decline in local industry. The very last Holland business to stay open was the general store. The store had switched hands several times, and ultimately ended up under the care of A. T. Medley, who closed its doors in 1958. During those 70 years that marked business in Holland, population peaked at 72, but the town's businesses provided services for many surrounding families.

Today in Holland there are a few establishments that service the area: a Crop Services Center, a Veterinary Clinic owned by a descendant of the aforementioned B.A. Myers, and a bike club that occupies the building that used to be the general store (shown in Figure 3). Though the address on the Crop Service Center says Abilene, green signs along Eden Road announce Holland as you draw close to it. Holland was the axis of a broader community than the population that resided in the town limits, and still today provides service to a similar community.

¹⁷ Meserve, "Holland Was Homesteaded By Veterans of the Civil War."



Figure 3. Photograph of the former general store, taken by Matthew May in December 2012. The building has new siding and a different front, but the windows, and overall structure are the same as shown in Figure 1.

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