

WHERE HEAVEN MEETS EARTH:

An Examination of Persistence through Church Life

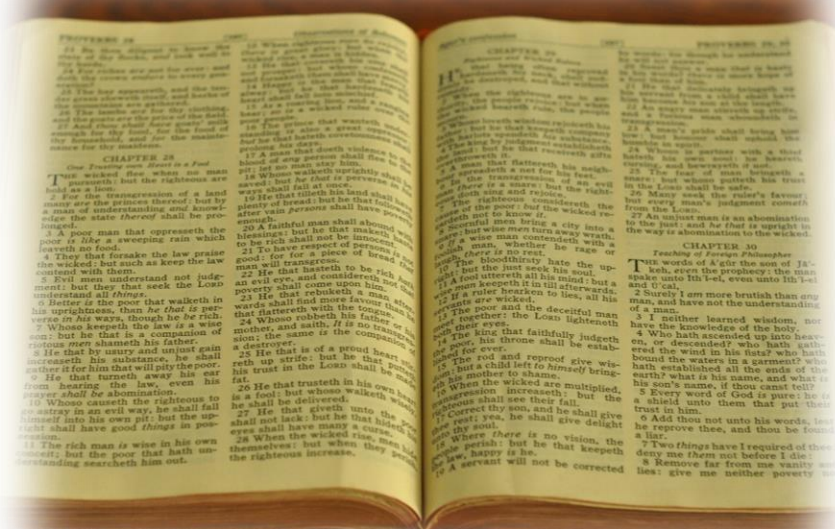
Denison, Jackson County, Kansas, 1887-2016

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This is a history of Denison, Kansas. Located in Garfield and Cedar Townships in Jackson County, between the dates of 1887 and 2016, this story is a topical examination of the churches through the use of photographs, newspapers, and historical accounts.

Introduction

You are standing at the intersection of Fifth and Western Streets. To the west, the road dead-ends; the rolling hills and farmland pull your eyes skyward. To the east, the road continues for two blocks and then disappears below the crest of a hill, giving way to wavy hills and crowded woodlands. To the north and south, quaint houses pepper the road and you can see the edges of town. At this intersection, faint music dances around your ears, echoing from the Denison Bible Church. The vast white building stands in stark contrast to the clear, blue sky and autumn-colored, half-naked trees, whose fallen leaves are laying near their bases. Weathered, multicolored stained glass reflects the sun onto the cracked sidewalk and a stone stairway invites you to the entrance. Grasping the railing, the music grows ever louder with each step. The deep basses are overlaid by crisp sopranos, male and female blending into one cohesive, patterned melody. As your hand approaches the handle of the worn, wooden door, a cool glance of autumn's breeze passes through your hair. You are beckoned to turn around and drink in the quiet, subtle grace of Denison, Kansas on a fall Sunday morning. And you might rightfully think to yourself, "This is where heaven touches the earth."

Denison has seen its ups and downs. But one constant throughout the whole history of the little town has been the presence of the churches. The Christian, Reformed Presbyterian, United Presbyterian, Methodist, and later, the Union (now called Bible) churches have all played a crucial part in the persistence of Denison. It is through the spiritual community that the physical town of Denison continues to exist today. This was accomplished through the magnetic structures of the churches, by consolidating to remain viable during difficulties, and by providing social anchors once other organizations vacated the town. Much like a church building cannot be held up by a single support beam, so too this story needs other beams – for in order to fully understand the role of the churches in the community, a succinct history of Denison must be presented.

Early Town History

Situated in the wooded, undulating hills near the Morgan Creek and North Cedar Creek conjunction, Denison was established in 1887 by A.D. Walker and Hollis Tucker, a town promoter from Ohio. The reason was that the Kansas City, Wyandotte, and Northwestern Railroad was slated to come through a mile south of the previous town, Tippinville.¹ The residents of Tippinville voted to literally uproot their community and move closer to the railroad, visions of economic success dancing in front of their eyes as they built a train depot, shown in figure 1 in its completed state. At the new site, their visions were fulfilled; a lumber company, a meat market, a hotel, and a cheese factory were among the first businesses to grace the green, arboreal fields.² By the turn of the century, there was an estimated 300 people living in and around the town.³ Denison State Bank, shown in figure 2 on page 4, was founded in 1901, at the behest of the multiple newspapers in town that started and subsequently folded. A schoolhouse was built out of local stone in 1908. This was the heyday of the town and, due to burgeoning population growth and class sizes, Denison Rural High School started operation on September 2, 1918 with 80 students first walking through its doors, displayed in figure 3 on page 5.⁴

¹ "City of Denison moves site when railroad being planned," *Jackson County, Kansas Sesquicentennial*, Sept. 7, 2005.

² "Denison," in *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory, Volume VIII*, ed. R.L. Polk & Co. (Detroit: R.L. Polk & Co., 1894), 244.

³ "Denison," in *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory, Volume IX*, ed. R.L. Polk & Co. (Detroit: R.L. Polk & Co., 1900), 255.

⁴ Lloyd and Kathryn Copeland, *Through the Years: History of Denison* (Holton, KS: Gossip Printery, n.d.), 20.

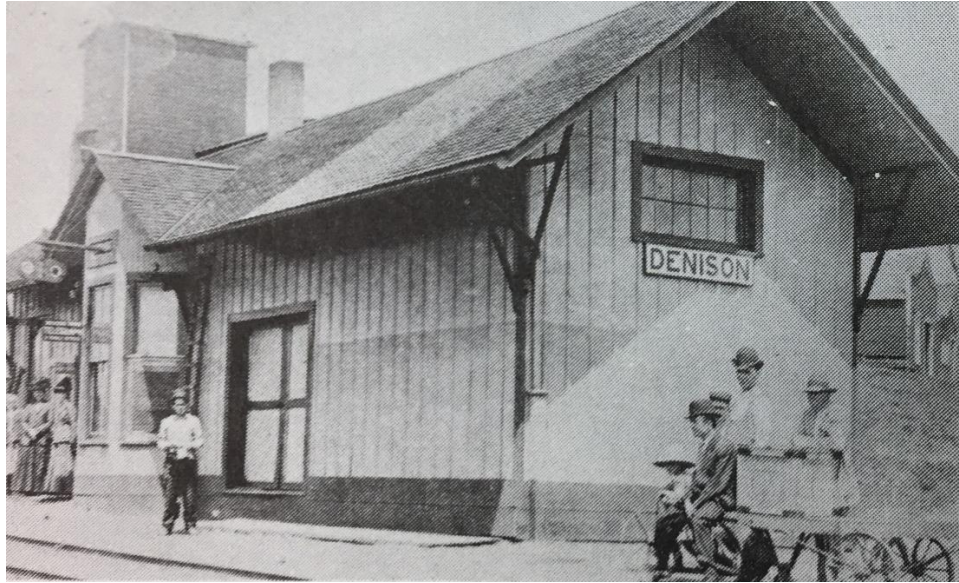


Figure 1. A historic photograph, c. 1890. The train depot for the Kansas City, Wyandotte, and Northwestern Railroad was a way for the outside world to reach Denison. Shipments in and out of the town brought immense business and helped anchor it to the landscape. SOURCE: Courtesy of the Jackson County Historical Society.



Figure 2. A historic photograph, c. 1901. The Denison State Bank was organized by Joseph Lanning and opened for business February 18, 1901. The initial capital and deposits were \$15,000 and \$100,000. SOURCE: Courtesy of the Jackson County Historical Society.

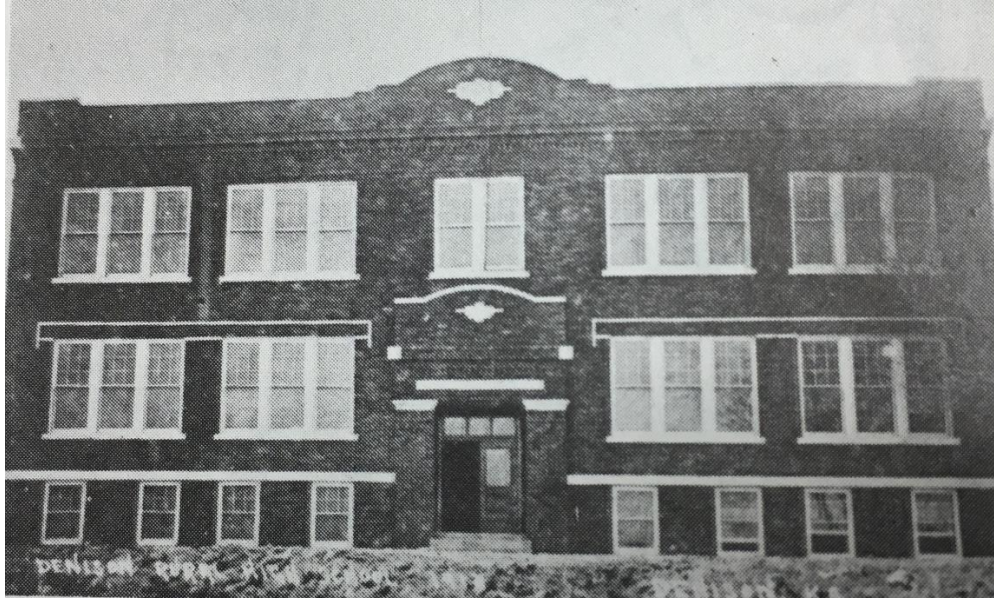


Figure 3. A historic photograph, 1918. Denison Rural High School was built from 1916 to 1917, with the first classes attending in 1918. C. R. Van Nice was the first principal of the school. SOURCE: Courtesy of the Jackson County Historical Society.

However, tougher times were on the horizon. The railroad ceased operating in 1919 due to bankruptcy and some citizens have proposed that this was the start of the decline of Denison.⁵ In 1938, the high school was engulfed in flames and destroyed, shown in all its infamy in figure 4 on page 6. After robberies in 1910⁶ and 1938⁷, the bank was relocated in 1939 to Holton, the county seat, 11 miles northwest of Denison. The rebuilt high school stopped churning out graduates in 1969, when Holton High took over that responsibility during the consolidation of schools. Elementary classes were still held in the old building until 1991 when the Holton school system added another specimen to its collection. The old school has since fallen into disrepair, as evidenced by the figure 5. From that point, the town has only shrunk, with only 187 residents registered in the 2010 census.⁸

⁵ "Changes in farming and travel have impact on community," *Denison Centennial*, May 21, 1987, 8-9.

⁶ "Rob Bank as Citizens Watch the Operation," *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 5, 1910, 3.

⁷ "Denison Bank Is Victim of Robbers," *Holton Recorder*, Jan. 17, 1938.

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, "Kansas: 2010 Population and Housing Unit Counts," Population and Housing Units: 1990 to 2010; and Area Measurements and Density: 2010 table 8, accessed Nov. 30, 2016, <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/cph-2-18.pdf>, 25.



Figure 4. A historic photograph, 1938. A fire on the early morning of December 18, 1938 ravaged the high school. Students were forced to attend classes in churches and the grade school while a new building was built. SOURCE: Courtesy of the Jackson County Historical Society.



Figure 5. A photograph, 2016. Denison Rural High School is a mere shell of what it used to be - trash is strewn in and about the building, windows are smashed, and tall grass dominates the surround land. Old desks and equipment can still be found inside, even though all official classes were ceased in 1991. Photograph by author, 2016.

And yet, the town still hangs on.

From its founding on the railroad line to the advent of the automobile, through World War One and the Roaring Twenties, stumbling through the Great Depression, strengthening slightly during World War Two, and then limping into the 21st century, Denison has stood, not always tall and proud, but it has stood. The real question is how? With its proximity to larger cities such as Holton and the state capital, Topeka, how has this shrinking town managed to hang on? The cheese factory and stockyard are gone, the railroad stopped running almost one hundred years ago, the high school and elementary school have vanished, and almost all of the businesses are extinct. In order to find a suitable explanation, we must go back to the 1850s and turn to religious explanations.

“Build Your House Upon the Rock”

The year is 1856. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 opened up Kansas to a flood of settlers from all around the country and Jackson County was no exception. The popular sovereignty clause regarding the determination of slavery in the state charged the settlement – people came from New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and perhaps the most important state during this time, Missouri. As Missouri was a slave state, many sought to make Kansas, its western border neighbor, a slave state as well. However, one settler from Platte County sought differently – that man was John Trimble Gardiner.

Imbued with abolitionist fervor, Gardiner, his wife Mary, both shown in figure 6 on page 8, and family moved to Jackson County in 1856 and, with the help of William A. Dodson, James McAlexander, Jonathan S. Saunders, and a few others, founded the third Christian Church in the state of Kansas. Initially, meetings were held in a log cabin on South Cedar Creek (south of present-day Denison); they later erected a small, never plastered, unfinished church building, only to move to a log schoolhouse in where the present-day South Denison Cemetery is located. In 1863, following the 1858 establishment of

Tippinville, Gardiner and church moved services to a new log schoolhouse within town limits; a stone schoolhouse became the meeting place in 1867. By 1870, the Church had 70 members. He, along with William Dodson and others, erected the present-day structure in Tippinville in 1878, shown in figure 7 on page 9. This structure was one of the buildings uprooted when Denison was formed around the new railroad in 1887 and it has sat in its current spot for almost 130 years.

Regarding the Denison Christian Church, it is hard to ignore the presence of John Gardiner. Even though he not the pastor of the church for an extensive period of time (1856-1858), he continued to serve the congregation, denomination, and community faithfully. He helped organize multiple revivals, attended regional meetings for the Christian denomination, and was even reported to have facilitated in the Underground Railroad, which helped escaped slaves leave the South. He made his living as a farmer, carpenter, and pioneer school teacher, clearly understanding the difficulties experienced by his fellow townspeople.



Figure 6. A historical photograph, c. 1880s. Rev. John T. Gardiner (1829-1894) and his wife, Mary J. Conway (1834-1896), were married in 1852 in Platte County, Missouri. They moved to Jackson County, Kansas in 1856 with their first two children, Sarah and Henry. They would eventually be parents to 12 children, with only 5 living in 1880. SOURCE: Courtesy of the Jackson County Historical Society.



Figure 7. A historic photograph, c. 1965. This was the structure built of native lumber in 1878 to house the North Cedar (later Denison) Christian Church. It was moved in 1887 when the town of Tippinville was relocated to form Denison.

SOURCE: Courtesy of the Jackson County Historical Society.

The second church to be established in the Cedar Creek area was the Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1869. Here, James S. T. Milligan is the central character. Leaving Southfield, Michigan in 1870, Rev. Milligan joined the Wright, Scott, Montgomery, McIntyre, and Boyd families in Tippinville, where they had been meeting in the old stone schoolhouse within town boundaries since 1869. The arrivals of the McCrory, Chestnut, and Woodburn families grew the congregation and they soon outgrew the space of the schoolhouse. The first structure, deemed the Tabernacle, shown in figure 8 on page 10, was completed in the summer of 1870. They had 126 members in 1875, which was remarkable after a severe dip in attendance during the previous year of drought and grasshopper plagues. Still, not even the Tabernacle could hold the fluctuating population. A new, large wooden structure, seen in figure 9, was completed in 1884 to house the growing membership and it still stands to this day.



Figure 8. A historical sketch, c. 1871. This was the “Tabernacle” built by the Reformed Presbyterians, or Covenanters, in 1870. It was built of native lumber and had a dirt floor covered in hay; all in all, the building cost was \$185.95 and measured 45x63 feet.

SOURCE: Courtesy of the Jackson County Historical Society.



Figure 9. A historic photograph, c. 1885. This structure was built for the Reformed Presbyterians in 1884, after a vicious windstorm blew down another conception of this building in 1883. Almost \$2,500 was raised for its construction. SOURCE:

Courtesy of the Jackson County Historical Society.

As with Gardiner, Rev. Milligan was a central figure in the Reformed Presbyterian Church and in the Denison scene. However, unlike Gardiner, Milligan was strictly a pastor. He had been in the ministry before moving to Denison and continued to serve the Covenanters for decades. According to William Cutler's "History of the State of Kansas," published in 1883, Milligan led the congregation valiantly. Their religious beliefs also mirrored political beliefs in that they thought the United States Constitution should acknowledge the authority of God, Christ, and the Bible. Citing this belief, they refused to vote or hold office until such recognition was installed in the Constitution, trusting that they avoided the "responsibilities for the sins of atheism and infidelity in the American nation."⁹ Rev. Milligan continued to serve the church and community until his death in 1912.

Denison also housed a United Presbyterian congregation in its community. The U.P Church was established in April 2, 1880 when a committee, led by W. A. and C. Z. Montgomery, met in the Tippinville school house to begin planning to construct a permanent residence. William A. Douglas, a prominent livestock rancher and real estate agent in the community, helped facilitate in the planning and construction. The church, seen below in figure 10, was completed in 1882 after securing a location on the western edge of Tippinville. In 1884, Sunday School enrollment was around 200 people. Once Denison was established, the church stayed behind in the original location; the decision to move was not finalized until the end of 1889. By 1896, the Sunday School attendance had decreased to 130. Throughout its history, the church was not dominated by one figure, but rather multiple families; the Montgomery, McCreary, Douglas, Tweedy, and Tharp clans all held ministerial roles.

⁹ William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883).



Figure 10. A historic photograph, c. 1965. The United Presbyterian Church built this 34x144x14 foot structure, proposed by John McCreary, in 1882 at a cost of \$1,346.25. The congregation voted to move the church to Denison on December 28, 1889.

SOURCE: Courtesy of the Jackson County Historical Society.

The final church was the only one to be founded after Denison was constructed. The Methodist Church first met in 1889 in the old Tippinville school house, much like the previous churches before it. A charter was established on July 8, 1889 and soon after a modest building was built in Denison. However, membership grew rapidly – the need for a larger space became apparent. Started by Jim Copas and Dave Neff, construction was finished in January 1916, enabled by a rallying community effort. Finishing touches were added later, with pews, plastered walls, and stained glass windows sorted out by June 1916. The church still stands, shown in figure 11 below, and still contains the same pews and stained glass windows. Like the United Presbyterians, the Methodists were also not defined by a singular, magnetic person. The Clark, Hedrick, Boyles, O’Neal, and Darlington families all allowed the congregation to flourish. Dr. J. W. Darlington, for instance, donated the organ and first silver communion cups. Community helped build the church and community would sustain it.

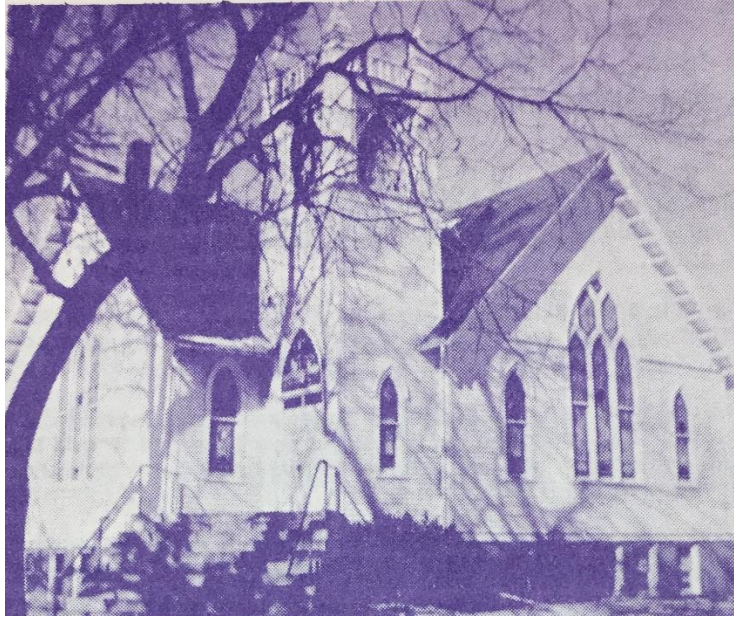


Figure 11. A historic photograph, c. 1965. The Denison Methodist Church congregation made this their home in 1916, after a large community effort. Non-Methodists pitched in labor, money, and time, resulting in the quick, nine-month construction of the fine building. SOURCE: Courtesy of the Jackson County Historical Society.

The Bountiful Harvest and the Lean Times

The churches, in some form or another, were largely established by the turn of the century, with the number of parishioners grew as Denison became home to around 300 inhabitants. From 1910 to 1930, Denison's heyday was in full swing. Following the establishment of the bank, elementary and secondary schools, and a fully operational railroad, the churches played a large role in holding the town together. Women, concerned with the morality of town, threatened to dismantle and burn a tobacco advertisement that stood near the train depot.¹⁰ Ladies Missionary Societies were founded in the Christian, Methodist, and United Presbyterian churches; these ladies, freed from housework with advancements in technology, cleaned and beautified the buildings, planted trees, and organized town events, forging communal bonds that would later become vital to hold the town together.

¹⁰ "Denison Department," *The Valley Falls New Era*, March 30, 1916, 2.

As technological advances, such as indoor plumbing and the telephone, increased the quality of life for Denison residents, one particular advance revolutionized the town: the automobile. In the 1910s, farmers and townspeople took to this invention heartily, despite the frequent problems in roads and maintenance.¹¹ What this entailed for the churches was a greater pool of people to draw members and tithes from, as well as a greater connectedness to other churches in the area. For instance, the Methodist pastor was responsible for holding services in Denison, Birmingham, Mayetta, Hoyt, South Cedar (until dissolution), and Point Pleasant until 1904 when it was reduced to just Denison, Birmingham, and Point Pleasant. Churches also responded in earnest to natural disasters, like tornados, by contributing money or helping rebuild farmhouses, even other churches (the exception was Point Pleasant, whose congregation was absorbed into area churches after a tornado wrecked their church and school in 1917).¹² The automobile also enabled members of the populace to move to larger cities; the church communities assisted in the process and connected parishioners to churches in Holton or Topeka.

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. Denison began to lag as early as 1919, with the discontinuation of the railroad, and the churches began to hurt then too. Automobiles gave the community greater mobility and the relocations to larger towns precipitated a shrinking church membership; the United Presbyterians' Sunday School attendance dwindled to just 75 in 1930. The Great Depression, triggered in October 1929, also extracted a toll on the community. Membership and wages continued to shrink, which resulted in fewer tithes paid to the churches. A drought slammed the town in the early 1930s, further reducing available money. And in order to make back lost money, town members were forced to work longer hours and more days, which led to an even larger reduction on church attendance. Ministers, who served the surrounding area, were also hit hard by the Depression.

¹¹ "Denison Department," *The Valley Falls New Era*, Sept. 21, 1916, 7.

¹² "Real Cyclone Strikes Close, Destroys Buildings and Stock," *The Valley Falls Vindicator*, June 8, 1917, 1.

With circulating money significantly reduced, churches were unable to pay ministers what they were making before 1929, forcing them to also find ways to make money. These problems mounted up until each church was staring closure in the face.

But then, a solution arose.

“A Cord of Three is not Easily Broken”

The deacons and elders of the Christian, Methodist, and United Presbyterian churches met in 1937 to find a solution to the perplexing and drastic situation. What they proposed was unique: combine the three churches into one. So it was determined that one pastor would lead the combined congregation, each denomination supplying a minister on a rotating schedule. The Methodist and United Presbyterian buildings held the sermons and the Christian structure was responsible for housing Sunday School classes. The women’s societies continued to meet separately. Attendance followed interest, as numbers steadily grew.

This system carried them through World War Two, when Rev. H. V. Wright of the United Presbyterians was pastor from 1940 to 1944 and Rev. Edward Carter of the Christians served them until summer 1945. The Holton Methodist pastor Rev. Travis Siever held evening services in 1948 and 1949, further showcasing the great reach of the automobile and the regional bonds. As the community recovered from the Depression and war, a full time minister was secured in June 1950. Rev. Harold Brown was the first to live in the parsonage, shown in figure 12 below. My own great-grandfather, George Brown, was minister of the congregation from 1952 to 1956. It was under him that the Methodist building was selected to house all of the services and classes, for the Presbyterian church was too small for the increasing numbers of attendees.



Figure 12. A photograph, 2016. Former home of Bertha Patton, this was the parsonage for the combined churches. Purchased in 1947, Rev. Harold Brown and family were the first to utilize the space. Photograph by author, 2016.

After 18 years of successful merging and working together, despite denominational differences, conversation began to permanently unite the churches in 1955. My great-grandfather was part of the committee that drew up a potential constitution for unification. After extensive revision, Denison Union Church was officially established January 5, 1958. That year also saw various improvements to the now-permanent residence – floors were tiled, folding doors were installed to divide classrooms, the kitchen and bathrooms were remodeled, and a library was started. Additions to the building were constructed throughout the years, including an education unit in 1963. The three ladies’ societies merged as well in September to form the Women’s Missionary Society. The church flourished under the new structure and membership was around 300 in 1965, with average attendance of about 195.

This joining together in difficult times gave Denison life. Instead of stubbornly holding on to beliefs and slowly collapsing, the Methodist, United Presbyterian, and Christian churches truly invoked a communal faith and grouped together. That’s not to say that there were not fierce arguments about doctrine or how money should be spent, but this combination truly saved the town. There was something to work towards upon unification and their hard work paid off in the survival of Denison.

The Church Today

It's not an easy thing to glaze over 50 years of town history and jump immediately to 2016, but it can be summed up in a few words: slowly perishing. As explained above, the high school and elementary schools leaving in 1969 and 1991 constricted the need for Denison establishments. Business that were once so necessary, such as general stores and specialty shops, could be found in larger cities, such as Holton and Topeka, often with lower costs and greater selection. Job opportunities were more plentiful in those cities as well and relocating to the cities was a decision made by many residents. However, one constant was the church, whether it was the Union Church or still-persisting Reformed Presbyterian Church. The churches continued social gatherings, uniting the community and making people feel needed and loved. The education provided to the children of the town by the church was (and still is) indispensable, even as Sunday School classes united in 1978 and 1979.

There was also a pride in maintaining historic structures that served to hold the community together. The Christian Church, after services were moved full time to the Methodist building, was sold to the local schools in 1957 to use as a music building. After the high school left, United School District #336, which governed from Holton, used the structure as storage and allowed the building to fall into disrepair. Resident Anna Pierson led the charge to maintain the building's integrity and history. Although she and a number of other residents were unable to purchase the structure back from USD #336, they were allowed to paint and preserve it. Still, this was not enough. Pierson brought it to the attention of the Kansas Historical Sites Board of Review and on November 7, 1987, the building was the second structure in Jackson County to be included in the State Register of Historic Places. August 1988 saw the establishment of the Denison Historical Society and they have since repaired and restored the now 138-year-old building, transforming it into a museum, seen below in figure 13. This is the sort of community loyalty and cultural necessity that the churches have cultivated in the town.



Figure 13. A photograph, 2016. Home to the Denison Museum, the old Christian Church building is open on holidays to the public; artifacts from the town's and church's history are housed within. The former grade school bell can be seen in the bottom-right corner. Photograph by author, 2016.

Two churches still persist in the town - Denison Bible Church (as the Union Church became known), shown in figure 14, and Denison Reformed Presbyterian Church, in figure 15, still hold services and Sunday School every week. Brunches on Saturday mornings and youth groups gather. Friendships are forged, families are united in marriage, and lives are celebrated in these halls. There is an air of respect and hallowedness pervading the grounds as one strolls the cracked sidewalks and empty streets.

Even though the town suffers and structures decay, these buildings seem removed from the true ravages of time; it's almost as if God Himself is keeping these buildings alive to sustain His community, for He knows how important they are to Denison. The town has seen good and bad times, but as long as the churches press on in the faith, the town will exist. As one elderly citizen once wrote, "You could search the world over; I am safe to say; You would never find a better; Along the way."¹³

This is Denison, Kansas: a landscape of churches where heaven meets earth.

¹³ Nora Blumberg, "Centennial for Denison," in *Through the Years: History of Denison*, ed. Lloyd & Kathryn Copeland (Holton, KS: Gossip Printery, n.d.), 77.



Figure 14. A photograph, 2016. The Denison Bible Church still occupies the Methodist Church building, having added on to the west (left) side of the structure with more classroom space. While the bell tower doesn't look as ornate, it does still sit in the belfry, ready to be rung. Photograph by author, 2016.



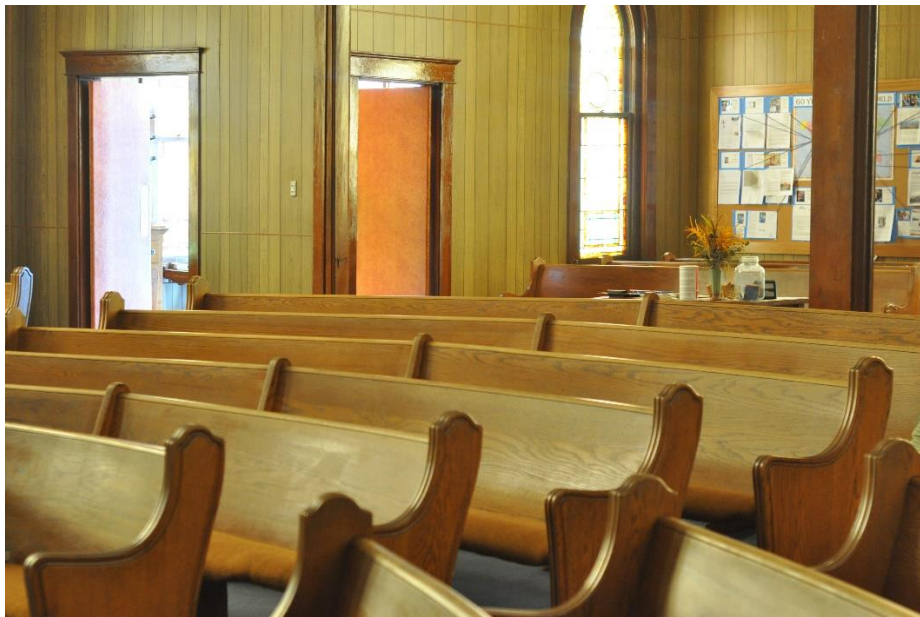
Figure 15. A photograph, 2016. Denison Reformed Presbyterian Church has met in the same building since its construction in 1884. Its large steeple has been replaced with a lower, sturdier structure. Photograph by author, 2016.

Appendix A

This appendix only serves one purpose: to give the reader the chance to truly set themselves in the town of Denison. All photographs were taken by the author in November 2016.



Facing west, looking at the Bible Church. Notice the westward expansion of the building. The current pastor is Tom Fraunfelter.



The inside of the Bible Church. These are presumably the same pews purchased in February 1916. The two doors on the left side of the picture lead to the main entrance under the belfry.



Facing northeast, this park was the former location of the grade school that was built in 1908. The back of the tattered high school can be seen over the wooden fence. This park is directly across the street from the Bible Church.



Facing west, looking through the east entrance to the Denison Cemetery. The white building on the right side of sidewalk is the cemetery office and plot directory.



Facing north, this is Denison's main thoroughfare, Central Street. The post office is on the left side and a defunct store sits on the right. The wide street is a holdover from the large stock animal drives that happened prior to 1900.



Facing southwest, the now defunct farming cooperative still towers over the landscape.



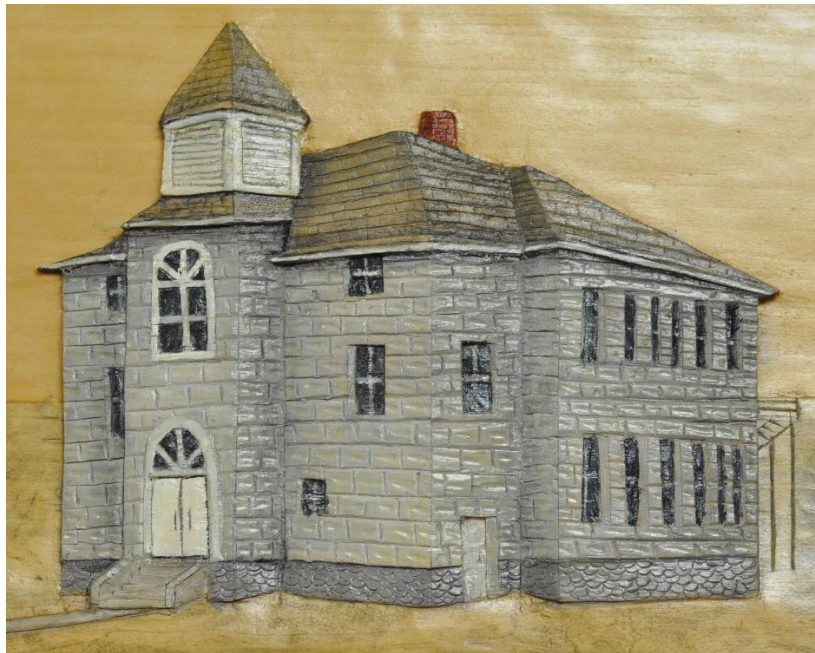
Facing east, an abandoned home on Central Street.



Facing northeast, an abandoned store at the corner of Central and Second Streets.



Facing southwest, this is one of the only remaining businesses in Denison, Racks and Reels Bar & Grill, on the right (they serve a very good cheeseburger, fries, and beer). City hall and the fire department occupy the building on the left.



A wood carving of the elementary school, carved in 1999. Courtesy of the Jackson County Historical Society.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my grandfather, Philip Brown, for inspiring me to research Denison with his entertaining anecdotes. His fond memory and inquisitive presence was extremely vital when we visited the town early November 2016. I hope this paper makes him proud.

Second, a thank you needs to be given to Dr. M. J. Morgan at Kansas State University and Research Director at the Chapman Center for Rural Studies. As my academic advisor, her persistence in making sure I took the class that allowed me to write this paper was outstanding. Her enthusiasm pushed me to work even harder and to dig even deeper in my research.

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And finally, a very large **THANK YOU** must be given to Anna Wilhelm at the Jackson County Historical Society. She graciously allowed my grandfather and me to dig around in the archives one Saturday afternoon and was extremely helpful in facilitating my research. Without her, I couldn't have done this to the extent I was able to. Thank you once more!

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