

**Moonlight: Founded on Faith, Focused on Community,
Dickinson County, Kansas, 1876-1920**

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Moonlight, located in Hayes Township, Dickinson County, Kansas, was founded by members of the Brethren in Christ Church migrating from Pennsylvania. It thrived temporarily, for about forty years, but dried up as business moved to larger towns and citizens moved away.

Imagine, if you will, what it would be like back in the late 1800s. You're in Pennsylvania, surrounded by mountains, lush wooded forests, family on nearly every farm around you, and roads that wind through the hills, following every curve and rise. Now take all that away and move to the plains of Central Kansas. You came alone, facing an empty, open prairie. Trees are scarce at best, the nearest town is over a day's ride away, and roads only lay in straight, blocked lines.

This was the reality facing Peter Burt, who came to Kansas in 1876 by himself as a scout for a much larger community¹. A large number of members of The Brethren in Christ Church, back in Pennsylvania, had decided to move out to Kansas. Peter volunteered to serve as an advance, reporting back to the individuals still back east. After getting off the train in Abilene, he spent almost three years getting things ready for the arrival of the Brethren in Christ Church.

In 1879, Peter's hard work paid off. Three hundred colonists rented an entire train, bringing with them animals, machinery for farming, and household goods. Initially, they camped out in Abilene, before spreading across Dickinson County and founding five separate communities. One of these, set north of Abilene, became the town of Moonlight.

The land that they settled on was originally owned by the Kansas Pacific Railroad², which had been deeded the land by the government in 1874. Around one hundred of the colonists bought land from the railroad, forming a small community.

At first, though, the settlement was nameless. Sometime in the 1880s, that changed. A Scottish Civil War leader, Thomas Moonlight, ran for the position of Governor of Kansas. While

¹ Hoover, Jared. Interview by Dakota Caldwell. Moonlight, KS, November 21, 2016

² Abstract of Title, Situated in Dickinson County, state of Kansas, A tract of land in the northeast quarter (ne ¼) of section 21 (21), township 12 (12) south, range 3 (3) east of the 6 p.m. described as follows: beginning at a point 467.28 feet east of the northwest corner of said northeast quarter thence east, along the north line of said section, a distance of 413.82 feet more or less, to a point 881.10 feet east of said northwest corner of the northeast quarter of said section; thence south 326 feet; thence west a distance of 440.91 feet to a point; thence north 162 feet; thence east 27.09 feet; thence north 164 feet, to the point of beginning. In private collection of Doug Caldwell.

he was unable to secure the election, he was able to make an impact on northern Dickinson county.

Thomas Moonlight had an incredibly interesting history. He was born in Scotland, though the records are fuzzy on specifics³. In fact, he is recorded as being baptised by the Church before he is recorded as being born. No records exist of him leaving Scotland, but it is known that he enlisted in the army at age twenty.

Soon after enlisting in the army, the Civil War began. He was stationed in Kansas at the time, and was quickly shuffled and reshuffled into different units as the uncertain political landscape changed. He rose in rank as he transferred between units, eventually serving as a colonel. At this point, he led troops against border ruffians and bushwhackers during Bleeding Kansas, as well as pursuing Confederate troops following several massacres. After the Civil War, he became the commander of a fort in western Kansas and fought in the Indian Wars. After he left the army, he entered politics.

The absolutely fascinating part of this is that, when Moonlight came over from Scotland, he came with two cousins, George and Thomas Moonlight. While no real records exist for the second Thomas (he is known to be buried in New Zealand), George made quite a name for himself. In fact, soon after arriving in America, George became a surveyor and left for New Zealand. He wound up naming several geographical locations in the country, and had an entire township named after him. Additionally, while in New Zealand, he took on Thomas's military achievements as his own, calling himself "Captain" for the rest of his life.

In 1886, Moonlight came through Abilene, campaigning for his position⁴. Though no records exist, urban legend states that Moonlight offered to help push the Kansas Pacific railroad

³ "Thomas Moonlight." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 8 Oct. 2016. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.

⁴ "Liberal Republicans..." *Abilene Weekly Reflector*, September 9, 1886

through the community. This would have given the settlers a valuable boost, and so, naturally, they named themselves after the politician. Both the campaign and the railroad failed to materialize, but the name stuck.

After arriving at their final location, one of the first things that they built was, naturally, a church. The steps of the Bethel BIC church still stand today, a testament to their strength and ingenuity. The residents didn't stop with the church, though. In short order, a blacksmith shop, grocery store, city hall, post office, school, and creamery were also built. The creamery, though, became the foundation of the Moonlight economy. It was originally owned by the Sheets family, a small business that was able to process milk into usable products. Since nearly every farm in the area had a cow, this business was of utmost importance.

It quickly became such a pillar that, in 1891, when talk began circulating of closing the creamery, a meeting was held in the nearby town of Enterprise to try and keep it running⁵. The entire Hayes township shipped milk to this location, and desperately needed the business to keep functioning. The meeting obviously succeeded, as Ezra Sheets is recorded as training to take over the Creamery, continuing the family business.

While the Creamery was enormously successful for quite some time, other businesses that attempted to take root in the town weren't given that chance. At some point, a man with the last name of Bolinger opened a tobacco shop. It was so hated that the church held a prayer meeting, intended to drive him away. It succeeded, as Bolinger left town shortly afterwards. Unfortunately, no written records can be found of the shop.

One of the most interesting parts of the town was the school. Built in the early 1900s, it became District 124, the last rural school in Dickinson County. It stood for quite some time, teaching children into the 1940s.

⁵ "North Dickinson...", "Abilene Weekly Reflector, March 26, 1891

Ultimately, while the town had its commercial successes and fails, Bethel Church remained the center of Moonlight. Their community was intricately tied around it, incorporating all their social activities into its schedule.

One of the main things Bethel did to bring people together was an annual Love Feast. This was a massive celebration that lasted an entire weekend, filled with preaching, Communion, footwashing, worship sessions, and lots of food. In fact, this was one of the rare occasions where the residents would make the trip into town to buy real bread and apple butter to feed everyone. Iron silverware, stored all year for this occasion, would be brought out and polished for the event. Stew was also a staple at the events.

Men would sit on one side of the church sanctuary, while women sat on the other. Curtains were drawn between them, so that no inappropriate exposure would occur. After this came Communion, where a common cup was used for the entire church.

Even bigger than the love feasts, General Conference was occasionally held in Moonlight. On two separate occasions, BIC leaders from across the country convened at Bethel to discuss current church issues. One of the most commonly discussed items was what churchgoers were supposed to wear. An example of common BIC dress is shown below. Other issues, such as heracies, were discussed as well.



Figure 1. A Photo of Levi and Louisa Winger c. 1930, Private collection of Betty Hoover

While Bethel was indeed the foundation of Moonlight, it wasn't without its squabbles. In January 1890, Bible classes were organized for the community⁶. However, these lasted little more than a year, as in February 1891, the classes were discontinued due to "objections⁷."

The largest threat to the church came in the early 1900s. Two traveling evangelists, tent preachers, set up shop in Moonlight. One of them led the worship music, while the other focused on preaching. When they arrived, they immediately began preaching that belonging to a specific denomination was wrong. Everyone belonged to the "Church of God," and specifying that you identified as otherwise was sinning.

⁶ "North Dickinson....," Abilene Weekly Reflector, January 2, 1890

⁷ "General News," Abilene Weekly Reflector, February 19, 1891

The BIC were powerfully attached to their denomination. It was what pulled them from Pennsylvania to Kansas, and what drove them as they pushed forward. These evangelists flew in the face of that. In addition, the two preachers began trying to sell dissention, referring to the Bethel preacher, Engle, as an “Old Whiskered Mule.”

Fortunately, this disturbance was soon put to rest. A nearby family, the Longs, knew that the evangelists were trouble. None of them belonged to the BIC church, but they were sympathetic to the cause, and had friends that did belong to the BIC. Knowing that the community was being threatened, they did the only thing they could: led an attack on the preachers.

During a revival meeting, the Longs snuck up next to the tent and began to throw rocks up onto the canopy. When the tent collapsed, the evangelists did their best to run. One of them, a younger man, was able to outrun the Longs and escape. The other, an older gentleman, was captured. He was then led to a horse trough and told to leave. When he refused, he was dunked repeatedly. The first several times, he came up singing and praising God. After this failed to achieve a desired result, the Longs held him under long enough that he finally agreed to leave. The younger man who escaped was reportedly seen around the countryside in the aftermath, but ultimately ran off and was never heard from again.

Moonlight never had a definite ending date. In fact, the Hoovers who live there now are direct descendants of Peter Burt, showing how the family has stuck with the settlement even as it grew smaller.

The town began to decline soon after it was founded. The creamery, one of the economic foundations, had numerous struggles. In 1896⁸, the Sheets family sold the business to the Oakwood Creamery. It changed hands again when Oakwood sold the factory to the Belle Springs

⁸ “Abstract...”

Creamery. Belle Springs was a major business in Abilene at the time, serving as a massive processor. For unknown reasons, while Belle Springs continued in Abilene until 1938, the expansion in Moonlight was sold back to a local farmer in 1912. It was demolished shortly afterward, though the foundation can still be seen.

The blacksmith shop suffered a similar fate. After it closed its doors, it was actually removed from its foundation and drug across the section to serve as a machine shed. It housed machinery for some time until it was demolished as well. The school has also since vanished, being torn down in (insert date) after it was closed. Other buildings in the town were torn down, one at a time, until now only a handful of houses and the steps to the church still remain.

Attempts were made to keep the town alive. In March 1916, oil and natural gas rights were sold to John Stark. It is unknown exactly why he sought those rights, as there isn't any indication of either of these all around Abilene. It seems that Stark figured this out, as the rights were sold back to the farmers in June 1917.

This was, realistically, about the time that Moonlight dried up. Various aspects of it hung around for a time longer, but the heyday was past. Today, only remnants and memories exist of the community. While the infrastructure may have waned, though, the impact of Moonlight will be around for generations to come. As stories are told and retold of the community, and new BIC churches are built by the descendants of the original colonists, it will live on, always shining a light on the prairie as it did a hundred years ago.

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