

In the Dust of Diablo: Jarbalo, Leavenworth County, Kansas, 1872-1958

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Spring, 2016

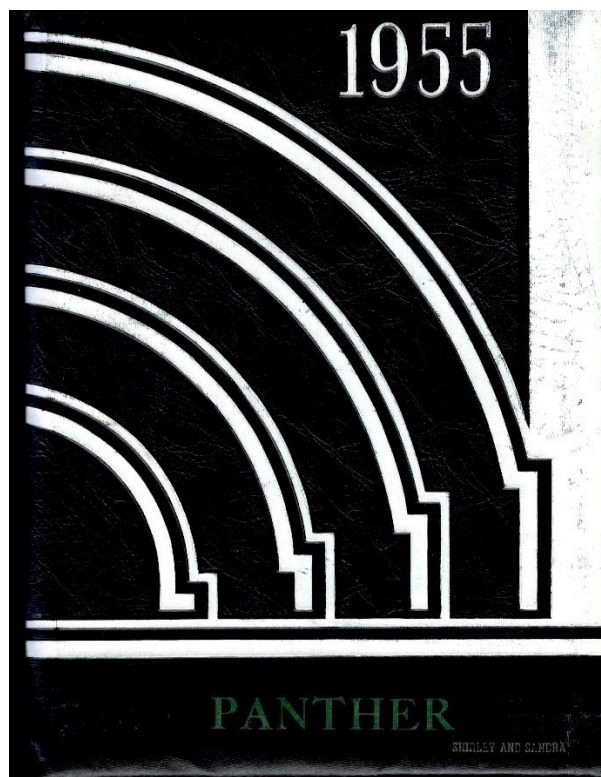


Figure 1. A modern scan of the cover for the 1955 Panther, the Jarbalo Rural High School Yearbook. SOURCE: Shirley Kochanowski, 1955.

This is a study of Jarbalo in Alexandria Township, Leavenworth County.

While never officially incorporated, it is a community with a curious history that survives even now.

This exhibit uses field work, photographs, interviews, written histories, and newspapers

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For much of the year in Leavenworth County Kansas, the grasses of the fields and prairies that dance in the sunlight are a golden tan. They wave freely in the unending breezes that sweep through their numbers and through the rustling leaves of ash trees and oaks. This symphony of the wind is often broken only by the distant rhythm of a pick-up truck, crossing over from where paved street meets gravel road, kicking up dust as it goes. In the shadow of the hills that spread just north beyond the small town of Tonganoxie lies the even smaller hamlet of Jarbalo. The origin of such a unique name is only the beginning of the history behind such a uniquely persistent town. Despite never being officially incorporated, Jarbalo has endured well beyond its years as a stop on the Leavenworth, Topeka and Southwestern railway and has remained steadfast in the face of many factors which could have easily spelled the end for the community. In that sense, calling Jarbalo a “lost town” may be a touch misleading, for it still possesses an essence of vitality that continues to this day, and a small community remains that embodies this vitality. All of this contributes to the individual mystique of a town that refuses to fade, a truly admirable feat indeed.

What’s in a namesake?

At a glance, one may be quick to assume that the name “Jarbalo” has a similar origin to that of Tonganoxie, in that it is perhaps linked to Native Americans. It is true that the Delaware tribe once inhabited the area where both towns would crop up as part of the Delaware Indian Reserve. While Tonganoxie was named for a Delaware chieftain who established a trading post near the town’s site around 1866, Jarbalo’s story did not really begin until 1868. Previously the only settlement that had existed in the area was known as “Wright’s Station,” located about 2.2 miles northwest of Jarbalo’s current position. For many years thereafter, the old covered bridge as seen in Figure 2 below, stood near the approximate location of this mysterious station along the Stranger Creek, which, according to

Jarbalo historian Tamar Barnett, was named for its tendency to wander and meander like a stranger. It has now long since been converted to a concrete bridge.



Figure 2. A black and white photograph of the Jarbalo Bridge, crossing over Stranger Creek. Its modern equivalent can be found one-mile north and one mile east of Jarbalo. This photograph was taken sometime during the 1930s. SOURCE: kansasmemory.org.

As stated by Julia Farrar, a Jarbalo resident: *“John Wright is said to have appeared in Alexandria Township in 1854. This place was probably only a store, with a post office, to which the mail was brought from Leavenworth by horseback, and the settlers could pick up any mail that came while shopping for groceries.”*¹ It was during the year of 1868 that the United States government offered the land on the reserve to the Union Pacific Railway Company, who then opened up the land to sell to settlers, eventually landing under the possession of one Isaiah Lowe. The land experienced little development until Lowe authorized the new Leavenworth, Topeka and Southwestern Railroad (L.T.SW.), which began operation in 1881, to run through this land in an attempt to increase the interest in the further settlement of the area. He continued this effort by officially establishing a plat on his property as alluded to in the *History of Jarbalo*, penned by Barnett: *“[Mr. Lowe] then in 1883 platted four blocks of lots in the southeast corner of his place, exclusive of the school half block which was already established, and the*

¹ Julia Farrar, “History of the Jarbalo Methodist Church,” in *Jarbalo: A Collection of Stories and History*, comp. Tamar Barnett (1983), 7.

village of Jarbalo was born.”² Figure 2 illustrates the original layout of the town not too long after it was platted and the railroad began operation.

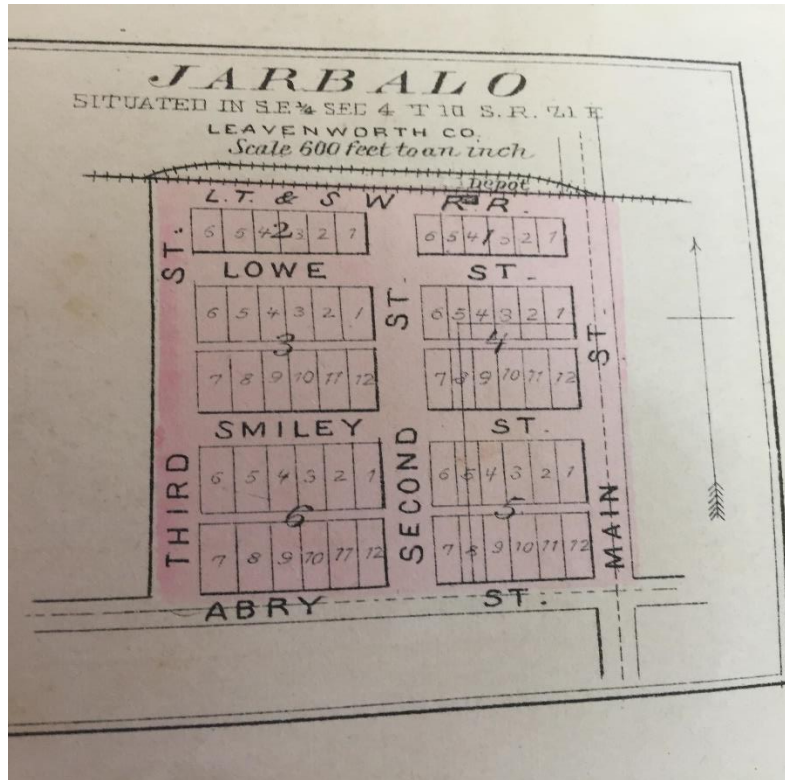


Figure 3. A photograph of an early plat map of Jarbalo from around the turn of the century. The L.T.S.W. Rail is shown as being located at the very north side of town. All roads pictured here retain their names to this day, with the exception of Abry Street and Main Street (now Dempsey Road and 211th Street, respectively). SOURCE: Historical Atlas of Kansas, 1880.

In these early days of settling, it is uncertain just how Jarbalo as a name exactly came to be. What can be discerned, however, is it is most likely a misheard or mistranslated variant of the Spanish word “Diablo.” Some claim it was a favored interjection of Mexican freight workers who often found themselves unable to leave town, exclaiming the word in reference to the terrain near the hill which may have held a tendency to become extremely miring for any vehicle after a good rainfall. Another story involves the hill itself which shares the same name of the town, referred to either as Jarbalo Hill or

² Tamar Barnett, “History of Jarbalo,” in *Jarbalo: A Collections of Stories and History*, comp. Tamar Barnett (1983), 3.

Jarbalo Mound. Early settlers Doc and William Mason may have likened the hill to Mt. Diablo (at that time located in northern Mexico, now the modern San Francisco region). It is completely within the realm of possibility that the brothers misheard the local pronunciation of the name and the error by which they had named the hill then carried over into the naming of the adjacent town.³ This has led to some confusion over whether the town was originally meant to be called Jarbalo Hills or even Jarbalo Mills, which could possibly be a completely unrelated reference to the various grain mills that had begun their production near the town early in its development. Those familiar with the history of the area will recognize the infamous Wright's Mill, which was the site of an explosion that killed eight men in 1861 (many of whom still have recognizable graves at Fall Creek Cemetery northeast of Jarbalo). There is also evidence to suggest that a grain elevator did exist on the north side of town just by the railroad tracks.

The Buildings of Jarbalo

With the initial success of the railroad, the first period of major growth for the town began in the 1870s and continued well into the 1890s, following the town's platting. This period oversaw the construction of the first commercial and public structures in the town, including its earliest school building, Stranger Valley School, which began construction in 1871. This building provided many services to the community as a meeting place for the local church, for the Stranger Valley Grange No.11 (an agriculturally-centered fraternal organization), and as a center for public gatherings in general. Early local businesses include the practice of one Dr. Mount, a blacksmith's shop run by a Mr. Jeffries, and the large general store owned by Uriah M. Morgan which also served as the town's earliest recorded post office.⁴ In 1888 the schoolhouse was relieved of some of its duties as a gathering place when the local church had finally gained the necessary funds to proceed with their long-awaited plan to construct the community's first church building. The building itself would remain under a constant state of renovation

³ Barnett, "History of Jarbalo," 3.

⁴ Tamar Barnett, "Post Offices," *Jarbalo* (1983), 67.

throughout its history, but would eventually be a solid fixture in the town until its tearing down in 1957, then to be replaced by an entirely new building.

In 1905 a crucial turning point in the history of Jarbalo came to pass as a large two-story building, as seen in figure 4, was sold to the Stranger Valley Grange by Mr. William Willis (other sources say it was an A.E. Reeves). It was to become the Stranger Valley Grange Hall. The Grange Hall marks the beginning of the second major period of Jarbalo's development into the 20th century. It was a building of great size and magnitude within the community that provided many services outside of the obvious meeting place for the Grange Order. For a while it passed from renter to renter, each one taking up the mantle of the general store that occupied the first floor. Following the fire that destroyed the firm of Uriah Morgan's store in 1894, the building served as the post office as well, with the storekeeper also acting as the postmaster. The second floor contained the hall which was put to great use for town meetings, dances, and even a few play performances. According to a written account by Ward B. Kiester, a 7th degree member of the Grange, the local 4-H also used the building beginning in and around 1949: *"At a recent meeting the Order voted to transfer the lower part of the building to the 4-H Group rent-free for one year. The 4-H will refinish and decorate it and use it for a meeting place."*⁵

⁵ Ward B. Kiester, "History of The Grange," in *Jarbalo* (1949), 27.



A sketch of the Stranger Valley Grange Hall by a Jarbalo Rural High School student as featured in *The Jarbalo Hi-Lites*, January 1949. SOURCE: *Jarbalo: A Collection of Stories, Sketches and History*. 1983.

Along with the Grange, more and more stores began to open in Jarbalo. There are two particular stores of interest that had a prominent presence in the town throughout the first half of the 20th century and up and until the town began its decline. The first of these was the Opliger store, started in 1913 by Sam Opliger. It functioned as a standard grocery store and fueling station, selling Standard Oil in gas tanks until a pump was installed in 1918. The other major store was Dohrn's Service, established in 1947 by Carl and Katherine Dohrn. The building that housed the store had had a colorful history under many different owners. It began as the "Do Drop Inn," owned by the Somers family. It then passed unto the Naylor family who added onto the building, turning it into a grocery store in addition to the restaurant. This layout was continued by the next owners, the Throops, until finally being sold to the Dohrns who would be the owning family for the remainder of the store's existence.⁶

The Jarbalo State Bank, as seen in Figure 5 below, began operation in 1906, and one of the most sensationalized stories surrounding the community is linked to it. In July of 1916, a bank robbery took place; depending on whatever source you read about the ordeal, the details are never entirely the same. For example, the school newspaper, *Jarbalo Hi-Lites*, of 1963 claims that Ms. Blanche Brune was held up by two men, made her escape after they told her to step aside from the vault, and then phoned the

⁶ "Opliger Grocery Store," *Jarbalo Hi-Lites*, 1949.

sheriff; the robbers made off with \$215.⁷ By contrast, the robbery reported in the *Kansas City Gazette Globe* tells of a Claude Moore being held up by one robber, who then sealed him in the vault after making off with a whopping \$1,760.⁸ The only common trait of both stories is the conclusion that the robbers were never apprehended. Tales of Bonnie and Clyde styled stick-ups notwithstanding, the bank as a presence in Jarbalo met a relatively uneventful end in 1940. After struggling to regain its stability following the 1930s financial crisis, the bank was merged with the City State Bank in Leavenworth, and the building became a residence.⁹



Figure 5. A detailed painting of the Jarbalo State Bank by Mae Henry from 1966. The Bank faced south and stood across the street from the high school. It had a standard storefront as opposed to the common practice of banks at the time to have angled, less accessible doors to prevent robberies. SOURCE: leavenworthcounty.org.

The Jarbalo Schools

For most of its history,⁹ the school district at Jarbalo was one of the key driving forces behind the stability of the community. As mentioned previously, the school system has held a presence in the area since 1866, by further examining the evolution of Jarbalo's schools as somewhat of a pillar in the history of the town, one may better understand its role in the town's decline. By 1907, the grade school had

⁷ "Jarbalo State Bank," *Jarbalo Hi-Lites*, 1949.

⁸ "Jarbalo Bank Robbed of \$1760," *Gazette Globe*, Jul. 9, 1916

⁹ Mae Henry, "Jarbalo State Bank," in *Jarbalo* (1983), 53.

moved to another building and a restaurant called “The Beanery” was established in the building that had served so many purposes since 1871.¹⁰ While this building eventually burned down in 1945, it only marks the beginning of quite an eventful saga for the Jarbalo school system. There is no substantive evidence behind what eventually became of the new 1907 building. Nor is there any information about the transition to the third and final grade school building that was added onto the high school. Like the grade school, there has also been multiple separate Jarbalo high schools as well. After the first grade school built in 1871 became The Beanery in 1907, the building was moved to a location closer to the railroad tracks. On this site, the first high school building was built and opened during the 1917-18 school year, heralded as the first rural high school in the county.¹¹ As seen in Figure 6, Jarbalo Rural High was a small, but prominent building. It had both a basement and a small gymnasium.



Figure 6. Photograph of the first Jarbalo Rural High School building. Likely taken on the Northeastern side of the school, around the location of the Jarbalo State Bank. SOURCE: History of Jarbalo R.H.S. from 1949 JHS Yearbook.

Since there was no space within the town for a football field, football games were held in a cleared out lot north of the town just beyond the railroad. Unfortunately, the life of this vital building in the heart of the town came to an abrupt end one New Year’s Eve. According to Julia Farrar: *“This building burned the night of Dec. 31, 1933 and school was continued by using the M.E. Church for a study hall, as well as for*

¹⁰ Thamar Barnett, “The Beanery,” in *Jarbalo* (1983), 68.

¹¹ Julia Farrar, “Jarbalo High School,” in *Jarbalo* (1983), 49.

some small classes, the parsonage, and the Grange Hall...” Thankfully, a new high school building was quickly built just in time for the 1935-36 term. It would last for another 30 years.

A Slow but Steady Decline

One of the most unfair, albeit most common, causes that people often direct the blame for sending a small town into its decline is either the introduction, success, failure, removal or relocation of a railroad. It’s not “unfair” in the dramatic sense that it causes the tragic loss of a community, but rather in how often people point to this factor as the most likely or even the solitary cause of a town’s disappearance. For Jarbalo, this simply is not the case. This isn’t to say that the loss of the railroad in Jarbalo did not affect the town at all, but it was merely one of several factors that began to compound in on the town during the 1930s, culminating in a veritable (though not a complete) collapse by the end of the 1960s. To begin with the railroad, the Leavenworth, Topeka and Southwestern had had fair success throughout its run as a joint with the Union Pacific. By 1899 the railway had been contracted by the Santa Fe Company and enjoyed further success until 1917 when Santa Fe agreed to sell the line to have it be run independently by those who lived alongside it, forming the Leavenworth and Topeka Railroad Company. The L & T lasted until 1931. Possibly due to financial troubles, the track was sold one last time to the Sonken-Galamba Corporation in Kansas City, which had the line junked and sold to the Burlington Railroad.¹² Obviously, this may have slowed some of the commerce in Jarbalo, but there were still plenty of businesses left in the town. As mentioned previously, the bank had closed in 1940, likely forcing members of the community to travel to other towns to make transactions, but this would not have forced people to relocate. No, for Jarbalo, the end came somewhat all at once, much, much later.

After renter Randel Trackwell decided to quit running his store in Grange Hall sometime during the mid-1930s, the post office was moved one final time to the Vigus Garage on the southwest side of

¹² Gordon Barnhardt, “Railroad History,” in *Jarbalo* (1983), 63.

town with Mrs. Nina Vigus serving as postmistress. It would stay in this location until its closing in 1958. Barnett notes that, *"The Post Office was closed Dec. 31, 1958, with Jarbalo being put on Rural Route 1 and Rural Route 3, Leavenworth until it was all on Route 1."*¹³ This detail may suggest that the decision to remove Jarbalo's post office stemmed from the fact that it still remained an unincorporated community surrounded by farmland and country roads. Jarbalo, left without any local federal offices, clung to its school district as the last token of recognition by the government.

A Perfect Storm

A mere eight years later, another tragedy befell the town as a series of harsh June tornados ripped through eastern Kansas. As mentioned by *The Kansas City Times - Topeka, Olathe, Valley Falls, Wakefield, Manhattan* and even Jarbalo were all in its wake. In 1966 alone, Jarbalo lost the original Opliger Store (and by some accounts the Dohrn store as well), to the storm, and many residences suffered serious damage. Phil Jeannin, long-time teacher and coach at Tonganoxie High School, grew up in Jarbalo and was a member of the graduating class of 1967, the first Jarbalo Rural High School class to graduate from Tonganoxie High School. He recalls the events of that evening clearly: *"We watched it go over. It was a little bit to the south of our dairy up there, and it swung around and went through Charlie Woods'...and it went right through Jarbalo. It took out one of the grocery stores...Opliger is still there. And it took out my Grandma's trailer...the only thing that saved her was that she was underneath the bathtub. One of the other trailer houses right across the street was wrapped around a telephone pole like that. And I remember walking through there in my rubber gum boots, hoping to not get electrocuted. It was just incredible."*¹⁴

However, even after such a meteorological trial, the final blow to the town was still to come. In 1968, it was announced that the entire Jarbalo School district was to be consolidated with the

¹³ Thamar Barnett, "Post Offices," *Jarbalo* (1983), 67.

¹⁴ Phil Jeannin (Local educator) in discussion with the author, March 16, 2016.

Tonganoxie district and all school-related functions at the Jarbalo buildings would cease. Students began riding the bus out to Tonganoxie for their schooling, while others moved closer to the district. Many students who attended class at Tonganoxie likely opted to build their homes away from Jarbalo, business in the town was also on the rise with the introduction of Highway 24-40, serving as a major connection between Kansas City and Lawrence. All remaining businesses in Jarbalo had closed their doors by the end of the 1970s. Among the last to close was the Opliger Grocery Store in 1974.

Left in the Dust

Today, Jarbalo, in spite of all that happened so long ago, still survives. It's a quiet little village where some remnants of the town are not only visible but dominant. It retains more or less, the same layout with its buildings in an orderly grid-like fashion. The Methodist Church, built on the same lot as its predecessor in 1958, still remains in the southeast corner of the town and continues to hold services. With the exception of the building that once held Opliger Grocery Store and the unmistakable appearance of the residence that now occupies Vigus Garage, there is no further evidence of any of the businesses that once dotted Jarbalo's neighborhood. In the center of the town, the old high school and grade school building still stands, boarded up and privately owned, as illustrated by Figure 7.



Figure 7. A modern Photograph of the Jarbalo School Building, now a private residence. The large High school segment is toward the back, while the elementary school is in the foreground. This image was taken from the southwest corner of the town by the Methodist Church. SOURCE: Photograph by the author, Feb. 7, 2016.

Over at the high school in Tonganoxie, class composites from Jarbalo Rural High still hang silently in the hallways, while just outside, Highway 24-40 plays host to the countless roaring cars that rush through between Lawrence and Kansas City. This busy highway runs over a bridge, and passing beneath is Tonganoxie Road. Traveling northward along this road, and then turning left on 207th Street will carry you out to the serenity of a town that has not vanished, but has merely been hushed. If a presence as ominous as Diablo had ever existed here, one would not know it. It has since been replaced by the calm whisper of the breeze, blowing northward, carrying the fond memories of many former residents over from Tonganoxie and beyond. Dust may be beginning to show in the windows of Opliger, on the old sign post for Vigus, in the bricks of Jarbalo Rural High, and even in the bell of the old Methodist church that now sits on a stone pedestal outside the new one, but there is still more than one kind of dust in Jarbalo today. There's the dust of a school district that was the first of its kind in the area, the dust left by a railroad that sparked settlement, the dust of a church that fought to have its own building, the dust conjured by the construction of both businesses and homes. Dust whipped up by horses delivering mail, tossed up by a getaway car making off with a large sum, or blown about by a

tornado that failed to wipe such a resilient town from the map, all of it. It is the very dust of history, the dust of Jarbalo, and it is far from having settled just yet.

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