

The Ranch that Never Got a Chance:

Silkville Ranch, Franklin County, Kansas, 1868-2015



Silkville Ranch Sign, two and a half miles from Williamsburg, Kansas. SOURCE: Photograph by Author, May, 2015.

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This study of Silkville Ranch, an experimental socialist community in Franklin County, Williamsburg Township, includes interviews, an unpublished history, early pictures of the ranch, and later pictures taken by subsequent residents. Silkville persisted as a ranch long after the experiment failed.

Imagine moving from place to place your whole life, trying to make a successful way of living, and being forced to leave no matter where you go. For Frenchman Ernest Valetton De Boissiere, this was the case. The mid nineteenth-century was a difficult time for De Boissiere and fitting in was hard. He was not always successful with his leadership and his location. After the Civil War De Boissiere eventually founded Silkville, Kansas to pursue his dream of communal living at a leisurely pace. However, for a number of reasons the town of Silkville did not persist like it could have. Even today, Silkville is a very beautiful ranch with a peaceful and serene environment making it obvious why De Boissiere chose to create a silk ranch and start a community.

While living in France, De Boissiere's only dream was to live peacefully and pursue a socialistic and economic way of life. However because of his close association with Victor Hugo, De Boissiere was forced to leave by Emperor Louis Napoleon III. He looked toward foreign lands and was attracted to New Orleans for business concerns. He invested in merchant ships and made a fortune by operating a ship line between the "Big Easy" and France. De Boissiere traveled with his ships on occasion and on one trip he stayed in New Orleans and did not return to France until after the Civil War.

During the 1860's De Boissiere just wanted to fit in into his new home and the southern lifestyle, but he soon became unpopular with the wealthy southern planters. Local women wanting to establish a Negro orphan's home called upon De Boissiere for help. He donated a generous gift of \$10,000 to the cause, but mounting pressure against De Boissiere caused him to relocate in the late 1860's. De Boissiere left New Orleans to team up with Charles Sears, Albert Brisbane, and E.P. Grant. These gentlemen had a common

bond in the ideas of Fourierism, a form of socialism originating with Charles Fourier, and sought to put the notion into practice with De Boissiere as the main proponent.¹

So in 1867, De Boissiere began traveling throughout the Mississippi Valley in search of a location for his new community. A friend described Kansas to De Boissiere as a place of favorable freedoms with hot summers and cold winters, a climate similar to France.² In early 1869, all three of the men including De Boissiere purchased 3,156 acres of land about two and a half miles southwest of Williamsburg, Kansas, in what would become Franklin County. De Boissiere decided his location would be “Silkville, Kansas,” not too far from the Roger Williams University. However, Roger Williams University would only stay open for five years.³ Silkville’s purchase price amounted to around \$11,450.50,⁴ or about \$3 an acre. Shortly after the three men invested together, Grant and Brisbane left the community. To make sure his idea would persist, De Boissiere went to France to persuade 40 families to come and live in his town. Now he could get started on his community plan in earnest. With the economic and social philosophy of Charles Fourier in mind, De Boissiere decided that the men and women of his group should organize themselves into a self-sufficient community. Labor was to be made pleasant, with enough employment for everyone but guarding against overworking his community. The members of the community would voluntarily join a group, and become responsible for a specific kind of work. The men and women were free to join any “group” as they wished, and could to switch to a different

¹ This information on De Boissiere’s life is in Cathy Smith, unpublished history, *Silkville*, 1978, p. 1. Copy in Barbara Netherlands private collection.

² Melvin Bruntzel, “Silkville Ranch,” in *Quick Reference to Kansas Lost-Found-Missing Towns and Places*. 2010. Copy at Kansas State University Chapman Center.

³ Socolofsky, Homer E., and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, 1988, p. 45.

⁴ Cathy Smith, *Silkville*, p. 4.

“group” at any time.⁵ Income was guaranteed to all of the workers and to increase efficiency, all the men and women would live together. De Boissiere promised them that they would have economic and social security.

Notice the families with De Boissiere below in Figure 1.



Figure 1. A photograph of Ernest Valenton De Boissiere with French families from the silk community. Silkville Ranch, Franklin County, Kansas. C. Early 1870's. SOURCE: private collection of Barbara Netherland. Notice the rabbit skins and guns in the hands of some individuals.

Now with his plan firmly entrenched, De Boissiere decided to create and sell silk in his newfound venture. He made sure that all of the French Immigrants were experts in silk

⁵ Cathy Smith, *Silkville*, p. 2.

production.⁶ By 1871 the community had planted 8,000 mulberry trees imported from Russia, which provided a food source for the silkworms. After he imported silkworms from France, De Boissiere also planted 2,000 peach trees, 1,000 grape vines, and 900 other trees in his orchard. Additionally, many detailed buildings of native stone were built, and in the largest house, also known as “the large chateau,” there were 60 rooms that could house 100 men and women who worked on the ranch.⁷ Additional structures included barns, an icehouse, a school, a library, a winery, several churches, and a cocoonery which was a place to raise the silkworms, as seen below in figure 2.



Figure 2. A 1954 photograph of the Cocoonery built in the time Ernest Valenton De Boissiere was present in Silkville, Franklin County, Kansas. SOURCE: Private collection of Barbara Netherland. Notice how the entire building is still in good condition.

⁶ Melvin Bruntzel, “Silkville Ranch” in *Quick Reference to Kansas*.

⁷ Melvin Bruntzel, “Silkville Ranch” in *Quick Reference to Kansas*.

In the large library, around 2,500 volumes were available and many were accessible in four different languages so all of the townspeople could read them.

By the 1870's, De Boissiere's looms were very successful, producing 260-300 yards of silk per day.⁸ Silk weavers from France made ribbons of silk worm webs, which girls unwound from the cocoons. Many others fed and cared for the worms. But there were still some problems with the business.⁹ The American-made dyes would not keep their color, causing him to send his silk to France and then back to Kansas, significantly increasing his production costs. He soon employed multiple weavers and dyers from France. De Boissiere became advanced in his field and by 1876, his silk received first place in both the Philadelphia Centennial and the Centennial Exposition in Chicago. Unsatisfied, he put his silk to the test and competed for the best silk in the world and received first place at the World's Fair in Paris.¹⁰

Many neighboring towns and visitors often traveled to Silkville and with so much to do, it was always a happy and active town. De Boissiere was also active in the surrounding communities. For several years he was the Vice President of the First National Bank of Ottawa.¹¹

By the early 1880's, the Silkville cheese and butter factory was in full swing with production making 1,200 pounds per day. Although this sounds like mostly a positive thing, difficulties occurred. Families caring for the cows wanted cash upfront for their milk, but

⁸ Melvin Bruntzel, "Silkville Ranch" in *Quick Reference to Kansas*.

⁹ Cathy Smith, *Silkville*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Melvin Bruntzel, "Silkville Ranch."

¹¹ Cathy Smith, *Silkville*, p. 4.

De Boissiere could not afford to operate this way. He also conceived raising a large herd of cattle, milked by high-priced farm labor but realized it was unprofitable.¹²

By 1882, the price for labor was very high. De Boissiere knew he wasn't meeting the demand, and the French started drifting off with the women marrying Kansas farmers around the area. Soon many families of the community realized they could move, buy land, and make money on their own. De Boissiere was also coming to the realization that his silk community couldn't economically compete with those in Japan, China, or France.¹³

By 1884, De Boissiere decided to return to France with most of his fortune spent and disappointed that his communitarian program had failed. By 1886 the culture of silk was completely abandoned.¹⁴ Once back in France, De Boissiere established an industrial school and again became very successful. But he still had a desire to return to the United States, which he did in 1892. He bequeathed the property at Silkville, valued then at \$125,000 and \$20,000 in cash and securities, to the Odd Fellows Lodge as an orphanage. Shortly after, De Boissiere died in France on January 12, 1894.¹⁵

After his passing, it was rumored that an enormous treasure remained hidden on the grounds of Silkville. Charles Silly, who was a close friend of De Boissiere's, decided to search for the treasure. In 1894 he was found shot to death in the Orchard at Silkville. No one knows exactly why he was killed or if he ever found the treasure, but the mystery lies buried with Silly on top of a hill overlooking Silkville.¹⁶

¹² Cathy Smith, *Silkville*, p. 5.

¹³ Cathy Smith, *Silkville*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Cathy Smith, *Silkville*, p. 6.

Silkville was a controversial property after De Boissiere died, being passed from courtroom to courtroom. An insurance company eventually ended up with the land and sold it to a rancher for \$130,000. Since that time the property has been sold many times, until one of the last owners, John Netherland, Sr., St. Joseph, Missouri, bought it in the early 1940's. John Netherland, Sr., used it as a cattle ranch and once he retired, he sold it to his son, John Netherland, Jr., of Ottawa, Kansas. In an interview with John and his wife Barbara Netherland, I learned that they owned pieces of the ranch for 48 years. John Jr. took over the ranch in 1954 and moved to the property in the winter of 1963. He had just graduated from the University of Missouri and took up residence in the big stone Chateau shown in figure 3 below.



Figure 3. A photograph of the large orphanage that once housed the entire community of Silkville. At Silkville Ranch, Franklin County, Kansas. C. 1871. SOURCE: Private collection of Barbara Netherland. Notice the people posing in the windows in the large Chateau.

By the time John Jr. lived there, only about a dozen rooms were livable because of multiple fires occurring before he purchased the ranch. John Jr. described it as a large two-story house, and he lived in it with some ranch hands for two to three years before moving to Ottawa in 1955. In the beginning, John Sr. bought the ranch because a close friend from St. Joseph, Missouri had talked him into it; possibly as a good investment. The Netherlands used the ranch as a cattle farm, just as many did before. Mrs. Barbara Netherland also commented that, over the years, many people have approached her to discuss the history of the ranch. She stated that just the other day, a woman from the Historical Society had told her that her great, great grandfather was a worker in Silkville.

The current owners are the Bichelmeyers, who also use it as a cattle ranch. The Netherlands sold most of the ranch in the fall of 2003 but retained 300 acres until finally selling this remaining tract in January, 2015. As a condition of sale, the Netherlands stipulated that the Ranch was to still be used as a cattle ranch. They did not want to see anything bad happen to the beloved ranch to which they have grown very near and dear. As a result, it took a while to find someone interested in keeping the ranch tradition.¹⁷

Currently, there are still many buildings remaining at the ranch. During a field research trip, I went to the Silkville ranch and observed many of them. Instead of a beautiful 15-mile stone fence as seen on the following page in figure 4, it has now fallen in places, having to be reinforced with a barbed wire fence. The orphanage and winery remain, however, and there is also a barn that was used as a schoolhouse. A cemetery is on site, as seen in figure 5 on the next page, but the stones have been knocked over likely from the cattle roaming the place. There are also mulberry trees, but very few. Some trees have

¹⁷ Interview, John Jr. and Barbara Netherland, Ottawa, Kansas, May 9, 2015.

shown signs of aging and have begun to split, but the Netherlands decided to keep them on the ranch anyway. ¹⁸



Figure 4. A photograph of a tombstone at the Silkville Cemetery, at Silkville Ranch, Franklin County, Kansas. 1954. SOURCE: Private collection of Barbara Netherland. Notice how the tombstone has been knocked over, along with many others in the pasture.



Figure 5. A photograph of the stone fences once at Silkville Ranch, Franklin County, Kansas. 1954. SOURCE: Private collection of Barbara Netherland. Notice how the fence remained intact for many years, while also looking very neat.

¹⁸ Author's Field Notes, Silkville Ranch, Williamsburg Kansas, May 9, 2015.

A newspaper article from 1965 shows activity at the ranch when the Netherlands owned it. They had over 400 people attend Silkville for a 4-H Field Day. John Cagle, the 4-H club agent, was in charge of registration. The events began at 8:30 a.m. In the morning, the bulls and heifers were judged and at the end of the day, prizes were given out. "Prizes included five trophies, three plaques, and tie clips or blouse pins." If you did exceptionally well in the contest, you could get a special award including the choice of one of the outstanding Hereford heifers raised by the Silkville Ranch.¹⁹ When asking John Jr. about this 4-H day, one thing he remembered was a group from Topeka who brought along a journalist from Australia, prepared to write about the day. During the day a meal was served and the man from Australia was not used to this style of serving; he could only comment on how wasteful it was to use all the plates and then throw them away.²⁰

Even though there used to be many more buildings and people living at Silkville ranch, it is still near and dear to many people's hearts. The buildings have been kept in excellent condition and the owners refuse to let the vision of De Boissiere die. In efforts to keep Silkville looking and working at its best, many other buildings have been constructed on the ranch. When going to the ranch, I found it to be a peaceful and serene environment. It was a place where I could clear my head and imagine how this ranch was a home to many French families so many years ago. Many people today still go to visit and see the place where Ernest Valenton De Boissiere started his dream community.

¹⁹ *The Ottawa Herald*, July 10, 1965.

²⁰ Interview, John Jr. and Barbara Netherland, Ottawa, Kansas, May 9, 2015.

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