

Right Around a Hundred: Ramona, Marion County, Kansas, 1887- Present

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Figure 1: A photograph of a road sign directing traffic to Ramona from Highway 77. Photograph by Natalie Hilburn. March 16, 2013.

Ramona, Kansas was founded in 1887 as a stopping point on the Rock Island Railroad outside of Herington, Kansas. Ownership of the land Ramona is located on dates back to the Spanish occupation of the southern regions of North America. This study includes maps and photographs of the town of Ramona.

When you reach the flat fields of northern Marion County and look around at the mixed patches of lingering prairie and farmland, it's hard to believe that anyone would be able to keep a town running in such an isolated location, and yet, hidden far off the main roads, is a tiny jewel known as Ramona, Kansas.

Ramona seems to be a prime example of life in a small prairie town. With few hills nearby and springs and wells being the main source of water in the early years, due to the distance of the nearest creeks, the area around Ramona was likely nothing but flat, open grassland when the town was first starting to grow in the late 1800s.

In this paper I will be looking at the life and history of Ramona, Kansas, from the factors that lead to its founding in 1887, to its years as a bustling stop on the Rock Island Railroad Line, and finally to how the town is today and what challenges it may face in the future.

Early History

The earliest of Ramona's known history begins long before the town was founded. The first known ownership of the land where Ramona is located, excluding the Kansa and Osage Indians who lived and hunted in the area, was by a merchant and fur trader from New Orleans named Manuel De Lisa.^{1 2} The land was originally owned by Spain, but De Lisa received a grant for 6,439 acres of land on July 16,

¹ Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical atlas of Kansas*. 2nd ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988, p 11.

² Dale Sondergard Dale, and Leona Sondergard. *A Century of Memories: The Ramona Story, Early History And Settlement*. Hemet, 1987, p 1.

1799.³ In 1870, fifty years after De Lisa died; his land was sold to A.W. Allen in Kansas City.⁴ This was also the year that the first settlers began to move into the area—probably from Lost Springs, Kansas, which was a major stopping point on the Santa Fe Trail due to its convenient water supply and location less than ten miles southeast of Ramona—although it would be 17 more years before Ramona got its true start.⁵

In 1887, expansion began on the railroad line leading out of Herington, Kansas.⁶ In April of that year, the Golden Belt Town Co. filed a town plat for Ramona, creating the first town south of Herington on the new Rock Island Rail Line; the company began selling the land and possibly railroad stock.⁷ As seen in Figure 2 below, at first glance, the plat map appears to be a complete paper town (that is, a town that only existed on paper as a map); the plots of land seem too well-planned and organized. This likely means that it was drawn before anyone had settled in the town itself.

³ Sondergard, p 1.

⁴ Gilbert, Jessica. "Ramona History." Ramona Kansas. www.ramonaks.com/index.php/aboutramona/history (accessed March 16, 2013).

⁵ Sondergard, p 1.

⁶ "Ramona, Kansas - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramona,_Kansas (accessed May 10, 2013).

⁷ Sondergard, p 1.



Figure 3: A satellite view of Ramona today. When compared to the plat map, it becomes apparent that many of the roads and "blocks" that had been planned out never reached completion. For reference with other photos and descriptions in this paper, "Main Street" is labeled as "D St." The main shops and public buildings can be seen at the southern end of D Street, before the road curves. (SOURCE: Google Maps.)

Originally the man who sold the land to the Golden Belt Company wanted the town to be named "Shields" after the area's first school teacher, J.B. Shields.⁸ However, Shields, Kansas, already existed, and a new name had to be chosen. There are a few theories as to how Ramona got its final name. The first is that Ramona was

⁸ Sondergard, p 1.

the name of a well-known Indian Maiden.^{9 10} The second is that it was the title of a popular novel written by Helen Hunt Jackson in 1844.^{11 12}

Despite being a nearby stop on the rail line, Ramona grew very slowly. It needed at least 250 residents in the town in order to apply for incorporation, and didn't reach that population until 1909, nearly twenty-two years after it had first been founded.¹³

⁹ Gilbert.

¹⁰ Sondergard, p 1.

¹¹ Gilbert.

¹² "Ramona - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramona> (accessed May 10, 2013).

¹³ Gilbert.

Prosperous Years



Figure 4: Two photographs of Ramona's main street circa 1890 - 1909. Some of these buildings are still standing today, as later pictures will show. (SOURCES: <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/213889> and http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/kw/images.asp?xfile_name=kw_ramona_marion_ks2.jpg)

Ramona was an exciting meeting place for all types of rural families during its “bloom” years from 1910 to 1930. Among the many businesses that lined Main Street at various times were a hotel (Seen in Figure 4, the top image, as the darker

building with two chimneys), a barbershop, tractor and car dealerships, a few general stores, a post office, a telephone company, and even a lumber dealer.^{14 15}

The hotel was one of the first buildings in Ramona, as the new railroad offered revenue opportunities from travelers and businessmen who arrived from Herington. In the early stages of Ramona's history, the post office was located within the hotel, only moved to its own building around 1910.¹⁶At some point in time, the hotel was torn down so that the lumber could be used to build a farmhouse.¹⁷

The Ramona Garage was one of the major businesses in Ramona. Built in 1915 (and expanded in 1922), the Ramona Garage was a dealership for Model-T Fords. The cars were brought to town in pieces via railroad cars, and then taken to the garage to be assembled and sold.¹⁸ In the late 1920s, competition with Model-A Fords and Chevrolets lead to the sale of the garage by the original owner, S.C. Eskeldson.¹⁹ The garage was sold to his business partner, Niels Sondergard, and the business was passed down through generations of the Sondergard family as a repair shop and gas station until the roof of the building collapsed during a snowstorm in 2001.²⁰ Today only the brick sides of the building remain standing, while the front and back have crumbled away.

¹⁴ Gilbert.

¹⁵ Sondergard, p 4-9.

¹⁶ Gilbert.

¹⁷ Gilbert.

¹⁸ Sondergard, p 6.

¹⁹ Sondergard, p 6.

²⁰ Gilbert.



Figure 5: A photograph of the Ramona Garage circa 1915-1922, with Model-T Fords sitting out front. The success and popularity of the business might explain why the Ramona highway sign (See Figure 1) is shaped like a Model-T. (SOURCE: <http://www.ramonaks.com/index.php/aboutramona/history>)

Other successful businesses in Ramona included the general store and grain elevator, both of which were built by Joseph Strickler and run by his family for many years.^{21 22} The grain elevator, as seen in Figure 6, was the first property he obtained and built, and the only one of the two still standing today, as the general store burned down in February 1955.²³ Before then it had been the largest store serving the Ramona area, although there were several smaller grocery stores in town as well.

²¹ Gilbert.

²² Sondergard, p 2-3.

²³ Sondergard, p 3.



Figure 6: A photograph of the Ramona Grain elevator. It is, by far, the tallest structure in Ramona. (Photograph by Natalie Hilburn. March 16, 2013.)



Figure 7: Another photograph of Ramona's Main street; this one appears to be circa 1970-1990. The width of the street is interesting to note. It is wider than a usual street, which is typical in Kansas towns where cattle drives were common. However, Ramona was founded after the era of cattle driving, and cattle ranching was more common on the western side of the state, while Ramona is somewhere between the middle and eastern side. (SOURCE: <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/228252/page/105>. The image has been cropped from the original source.

Modern Day

The Ramona of today is quite different from the Ramona of the early 1900s, and yet it has still managed to survive all of these years. It's much quieter now that the majority of the businesses and shops have disappeared, but the enduring spirit of Ramona's community seems ready to keep the town going into the future.

The surest sign of the community's dedication to the town is in the struggle to keep the Ramona Post Office running. During the recent recession, many rural post offices were and have been marked for closure to try to decrease waste from

the lesser-used offices. Ramona was one of the first to be targeted, and was scheduled for closing in January of 2012.²⁴ Because the post office is one of the few remaining businesses in Ramona, and possibly the only thing keeping it on the map, the local residents began massive letter-writing campaigns and efforts to increase the sale of stamps from the post office and keep the revenue high enough to allow the office to stay.²⁵ For now the Ramona Post Office has been guaranteed that it will remain in business until 2014, but it's still uncertain what will happen once that time runs out.



Figure 8: The current Post Office building, built in 1936. Despite being built later, the building shares many similarities with the earlier shops of Ramona, such as the Strickler General Store seen in Figure 4. (Photograph by Natalie Hilburn. March 16, 2013.)

²⁴ Gilbert.

²⁵ Gilbert.

It seems that Ramona began to slow down around the 1930s, when the automobile had gained popularity and the railroads were on the decline. With fewer people coming through by train, and more of them using the highway that bypasses Ramona, the population slowly leveled off and remained around a hundred people for the next 80 years. As the population decreased, it must have become tougher for businesses to keep running like they used to, and once they began to close, there would be even less encouragement for new people to move into town.



Figure 9: A photograph of Main Street as it looks today. Despite the loss of many of the old buildings (and the growth of many trees), it still looks similar to the first photo (Figure 4) from 1908. (Photograph by Natalie Hilburn. March 16, 2013.)

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