

A Sketch of White City, Kansas: A Colorful Past
Morris County, Kansas

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At the ridge of the Flint Hills in Morris County lies the rural community of White City, Kansas. Today, with 618 people, White City is still a viable community, but it bears little relation today to the regional consumer and mercantile center it once was. Like many other Kansas towns, the railroad played a large role in White City's founding. "As early as September 1865, Morris County settlers had expressed their eagerness to obtain a railroad by voting to aid Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe with \$100,000 to lure a line into their area."¹ The Katy Railroad Company began recruiting settlers and pushing land sales to attract people to the area. A few years later, the Rock Island Railroad also constructed a line through the town, attracting even more settlers.

Many of the people who came to the area were European immigrants who had previously settled in Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana. A large majority of the settlers were of Swedish descent so "Swedeland" was one of the first names proposed for the town. The Swedish influence can still be seen today when one looks at the street names such as Gusaf, Stockholm, and Adolph. Contrary to some peoples' beliefs, White City was not named to reflect a Caucasian population; rather the town was named White City in 1873 after F.C. White, superintendent of the Neosho division of the Katy Railroad.²

The expansion of the railroad created a booming start for the small community. "James Thornley and W.N. Dunbar built the first permanent building, a red stone structure still standing on the northeast corner of Mackenzie and Commercial. It was used as the village post office

when President Ulysses Grant appointed Thomas Eldridge postmaster of the town in 1872.”³

Homes began popping up all over the town and the Commercial Hotel was built to accommodate guests, railway travelers, and settlers coming out to view homesteads. Soon a schoolhouse became a high priority for the people of White City. “Citizens voted \$1,200 to build a 20x30 foot stone school building in 1873 and hired a teacher. It was not until 1879 that White City School District #27 began offering a nine-month term.”⁴ The lumber yard and banks were thriving enterprises in the early years of settlement. Other businesses also began to flourish in the town, including “3 general stores, 1 drug store, 1 grocery store, 1 millinery shop, 2 wagon shops, and 2 elevators.”⁵ One of these general stores was known as the Jenkins Brothers Store; the brothers would travel to St. Louis once a year and bring back the finest silk and wool around. This store was also the first in town to sell the first Converse sneakers and athletic briefs. The Jenkins Store, a 6,000 square foot building, still stands today after a major reconstruction period. Owner Nina Miley has converted the building into an art gallery, law office, apartment, bed and breakfast, and a ballroom. Miley said that “White City was known as a regional shopping and agricultural center during its booming years.”⁶

The Protestant religion dominated the town and still does to this day. “The town supported Methodist, Christian, Congregational, Baptist, and Episcopal churches that not only served the spiritual needs but also met the social needs of various types.”⁷ Weddings, births, and funerals almost always served as grounds for a large get-together in this community. Hunting, ice skating, bonfires, dances, ice cream socials, and traveling shows all served as means of entertainment for the citizens of White City during its early years. “In 1898, White City staged a big celebration to commemorate both Memorial Day and Dewey Day to pay homage to the

Admiral's victory over Spanish forces at Manila Bay. A crowd of 1,500 to 2,000 attended the patriotic event while businessmen adorned their stores with flags and bunting.”⁸

White City proved that it could prosper in agriculture, business, and education, but today when a visitor looks down the streets of the town, she sees a few cars, abandoned businesses, and many houses in need of repair. The question that comes to mind is what factors led to the demise of this once thriving town? The first major blow to the town's economy emerged after the Delevan Air Force Base closed down shortly after World War II. “The city of Herington took control of the air base until the Beech Aircraft Company of Wichita decided to close it permanently and move all operations to Wichita. A number of workers car pooled from White City to the main plant daily and several families chose to just move to Wichita.”⁹ In addition, the Katy and Rock Island Railroads slowly phased out of White City in the 1950's and 60's, taking jobs and a major mode of transportation with them. The town also decided to cut back on the funding for maintaining the roads and sidewalks. Next, “in June of 1969, a devastating cyclone hit the town, leaving heavy damage to the hotel, the Brown Motor Company, and the Methodist church.”¹⁰ One setback after another plagued the town of White City, as in many other Kansas towns.

As a recent graduate of White City High School, there are also two major trends that I saw that were drawbacks for the town. The first was that businesses in White City have had to charge much higher prices than larger towns like Junction City. Since local businesses now serve fewer customers, they have to charge higher prices to make any kind of a profit, so they are unable to pass savings on to their loyal customers. I remember reading a letter to the editor by the service station owner in 2007 that covered this very problem. He discusses how his customers complain

because he charges a higher price than larger cities and that he has cut his hours, but his rationale is just. He stated, “I have looked up and down the deserted streets of White City on any given business day and wondered how much longer I can survive.”¹¹ Another trend that I have observed as a resident of the White City are is that once students graduate high school and go off to college, many of them only return to visit their families. There are very few jobs or opportunities in the town. When I interviewed local business owner Nina Miley, she stated that she “had booked her bed and breakfast 65 times in the last year, and that it was almost always to someone with family ties in the town.”¹² This is a sad, yet true reality in White City and many other small Kansas towns. More and more businesses are closing down and the population is growing older. The new global economies draw people away from the quiet rural landscape, from towns that were bustling social and economic centers in the past.



Figure 1: Jenkins Brothers General Store (present day)
Photo taken by Brooke L. Hollis



Figure 2: Mackenzie Street
(present day)
Photo taken by Brooke L.
Hollis



Figure 3: White City Methodist Church (present day)
Source: <http://www.city-data.com/picfiles/c/picc33257.php>

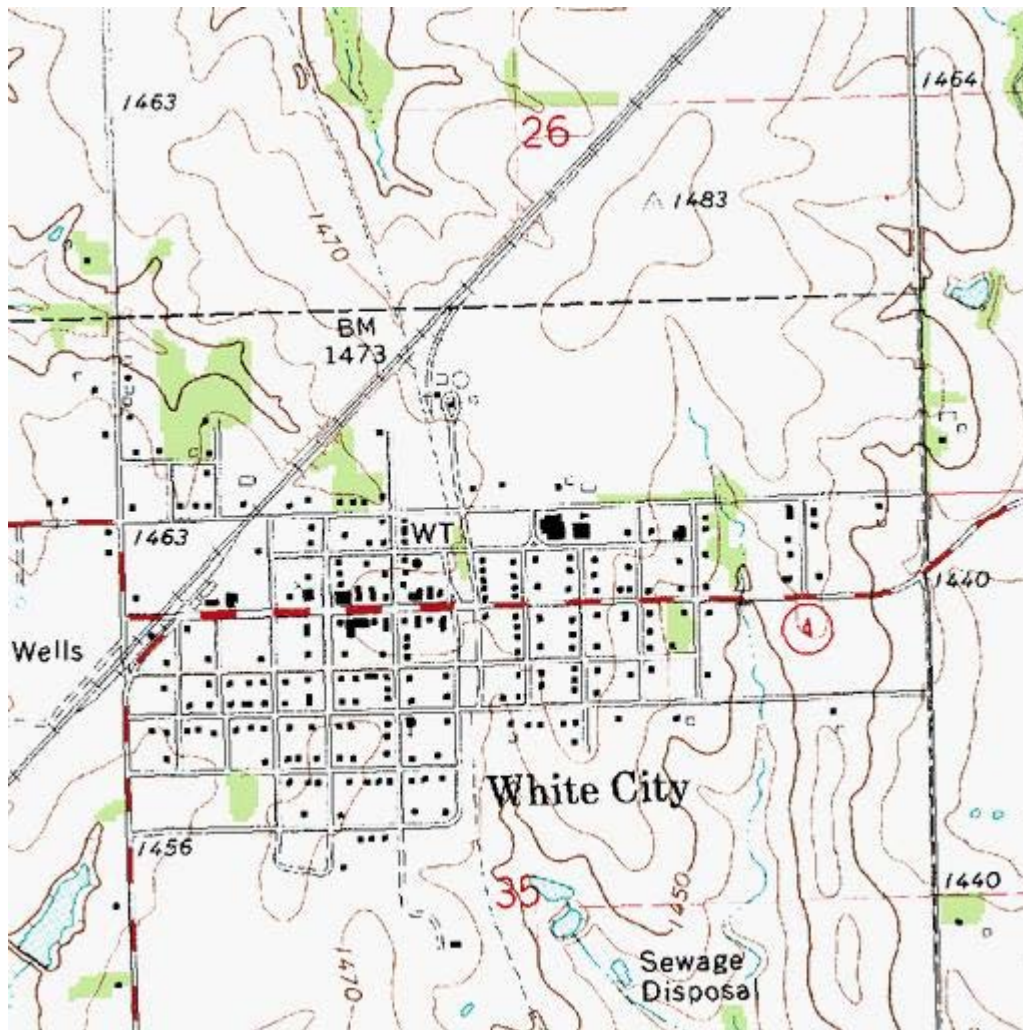


Figure 4: Topographic Map of White City

Source: [http://www.topoquest.com/map.php?](http://www.topoquest.com/map.php?lat=38.79727&lon=-96.73239&datum=nad27&zoom=2&map=auto&coord=d&mode=zoomin&size=m)

[lat=38.79727&lon=-96.73239&datum=nad27&zoom=2&map=auto&coord=d&mode=zoomin&size=m](http://www.topoquest.com/map.php?lat=38.79727&lon=-96.73239&datum=nad27&zoom=2&map=auto&coord=d&mode=zoomin&size=m)

Endnotes

1. Lee, Alton. *T-Town on the Plains*. Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press 1999, 16.
2. Miley, Nina. Personal interview by Brooke L. Hollis. September 15, 2011.
3. Lee, *T-Town on the Plains*, 21.
4. Ibid.
5. Laughead, George. Kansas Community Networks. (Accessed September 18, 2011) <http://kansastowns.us/whitcity.html>.
6. Nina Miley interview
7. Lee, *T-Town on the Plains*, 55.
8. Ibid, 54.
9. Ibid, 156-157.
10. Ibid, 160.
11. "Change is Never Easy," *Prairie Post*, May 24, 2007. http://www.smalltownnewspapers/g_frame.php?googleFrameId=the_prairie_post&keyword=change+is+never+easy&google_archive=google_archive&x=0&y=0 (accessed September 13, 2011).
12. Nina Miley, interview.

Sources

“Change is Never Easy,” *Prairie Post*, May 24, 2007. http://www.smalltownnewspapers/g_frame.php?googleFrameId=the_prairie_post&keyword=change+is+never+easy&google_archive=google_archive&x=0&y=0 (accessed September 13, 2011).

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