

Diamond Springs: A Tale of Two Communities

Morris County, KS



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Today you can drive through the valley of waving bluestem grasses without noticing anything but the occasional cow grazing. The stream is dried up from the drought and the air is cool with the coming winter. This is the site of Diamond Springs. This name and home were shared by two settlements. One was a rest stop along the Santa Fe Trail. One was a small community settled by a cluster of families. They shared the same name, and they ultimately shared the same fate.

A Stop on the Trail

In 1825 three commissioners were sent by the federal government to survey and mark a trading road from the Missouri River to Santa Fe, New Mexico.¹ Figure 1 below illustrates the route mapped out by the commissioners. Traveling across the dry, windy plains, these commissioners made careful note of available water resources, and one of these well-documented sources was located in Morris County, Kansas. Commissioner Colonel George Sibley described the area and how he marked it, saying, "This spring is very large, runs off boldly among rocks, is perfectly accessible and furnished the greatest abundance of most excellent, clear cold sweet water. It may be appropriately called 'The Diamond of the Plains,' and so I had it marked on an Elm tree which grows near and overlaps it."²

1. T. Lindsay Baker, "The Survey of the Santa Fe Trail: 1825-1847," *Great Plains Journal* 14, no. 2 (1975): 210-211.
2. Warren Dix, "A Brief History of Early Western Morris County," Morris County Historical Society Collection, 10.

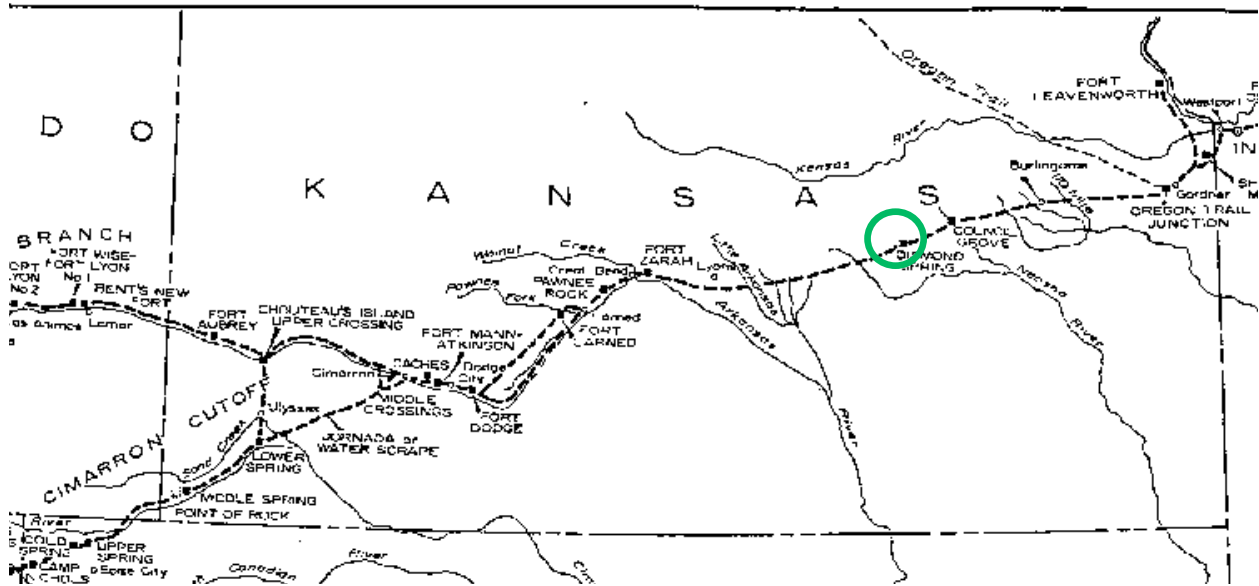


Figure 1. Map of the Santa Fe Trail through Kansas in 1850 courtesy of www.santafetrailresearch.com. Notice the location of Diamond Springs and the stretch of barren trail west of this settlement making the stop at Diamond Springs more important.

After the survey, various Indian treaties allowed freighters safe passage through eastern Kansas, and caravans along the Santa Fe Trail became frequent. By 1830 a town called Diamond Springs was established near the site of the springs the commissioners had noted five years before and had become a favored stopping point.³ The town grew to accommodate the travelers. A large two-story stone hotel provided lodging and meals for men while a large stone corral was capable of holding several hundred head of livestock.⁴

The frontier days along the Santa Fe Trail were a time of conflict and instability. The western Kansas plains were home to the Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, and other roaming Indian tribes. The route west of Diamond Springs became known as the “Gornada Del Muerte” or

³ Lenord Sill, *Six Mile and Diamond Creeks, Morris County, Kansas: Stories of the Old Santa Fe Trail* (Lenord Sill, 2005), 129.

⁴ Dix, 10.

Journey of the Dead. The trail was said to be strewn with the bones of horses, oxen, and men fallen by Indian attacks and short water supplies.⁵

During the Civil War, on May 4, 1863, a gang of confederate leader William Quantrill's allies gathered at Council Grove, a town near Diamond Springs. Led by Dick Yeager, who later that summer would take part in the raid and massacre of Lawrence, the gang's original plan was to burn and raid the town of Council Grove.⁶ But Yeager's plans changed; Council Grove was spared and the town of Diamond Springs was attacked instead. The gang burned and destroyed property, and they raided the supply station killing the owner August Howell and wounding his wife.⁷ The raiders then headed east leaving a scene of ruin. When Samuel Kingman visited the area in 1865, the town of Diamond Springs was there no more. As Kingman noted in his diary, "Six miles farther on we passed Diamond Springs. The remains of three buildings of stone two stories high tell their own story of violence."⁸

A Cluster of Families

Following the Civil War, pamphlets distributed by the Immigration Society advertised the rich farmland and grazing potential of the land available in Morris County.⁹ These pamphlets made their way to Edward County, Illinois, where they attracted a cluster of families. Seven

⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁶ Barbara, Booth, "Diamond of the Flint Hills," Morris County Historical Society Collection, 6.

⁷ Samuel Kingman, "Diary of Samuel A. Kingman at Indian Treaty at 1865," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* 1, no. 5 (1932): 442-450.

⁸ Ibid, 9.

⁹ Mark Evens, "A History of Diamond Springs, Kansas," Morris County Historical Society Collection, 2.

families purchased land near Diamond Creek, just three miles south of the old Santa Fe Trail town site: the Loomis, Rude, Rice, Harris, Phillips, Stanley, and Stephens families.¹⁰

Soon after arriving in the valley, the families sought to establish a school and church. First, they formed a school board and began plans for a building. The school, named Bob Tail Schoolhouse, had two stories; the first floor was used for school lessons, and the second for neighborhood meetings and socials such as pie suppers, Christmas programs, and the last day of school celebration.¹¹ The last day of school celebration was a community favorite where pupils delivered recitations followed by a gathering upstairs with food.¹²

As the families were members of the Congregational Church back in Illinois, they decided to organize church services. For the first eleven years the services were held in the Bob Tail Schoolhouse every Sunday morning.¹³ In 1880 the community began to talk of building a church, but they could not agree on a site. About this time a Methodist preacher named Mr. Pearson moved to the area from Illinois. He offered the idea of building the church at the halfway point between to the two disputed sites. The citizens accepted this compromise and the church building was completed and dedicated in May of 1884.¹⁴

10 Sill, 130.

11 Booth, 24.

¹² Sill, 134.

13 Booth, 30.

14 *ibid.*

The Town

The families seemed to have selected a favorable site for settlement. The land provided stone and timber for building. There was water for power and by the mid-1880s there was promise of a railroad line. On April 2, 1887, the Diamond Springs Town Company was organized. The company filed an official plot of the town with 38 blocks.¹⁵

The town grew in anticipation of the railroad line. J.S. and Frank Loomis opened a lumberyard, and I.J. Cook set up a blacksmith shop. Aretus W. Loomis contracted the building of a store, and Merrill Loomis purchased a lot to build a boarding house.¹⁶ This building boom forced prices high, and at one time the lots were selling for \$150.¹⁷

The growth was short-lived, as later that summer Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad officials announced that the line from Council Grove to Diamond Springs would not be constructed. However, the officials commented that the site might be practical for another line in the future.¹⁸ Regardless of this comment, building slowed in the community of Diamond Springs until a line from Strong City to Abilene reached the location later that same year.

¹⁵ Sill, 131.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; Booth, 44.

¹⁷ Sill, 131.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*



Figure 2. Photograph of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway Company depot at Diamond Springs in 1890 courtesy of www.kansasmemory.org.

The one-story structure was located approximately fifteen to twenty miles northwest of Strong City, Kansas.

With a railroad line secured and built, the depot depicted in Figure 2 was erected near the main street, and S.I. Taylor was appointed as the first agent. At this time, there were not any houses available for sale or rent in Diamond Springs, so Mr. Taylor had to live in the back of the depot.¹⁹ Stockyards were also built to ship the thousands of Texas Longhorn steers pastured in the surrounding Flint Hills region. These steers were turned out in the spring to graze the lush tall grass prairie, gathered in the fall, and shipped to eastern markets.²⁰

¹⁹ Sill, 132.

²⁰ Dix, 20.

The town of Diamond Springs never experienced the anticipated growth of a major railroad community. For a couple of decades, the town served as a minor shipping point for the area's agricultural products. In 1910, the town consisted of 27 residents.²¹ In the years to come the depot was torn down, the church was converted to a fire station after years of low attendance, and the school consolidated with the nearby town of Wilsey.²² In 1930 the town's post office closed.

Today there are no existing signs of either community. The only things left to bear the Diamond Springs name are the creek and nearby ranch shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Photograph of the present-day Diamond Creek Ranch, taken December 10, 2012 by Meghan A. Blythe. The original spring is located on the private property owned by Diamond Creek Ranch.

²¹ Sill, 131.

²² Ibid., 131-134

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