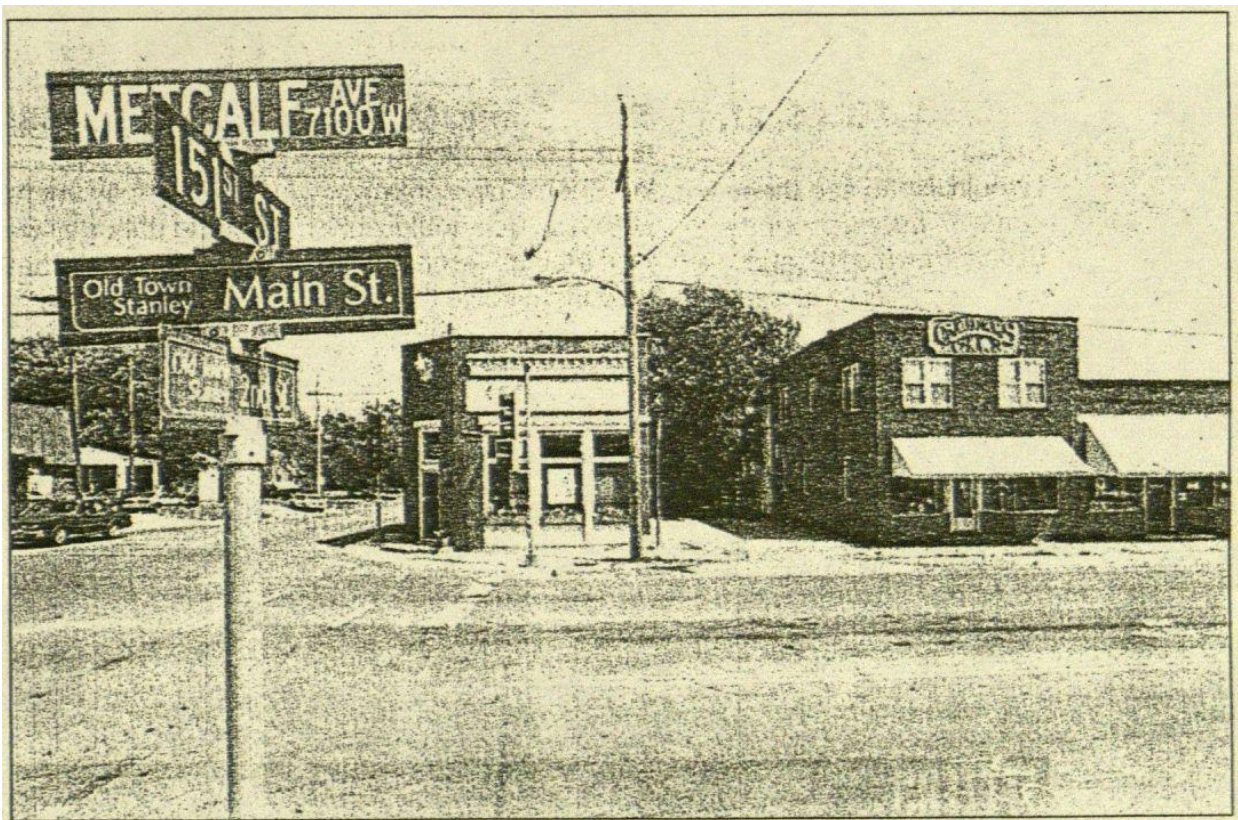


Swallowed Whole:

Stanley, Johnson County, Kansas, 1866-1985



A photograph of Stanley, Kansas, c. 1990. SOURCE: Johnson County Museum
 Notice: Both streets of the intersection have two names. The two top signs are the names as recognized by Overland Park, while the two bottom signs were the original street names for the town of Stanley. The Stanley street names have since been removed.

By: Griffin Page

Chapman Center for Rural Studies, Fall, 2013

The following paper is a history of the town of Stanley, Oxford Township, Johnson County, Kansas. Stanley was an unincorporated community that was annexed by Overland Park in 1985 despite resistance from residents. The information was mainly compiled from old newspaper articles, a book on the early history of the area, and from interviews of former Stanley locals.

SWALLOWED WHOLE:

STANLEY, JOHNSON COUNTY, KANSAS, 1866-1985

“Leave Stanley alone.”¹

This anonymous response to a survey question was the stance widely held by the residents of the town formerly known as Stanley, located in Johnson County, Kansas. The threat to residents was the city of Overland Park which, spurred by continued development, sought to expand its boundaries southward and absorb the land around and including Stanley itself. Despite resistance (including lawsuits) by the residents of Stanley, its status as an unincorporated community stood no chance against the much larger city of Overland Park. Stanley and the neighboring community of Morse were eventually annexed in 1985.²

Stanley is unique among “lost” Kansas communities in respect to the cause of its demise. The state of Kansas, with an estimate of 9,000 towns no longer in existence, ranks among the top ‘ghost town states’ in numbers of communities that have disappeared.³ While many towns, especially further west in the state, disappear for reasons such as poor location or loss of the railroad, very few have actually been absorbed by a larger city and had a new name (and new taxes) forced upon its residents. But that is Stanley’s story. Even though Stanley had its own history of settlement, success and community pride, the annexation by Overland Park was likely an inevitable outcome, despite resident opposition. Stanley’s unincorporated status, its proximity to the greater Kansas City metropolitan area, and the explosive growth of development in Johnson County over the past several decades were all factors that led to Overland Park’s annexation of an area that long-time residents knew only as Stanley.

In the Beginning

The site that became Stanley was like all land in Kansas, in that it was originally inhabited by Native Americans. In 1854, a treaty was signed awarding the land that is now Johnson County in northeastern Kansas to the emigrant Shawnee Indian tribe. The land was divided among the eight chiefs, one of whom, Chief Black Bob, was awarded the southeastern corner of Johnson County. This area later became the townships of Oxford (where Stanley was settled) and Aubry. The land was ideal for Black Bob and his 167 tribe members. They were primarily hunters and fishermen, and the 33,392 acres they were awarded had many creeks, including the source of the Blue River.⁴ The land also aided the horticultural tradition of the Shawnee, who had long grown corn as a staple for their diets, along with beans, squash and pumpkins.⁵ When the Civil War broke out, the tribe abandoned the area and headed for Oklahoma. When Black Bob returned in 1866, he found white settlers on his land.⁶ In 1879 President Hayes officially removed Black Bob and his tribe to Oklahoma, ending all Native American settlement in Johnson County.⁷

Topographically speaking, this part of Kansas is a part of the Osage Plains, which does not do justice to the land itself.⁸ The area is not flat as the name implies, but is instead distinguished by gently rolling hills with long, gradually rising slopes, cut through by numerous creeks. Before settlers arrived the vegetation was primarily prairie, especially on the crests and slopes of the hills, which would have been covered in tall, blue-stem prairie grasses. The area did have some forest cover, however, as oak and hickory trees could have been found along the streams of the area and the Blue River⁹. This varied landscape also led to variance in the soil as “some sections were rich and fertile, while other parts were extremely rocky and stony and almost worthless.”¹⁰

On July 4, 1866, the families of John McCaughey, John Dougan and Adam Look arrived from Ohio and settled the land that was destined to become Stanley.¹¹ The area itself lies about three miles west of the Missouri border, at the point where Sections 5, 6, 7, and 8 of Oxford Township meet, with most of the town located in Section 8.¹² With its proximity to Missouri, and the issue of slavery on the line, Oxford Township had attracted largely southern settlers in 1865. Over 50% of the township's population was native southerners, with Missouri (around 40%) and Kentucky (15%) as the largest contributors¹³. That shifted by the 1880 census, however, as 47% of the Oxford population came from the "North-Midland" states of Illinois, Indiana and Ohio, and only 25% arrived from the "South-Midland" of Missouri, Kentucky and Arkansas.¹⁴

The town had a water source just to the south in Negro Creek, which flows eastward into the Blue River.¹⁵ It was not until 1871, however, when the post office was established in H.L. (Heck) Mardis' general store, that the area had a name.¹⁶ The residents agreed upon Stanley, in honor of Sir Henry Morton Stanley, a journalist and adventurer who covered the "Indian Wars" in Kansas for newspapers.¹⁷ The settlement of Stanley kept progressing and in 1872, gained a branch of the Kansas City, Clinton, and Springfield railroad on the southern edge of town. The rail line traveled from Olathe eastward into Missouri; was known as the "Leaky Roof Railroad" because freight cars could not seem to repel rainfall from the cargo inside.¹⁸ Despite the nickname, the train led to a grain elevator built in Stanley in 1919, and "traffic consisted of four passenger trains daily."¹⁹ In 1934 the tracks were removed.²⁰

Stanley and its residents were not distinguished on a census from the surrounding township until 1880, when the census notes that there were 55 families in Stanley and 368 in Oxford Township (1,158 people). The majority of the residents were farmers, whose most common crops were corn, rye, soft winter wheat, pumpkins, melons, squashes and tomatoes.²¹

Dairy farming was also common.²² The first settlers stressed the importance of education for their children, and set as the goal to establish a school about every two miles. These schools were built by neighbors and housed 1st through 12th grades on donated land.²³

In 1920, Stanley Rural High School was constructed for the 9th through 12th grades. When it was completed in December, it had 40 students enrolled.²⁴ The town's population remained relatively constant for the first half of the 20th century, with a population of 1,442 in 1930 and a peak population of 1,709 in 1960.²⁵ In 1965, the towns of Stanley and Stilwell (located in Aubry Township to the South) consolidated into Southeast Johnson County Unified School District #229, later to be renamed Blue Valley.²⁶ Little did Stanley residents realize that that move signaled the end of what was for almost 100 years an independent community.

Manifest Injury

The Kansas City Star newspaper published a notable forewarning for Stanley residents in a 1957 article on "Suburbia." The article had a photograph of downtown Stanley with the caption, "The peaceful days of Stanley, Kans., may be numbered as the suburban push spreads south and southwest. The business district, shown here, is only six miles from residential areas near One Hundred Third and Nall."²⁷ Stanley was moving closer to becoming a participant in the suburban sprawl of Johnson County, whether the residents were ready for it or not.

On August 20, 1971, Overland Park made its first attempt to annex Stanley. The annexation was approved by the Overland Park Council after an eight day "expansion campaign."²⁸ Stanley residents were outraged and created the Johnson County Rural Community Association to investigate the legality of the annexation. Eventually they took the case to court. In September of 1973, the Johnson County District Court Judge ruled the Kansas Annexation

Law unconstitutional and “nullified Overland Park’s controversial 1971 annexation of 4,640 acres.”²⁹ The case was titled, State Ex Rel. Margaret Jordan vs. City of Overland Park. The case went to the Kansas Supreme Court, where in November, 1974, the court both upheld and reversed the District Court’s decision. The Supreme Court upheld the Kansas law itself regarding annexation, but determined that the annexation attempted by Overland Park of Stanley was “invalid.”³⁰

The annexation attempt, however, merely magnified the issue at hand: that development in Johnson County was pushing farther and farther south, and Stanley was in the way. Stanley actually was discontinued as an official postal address on May 1, 1973, instead being listed as “Shawnee Mission.”³¹ The post office was still located at 15119 Metcalf, right in the heart of Stanley, and letters were still being addressed to residents of “Stanley,” but the postal service did not recognize it as a town. Stanley residents faced stronger challenges than discrepancies in mailing addresses, however.³²

In 1978, the Johnson County Commission approved the construction of the Blue River Sewer District 5 sewer system to serve 23,000 people in the Stanley area. The system was built in anticipation of residential development, but due to a downturn in the economy, the development never occurred.³³ What was left was an \$11 million sewer system to be paid by the 125 families living in the area, many of whom were retired.³⁴ Most residents were farmers and stood to lose their homes and declare bankruptcy as they could not afford to pay for the sewer system themselves.³⁵ Fortunately there were residents in the area who fought back. One of the leaders for Stanley was Nancy Brown, who helped organize the legal team to defend Stanley residents from this unfair payment by suing the county. Brown, who later served as a State Representative for the area, recalled that the residents used to host “hog roasts” to raise funds to

pay the lawyers. The suit was eventually settled out of court in 1984. “We think we won, they think we settled,” Brown said.³⁶

Throughout its history, Stanley had remained an unincorporated community. It had no mayor, no city council, and the services for the residents (such as the fire department) were provided by the county. Mrs. Brown acknowledged that Stanley had “community spokesmen and leaders” who voiced concerns to the county on behalf of the residents, but none were elected or had any political clout.³⁷ In 1978 Stanley tried to make itself official and applied to become an incorporated city of Johnson County. The attempt failed.³⁸ Stanley tried again to incorporate in early 1985, but was once again denied by the County Commissioners.³⁹ Brown cited that Stanley needed to satisfy certain pre-requisites to become incorporated. A major requirement was a large enough tax-base for the community to provide its own services, which Stanley just did not have. Brown also noted that Johnson County already had 21 incorporated cities, and that the Commissioners told her that, “There will never be another incorporated city” in the county.⁴⁰

On May 8, 1985, the Overland Park City Council approved the annexation of one-third of Oxford Township, which totaled about eight square miles and 1,000 new citizens.⁴¹ Stanley was part of the proposed expansion, as seen in Figure 2. Donald Pipes, the City Manager of Overland Park, publicly cited several reasons for the proposed annexation. Among them were Stanley’s already completed sewer system, the promise of future development in the area, and the constant chatter of incorporation by the residents of Stanley.⁴² Perhaps the reason that pushed Overland Park’s aggression the most, however, was legislation in Topeka that was meant to prevent annexation of county territory by cities. Nancy Brown, from the 27th District in southeastern Johnson County, proposed the legislation to protect Stanley’s independence.⁴³

“I was adamantly against it [annexation],” Brown said. “I am opposed to annexation of people who didn’t want to be annexed.” She viewed the annexation as “more taxes, no benefits” for the residents of Stanley.⁴⁴ She was not wrong. In 1985, the estimates showed that Overland Park property taxes were 6.5% higher than the taxes by Oxford Township, which Stanley residents had been paying. Unfortunately, the annexation process had begun months earlier when in March, 1985, 160 acres at 151st and Nall (less than a mile east of Stanley) were annexed by Overland Park at the request of the landowner, developer JC Nichols, Inc. Nichols was proposing a 500 home subdivision on the land and felt that Overland Park could provide the services the future residents needed.⁴⁵

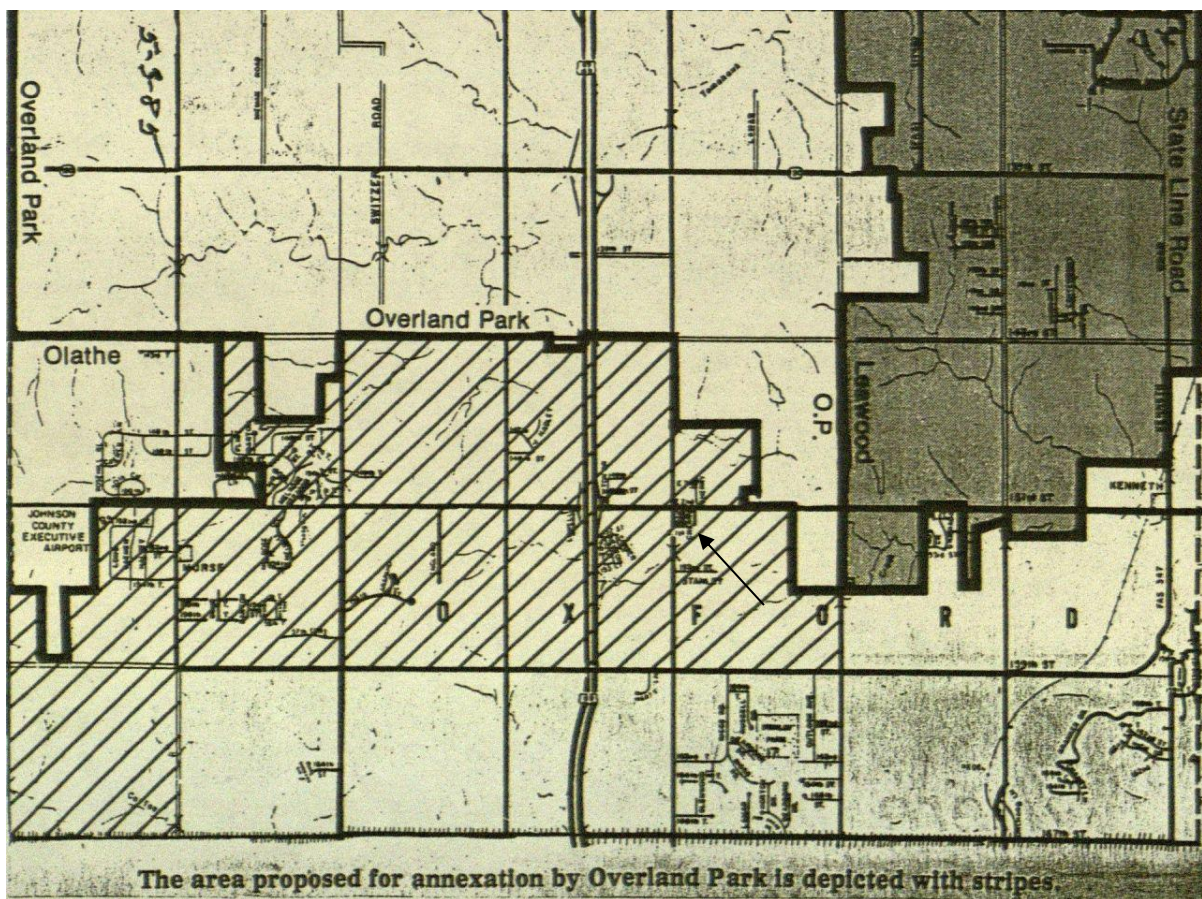


Figure 2. A depiction of the 1985 annexation proposal by Overland Park.

Source: Johnson County Museum.⁴⁶

Notice: The arrow points to Stanley, as it was in 1985.

“That annexation created an awareness that something is going to happen here. A lot of people assumed that was the beginning, that it would only be a matter of time,” John Finfield, Oxford Township Trustee, stated in 1985.⁴⁷ People may have realized that it was inevitable, but that did not make them open to the idea of being Overland Park residents. Below are a few samples of local opinions:

“Some city, because of top officials’ ambitions and pushing by developers, is trying to take my city and give it another identity,” – Norm Ledgin, Oxford Township clerk.⁴⁸

“Not too many people I’ve talked to are favorable to it. People are saying they aren’t going to get anything out of it but higher taxes,” – Hazel Ball, Stanley Citizen’s Committee President.⁴⁹

“I don’t think a hell of a lot of ‘em. I’ve only lived here 80 years. They’ll do it whether you want it or not, but I don’t like it,” –Luther (Tooter) Crust, Honorary Mayor of Stanley.⁵⁰



Figure 3. Photograph of Tooter Crust with a dog, Kodiak, published in local newspaper. Source: Photo by Scott Smith. Article written by Steve Porter. Published in *Olathe Daily News*, February 22, 1987.

The final approval of annexation rested with the Johnson County Commissioners, who on August 8, 1985, unanimously approved the proposed annexation by Overland Park.⁵¹ With that vote, a 25-year-old city (Overland Park became incorporated in 1960) had annexed 119 years of

history and community.⁵² Stanley was no more.

Stanley Today

Anne Weaver spent her high school years on a farm at what is now 119th Street and State Line Road in Leawood, Kansas. She rode the bus the seven miles to Stanley Rural High School. She described the landscape outside her bus window then as, “All country everywhere.” She remembered only one of her classmates actually living in the town of Stanley. She graduated in May, 1954, in a class of 20. There were only 100 students in the entire high school. She moved away after high school, but returned for her 50th high school reunion in 2004, which was hosted in the building that was once Stanley Rural High. When asked how Stanley had changed since her time there, Weaver exclaimed, “Oh my gosh! I didn’t recognize it.”⁵³

It is hard to calculate the exact population change in Stanley from the time it was Stanley Rural High School until now, or to truly grasp the explosive growth in development in the area. Probably the most accurate method is to measure enrollment in the Blue Valley School District, since a large portion of the district used to attend Stanley High School. In the 1978-1979 school year, the Blue Valley School District was composed of five schools (Blue Valley High, Blue Valley and Leawood Middle Schools, and Stanley and Stilwell Elementary Schools), and had over 2,000 students enrolled.⁵⁴ Currently, there are 34 schools, including five high schools, in the district (which covers 91 square miles) and has more than 20,000 students enrolled.⁵⁵

Despite all the development, the name of Stanley is still found throughout the area. Stanley Rural High School still stands (with some minor additions), and has served as the district’s Administrative offices since the current Blue Valley High School was opened in 1977.⁵⁶ See Figure 3 at the conclusion of the essay for a recent photograph. Stanley Elementary

bears its former name, as does “Stanley Station” on 151st street which houses several commercial businesses including the QuikTrip gas station and the New Stanley Station Liquors store.

Perhaps the most telling sign of Stanley’s persistence is the old bank building constructed in 1910. It survived the stock market crash of 1929, a fire and a street widening. When the 151st street widening was proposed, the bank was scheduled to be bulldozed. But the bank found an interested buyer and in 1996, was moved from the southeast corner of 151st Street and Metcalf a few blocks west to its present site at 151st and Newton Drive.⁵⁷

Yet namesakes are merely tributes to a community that is no longer recognized by its residents. In 1985 citizens such as Lillian Dale (known as the “Queen of Stanley”) wondered, “I don’t know where all the people are coming from.”⁵⁸ Yet Nancy Brown never doubted the development potential of the area, as Johnson County suburban sprawl continued to move south. That does not mean that residents who knew Stanley do not miss how it was, however. “If you just drive around you go, ‘Oh no, another subdivision coming up,’” Brown said.⁵⁹

Stanley was likely destined to become a member of the Kansas City metropolis. With an unincorporated status, its location and the rapid suburban development in Johnson County, Stanley stood no chance when Overland Park went looking for land. While most of the people who loved and lived in Stanley are no longer around, their story continues. Stanley may not be recognized or known by many who now reside in the area, but something must draw them south, away from the city. It is easy to conclude that it is the new housing and good schools, but that may be too pedestrian an answer. Perhaps what draws people out to the Stanley area is the same force that the McCaughey, Dougan and Look families experienced 147 years ago. It is the same force that caused the Stanley residents to oppose Overland Park’s annexation twice, even when they had a snowball’s chance in hell of winning. It is the land, the people, the spirit, and the

home Stanley provided that cemented such pride in its citizens. Those folks may have become official residents of Overland Park, but Stanley will always be their home. Their pride in their town will always persist, no matter what the address reads.



Figure 4. A photograph of Stanley High School as it is today.

SOURCE: Author photograph, November, 2013.

Notice: While the structure of the building is the original, the windows are clearly from a much more recent installation.

Notes

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- ¹ No author, "Quaint or Stupid, plans for downtown Stanley draw ire," *Newspaper Unknown*, Summer 1986. Source: Johnson County Museum.
- ² No author, "Judge rules Stanley annexation Stands," *Sun Newspaper*, July 18, 1986. Source: Johnson County Museum.
- ³ Dr. Morgan Morgan, "Lost Kansas Communities" (lecture, Kansas State University, Manhattan, August 2013).
- ⁴ *The Settlement of the Stanley Area*, ed. Anita Tebbe (Stilwell, KS: Blue Valley High School, 1978), 9-10. Source: Johnson County Central Resource Library.
- ⁵ James H. Howard, *Shawnee!* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1981), 48-49.
- ⁶ Tebbe, 11.
- ⁷ Tebbe, 21.
- ⁸ Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), Map 3.
- ⁹ Socolofsky, Map 5.
- ¹⁰ Tebbe, 34.
- ¹¹ Tebbe, 1.
- ¹² John P. Edwards, *Map of Johnson County, 1886*, map, www.kansasmemory.org/item/210670/page/1.
- ¹³ James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains: Who Went Where in Frontier Kansas* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 20, 21, 23.
- ¹⁴ Shortridge, 199.
- ¹⁵ Edwards, map.
- ¹⁶ Tebbe, 28.
- ¹⁷ *What do Africa and Kansas Have in Common? A history of the man whom Stanley, Kansas was named* (Overland Park, KS: 2013), from Blue Valley History Museum.
- ¹⁸ Norm Ledgin, *Stanley History in Brief* (Overland Park, KS: 1998), from Blue Valley History Museum.
- ¹⁹ Tebbe, 30.
- ²⁰ Ledgin.
- ²¹ Tebbe, 22, 33.
- ²² Tebbe, 34.
- ²³ Tebbe, 22.
- ²⁴ Tebbe, 23.
- ²⁵ Tebbe, 36.
- ²⁶ Tebbe, 24.
- ²⁷ John T. Alexander, "This is Suburbia, IV.-Overland Park, Lenexa, Martin City and Stanley," *Kansas City Star*, August 4, 1957. Source: Johnson County Museum.
- ²⁸ Tebbe, 36.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ *Kansas Post Offices*, ed. Bill and Diana Sowers (Topeka: Kansas Historical Society, 2013), www.kshs.org/geog/geog_postoffices/search/placenames:Stanley/county:/begyr:/endyr:/submit:SEARCH (accessed December 16, 2013). Steven Porter, "Stanley residents facing changes," *Olathe Daily News*, February 22, 1987. Source: Johnson County Museum.
- ³² Porter.
- ³³ "The Stanley sewers: Who should pay?" *Olathe Daily News*, February 9, 1983. Source: JoCo Museum.
- ³⁴ "Sewer items make news: Could new plan be Stanley Sewer snafu revisited?" *The Sun Newspapers*, February 13, 1987. Source: JoCo Museum.
- ³⁵ "The Stanley sewers: Who should pay?"
- ³⁶ Nancy Brown, interview by author, First Watch, Overland Park, December 14, 2013.
- ³⁷ Brown interview.
- ³⁸ "Overland Park Petitions for Annexation of Stanley, Morse," *The Sun Newspapers*, May 9, 1985. Source: JoCo Museum.
- ³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Brown interview.

⁴¹ "Traffic, housing worries swayed Amigo vote," *Kansas City Star*, May 1, 1985. Source: JoCo Museum.

⁴² "Overland Park Petitions for Annexation of Stanley, Morse."

⁴³ Brown interview.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ "Overland Park Petitions for Annexation of Stanley, Morse."

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Cathy Carlin and Greg Coonrod, "Some in Stanley oppose Annexation move," *Kansas City Star*, May 1985.

Source: JoCo Museum.

⁴⁹ "Overland Park Petitions for Annexation of Stanley, Morse."

⁵⁰ Steven Porter article.

⁵¹ "Judge rules Stanley annexation Stands," *Sun Newspaper*, July 18, 1986. Source: JoCo Museum.

⁵² Cathy Carlin.

⁵³ Anne Weaver, telephone interview by author, December 6, 2013.

⁵⁴ Tebbe, 24.

⁵⁵ About the Blue Valley School District, ed. Blue Valley School District (Overland Park, KS), www.bluevalleyk12.org/education/components/scrapbook/default.php?sectiondetailid=548 (accessed December 16, 2013).

⁵⁶ Tebbe, 24.

⁵⁷ Dustin Bleizeffer, "Connecting past with future: Officials rededicate Stanley Bank," *Overland Park Sun*, October 14, 1998. Source: JoCo Museum.

⁵⁸ Steven Porter.

⁵⁹ Brown Interview.

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