

Chetolah: One Place, Many Faces

Ellis County, Kansas



Figure 1. Photograph of the Chetolah town site present-day. Photo by author. Chetolah Gold Road is one of the only reminders of Chetolah's existence today.

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The lost town of Chetolah, located in Ellis County, Kansas, was settled by three diverse groups of people at different time intervals: the Pawnee Indians, optimistic railroad investors, and hopeful gold miners. The town struggled to survive after missing the railroad and finally drifted out of existence after being subjected to a false gold rush. Although the town was never completely revitalized, in the 1920s it became a tourist attraction known as Golden Springs Beach. This study provides a history of Chetolah using maps, newspapers, photographs, and an interview of the longtime property owner.

Imagine a bright, sunny day near a spring-fed pond. Geese float atop the water, and turtles leisurely sun on logs near the shore. This is the sight that first greeted me when I arrived at the former town site of Chetolah, situated along the Smoky Hill River in southern Ellis County, Kansas, in Smoky Hill Township. The view I saw was probably similar to the sight Pawnee Indians witnessed there 160 years ago. They would have hunted buffalo on the bluestem and grama prairie¹ and fashioned tools from the prevalent limestone and shale.² After the Pawnee vacated the area in the 1860's, Chetolah saw ambitious railroad investors come and go during the 1880's, followed by hopeful gold miners eager to strike it rich in the 1890s and early 1900s. Between 1926 and 1933 the area even fostered a tourist attraction in the form of Golden Spring Beach. But Chetolah might never have been settled if not for its natural landscape. From the abundance of fresh spring water to the potentially gold-yielding shale hills, the geography of Chetolah was instrumental in the repeated settlement and decline of the town.

Pawnee Indian Village

In 1844, Lt. John C. Fremont led his second expedition, numbering 26 men, along the Smoky Hill River to explore the West. He began his journey at the river's junction with the Missouri River and traveled west.³ It was on July 17, 1844, during his return trip that Lt. Fremont had an exciting encounter with the Pawnee Indian Village located where the town site of Chetolah was later established. His report of the expedition records the event as follows:

“On the 17th we discovered a large village of Indians encamped at the mouth of a handsomely wooded stream on the right bank of the river. Readily inferring from the nature of the encampment that they were Pawnee Indians and confidently expecting good treatment from a people who received an annuity from the Government, we proceeded directly to the village

¹ Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (2nd Edition), (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 3, 5.

² “Ellis County, Kansas,” e-Reference Desk, accessed May 1, 2012, <http://www.e-referencedesk.com/resources/counties/kansas/ellis.html>.

³ Howard Raynesford, “Notes of Howard Raynesford,” *Kansas Collection*, 1953, <http://www.kancoll.org/articles/raynesford/raynotes.htm#village>.

where we found assembled nearly all the Pawnee Tribe, who were now returning from the crossing of the Arkansas where they had met the Kiowa and Commanche Indians. We were received by them with unfriendly rudeness and characteristic insolence which they never fail to display whenever they find an occasion for doing so with impunity. The little that remained of our goods was distributed among them but proved entirely insufficient to satisfy their greedy rapacity; and after some delay and considerable difficulty we succeeded in extricating ourselves from the village and encamped on the river about fifteen miles below.”⁴

Two months later it was discovered that what Lt. Fremont mistook for “unfriendly rudeness and characteristic insolence” was actually a heated debate about robbing and murdering his entire party. The full story came to light when several of the Pawnee responsible for preventing the attack encountered Major Wharton, who was visiting several other Pawnee villages, and told him the full story. Upon discovering that there were six Indians present responsible for preventing Lt. Fremont’s death, Major Wharton gave a grandiose speech along with some tobacco and a blanket to each of the Indians.⁵

Although Fremont failed to record the longitude and latitude of this Pawnee village where he was almost attacked, it is possible to verify that it was located at the same place as the future Chetolah town site based on the recorded locations of his campsites the previous and following nights.⁶ A map in the *Historical Atlas of Kansas* showing pre-territorial trails through Kansas supports this theory by indicating the end point of the Pawnee Trail where it intersects the Smoky Hill River, very near the town site of Chetolah.⁷ It is probable that the Pawnee village was located at the endpoint of the trail, especially considering the availability of fresh water provided by the spring. In addition, remains of the village were visible years later by the presence of over 50 large stone rings. These stones had been used to hold down the edges of the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Socolofsky Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (2nd Edition), 17.

teepees, but were later abandoned when the Indians relocated.⁸ Mr. Schutte, a nearby property owner, wrote that he remembered seeing Pawnee camps there up until the early 1860s. Later on, the property was bought by Mike Unrein, who used the stones to construct a barn. In the interest of preserving their locations, Unrein placed a stake in the center of each ring.⁹ As seen in Attachment One, a partial map of the village was created in the 1930s by Mr. H.M. Pollack, and later completed by Howard Raynesford in 1953.

Hopes for a Railroad

By 1888, the Pawnee Indians had not frequented the natural spring for many years, giving Thomas Fulgrum the opportunity to rediscover the site. Fulgrum named the area Riverview, but later changed it to Chetolah, after the Native American name for the Smoky Hill River.¹⁰ Fulgrum recognized the value of the land as Ellis County prepared itself for the arrival of the Omaha, Dodge City and Southwestern Railroad, a north and south railroad that would cut through the county.¹¹ Its proposed route can be seen in Attachment Two. Because of Chetolah's geographic location and access to water, it was in a prime location to receive a depot on this new line. Fulgrum convinced four other investors of Chetolah's worth, and on July 2, 1888, the Chetolah Town Site Company was incorporated.¹² Seven months later on February 18, 1889, a new petition was filed under the name of the Chetolah Land and Town Company. This new corporation was comprised of three new investors as well as two original shareholders, T. Fulgrum and Dora Barnes.¹³

⁸ Raynesford, "Notes of Howard Raynesford."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Chetolah," *Hays Republican*, July 7, 1888.

¹¹ "Another Railroad for Hays City," *Hays Democratic Times*, Nov. 15, 1888.

¹² Kittie Dale, "The Gold Boom of Smoky Hill City," *Hays Daily News*, June 25, 1967.

¹³ Ibid.

Backed with funding from his investors, Fulgrum began building a city. Before the close of 1888, a bridge had been built over the vivacious Smoky Hill River, and construction supplies could be easily carried to the town site where a twelve room hotel had been built in preparation for future railroad workers.¹⁴ This bridge and the frame of the hotel can be seen during its construction in Figure 2 on the next page. In 1888, the town also welcomed the arrival of the Palatine Post Office, which had originally been located a few miles east, but was moved into the Chetolah Hotel to serve the area's expected population increase.¹⁵

Much to Fulgrum's disappointment, the north-south railroad had a harder time finding investors for the new line than he had for his new town. In addition, contractors expressed concern about constructing a stable railroad bridge over the Smoky Hill River, which was prone to flash flooding.¹⁶ Eventually this concern was validated when the bridge in Figure 2 washed out and was later replaced by the bridge in Figure 3, built by the WPA in 1940.¹⁷ For these reasons, the Omaha, Dodge City and Southwestern Rail Company folded along with the hopes for a railroad in Chetolah. Without the railroad and its ancillary businesses, Chetolah could not achieve economic success or population growth, and the Chetolah Land and Town Company collapsed a few months after its founding in 1889.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Blaine Burkey, *At Home in Ellis County, Kansas* (Hays, Kansas: Historical Book Committee, 1991), 63; confirmed by a county map published in *Hays Free Press*, Dec. 8, 1888.

¹⁶ Dale, "The Gold Boom of Smoky Hill City."

¹⁷ Harold Kraus, interview by Jessica Wheeler, Hays, KS, Mar. 23, 2012.

¹⁸ Ibid.



Figure 2. Photograph of the Chetolah Bridge looking south with the town site visible in the distance. 1888. Personal collection of Harold Kraus. Note the tall building frame on the right is the Chetolah Hotel.



Figure 3. Photograph of the former Chetolah town site as it appears today. March 23, 2012. Photo by author.

The hotel, shown below, closed for commercial business the same year the Chetolah Land and Town Company folded and switched hands between Fulgrum and A. W. Copeland, who lived there with his family. Copeland served as postmaster until 1897, when the post office finally closed. He also ran a general store that catered to nearby farmers traveling between McCracken and Hays. Officially the hotel was not open for business during this time, but passersby were welcome to stay the night.¹⁹



Figure 4. An image of the Chetolah Hotel at Chetolah, Ellis County, Kansas. n.d. SOURCE: *Hays Daily News*. Jan. 28, 1968. Copy available at Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas. The hotel was built in 1888 and demolished in 1940.

The Gold Boom

For most potential railroad towns this would have been the end, but Chetolah was granted another chance for settlement in the 1890s, when gold was found in the area. In 1895, Cyrus K. Holliday, founder of the AT&SF Railway and Topeka Township,²⁰ caught wind of an 1848 government report concerning the presence of precious metals in the Smoky Hill River Valley,

¹⁹ Dale, "Her Childhood Playground Ghost Town,"; confirmed by Harold Kraus in an interview by Jessica Wheeler on Mar. 23, 2012.

²⁰ "Cyrus K. Holliday," *Kansas State Historical Society*, accessed Sept. 22, 2012, <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/cyrus-k-holliday/16833>.

especially in Ellis County.²¹ In conjunction with the 1848 report and a rumor about an ancient Native American tin mine, Holliday hired a company to prospect for zinc in the Smoky Hill shale in Trego County (adjacent to Ellis County). In 1895, to everyone's great surprise, deposits of gold were discovered instead of zinc.²² This important event led to a decade of gold prospecting in Ellis and Trego Counties, and a series of gold mills built in between Chetolah and Smoky Hill City, a second gold mining town located a few miles west of Chetolah.

On April 22, 1899, *The Ellis Independent* ran an article stating that, "the Smokey [*sic*] river gold miners began sinking a shaft on their mineral claim on the Smokey river, last Monday."²³ The same year the *Hays Republican* ran another article explaining the uniqueness of the Ellis County gold, claiming that, "Most people want to find gold in the quartz, while the richest gold deposits could be found in the form of gold dust, but as yet no process had been found to extract it. . . . one of these days some Yankee would invent a machine that would separate it and the richest gold fields would then be opened in the west."²⁴ Indeed, the race was on to create a method for separating the fine gold dust from the soft, flaky shale.

First off the block was F. W. Miller, a chemist from St. Louis promoting his process called the Miller electric chemical process. He claimed he would be able to remove the gold and silver from the shale at the low cost of only one dollar per ton of shale. By December of 1900, the Imperial Mining Company was founded with C. K. Holliday as treasurer, and the construction of a \$7,000 reduction mill had begun.²⁵ This new mill was to process up to 180 tons

²¹ Charles C. Howes, *This Place Called Kansas* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 178.

²² *Ibid*, see also "Gold Mining in Kansas," n.p., n.d., copy at Ellis County Historical Society, Ellis, Kansas. It should be noted that gold was discovered in 1895, not 1893, as reported in *Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler's Guide*, (1988).

²³ *Ellis Independent*, untitled article about gold mining in Ellis Co., April 22, 1899. Copy available at the Ellis County Historical Society.

²⁴ *Hays Republican*, untitled article about gold mining in Ellis Co., Dec., 1899. Copy available at the Ellis County Historical Society.

²⁵ "Hunting for Gold in Kansas," *Ellis Review Headlight*, June 14, 1901.

of ore per day, and 25 to 30 men were employed in its construction. Even more workers were to be hired to raise 75 to 100 tons of shale per day.²⁶ The mill was completed in February of 1901, but due to problems with attaining the patent to the Miller process, the opening was delayed.²⁷ By August, Miller had left town, and it was determined that “the Miller system was not a complete success.”²⁸

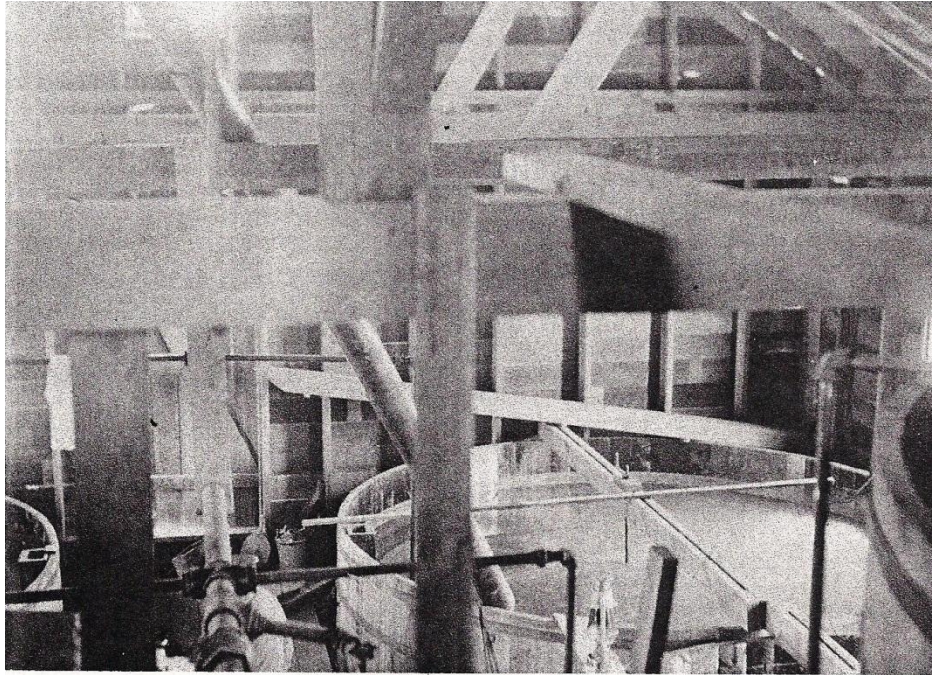


Figure 5. A photo taken inside the Beatty Gold Mill at Chetolah, Ellis County, Kansas. Circa 1901. SOURCE: *At Home in Ellis County, Kansas*. Hays, Kansas: Historical Book Committee, 1991. The large vat was used to treat the shale using the Gage process.

Miller’s absence set the stage for Professor Charles Gage, “the first to earnestly and intelligently compel these shale deposits to give up their values through his process of treatment as Moses when he smote the rock compelled the water to come forth,” professed the *Hays*

²⁶ “From the Smoky,” *Ellis County News*, Dec. 15, 1900.

²⁷ “Hunting for Gold,” *Ellis Review Headlight*.

²⁸ *Ellis Review Headlight*, untitled article about gold mining in Ellis Co., Aug. 23, 1901. Copy available at the Ellis County Historical Society.

Republican in September 1901.²⁹ The Gage method began with crushing the shale into a powder and then adding water until it had a pasty, mushy consistency. At that point, cyanide was introduced, and the gold separated from the shale and could be filtered out.³⁰ By this process, the Smoky Hill Gold Fields were allegedly producing on average \$20 to the ton in gold, \$10 to the ton in silver, and some samples even reached \$35 to the ton in gold and silver combined.³¹ In September, a second mill was opened by the International Reduction Company at Smoky Hill City where the Gage process was also implemented.³²

These high numbers were enough to entice R. T. Beatty, “Beaumont Oil King,” and C. E. Foote, president of the largest municipal bond house in Kansas at the time. Beatty and Foote in addition to several other prominent Kansas and Texas citizens, including H. J. Penney, mayor of Hays and vice president of the Citizens State Bank, founded the Kansas Pioneer Gold Shale Company, with a capital of 2.5 million dollars.³³ The company bought the land formerly owned by the Imperial Mining Company known as the Miller tract, approximately two thousand acres, and built the Beatty Gold Mill. Shown above, this mill was located at Chetolah.³⁴

The fourth mill in the area was built by Charles J. Lantry, owner of one of the largest construction companies in Kansas, who had previously expressed interest in the land, having “made an investigation and . . . satisfied that the shale is not ‘salted,’”³⁵ Lantry bought some land, waiting for an effective milling method to be invented. Gage had been unable to convince

²⁹ “Gold Mill Started,” *Hays Republican*, Sept. 28, 1901. Reprinted in *At Home in Ellis County*.

³⁰ It should be noted that this process is very similar to the MacArthur-Forrest Process developed in Glasgow, Switzerland in 1887, which is still used today. <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/MacArthur-Forrest+Process>.

³¹ “Ellis County Gold Has Excited Lopeka [sic],” *Ellis Review Headlight*, July 5, 1901.

³² “Gold Mill Started,” *Hays Republican*.

³³ Howes, *This Place Called Kansas*, 181-82.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ “Ellis County Gold Has Excited Lopeka [sic],” *Ellis Review Headlight*, July 5, 1901.

this important investor of his method,³⁶ but Ernest Fahrig of Philadelphia met with more success promoting his electrolytic process. Soon the Fahrig Mining and Milling Company, funded by Lantry, built the fourth mill in the area.³⁷ Some of Lantry's property is visible on the map below.

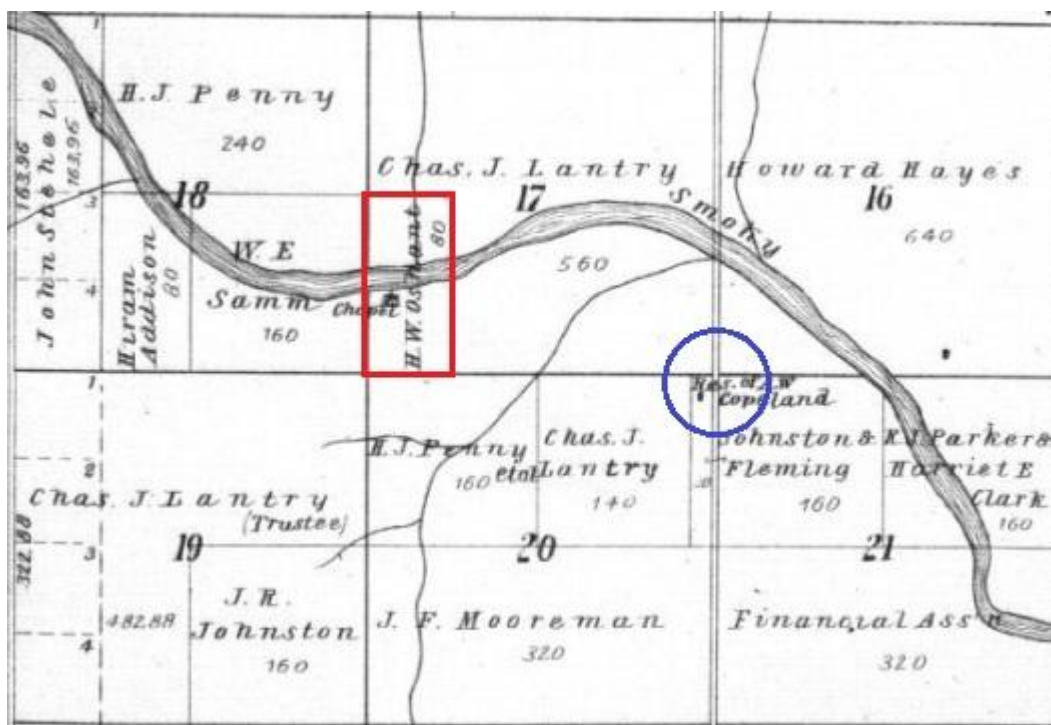


Figure 6. A section of a plat map of Township 15 S. XIX W., Ellis County. 1905. SOURCE: Geo A. Olge and Co., *Standard Atlas of Ellis County, Kansas*, last accessed May 1, 2012, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209418/page/22>. Note that the blue circle indicates the area where the Chetolah town site was, but had already vanished by 1905. The red box indicates Henry Oshant's plot, where the Beatty mill is mismarked as a chapel. Also note the multiple plats owned by C. Lantry of the Fahrig Mining and Milling Company, and H. J. Penney, board member of the Kansas Pioneer Gold Shale Company.

Henry W. Oshant is yet another interesting piece of the puzzle in the history of the Kansas Gold Fields. Oshant placed an ad in October of 1901 stating, "Shale Lands for Sale: Parties who have more of this land than money, will sell a portion to get money to build a mill.

³⁶ "Gage Mill Starts," *Ellis Review Headlight*, Sept. 27, 1901.

³⁷ Howes, *This Place Called Kansas*, 182

If you want to invest, this is a good opportunity. Call or write soon as it will not last long.”³⁸ On the 1905 plat, Oshant’s property is visible, and curiously an otherwise unknown chapel is located there. According to *At Home in Ellis County*, the chapel actually indicates the location of the Beatty mill, which was torn down in 1904. The lumber from the mill was used to build Our Lady Help of Christians Catholic Church in Antonino, a few miles away. Oshant donated the lumber on the condition that the parishioners would dismantle the mill.³⁹ It is unclear exactly how Oshant fits into the history of the gold rush, but presumably he found the investor he was looking for in R. T. Beatty, who likely built the mill on Oshant’s property.



Figure 7. Photograph of the Beatty gold mill at Chetolah, Ellis Co., Kansas. Circa 1902. SOURCE: *At Home in Ellis County, Kansas*. Hays, Kansas: Historical Book Committee, 1991. Note the Smoky Hill River flowing near the mill on the right side of the photo.

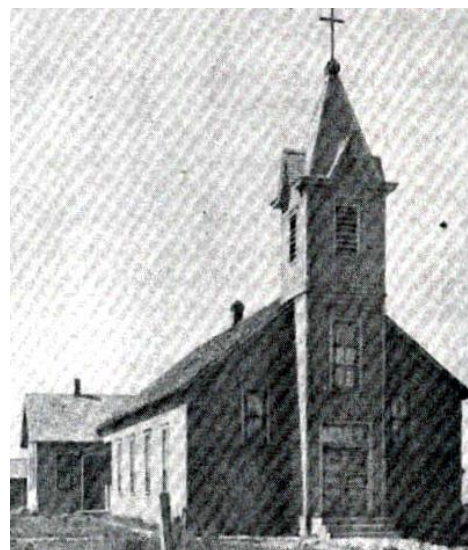


Figure 8. Photograph of the Catholic church in Antonino, Ellis Co., Kansas. Circa 1905. SOURCE: “The Founding of Antonino, Kansas,” last accessed April 29, 2012, <http://www.germancapitalofkansas.com/index.asp?DocumentID=714>. Built in 1904, the church was torn down in 1951. Materials from this church were used to build a new one, which still stands today.

³⁸ H. W. Oshant, “Shale Lands for Sale,” *Hays Republican*, Oct. 26, 1901.

³⁹ “Our Lady Help of Christians Catholic Church, Antonino,” *At Home in Ellis County*, 188.

The order of events in the demise of the Kansas Gold Fields is unclear. However, it is apparent that the reports of \$35 to the ton in gold and silver were either falsified or extremely rare. Professor J. T. Lovewell of Washburn College arrived at the scene and made over 100 assays of the shale taken from various locations in the area. In a report written for the Kansas Academy of Science, Lovewell concluded, "It would appear, therefore, that the gold is not uniformly distributed and unwittingly, in taking our assay, we get a rich portion one time and a lean portion at another time." His tests averaged at about two dollars per ton in gold.⁴⁰ In May of 1902, the United States Geological Survey came to the area and took 19 samples. Silver was found in only nine of the samples, ranging from a value of .004 cents per ton to six cents per ton. The most valuable of the samples taken contained .30 ounces of silver and .05 ounces of gold per ton, worth \$1.18.⁴¹ Once again, Chetolah's geography was unable to produce what was being asked of it. It would seem that the cost of operating the mills outweighed the value of the gold, and eventually the Ellis County Gold Rush faded out. In addition, the discovery of oil at Smoky Hill City⁴² shortly after the gold rush likely attracted people from Chetolah, causing the town to fade out even faster.

As for the hotel, Copeland sold it to Peter Hauschild in 1907, who converted it into a home and never used it commercially again.⁴³ In 1940, the building was torn down. However, the front step still remains today and is being used as a decorative bench by the current property owners.⁴⁴

Golden Spring Beach

⁴⁰ Ibid, 180.

⁴¹ See "Gold Mining in Kansas," n.p., n.d., copy at Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas.

⁴² "Report From the Gold Fields," *Ellis Review Headlight*, Oct. 25, 1901.

⁴³ Dale, "Her Childhood Playground Ghost Town."

⁴⁴ Harold Kraus, interview by Jessica Wheeler, Mar. 23, 2012.

Although the end of the gold rush spelled the end for settlement in Chetolah, in the 1920s the area attracted the masses once again by means of the Golden Springs Beach. Mike Unrein inherited the property from his father, and dammed the spring creating a lake. In 1926, he opened the Golden Spring Beach to the public.⁴⁵ The area was equipped with a 36,000 square foot pool big enough for motor boating in addition to a 36 foot tall diving tower and a 34 foot tall slide into the water. As seen in the sketch below, there was a dance pavilion right next to the water. The area also had running showers, bath houses, concessions, and a fish pond.⁴⁶ The beach closed in 1933 due to the Great Depression,⁴⁷ but the springs still supply enough water to fill the pond even today, and the diving tower foundation is still there.

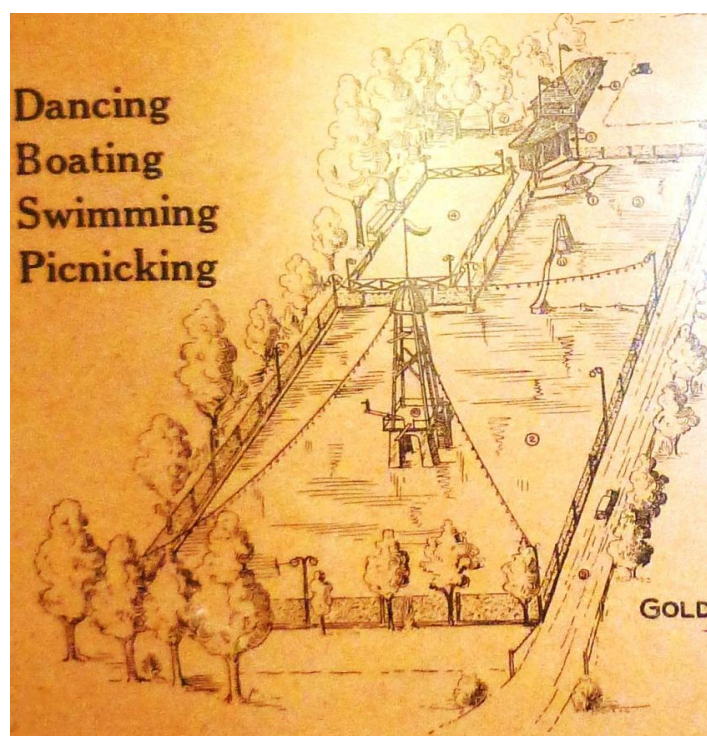


Figure 9. A sketch of Golden Spring Beach that appeared on a promotional poster. Circa 1927. SOURCE: Personal Collection of Harold Kraus.

⁴⁵ "Ellis County 'Beach' was a Popular Recreation Spot," *Hays Daily News*, June 14, 2012. <http://www.hdnews.net/communitystory/ECHS060712>.

⁴⁶ Golden Spring Beach poster, personal collection of Harold Kraus.

⁴⁷ "Popular recreation spot," *Hays Daily News*, June 14, 2012.

The End of the Golden Years

Over the years Chetolah has seen many different faces. The natural spring led Pawnee Indians to settle there in the mid-1800s. Its geographic location and proximity to water brought eager railroad chasers in 1888. The shale hills teased hopeful gold miners in the 1890s, who eventually gave up on Chetolah in the early 1900s. In the 1920s and thirties the beautiful landscape attracted many day visitors. Chetolah has offered hope to many, but ultimately the land could never provide long-term sustenance as a town site. Now most evidence of the town is gone, and many residents of Ellis County have never heard of Chetolah or the Ellis County gold rush. The last reminder of the town is the county road that passes by, Chetolah Gold Road.

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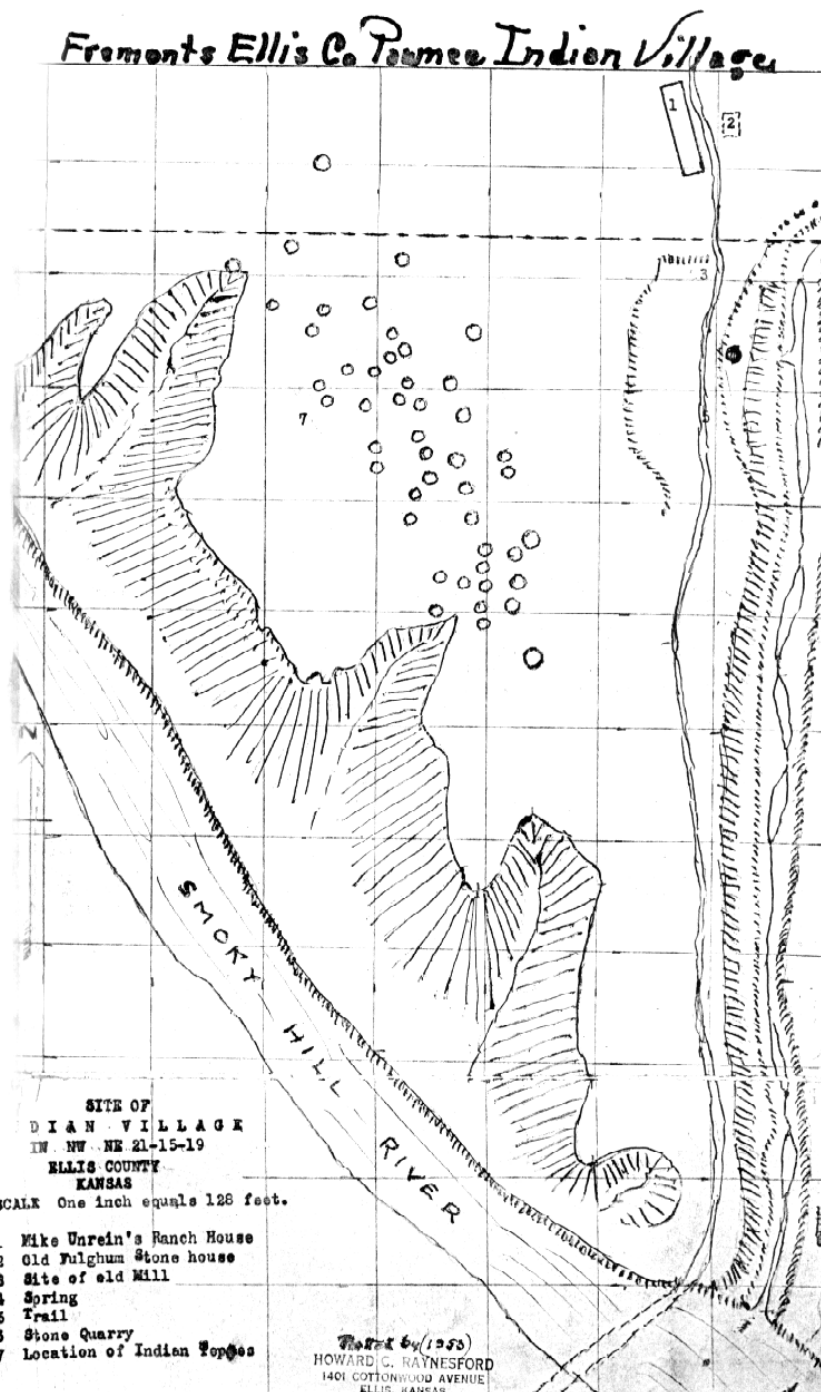
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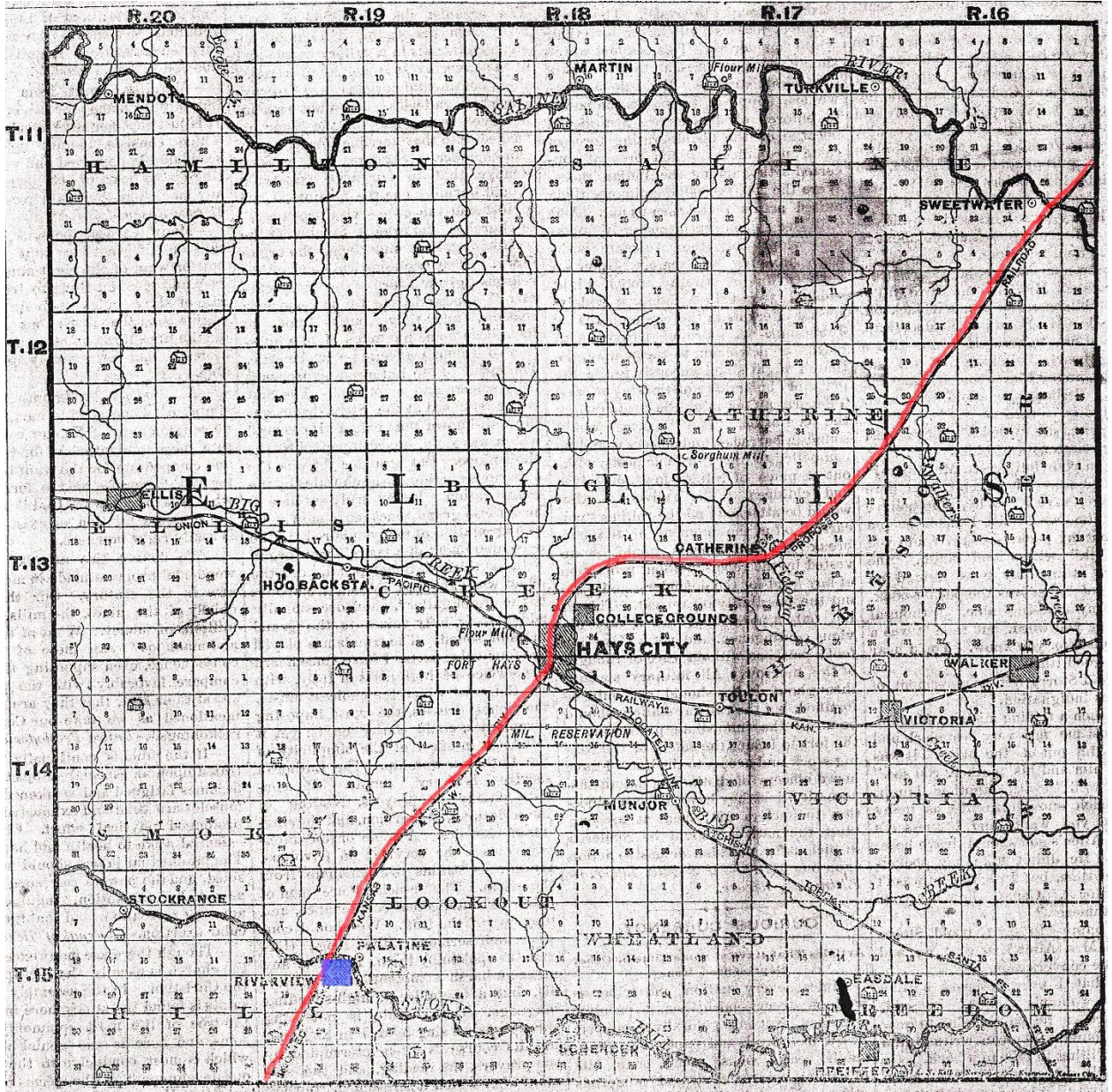
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Attachment 1. Map of Pawnee Indian Village. 1953. SOURCE: Howard Raynesford, "The Raynesford Papers," last accessed May 1, 2012, <http://www.kancoll.org/articles/raynesford/raymap08.htm>. Note that 30 of the teepees were 17 feet in diameter, 16 were 19 feet in diameter, and one teepee was 24 feet in diameter. There may have been more teepees, but their locations were no longer visible at the time the map was created.



ON The Onward. MOVE The Water-works and the N. & S. Railroad.

Attachment 2. Map of Ellis County, Kansas. 1888. SOURCE: *Hays Free Press*. Nov. 17, 1888. Copy available at Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas. Note the red line indicates the proposed route for the Omaha, Dodge City and Southwestern Railroad. The blue box indicates the Chetolah town site, which was originally called Riverview, as labeled on this map.