

Whiskey Point: A Memorial Town to the Cavalry Soldiers of Fort Riley

Geary County, Kansas



Figure 1: Photograph of Whiskey Point present day town site. Photo by Author.
Whiskey Lake Raceway is one of the only reminders of Whiskey Point in existence today.

Sarah E. Stowers

History 533: Lost Communities

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

Kansas State University

Fall 2012

Dr. Morgan

The lost town of Whiskey Point is located in Geary County, Kansas. It was an “Island” community known to cavalry soldiers for its saloons, brothels, and restaurants. The town disappeared after the Provost Marshall dumped barrels of whiskey into the lake. This study provides a history of Whiskey Point using photographs, newspapers, maps, and an interview with a local history buff and artifact retriever.

Driving down I-70 in Riley County, you would not imagine that part of Marshall Airfield was once a lake. As you take the exit going to Fort Riley, you might not have known that the road before you enter the post was once the thriving town of Whiskey Point, the “go to” spot for the cavalry soldiers on Fort Riley at the time. The town was founded in 1855 and did not survive much longer after that, roughly eight years. Today the once lavish lake is now nothing but farmland and a race track used mainly during the summer. The main reason the town died was that the Provost Marshall at the time decided to reprimand his soldiers and dump all the whiskey that the town had into the lake; thus, the life of Whiskey Point ended.



Figure 2: Photograph of Whiskey Lake Raceway as it appears today. November 28, 2012. Photo by Author.

Early Life in Whiskey Point

Whiskey Point was founded in 1855 with three other little towns: West Point, Island City, and Riley City. The towns would later become one: Whiskey Point.¹ The towns sprang up opposite of Pawnee, the site of the first territorial capital of Kansas.² Early settlers of Whiskey Point were witness to wagon trains turning north off the Santa Fe Trail unto the Mormon Trail to Utah. The use of this trail was discontinued when the Mormons started using the California Trail to cross Kansas.³ An island would form due to a flood on the Kansas River and during certain times of the year, the water would rise and form what is now called Whiskey Point.⁴ Not much is known of the town, since it only survived eight years. What is known of Whiskey Point is that it was the hang out spot for Fort Riley soldiers. The town was primarily made up of saloons, brothels, and restaurants; it was a place for soldiers to go and have a good time and relax. Today, many artifacts of this drinking town have been recovered and are all that remain.

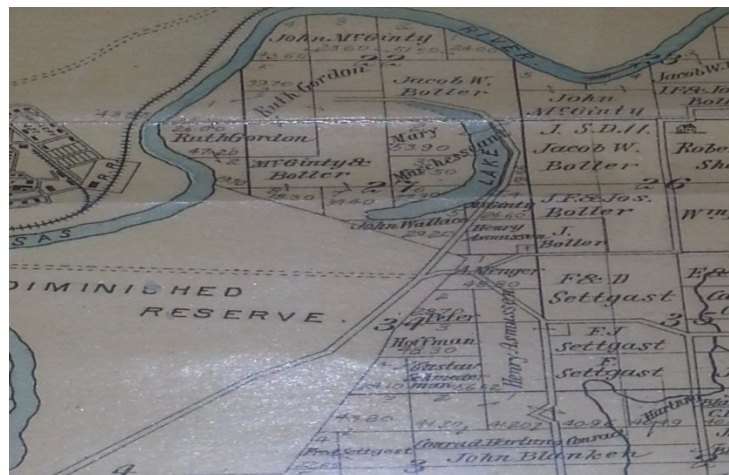


Figure 3: Plat Map of Geary County, circa 1897. Source: *Junction City Historical Society*, Junction City, Kansas. The “lake” shown as an oxbow may be an early depiction of Whiskey Lake.

¹W.F. Pride, “The History of Fort Riley.” Fort Riley, Kansas, Fort Riley Historical and Archeological Society. 1926, Pg 110

²Ibid

³Winifred N. Slagg, *Riley County Kansas: A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies, and Sunflowers*. Manhattan, Winifred N. Slagg. 7

⁴William G. Cutler, “Davis County, Part 2.” *Kansas Collection*, 1953, pg.5.



Figure 4: Photograph of a old perfume bottle found at Whiskey Point, Kansas. Courtesy of Joe Colbert. November 28, 2012. Photo by Author.

The Soldiers' Impact

Whiskey Point was known for its rich night life. On the small ox-bowed island there were saloons, brothels and restaurants. With such a predominant night life, it attracted the soldiers from Fort Riley. During this time, it was common for soldiers to receive a three-quart ration of liquor. The liquor was almost always whiskey. One quart was taken before breakfast and the other two was to get the men through the remaining hours. Soldiers could purchase more whiskey in the saloons on the island point. Before L.B. Perry and his wife introduced a ferry system in 1856, soldiers would have to swim back and forth from the island. Perry and his wife started a ferry that would transport soldiers from Fort Riley to Whiskey Point. This system would only survive until the town's disappearance just nine years later.⁵

⁵Vida Wooldridge, "Whiskey fed to fish Resulted in naming of Non-Vanished Area Lake." *The Daily Union News*, N.D.,.

Whiskey Point was known for its rambunctious nature; fights would break out among the soldiers resulting in the Provost Marshall Captain Sylvester enforcing strict no drinking laws. On May 6th, 1862, the Provost Marshall dumped thirteen barrels of whiskey into the lake, reprimanding the soldiers for their outrageous behavior.⁶ Within the same month on May 14th, 1862, two soldiers were killed and another was injured during a fight that broke out at Whiskey Point.⁷ In the same night, the Provost Marshall shut down all the saloons “carrying intoxicating liquor,” on the Island.⁸ Within the next couple of years, Whiskey Point and all the other small towns around it would disappear. The soldiers were going to Manhattan, Junction City, and Ogden to have a good time.



Figure 5: Photograph of artifacts found at Whiskey Point, Kansas, Courtesy of Joe Colbert. November 28, 2012. Photo taken by Author.

⁶W.F. Pride, “The History of Fort Riley.” Fort Riley, Kansas, Fort Riley Historical and Archeological of Fort Riley. 1926, Pg 111.

⁷William G. Cutler, “Davis County, Part 2.” *Kansas Collection*, 1953 pg. 6.

⁸Ibid.



Figure 6: Photography of Opium Vial found at Whiskey Point, Kansas. Photographed November 28, 2012. Courtesy of Joe Colbert personal find. Photo taken by Author.



Figure 7: Photograph of an early Whiskey jug found at Whiskey Point, Kansas. Photographed November 28, 2012. Courtesy of Joe Colbert personal find. Photo taken by Author.

Reappearance of Whiskey Lake

Whiskey Point's small community disappeared in the late 1860s, but the ox-bow shaped lake still remained until it eventually dried up in the 1930s. In April of 1927, B.C. Carr tried to fight to have the lake become one of the finest lakes in Kansas.⁹ These efforts were lost due to the lake drying up in the 1930s Dust Bowl. The flood of 1951 brought the lake back to Whiskey Point.¹⁰ In July of 1984, the U.S. Army of Engineers devised a plan to put two dikes in north of the airfield¹¹ so that the lake would not intervene with their plan to expand Marshall Air Field on Fort Riley.¹



Figure 8: Photograph of remaining dike system of present day Whiskey Lake. Whiskey Point, Kansas. Photo by Author.

Whiskey Lake Now

The once lively town lies dormant with just a raceway and farmland to the east of the racetrack. The remains of the bow of the lake lie waiting to once more be of purpose. Just behind the raceway is the newly extended Marshall Air Field on Fort Riley.

⁹“ Favor Old Lake Site,” *The Junction City Union*. April 7, 1927

¹⁰ Bob Honeyman, “ Corps will Revise Plan for Airfield Expansion.” *The Daily Union News*, July 31, 1984

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bob Honeyman, “Reappearance of Whiskey Lake has Homeowners demanding action.” *The Daily Union News*, July 27, 1984.

Traveling down Whiskey Lake Road parallel to the busy highway, you are met with a feeling of serenity and blissfulness, while just feet away cars are traveling up and down the highway. When you reach the fork in the road that connects Whiskey Lake Road to Raceway Road, you are reminded of how beautiful Kansas really is with its lush natural landscape, steep tree- infested hills, and stunning natural resources. When the town of Whiskey Point disappeared, this preserved a small tract of natural, enduring landscape.



Figure 9: Photograph of remaining ox bow of present day Whiskey Lake. Whiskey Point, Kansas. Photo by Author.

Bibliography:

Colbert, Joe. Interview by Sarah Stowers. Fort Riley, Kansas. November 28, 2012

Cutler, William G. "Davis County, Part 2." *Kansas Collection*. 1953.

<http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/davis/davis-co-p2.html>

"Favor Old Lake Site." *The Junction City Union*. April 7, 1927. Copy at Junction City Historical Society, Junction City Kansas.

Honeyman, Bob. "Crops will Revise Plan for Airfield Expansion." *The Daily Union News*. July 31, 1984.

Copy at Junction City Historical Society, Junction City, Kansas

Honeyman, Bob. "Reappearance of "Whiskey Lake" has Landowners Demanding Action." *The Daily Union News*. July 27, 1984. Copy at the Junction City Historical Society, Junction City, Kansas.

Pride, W.F. "The History of Fort Riley." 1926. Copy at Historical and Archaeological Society, Fort Riley, Kansas.

Slagg, Winifred N., *Riley County Kansas: A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers*. Manhattan, Published by Winifred N. Slagg

Wooldridge, Vida. "Whiskey Fed to Fish Resulted in Naming of Now-Vanished Area Lake." *The Daily Union News*, N.D. Copy at Junction City Historical Society, Junction City, Kansas.