

# The Town That Refused To Give Up

Navarre, KS

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Figure 1. Photograph of the north side of Main Street in Navarre. Photo courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives - Wichita State University Libraries. Photographer and original date unknown.

In the late hours of October 28, 1939, the small town of Navarre, KS, was peaceful and quiet, just like any other small Dickinson County town, as most of its residents were asleep. None of them could have imagined that on that night their town would forever be changed. Ed Hoffman had closed the Helstab Hardware store, which was located on the south side of Main Street around 9:45 that evening. Later, around 11 pm, he was awakened by a noise that sounded like someone had pounded on the side of his house. After finding no one around, he shrugged it off and went back to bed, only to be awakened again by the fire alarm. Flames were seen coming from the Helstab Hardware store by Mrs. Dave Rogers, who lived across the street to the north of the building. Mrs. Rogers and several others said they had heard a dull explosion a short time before the blaze was discovered. The firefighting force consisted of volunteers from neighboring towns and farmers from the surrounding area. As was the problem with many small towns during this period, Navarre had no water supply, so firefighters had to form bucket brigades in an attempt to oust the blaze. Because firefighting equipment from nearby towns would be useless without a water supply, none of them answered the call for aid. When the blaze reached the Hussey lumber yard residence, Mr. and Mrs. Hinkle and their two children were fast asleep in the west side of the building which was made into a home for the manager and his family. It was first believed that the Hinkles were not at home over the weekend, but a lady who appeared on the scene said that Mr. Hinkle had ordered two quarts of milk from her for Sunday morning, so she insisted that someone break down the door and wake the family. The Hinkles were finally awakened and hustled from the burning building.<sup>1</sup>

When light came the next morning, the residence had to assess the damage and recover anything they could. Residents reported nearly two thousand people from the surrounding area came in to help out and survey the damage. There were several businesses besides the hardware

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<sup>1</sup> *Abilene Reflector*, Oct. 29, 1939.

store, including the Hussey lumberyard, the Larsen Creamery, and the Larsen home, that were destroyed in the blaze. This was a huge blow to a town that had been growing and thriving. Town hall was on the second floor of the hardware store, so it too was gone. None of these buildings were ever rebuilt, so this was a serious blow to the town economy. That town hall had been used for plays, meetings, and social gatherings, so the loss of such a center was felt in the social life of the community as well. Fires like these were a real fear of early prairie towns; there were no fire departments or engines, and the use of coal and wood caused many fire hazards. Navarre was no stranger to fire, though. In 1927, the Navarre hotel was burned down, and the telephone building had been burned down. In the spring of 1917, the Brethren Church was burned down, and in 1929, the school burned as well.<sup>2</sup> This is proof that techniques in heating and electricity were not the best in the early 1900s, and that we have improved them a lot, because we do not see the number of fires in this day and age.

Fires like these are the reason why a lot of small towns are not even on the map anymore; everything gets destroyed, people feel that there is no reason to rebuild, and so they just move to another area or out into the country. Some towns, however, make it through a big blow like this; they may never retain the same glory they had before, but they still have a steady population where everybody knows each other. The personalities of the rural people really show up in a small town such as Navarre, and that has kept it from becoming a ghost town and long forgotten.

The town is located along 1400 Avenue, and is close to the intersection of Mink Rd., about eight miles south, southeast of Abilene.

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<sup>2</sup> Elaine Hassler, "Navarre," (N.p., 1988), 21.

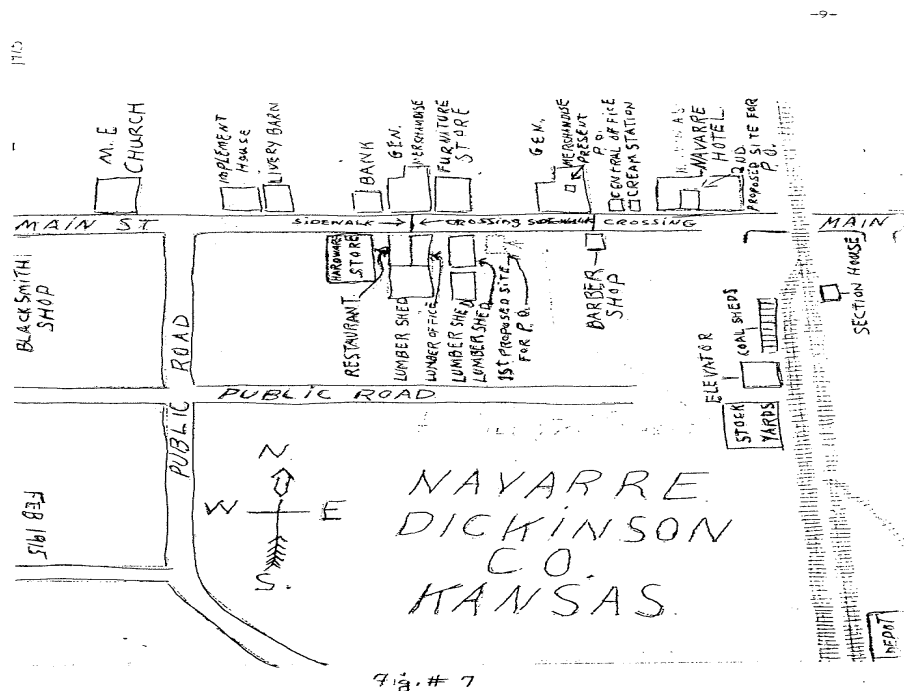


Figure 2. A hand-drawn map of Navarre, courtesy of Dickinson County Historical Society.

Navarre was created like a lot of small prairie Kansas towns in the late 1800s: by means of the church and school. In 1869, at a “love feast” at the John Humbarger home, church followers organized the German Baptist Brethren Church southeast of Abilene.<sup>3</sup> In 1887, Elder Wrightsman platted the town in Logan Township. Two years later, in 1889, Wrightsman was able to solicit the funds to build the new Brethren Church in the city limits of Navarre. Sadly, this was the church that burned down in 1917; it was replaced by another building which no

<sup>3</sup> Helen Dinger, *Past and Present Towns of Dickinson County, Kansas*, (Abilene, KS: Dickinson County Historical Society, 1999), n.p.

longer stands, but was located near the present-day cemetery on the west side of town, south of Main Street. There was also a Methodist church built in 1910 on the north side of Main Street; this church used ministers from the surrounding towns of Hope and Woodbine.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 3. Photograph of the bell that used to be on top of the Church of the Brethren that now sits at the cemetery gates. Taken by Adam Coup December 8, 2012.

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<sup>4</sup> Hassler, "Navarre," 10.





Figure 4. The Navarre Cemetery, located on Southwest side of town. Photograph taken by Adam Coup, December 8, 2012.

There was a school district in the area before the town was platted. It was District 13 Prairie Center, which started in 1880. The first board members were Joseph Billings, B.B. Kesdinger, and A.K. Bassler. They moved the school into town July 20, 1901, from its location one half mile east of town. The new building was built in 1914, but it too fell by way of fire in 1929. For one and a half years after that, classes were held in the Brethren church. Before the building burned, high school classes were held in the Methodist church basement from 1924 to 1926. Navarre had a postal service in 1884 and was actually a third-class city for a while during the period of 1915 to 1930. This was due to large shipments of butter from the Ira Kaffman Creamery, the baby chick shipments from Lenhert Hatchery, and the large influx of Mexican

workers on the Santa Fe railroad.<sup>5</sup> The early 1900s were a time of good spirits and doing things that would help put people in a good mood, and this included the formation of a town band. A lot of the small towns during this time had bands that consisted of volunteers from the community.<sup>6</sup>



Front row- Jake Linden, Bube Engle, Jim Lacey, Leander Engle, Ray Sheets, Kenneth Issitt  
 Second row- Robert Homler, Leo Zellinger, Norman Engle, Paul Lemby  
 Third row- Harvey Eshelman, Howard Homler, Oscar Londene, George Issitt, Fred Londene, \_\_\_\_\_feller  
 Leader Clem Pilsner is seated in front of the group

Figure 5. Photograph of the Navarre town band, courtesy of the Dickinson County Historical Society.

The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroad first came through Navarre in 1887. It was a branch that started at Neva, which is three miles west of Strong City, came through Navarre, and went all the way to Superior, Nebraska. The depot station was located south of the crossing of Main Street. In 1996, the Santa Fe merged with Burlington North to become the BNSF, which is what it stays today. However, most of the locals still call it the Santa Fe.<sup>7</sup> The railroad

<sup>5</sup> Hassler, "Navarre," 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>7</sup> "Navarre, Kansas," *Wikipedia.org*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Navarre,\\_Kansas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Navarre,_Kansas).

was a crucial part of Navarre's development, just like it was for many small towns of the period. It connected the town with the rest of the nation for trade and commerce. It was not just freight trains that went through either. People could pay a small fee and get rides to the surrounding areas; you could get to Hope, which is only seven miles to the south. The railroad still runs through the town right next to the current elevator.





Figure 6. Photograph one mile south of town at BNSF crossing looking north. Taken by Adam Coup December 8, 2012.



Figure 7. Photograph of the BNSF railroad crossing of Main Street. Taken by Adam Coup, December 8, 2012.

Another thing most of the small towns in Kansas have in common is that they usually have an elevator; in fact, the elevator is all that is left of some towns. Since nearly all small towns are agricultural-based communities, elevators can become the center for the town. With my experience working at one for a while, I discovered that they can even become very important social places where farmers that live around the area will come in every morning, drink coffee, and discuss with others how they are doing and share information with each other,



and Navarre is no exception to this. Chris Hoffman of Enterprise, KS, established Navarre's first elevator in 1901. Later there were two established elevators in the town. They were located where the current one is on the south side of Main Street, along the railroad tracks. On the west side of the tracks was the George Issitt elevator, and on the east side was the Farmers Union Coop.<sup>8</sup> Today, the Navarre elevator is part of the North Central Kansas Cooperative; it covers both sides of the tracks as it runs between the two concrete bins in the figure below. The North Central Kansas Cooperative also has elevators in surrounding towns of Hope, Dillon, and Woodbine.



Figure 8. NCKC elevator on the south side of Main Street. Photograph taken by Adam Coup, December 8, 2012.

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<sup>8</sup> Hassler, "Navarre," 5.

Navarre is still a very functional town today, even after it seemed it would go the way of so many other small towns and vanish completely. That being said, there does not appear to be any growth possibilities for the town. The postmaster's office was closed down in 1987, and though this is usually the final straw for most towns, it continues to thrive as a small community. I believe the main reasons for this are the fact that there are still many good houses in the town, and people are drawn to that small town charm that a place like Navarre has with its nice people and simple, quiet life. The elevator is another main factor in that it brings people in from the surrounding area for jobs and the services it provides to the community. So, what was once a bustling town with many businesses and crowded streets is now a quiet town with old worn-down buildings that hold a rich history, giving the people who still live there memories of the past. They will always be reminded of how their town endured years of hardship, yet they refused to give up.



Figure 9. Photograph of the north side of Main Street, taken by Adam Coup December 8, 2012.

## Bibliography

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