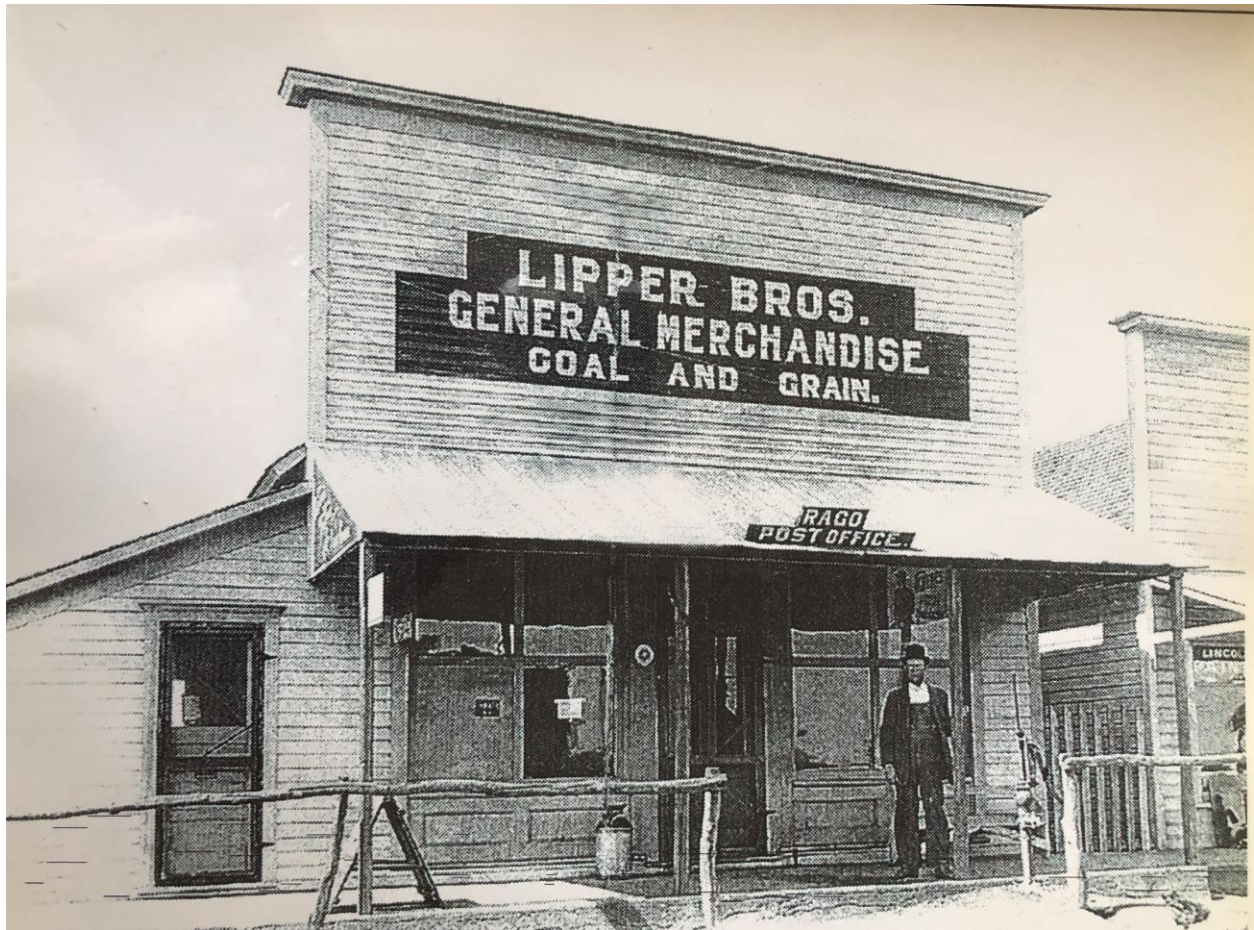


Planes, Trains, and Farming the 40
The History of Rago, Kansas



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Elder Jenkins called upon an angel of heaven, and come it did. In the midst of his powerful prayer, he beckoned for a heavenly apparition to unfold its wings and hover about his congregation. Suddenly, a great roaring of wings sounded outside and grew louder as it approached. The congregation rushed outside to watch in amazement as a bird-like object soared down from the sky. The object kicked up dust as it landed beside Elder Jenkins' rural Kansas church. Emerging from the cockpit was Clyde Cessna, a man from Rago, Kansas, in his homemade 1911 monoplane. He was late for church and decided to take the family plane to get there.



Figure 1. Silverwings.

Note: Clyde Cessna of Rago, Kansas flying his first monoplane, Silverwings.

Source: Courtesy of The Kansas Aviation Museum Archives.

It is more than likely that if there is a statement about Rago, Kansas, there will be mention of Clyde Cessna within the same sentence. However, Cessna is only one part of the small town's history. From the first Post Master J. H. Backer to its last, Olli Blazie, residents such as store owner and rodeo star George Furry called Rago home. The town of Rago is both connected to Kansas history and alienated from it at the same time. During the railroad expansion of the 1890s, it was a moderately important stop with some services along the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe Railway. In the 1910s, Rago was where Aviation Pioneer Clyde

Cessna built his earliest models. By 1999, however, the post office was officially shut down, and the town was unincorporated. Rago is a lost town, its history is a scattered collection of stories.

The most notable feature of Rago, Kansas is its position as the lifelong home of aviation pioneer Clyde Cessna. Cessna and his company have received national recognition and have a legacy that can be seen in the sky's today. He was born in Iowa in 1879 before his family moved to a farm near the old Rago trading post in 1882, they were among the first settlers in the town.¹ Farms like the early Cessna homestead were first farmed using a plow and a team of oxen, but it was not long before the homestead and many other local farms were introduced to mechanized farming.² Like other residents in the area, Clyde Cessna and his brother Roy would accompany their father to travel 12 miles down to the post office in Harper after each harvest for shipping.³

On April 13, 1883, a post office was established near the trading post, with J. H. Baker as its postmaster, marking the beginning of Rago as a small town. The post had a small population with its businesses primarily involved in livestock. Lattin Bros & Co, a mainstay of the town, with J. Henderson, and Joseph Tomas also working in livestock. However, the town's banking, as well as stagecoach shipping, was still done in Harper.⁴ In addition to livestock, A salt mine was operated, using Rago as an eventual shipping point.⁵ Rago was an ambitious town,

¹ Edward H Phillips, *Cessna, A Master's Expression*, (Eagan, Minnesota: Flying Books Publishers & Wholesalers, 1985), 6.

² Phillips, *Cessna, A Master's Expression*, 6.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *R.L. Polk & Co. R. L. Polk & Co.'s Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory, Including a Complete Business Directory of Kansas City, Mo 1884-5.*

<https://www.kansasmemory.org/item/200088/page/1205>, 1193-4.

⁵ Kingman Carnegie Library Vertical Files, Rago Folder.

however, and the people there knew that the town would never grow without direct shipping. In September of the same year, Rago moved four miles south of its original location to be closer to the railroads.⁶ In 1886, The new town was growing. Rago was advertised not only as a place with good soil for crops, but also a developing railroad town with amenities such as a dry goods store. The newly formed Rago Town Company saw nothing but potential for their town. They sold business lots for as much as \$125 and residence lots for \$40 claiming there was space for everything from a college to a secret orders hotel.⁷ Rago was soon home to the District 12 school house and a post for the Grand Army of the Republic.⁸ However, during the construction of the Hutchinson and Southern Railroad in 1888, the town uprooted and moved again to its present-day location a few miles to the East. The new rail lines would connect to the Englewood Railroad out of Wichita, through Rago, and on to the West, making Rago a 4 way stop.⁹ The entire town would be located on the railroad and grew as a shipping point for cattle, complete with stockyards along the tracks. Rago grew in importance and it was not long before a tool house and depot for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad was built in Rago.¹⁰

⁶ Kingman County Historical Museum vertical files, Rago Folder.

⁷ *The Leader Courier*, September 2, 1886,
[https://www.newspapers.com/image/149864531/?terms=rago.](https://www.newspapers.com/image/149864531/?terms=rago)

⁸ Kingman Carnegie Library Vertical Files, Rago Folder.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Kingman County Historical Museum vertical files, Rago Folder.



Figure 2: Rago Stock Yards, 1887

Note: The Rago Stock Yards were located next to the tracks, making it convenient to load Cattle on the trains.

Source: Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society

By the year 1900, the town had approximately 200 people and became a popular stop on the AT&SF Rail Road. New Amenities such as a dentist and a blacksmith were located in the town.¹¹ In 1904, Rago included Lipper Bros. General Merchandise, Coal and Grain, Stewart General Merchandise John Macomber Groceries, and the Rago Hotel.¹² With the growth of the town, the residents of Rago felt the need for a church. After numerous meetings at the schoolhouse, the cornerstone of The Rago Methodist Church was laid in 1911.¹³ Every morning Horton Kyle and John Kinert hitched up their horses and hauled in the lumber from Basil

¹¹ R.L. Polk & Co. R. L. Polk & Co.'s Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory, Including a Complete Business Directory of Kansas City, Mo, 1900. <https://www.kansasmemory.org/item/200095/page/790>.

¹² Kingman Carnegie Library Vertical Files, Rago Folder.

¹³ Kingman County Historical Museum Vertical Files, Rago Folder.

Lumber Yard five miles away. The church was completed and dedicated by Reverend D. L.

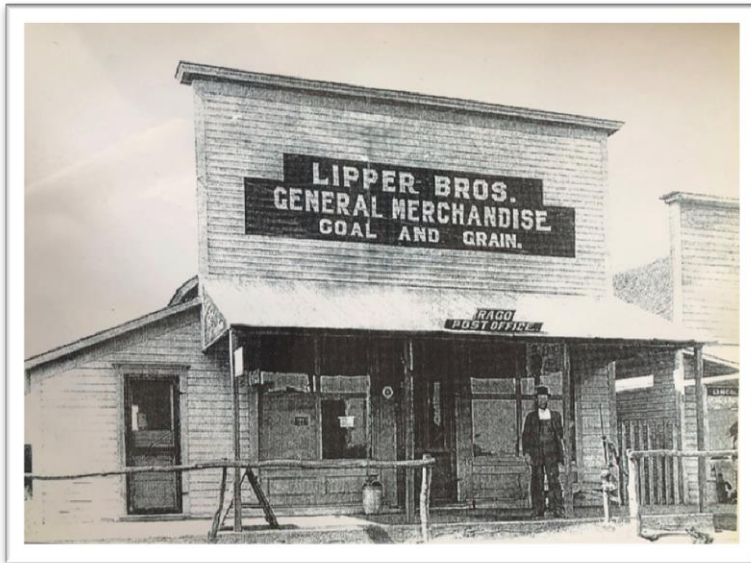


Figure 3: Lipper Bros. General Merchandise
Note: The Lipper Bros. Building housed both the general store and the town post office. There is no date on the photo.

Source: Courtesy of The Kingman County Historical Museum Archives

Jones. In 1912 ¹⁴ Piece by piece Rago grew.

On June 6, 1905, a 26-year-old Clyde Cessna married Europa Elizabeth Dotzour and bought his own humble 40-acre farm near Rago, Kansas from his brother, Roy Cessna, for the price of \$400 and one bay pacing horse.¹⁵ Like many residents of Rago at this time, Clyde made his living as a farmer. Cessna ran a custom threshing operation, helping the locals with their harvest. However, in 1910, Cessna saw his first plane at an air show, and by 1911, Cessna built his first airplane in Enid Oklahoma. After numerous crashes, he was off the ground and had the plane shipped home to Rago, where he perfected his design. Cessna flew his plane in various air shows around Kansas for extra income, but he used the plane as a small-town farmer would. Calling his plane the family carriage, Cessna flew to places like Wichita to run errands for his wife, or to get to the local church; it was not long before the novelty of Cessna's flying machine

¹⁴ Kingman Carnegie Library Vertical Files, Rago Folder.

¹⁵ Phillips, *Cessna, A Master's Expression*, 7.

wore off on the small town of Rago and became a regular part of the town.¹⁶ By 1912, Rago was a small, functional railroad town. Throughout the 1910s and 20s, the depot built in the town was a popular lunch stop for the trains that passed through. The Rago hotel was frequented by both workers and passengers on the AT&SF. It was not uncommon for travelers to hop off the Rago passengers train, nicknamed Doodlebug, for lunch.¹⁷ The town was populated not only by Kansas farmers but also those who were brought in to maintain the AT&SF.

The development of Rago is connected to its location on the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad. Kansas in the late 19th century saw a rapid expansion of 5 major rail lines, connecting small rural towns across the state.¹⁸ Rago was one of the many small towns West of the Arkansas River that was part of rapid railroad expansion. Kansas in 1890 had 8,900 miles of railroad, more than New York or New England.¹⁹ Due to its sheer size, outside work was necessary to maintain the tracks. In Rago and the surrounding area, Mexicans were employed as maintenance laborers and section hands. A 1911 newspaper article describes a Booster Club's visit to Rago while they were touring down the AT&SF Railroad. They noted that the first people they saw coming into Rago were the Mexicans employed on the section.²⁰ In April of 1916, there was a group of about 150 Mexicans who pitched their tents for the night near Rago

¹⁶ "Kingman Youth Flies to Market and to Fairs," *The Topeka Daily Capital*, September 15, 1915. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/64103302/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Richard White, *Railroaded*, (New York: Norton, 2010), 210.

¹⁹ Ibid, 2011.

²⁰ *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, May 21, 1911, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/63985774/?terms=rago%2Bsanta%2BFe>.

on their way to work other sections of the AT&SF in the area.²¹ Some families, however, called Rago their permanent home. In efforts to Americanize them, English language classes were set up in the basement of the Methodist church in Kingman, the county seat, hoping to help welcome the Mexicans into the surrounding communities.²² The Mexican's stay in Rago was not entirely without conflict. In 1919 two men who had been loitering in Rago decided that a Mexican family there would be an easy target, and broke into the house of a Mexican section hand. They tied and gagged the residents, a mother, and her little girl, and stole their savings of



*Figure 4: Atchison Topeka Santa Fe Railroad
Tool House*

*Note: This photo, taken in 1897, is of the ATSF
Tool house located on the tracks in Rago.*

*Source: Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical
Society.*

²¹ *The Kingman Journal*, April 14, 1916,
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/426106070/?terms=rago%2C%2Bmexican>.

²² *The Kingman Journal*, October 31, 1919,
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/426195169/?terms=rago%2Bmexican>.

\$300.²³ The two men were later arrested in Enid, Oklahoma.

Unfortunately, incidents such as robberies became more common as the years went on. In February 1922 Rago was targeted by high profile crime when a spree of safe robberies included the Rago post office. In the middle of the night, two men broke into the Rago post office and dragged a 200lb safe out to the middle of a field. They managed to blow open the safe and robbed it of \$150.²⁴ In addition to robberies, Rago was struck by a series of fires. In May 1921, The Rago Farmer's Cooperative, operated in part by Clyde Cessna, closed for good.

The Coop auctioned off it's mostly new or unused merchandise, warehouse, store, and all real estate. The Coop was indebted after a fire destroyed their building, and the owners were unable to recover costs after rebuilding and refurnishing.²⁵ In 1923, the original Rago Hotel was also lost in a fire. What started as a small attic fire grew to consume the three-story building, leaving only a few household items.²⁶ The Rago Hotel was rebuilt, though smaller than before, and continued to operate²⁷ Despite these setbacks, the small town moved on. The 1920s and 30s saw new businesses move into the town. Jay Williams garage, Burris Felts Grocery Store, and several filling stations operated in Rago. New places to have fun, or spend the night out came to Rago as well. Part of the Fred Fink Filling Station was used as a dance hall, and the John Wilson Recreation Parlor sold soda, sandwiches, and beer.²⁸

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *The Leader Courier*, January 27, 1922.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/153044196/?terms=rago%2Brobbery>

²⁵ *The Leader Courier*, May 20, 1912,

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/153043746/?terms=rago%2Bcoop>

²⁶ *The Anthony Republican*, April 19, 1923, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/418881076/>.

²⁷ Kingman County Historical Museum Vertical Files, Rago Folder

²⁸ Kingman Carnegie Library Vertical Files, Rago Folder.

The people who called Rago home had an affinity for it. In 1927, Clyde Cessna founded Cessna Aircraft Company. The company was among the first opened in Wichita, creating innovative and new models of aircraft.²⁹ Eventually, Cessna Aircraft Co became the largest producer of general aviation aircraft in the world. Though Cessna found success, he never moved away from his small farm, choosing to live in Rago over moving to Wichita to be closer to his work. Unfortunately, even the famous son of Rago was not immune to the economic downturn of the 1930s. During the great depression, Cessna relied on his Rago, Kansas farm for income, as he and his son worked desperately to keep the company alive.³⁰ In 1936 Cessna was out of money and disheartened after one test pilot, Roy Liggett, was killed in a crash flying one of Cessna's newest designs.³¹ After an innovative career, Clyde Cessna retired to his Rago farm, where he worked the land and tinkered with his farm equipment until his passing in 1956.



Figure 5: Clyde and Europa Cessna

Note: Clyde and Europa Cessna stand outside the front porch of their Rago Kansas Homestead in August of 1954.

Source: Courtesy of The Kansas Aviation Museum Archives.

²⁹ "Farmer Clyde Cessna Turned Out Wichita's First Airplane," *Wichita Eagle*, September 20, 1958

³⁰ Phillips, *Cessna, A Master's Expression*, 86.

³¹ Jeffrey L. Rodengen, *The Legend of Cessna*. (Fort Lauderdale: Write Stuff Enterprises Inc., 1998), 78.

Throughout his career, Clyde Cessna called Rago his home, always making time to make it home for dinner.³²

Besides Clyde Cessna, other important figures called Rago home such as all-around cowboy George Furry. Since Furry rode his first pony at the age of 6, he had a talent with animals. In 1924, he won the All-Around Cowboy Prize at the Kingman County Picnic.³³ Furry also ran a successful training stable, attracting owners with their horses from across the state. Furry trained horses to cut and herd cattle, which is normally a two-person job requiring a turnback man, but, he did the job on his own with the help of his well-trained dog, Queenie.³⁴ Furry worked with horses all his life, but it was not until 1961, at the age of 59 did he win the cutting horse contest at the Kansas State Fair, he was named All-Around Cowboy of the year.³⁵ In addition to training horses, George and his wife Clara Furry ran and operated a popular café that was once an old filling station.³⁶ Clara Furry, who often went by Mrs. George Furry, was dedicated to the town of Rago. She was a prominent artist, known for her detailed paintings of horses³⁷. Every week for 51 years, Clara Furry wrote the Rago dateline, a newspaper segment that detailed the ins and outs of the Rago residents. From 1938 to 1989, One could count on Clara Furry, who often went by Mrs. George Furry in the paper, to detail the town. Items such

³² Ibid, 23.

³³ Kingman Carnegie Library Vertical Files, Rago Folder.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Kingman County Historical Museum vertical files, Rago Folder

³⁷ Ibid.

as who was traveling, coming to visit, or notable weekly events were all chronicled by Clara Furry.³⁸



*Figure 6: George Furry
Note: George Furry and dog, Queenie, at the
State Fair in 1965.
Source: Courtesy of the Kingman County
Historical Museum Archives.*

In 1947-48, The Rago softball club was founded with Paul Stucky and Milo Sitts as the managers.³⁹ The team was successful despite coming from an exceptionally small town. In 1965, They defeated the Manhattan, Kansas team, the defending champions, to win the Kansas State Men's Softball Tournament.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, they were disqualified in the following western regional tournament due to fielding ineligible players.⁴¹ The team was among the last new ventures to begin in Rago and lasted into the 2000s.⁴² The 1940s and onward saw the end of the town.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ *The Salina Journal*, September 7, 1965,
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/40766302/?terms=Rago%2Bsoftball>.

⁴¹ *The Manhattan Mercury*, September 12, 1965,
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/423967842/?terms=Rago%2Bsoftball>.

⁴² Kingman County Historical Museum Vertical Files, Rago Folder.

In 1938, the population of the Valley Township, which includes Rago and the surrounding towns was 237 people.⁴³ Attendance to the Methodist Church dwindled and In 1940 the church closed its doors. A nondenominational church operated in its place until 1950



Figure 7: The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad Depot

Note: This photo of the depot was taken in 1969, one year before it was torn down.

Source: Courtesy of the Kingman County Historical Museum Archives.

when it too closed.⁴⁴ The same decade, the trains stopped running into the railroad town. The trains were rerouted and the depot, for which the town relocated twice to build, was closed.⁴⁵ With no more trains running through the town, The Rago Hotel was forced to shut down. The building was sawed in half, sold, and relocated to Alva, Oklahoma⁴⁶. Between 1950 and 1960 the population of Rago fell from 204 people to 144.⁴⁷ In 1960 the District 12 schoolhouse was closed and several of the longtime families of the town were forced to move away, some to nearby Harper Kansas.⁴⁸ In 1970, The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad Depot building was sold to Dr. Flowers of Anthony, and subsequently torn down and removed.⁴⁹ What once

⁴³ "Kansas, City and County Census Records, 1919-1961," Ansetry.com, Accessed May 5, 2019, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/kscensusrecords/>.

⁴⁴ Kingman County Historical Museum Vertical Files, Rago Folder.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "Kansas, City and County Census Records, 1919-1961," Ansetry.com, Accessed May 5, 2019, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/kscensusrecords/>.

⁴⁸ Kingman County Historical Museum Vertical Files, Rago Folder.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

was a staple of the town was gone, torn down, and thrown away. What remained of the town was a few small businesses and the old Rago Post Office. Piece by piece Rago was disappearing.

In 1982 the Rago Post Office serviced the smallest population in the state of Kansas, renting out only 17 post office boxes. Olli Blazier, who retired in 1982, served as the final postmaster in Rago at the Post Office. Residents of Rago were greeted by her smile for 27 years until the mail headquarters moved to nearby Spivey, Kansas, and Blazier retired.⁵⁰ Without Blazier, rural mail carrier Gale Reida delivered to Rago's 17 post office boxes.⁵¹ Rago, a town that 100 years prior was a promising and bustling railroad town, was now unincorporated and consisted of fewer than 35 residences and only three businesses. The Post Office was only open two hours a day and was losing \$10,000 a year.⁵² In 1988 The U.S. Postal Service tried to shut down the Post Office in Rago, only to be blocked by dedicated townspeople, such as Olli Blazier, and a restraining order from a Kingman County judge. The U.S. Postal Service would try to shut down the Rago Post Office again in 1989 but to no avail.⁵³ The few people and businesses left in Rago fought for their town, as losing the post office would make working and living in Rago a challenge. It took ten more years, but on September 30th, 1999 The Post Office was officially discontinued.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Kingman County Historical Museum Vertical Files, Rago Folder.

⁵² Kingman County Historical Museum Vertical Files, Rago Folder.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Kansas Post Offices," United State Postal Service, accessed April 29, 2019, https://webpmt.usps.gov/pmt011.cfm?stat_state_name=KANSAS.



Figure 8: Rago Post Office.
Note: The Rago Post Office as it stands in 2019. The building is abandoned but in good repair.
Source: Photo by Ethan Levin

Rago, Kansas today is only a fraction of its former self. The hallmark structures of the town are gone along with most of the residents. Rago was a hopeful town, home to innovators both nationally and locally. The people of this town were resilient. When the railroad did not run through Rago, they moved the town. When fires and depression struck, they rebuilt the best they could. When the Federal Government wanted to abandon them, they fought for their Post Office. All but gone, Rago is a lost Kansas town, however, its story survives.



Figure 9. Modern Rago.
Note: Rago, Kansas as it stands today. Many of the old structures, such as the Rago Hotel, are gone. Few people live here today.
Source: Photo by Ethan Levin

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