

From Pasture to Pavement and Pasture Again: Eminence, Finney County, Kansas 1887 – 1942

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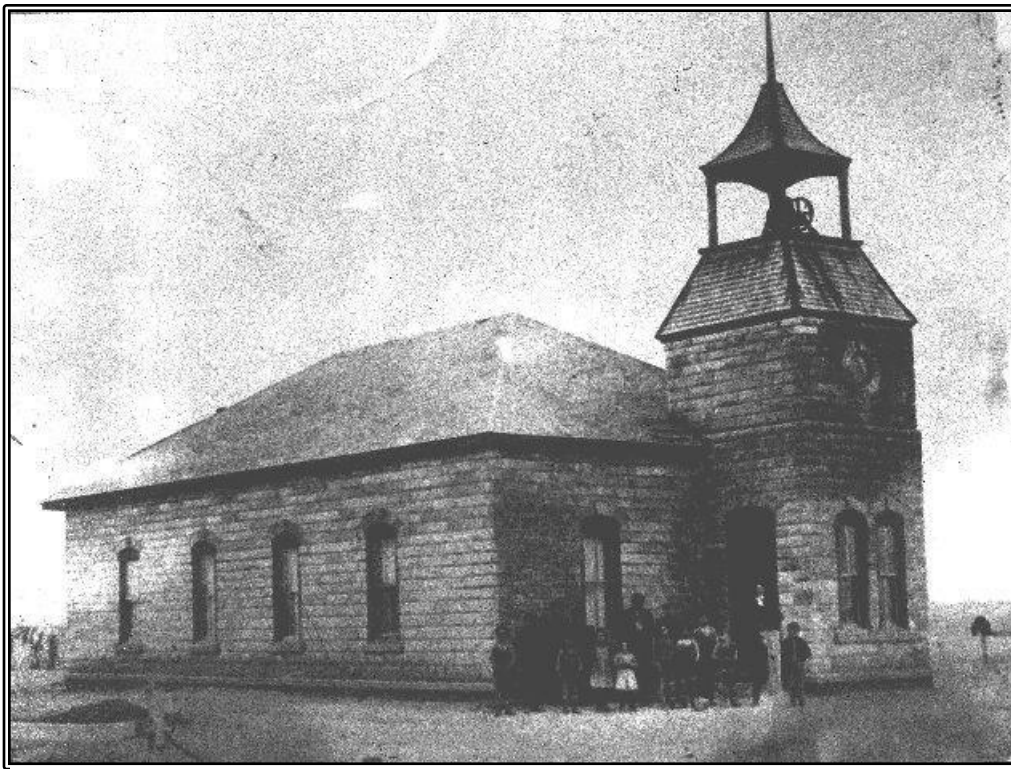


Fig. 1. A historical photograph of the Eminence Schoolhouse, circa 1888. Though the structure has now been modified into a shed, the schoolhouse still stands in the southeast corner of the old town site.

SOURCE: Private collection of Edwin Boots

This brief history of Eminence, Kansas chronicles the story of a rural town that went from its founding, to becoming county seat, and then ceasing to exist in under a decade. Located in now defunct Garfield County, Eminence was flourishing on the plain when a fight for the new county's seat destroyed not only both towns, but also the county itself. This study uses plat maps, newspaper articles, historic photographs, site studies, and an interview with a former owner of the town site.

The Past Hidden in the Stone Shed

In northeast Finney County, 27 miles from Garden City, sits a house with wooden siding and a stone shed with a metal roof. Though the house is fairly new, this shed is nearly one hundred and thirty years old. For the current owner of the property, the structure is used as a place to store farm equipment. In the late 1800s it was the schoolhouse in the town of Eminence. Today, Eminence is a distant memory on the plains of Finney County, as is the county it belonged to. The story is just part of an old farmer's tale about two towns which fought so hard for the Garfield County seat that they both lost. As years pass by, the story of Eminence and its details become narrower and the plot begins to sound like an old western movie. As the details dwindle, so does the rich history of a community that existed and played a part in shaping southwest Kansas.

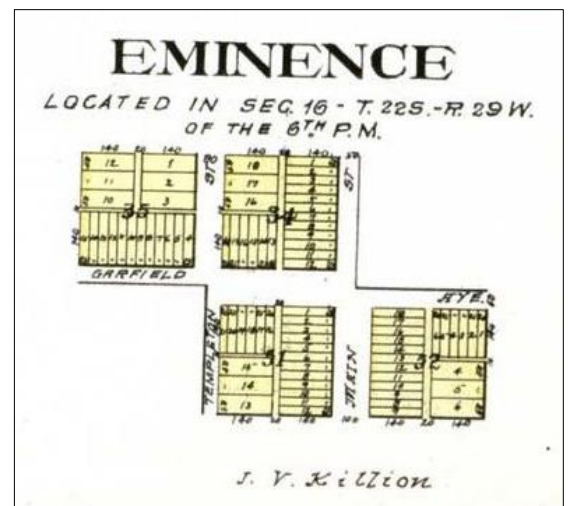
Of course a county seat war between two rural towns, where you will hear stories of election rigging, record stealing, horse and gun chasing, as well as the appearance of a Dodge City lawman and 20 of his deputies, sounds like the makings of a truly classic western; the fact is this happened. It's the details of this town that separate it from what you see on the screen. No amount of movie magic can duplicate the real emotions, people, and situations in the town of Eminence. The craziest thing: the set is your own backyard.

In 1886, a grant was issued from the state of Kansas to Creola Town Company for the formation of a town. A committee that was appointed to find a place for the county seat of Garfield County selected the location for the town. Originally the name Creola was requested in the town charter, but it was found that "Creola" was already a town founded in Kansas. Community member Lyman Naugel suggested the name Eminence.

The name of the town was changed and it was established on June 3, 1887.¹ The post office in Eminence replaced one called Cuyler that had been open from 1883-1887, just two miles west.²

Some of the founders of Eminence were some pretty impressive individuals. There was the American frontiersman, preservationist and cofounder of nearby Garden City, C.J. Buffalo Jones; fellow cofounder of Garden City and Eminence, L.W. Fulton, who would eventually become Garfield County's district clerk; and prominent southwestern Kansas businessman and philanthropist, Frederick Finnup who helped establish some of the town's first buildings. These three men were pioneers in their own

Fig. 2. A plat map of Eminence from 1910. Notice the name J.V. Killion at the bottom of the map, Killion was a very influential man in Eminence and at one time owned much of the land it was on. SOURCE: Plat Book of Finney County, 1910



right, and each played a role in the quick success of the town.

In July of 1887, Eminence began printing a newspaper, the *Garfield County Call*. According to Polk's Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory, in 1894, Eminence had a population of 150 people.³ The directory also had recorded that Eminence had a

¹ Boots, Ed (former Eminence site owner) in a interview with the author on November 21, 2016.

² "Kansas Post Offices, 1828-1961." kansasmemory.org. Aug. 3, 1961. Dec. 14, 2016.

https://www.kshs.org/geog/geog_postoffices/search/placename:/county:GF/begyr:/endyr:/submit:SEARCH.

³ Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1894.

dentist office, a hotel, a grocery store, schoolhouse, a general store, and the office of Dr. L.V. Miner. There were also daily stages offered to both Ingalls and Ravanna. Six years later, in the 1900 edition of the directory the town had added a livestock dealer, a cheese factory, and a blacksmith shop.⁴

The People Who Made a Town

The people of the Eminence community were tight knit and steadfast. Many were farmers and ranchers, and they came from all over. Each of them hoped to find something in southwestern Kansas. They lived in soddies and dugouts made from the earth and in houses made from large bricks of cement. Descedents from a handful of Eminence's original citizens still own, farm, or live on the land their ancestors purchased in the late 1880s.

One of Eminence's most influential citizens, J.V. Killion could be given credit for keeping the town going. Killion brought his family to western Kansas in 1885 by covered wagon. In 1889, he moved to Eminence and opened a mercantile store and ran the post office. Once the county was organized, Killion was elected probate judge.

Both an active and vocal member of his community, Killion would often serve as representative for Eminence. After Garfield County was defunct, Killion remained a pillar and influence in his community by representing the Garfield Township as an elected commissioner. He was also very influential in establishing a county fair in Finney County. Some of Killion's children remained at Eminence after the town had

⁴ Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1900.

declined.⁵ Ed and Shirley Boots, who lived at Eminence from 1959 until 2001, have had descendents of Killion's stop by to see what J.V. had built.

Another influential community member in Eminence was Dr. L.V. Miner. Miner started his first medical practice in 1887 in Eminence. He played an active part in the county seat war and was a leader in the Democratic Party in the town. He served as a physician and coroner for Garfield County and was a delegate during state conventions. Dr. Miner stayed in Eminence nearly 10 years after the dissolution of the county, before moving to Ingalls in 1902.⁶

“Eminence forever; Ravanna never”

Eminence was one of six towns in Garfield County. The other towns were Ravanna, Loyal, Essex, Kalvesta, and Lorenz. In the late 1880s, Garfield County was in need of a county seat. Seven miles east of Eminence was Ravanna. Though Ravanna was slightly larger than Eminence, the towns had many similarities. Both were communities flourishing on the southwest Kansas prairie, and both were eyeing the county seat. In March of 1887, Governor John A. Martin issued that a census be taken of both towns. After the information of the census was presented to Governor Martin, he decided Ravanna would be the temporary county seat, until an election was held in November to decide the county's permanent seat. So began the beginning of the end.

⁵ Connelley, William E. “John Vandiveer Killion.” ksgenweb.org. Aug. 13, 1999. Dec. 14, 2016. <http://www.ksgenweb.org/archives/1919ks/k/killiojv.html>

⁶ Boots, Ed interview with the author on November 21, 2016.

The Vote

Everyone in the Garfield area was partisan in one way or another in the county seat argument. In a story written for the Garden City Telegram in 1923 by H.D. Collins, he said,

“As the election time drew near, the interest grew. Both sides canvassed the county and held meetings in school houses, barns, or wherever they could assemble an audience.”

One man from Lorenz posted the phrase “Eminence forever; Ravanna never” on his windmill tower. The official election took place on November 9, 1887. H.D. Collins gave an account in his 1923 article:

“Votes were bought and sold that day like commodities.... I was a clerk on the election board that day in Garfield precinct. I did not see any votes bought, but there was ample proof that some were bought for both sides.”⁷

With the strong feelings for both sides, famous lawman Bat Masterson along with 20 deputies from Dodge City were sent to keep the peace. The results of the election showed Ravanna as the winner of the county seat. Eminence contested the results and accused Ravanna of stuffing the ballot box.

The “Re-Count”

The trial lasted from winter of 1887 until July of 1889. Both the Eminence newspaper and the Ravanna newspapers took turns insulting the other’s integrity

⁷ Collins, H.D. “Early Day History of Old Garfield County.” *Garden City Telegram* [Garden City, KS] 18 Jan. 1923 Published: pg. 6

throughout the ordeal. Those willing to testify against Ravanna had to have around the clock protection. One of Eminence's witness for the trial disappeared after two men in masks visited his hotel. The Kansas Supreme Court made their decision and ruled in favor of Eminence. Eminence raised a flagpole a hundred feet high to celebrate the victory. A gala day was hosted where J.V. Killion was the marshal. Ravanna attorneys immediately filed a motion for a rehearing.⁸

Violence Looming

In the meantime, the people of Ravanna were more than reluctant to let the county treasurer W.T. Williams move his office to Eminence. One night after Williams had closed his office to go to dinner, Ravanna resident Tom O'Toole broke into his office and broke the handle off the safe, which housed all the county funds and records. Williams eventually did move his office to Eminence but not without difficulty. On Sept. 10, 1889, in the middle of the night, Fred Smith and John Rader sneaked into the treasurer's office and loaded all the books into a wagon. There were two rooms in the building that held the treasurer's office; and the family of George Childs, who were to guard the records, occupied the other. When Mrs. Childs was awakened by the men fleeing with the records, a chase ensued. A few bullets were even fired at the two, but they managed to make it to safety and Williams was open for business the next day in Eminence.⁹

During the time Ravanna was the county seat, they had built a courthouse. Upon the Kansas Supreme Court's decision that Eminence was the rightful county seat, Eminence purchased the courthouse and planned to move it to Eminence. Because of the

⁸ Collins, H.D. "Early Day History of Old Garfield County." pg. 6

⁹ "A Lively Chase." *Topeka Daily Capital* [Topeka, KS] 12 Sep. 1889 Published: pg. 1

excitement of their victory, a large number of over-zealous Eminence citizens made the trip to Ravanna to help move the structure. They jacked up the structure and while moving it would often give “three cheers for Eminence”. This did not bode well with the still stung citizens of Ravanna.

When the courthouse was halfway between the two towns, the people of Eminence were surprised to find a large number of Ravannans riding towards them with rifles. Outnumbered and unarmed, the people of Eminence abandoned the courthouse, mounted their horses and headed for home. Victoriously the people of Ravanna hooked their horses to the courthouse and brought it back to where they believed it belonged. Eventually it was peacefully moved to Eminence.¹⁰

Not a Shot fired but Garfield was Dead

However, the threat of greater violence always seemed to be looming between Eminence and Ravanna. The shot that did them both in actually came from the state house in 1893. It wasn't so much as a shot as it was a request to have the county lines resurveyed. Backers from Ravanna claimed that Garfield County was illegal because it was smaller than the 432 square mile minimum guideline set by the state legislature. The results of the survey showed Garfield County was in fact one and a half square feet smaller than the minimum requirement. The Kansas Supreme Court ruled that the county had been illegally organized and was to become part of Finney County; this change was made official on March 7, 1893.¹¹

¹⁰ “Kansas Shacks With Histories; A Wichita Man’s Researches.” *Wichita Daily Eagle* [Wichita, KS] 3 Dec. 1905 Published: pg. 21

¹¹ “Sequoyah, Buffalo, Garfield – Once All Were Counties.” *Garden City Telegram* [Garden City, KS] 2 July 1976 Published: pg. 35



**Fig. 3. A photograph looking north on Main Street.
Photograph by Allison Doll, Nov. 22, 2016.**

What Became of the County

When the county was dissolved, many Eminence citizens moved to larger nearby towns. Yet some remained in the area out of love for the land and community. Even though much of the Eminence population was gone by the 1910s, a post office remained, kept open by Don and Emma Brown until 1944. When Garfield County was combined with Finney County, Ravanna challenged Garden City for the county seat. But just like their previous attempt at a county seat, they came up short-handed.

Throughout the years people who wanted pieces of the town would just take them. A majority of the town's deconstruction came from people taking objects or materials

they wanted to use or sell. In 1947, what was left of the town site was torn out to make room to grow crops.¹²

After Garfield County was dissolved in the late 1880s, a rancher moved the Eminence Hotel from the town site to his ranch six miles northwest of the town site. Years later the property was acquired by Otto Hund. During Hund's ownership of the property, it was rumored he practiced bootlegging in it. Emmanuel Doll purchased the ranch land and the hotel from Hund's son in 1965. Vandals began breaking into the property in 1966 and took everything from furniture to the doors and the staircase railing. The hotel still sits on the ranch site and is owned by Emmanuel's wife Catherine.

Another remnant of Eminence is the Eminence Cemetery. The cemetery is located a half-mile north and a quarter-mile west of the Eminence town site. There is no way to know exactly how many people are buried in the Eminence cemetery because of a fire that burned all of the wooden markers. In 1998 the Finney County Historical Society added a stone sign to the cemetery bearing the cemetery's name to help preserve the history of the area.¹³

Hope for Eminence Resurgence Comes to the End of the Line

In the early 1900s, a man named F.T. Burnham proposed an idea to build a railroad that would stretch across western Kansas, called the Nebraska, Kansas and Southern Railroad. The railroad would have run through Eminence and even would have started a new town called Burnham just a few miles northwest of Eminence.

¹² Boots, Ed interview with the author on November 21, 2016.

¹³ Boots, Ed interview with the author on November 21, 2016.

Construction began on the rail line, and a (paper only) plat map can even be found of what Burnham could have looked like in the 1910 Plat Book of Finney County, Kansas.¹⁴

The idea of the railroad brought a little hope for a resurgence of the town. But unfortunately, just like the life of Eminence, the project was dissolved. Though the line had already been started, the backers pulled their funds from the project and Burnham was not successful recruiting new ones. Evidence of the rail line can be found where a long area has been graded flat across multiple pastures near Eminence.¹⁵

From Schoolhouse to Shed

The final remaining structure is the Eminence Schoolhouse, located in the southeast corner of the Eminence town site. In 1916 Edwin Boots moved to the area and purchased the site of the schoolhouse from Killion. The land remained in Boots' family for many years. In January, 1959, Boots' grandson, Ed Boots, along with his wife Shirley, became residents of Eminence by moving into a refurbished school bus parked next to the schoolhouse. Ed Boots (grandson) began using the schoolhouse as a shed for his seed company and farming operation. Over time Boots made alterations to the schoolhouse to better fit his needs and keep the structure efficient. During Boots' time in Eminence, he collected more data and learned the history of the land he was living on. During one of his early years at Eminence, he pulled what was left of the hundred-foot flagpole from what is now a crop field. With the information Boots has collected, he now

¹⁴ *Plat Book of Finney County, Kansas*. Ashland, Western Publishing Company, 1910

¹⁵ "Announcement from J.T. Burnham." *The Garden City Telegram* [Garden City, KS] 19 June 1914 Published: pg. 2

gives presentations on Eminence and Ravanna as well as a few other lost communities in the area.¹⁶



Fig. 4. A view of the Eminence Road Sign. The road is named Eminence because it's the road the Eminence Cemetery is located on. Photograph by Allison Doll Nov. 22, 2016.

Lost to Kansas but not to History

Unfortunately, all that remains of Eminence are a couple of buildings, a cemetery, and the story of the fight for Garfield County that ultimately ended with no winner. The actors of this adventure played their parts long ago. There will be no reruns and as Eminence's set is long gone, no sequels. That doesn't mean the show won't go on, however; it is people like Ed and Shirley Boots who keep Eminence alive through their passion to share its incredible history with people. Keeping these stories alive comes

¹⁶ Boots, Ed interview with the author on November 21, 2016.

when you don't cut out the detail. Details are the people, and the people are the stories.

The tale of Eminence is filled with more twists, drama, and emotion than all the movies you could fit in your Netflix queue. Someday you will be flipping through television channels and you will come across some Clint Eastwood flick. You'll think Eminence had a much better story.

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