

# Pearl, Kansas Dickinson County

Research Paper for  
Kansas State University  
HIST 558

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November 28, 2011

Pearl, located in Dickinson County, KS, sprouted from one man's economic aspirations and endeavors. John "Jackie" Taylor emigrated from England with his family in 1838 at the age of 13. In the early 1840s, he moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he learned the grocery business under the guidance of pork packers and later bought his first grocery store. Jackie's brother, Joseph Taylor, joined Jackie, and together they formed a partnership, which rapidly expanded to the ownership of several grocery stores. Joseph Taylor moved to Kansas in the early 1860s after hearing the railroads were offering land. He found suitable land in Dickinson County and bought the section of land just south of where Pearl once stood.<sup>i</sup>

Wishing to follow the success of his brother, Jackie moved to Kansas in 1872. He purchased over ten sections of land adjacent to his brothers' in Dickinson County from the railroad at four dollars an acre. On it, he erected two stone homes and two three-story barns over the course of three years. During that period, Jackie traveled between Cincinnati and Kansas, helping run the grocery business, while also cultivating over one thousand acres of land in Kansas, with another sixteen hundred acres added later.

In 1876, Jackie sold his shares of the grocery company to Joseph and continued to buy land in Dickinson County. He spent the following two years working his lands before moving his family to Kansas in 1878. Over the next several years, he and his family successfully raised wheat and cattle.

When the railroads began rapidly expanding into Kansas, Jackie saw the potential to profit from them. If he could get the railroad to run through his lands, he could expand the market for his wheat and cattle into larger cities. So, in 1887, he offered the Rock

Island Railroad Company the right-of-way to lay tracks through his land. When his offer was accepted and a man named Robert Ballantyne erected a train depot, the town of Pearl, named after Jackie's youngest daughter, was born.

A neighborhood post office had already been established in 1883, with Sam Heller as the first postmaster. William N. Taylor, nephew of Jackie, took over as postmaster in the mid 1880s and remained in the position until the spring of 1889, when post office closed. The post office was then moved and reopened in Pearl in November of 1889 under the direction of Gus Leonard and listed as Section 5, Liberty Township. The location of the office within the town itself changed several times and its postmaster changed just as often, until it officially closed in 1935.

Building upon his father's success, Jackie's son, Clarence, erected Pearl's first grain elevator southeast of the main street in 1890. The elevator was destroyed by a fire in the summer of 1903, but it was replaced and upgraded that same year with the power of two massive steam engines furnished by J. B. Ehram.

Once the elevator was established, the town really began to take shape. In 1904, a creamery station, blacksmith shop, the Pearl Town Mercantile, and a farm implement shop were opened. The blacksmith shop was later converted into an auto repair shop once automobiles became popular. The creamery station was one of the first few of its type with access to a railroad.

In 1902, Pearl Union #1 school was founded. Pearl Union #1 resulted from the joining of Pearl District 97 in Logan Township and Big Bonanza District 103, becoming one of the first consolidated schools in Kansas. The school was a two-story, native stone

building complete with a basement, built at a cost of \$4,000. Two teachers taught in separate classrooms on the first floor, an auditorium and assembly room occupied the second floor, and the basement served as living quarters for the custodian and his family<sup>ii</sup>. In 1914, two years of high school were added to the curriculum and were taught on the upper floor. At its height, the school had an enrollment of 45 students.

Pearl Union #1 also had one of the first bus transit systems in Kansas. Horses and mules pulled the first busses, which were referred to as “hacks.” In early 1920, a commerce truck and a custom body Model-T Ford replaced the busses. In the winter, the vehicles heated their interiors by cycling their exhaust up through vents in the floors. Students knew they were sitting too close to the vents if they smelled the rubber soles of their boots melting.

The same year the school opened, Mrs. C. Willet Taylor organized the Union Sunday School. Attendance quickly grew to 125 members, each of whom were issued gold pins inscribed with “Union SS.” Sunday School and church services were held in the auditorium on the second floor of the schoolhouse. Ministers traveled from nearby Woodbine or Navarre to minister to the congregation until the Reverend Ralph Taylor, formerly the reverend of Enterprise Methodist Church, was permanently assigned in the late 1920s<sup>iii</sup>.

September 29, 1922 marked the completion of a community hall. Volunteers constructed the building using lumber from razed Fort Riley army barracks, at a cost of \$4,500. The hall was located south of the school building. Social activities, community

suppers and school programs, such as basketball and volleyball games, were all held in Pearl Community Hall.<sup>iv</sup>

The Pearl Cooperative Association was formed in 1948. A new storage facility was constructed in 1954, and J. B. Ehram and Suns Manufacturing Company added new machinery and elevators in 1962. In 1994, Pearl Cooperative consolidated with the Alida Cooperative elevator, located in Chapman, KS, to become the Alida Pearl Cooperative Association, which still exists today.

Both World War I and World War II took their toll on Pearl, causing its population to shrink. Many young men were called up to fight, leaving the town without a stable workforce. Booming industries, promising higher wages lured those left behind to jobs in larger urban areas. Automobiles made it easier for people to travel elsewhere for work and a lack of access to major roads deterred others from settling in the area. Further hurting the community, the Rock Island Railroad abandoned its service through Pearl in the early 1970s as it dealt with financial troubles, eventually declaring bankruptcy in 1979.

Pearl managed to survive for almost 80 years, but all that remains of the once bustling community are the old railroad tracks and the still functioning Alida Pearl Coop grain elevators. The grain towers are the first things a person sees when driving towards the spot where Pearl once stood. They stand out, memorializing the rich history and lasting presence of the town that once existed around them. Pearl was once a thriving community, built upon the dreams of an enterprising businessman, but succumbed to the strains of modernization and the pull of its inhabitants to the urban core. The town serves

as an example of the fate experienced by many once-thriving communities across the state of Kansas.

**Illustrations and Captions:**



Figure 1: Grain elevator, erected in 1890 by Jackie's son Clarence.



Figure 2: Two-story schoolhouse, built 1902.

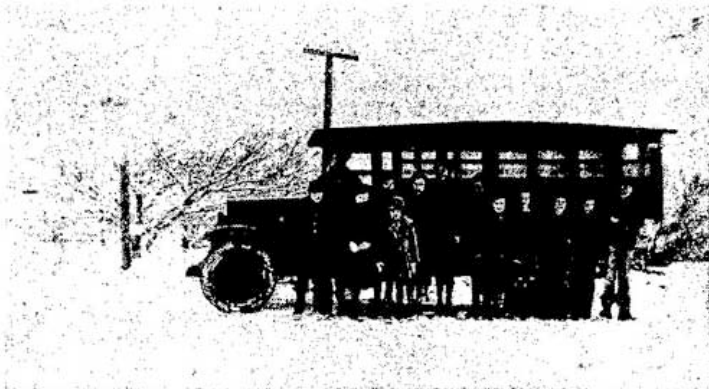


Figure 3: Modified Model-T used as a school bus.

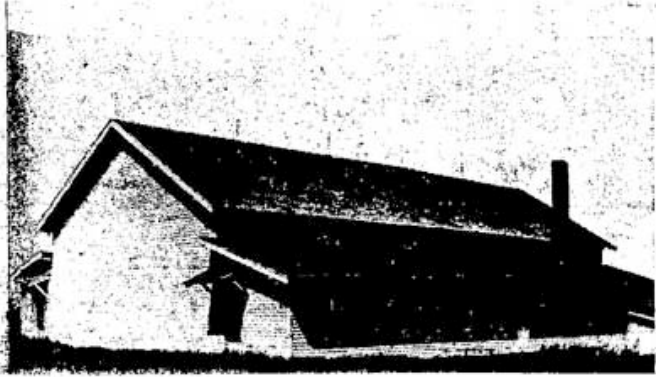


Figure 4: Community Hall, built September 29, 1922.



Figure 6: Alida Pearl Cooperative grain tower, still standing and in use today. Established 1944.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Scott, Phyllis. *Pearl, A Research Paper to Fulfull the Requirements for English Composition II*. (Cloud County Community College. 12, May 1981).

<sup>ii</sup> Helen Dingler, *Past and Present Dickinson County*, (Dickinson County Historical Society, 1999), 240.

<sup>iii</sup> Helen Dingler, *Past and Present Dickinson County*, (Dickinson County Historical Society, 1999), 241.

<sup>iv</sup> Helen Dingler, *Past and Present Dickinson County*, (Dickinson County Historical Society, 1999), 242.