

Wilsey vs. Helmick, Morris County, Kansas:

A Twin Town Rivalry

That Ended in a Knockout, 1884-1950

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The author used an accumulation of fragmented information collected from local contacts and historic documents to create a comparison between the twin towns of Wilsey and Helmick, Morris County, Kansas. She used census reports, plat maps, statistical data, personal interviews, taped interviews and information from local historians to piece together the history of these twin towns.

Was the disappearance of Helmick a KO (knock out) or was it a TKO? According to boxing professionals, a TKO (technical knockout) is declared by the referee when there have been multiple knockdowns, and it is determined the fighter is unable to go on.¹ We will see this pattern as we investigate the rivalry between the twin towns of Wilsey and Helmick, in Elm Creek Township, Morris County, Kansas. The twin town phenomenon occurred from the towns' beginnings in 1884 and 1886 respectively. This essay examines the events that kept Wilsey alive; and especially, the events that led to the final knock down and disappearance of Helmick around 1950. Extensive research will suggest as accurate a picture of these two towns and their fight as the evidence allows.

The first settlers who arrived in the area that was to become Elm Creek Township in Morris County, Kansas, would have looked over the area from a small bluff. From this bluff they would have seen rolling prairie bluestem grasses interrupted by the sparkling waters of a creek surrounded by large trees that included the oak, hickory, walnut, cottonwood, hackberry, elm and sycamore varieties. The variety of trees would provide the settlers with everything they needed in the way of home construction as well as for cooking and warmth. The soil was rich and ran deep in this area.² It was perfect for farming or for the raising of livestock. Another plus for the area was that it was only 7-11 miles from Council Grove and not far from help in case of Indian trouble. It was a perfect place to settle, and so soon after the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, people began to settle the area.

¹ Courtney Spratley, "Types of knockout" *eHow*, 2011, acquired April 20, 2012 from: http://www.ehow.com/info_8723967_types-knockouts.html

² William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas*, Chicago, A.T. Andreas, 1883. Accessed on October 8, 2012 at <http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/morris/morris-co-p.1.html>

Wilsey and Helmick are communities that developed within Elm Creek Township in Morris County; the township was formed in 1871 using acreage from the Diamond Creek Township and the Council Grove Township.³ This area was lush farm land situated within the Flint Hills of Kansas and included Elm Creek, which ran from the NW to the SE through it. The township took its name from the creek, and the creek took its name from the majestic elms along its banks.⁴ Imagine coming to this area for the first time, finding not only fertile farmland but also a nearby water supply and tall, mature elm trees ready to be felled for use in building homes as well as for other uses. Below is a picture of what settlers might have seen.



Fig. 1. Looking down Elm Creek, in Helmick, Kansas. Photograph taken by author August 12, 2012.

³ John C. Campbell, *History of Wilsey & Morris County, Kansas*, 1990, pp. 6-9, privately published, copy at Elm Creek Library, Wilsey, Morris County, Kansas

⁴ William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas*, 1883, A.T. Andreas, Chicago, IL. Accessed April 12, 2012, from: www.kancoll.org/books/culter/morris/morris-co-pl.html

The features of this area are one reason that by 1880, the population of the township was 931; of this number, 329 were adults and 602 were children. The large number of children in the township is a good indicator as to why there were so many schools established in Morris County. Most of the early settlers came from Iowa, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Missouri, Kentucky, England, Ireland, and Germany.⁵ People from these areas were interested in the value of education either because they grew up with it or without it.

Elm Creek Township is just west of Council Grove and it was home to part of the Santa Fe Trail. As the trail left Council Grove, it split into two trails, one to the north of Elm Creek and one that traveled up the Elm Creek valley. They met close to where Wilsey and Helmick developed. Luckily, some early recollections of these trails are available to us.

In a series of recollection, Ida Ferris Pirtle, a lifelong area resident, talked about growing up in a large stone house on the Santa Fe Trail three miles southwest of Wilsey. She remembers seeing as many as 50 wagons at a time in a train heading west. The travelers would camp in an area where there was a grave of a little boy marked with a sign that said “Little Willie”. According to Ida, her family hauled stone and water from Diamond Springs, three miles west of their farm. Ida talks about seeing the ruins of an old fort. She recollects the stone ruins of two large buildings; a part of one was still standing in the early 1880s, 25-30 feet high. Her brothers often collected old bullets from the fort and melted them to make new bullets. There were also the remains of an old stone corral, probably used by the fort for their horses.⁶ Today, research gives us an answer to what these building were. They were actually the remains of the Waldo Hall Company -- a mail station that had been established in 1850. The owners built two large stone buildings, one for a hotel, restaurant, and saloon and the other for a warehouse. They also

⁵ John C. Campbell, 1990.

⁶ Marc Evans, “Recollection in 1934 of Ida Ferris Pirtle”, *1884: A History of Wilsey, Kansas 2nd Ed. N.P.* (2007).

built stone corrals for their horses. The station was abandoned in 1862 when a Quantrill confederate, Dick Yeager, killed the proprietor Augusta Howell and wounded his wife.⁷ Today, the ruts of the wagons that followed the Santa Fe Trail can be seen less than a mile from where Helmick stood, and a Santa Fe Trail sign will show those interested how to find them.⁸ Below is a map that shows the path of the Santa Fe Trail through Morris County, Kansas in the left hand corner.

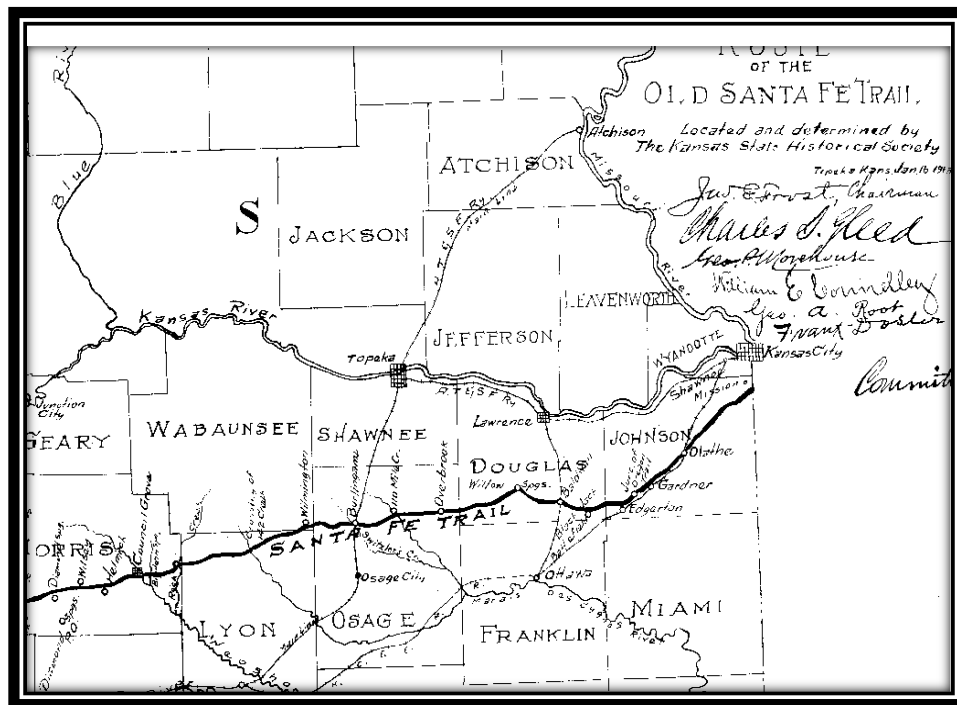


Fig. 2 Map of the old Santa Fe Trail. Located and produced by the Kansas State Historical Society, 1945 Topeka, Kansas.

When examining the twin town phenomenon it is important to understand that this pattern happens when two towns are started usually within ten miles of each other, within a short time period, and usually with a geographical marker in between. Often a sort of rivalry would

⁷ "Diamond Spring in Morris County, Kansas" Santa Fe Research Site. Accessed on October 19, 2012, from <http://www.santafetrailresearch.com/main-route/diamond-spring.html>

⁸ "Santa Fe Trail-Report of Committee," 1911-1912, p. 7, reprinted from Eighteenth Biennial Report of The Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas

develop between the two communities. Wilsey and Helmick were two such towns. The first town was platted in 1884 on the northwest side of Elm Creek, and the second followed suit just four miles from there in 1886, on the southeast side of the creek.⁹

Early History of Wilsey, Morris County, Kansas

Wilsey was the first of the two twin towns to be platted. The town's founder John Derrick Wilsey was born November 9, 1828 in Binghamton, New York to Tunis Wilsey and Nancy A. Lukins. He had one sister, Margaret and two brothers, Isaac and Sylvernus. The family moved to Pennsylvania where in 1854 John married Calphurnia Ottis. Her siblings are important because some of them also migrated out to Kansas; Calphurnia had one sister, Ellen, and three brothers, O. L., Matson, and William.¹⁰ John and Calphurnia together had five children. Jay F. and Frank D. were born in Pennsylvania and Ora T., John H., and Glades W. were born in Ohio.

In 1870, the Federal census shows John D. Wilsey living in Farmer, Defiance County, Ohio. At this time a Phoebe A. Perrin was living with the family as a domestic servant. Having a domestic servant was symbol of status and it reflected on the family's wealth and reputation. John Wilsey's occupation was listed as a manufacturer of oars.¹¹ He had established an oar factory with his one of his sons in 1874. This event was noted by the town of Bloomville, Ohio, as being a major step forward for the town in their attempts at becoming a manufacturing center.¹²

⁹ A. J. Coffin, *The Centennial of Council Grove, Kansas*, Council Grove, Kansas, 1925; Kenneth W. McClintock, personal letter, written to author April 1, 2012, Local Historian, Council Grove, Kansas,

¹⁰ Jackson Girls Family Tree, Public Family Trees. [www.ancestry.com](http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/17039454/person/909601076?ssrc=), accessed on April 10, 2012, from, <http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/17039454/person/909601076?ssrc=>

¹¹ United States Federal Census 1870, Farmer Township, Defiance County, Ohio, pg 11. Accessed on August 12, 2012, from: http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/print_u.aspx?dbid=7163&IID=427...

¹² W. Lang, "History of Bloom Township, OH" *History of Seneca County, Ohio*, Springfield, Transcript Publishing Co. 1880. Accessed on October 5, 2012, from: <http://history.rays-place.com/oh/sen-bloom.htm>

Meanwhile, Calphurnia's brother Matson B. Ottis had married and moved to Elm Creek Township in Morris County, Kansas. Her sister Ellen married Henry H. Vorse in 1866 and was recorded as living in Kansas as early as 1870, along with Calphurnia and Ellen's father, Ora Ottis.¹³ These extended clan migrations were typical of frontier Kansas.

Whether John Wilsey's interest in buying land in Elm Creek Township came from coaxing by his wife or from his in-laws, Matson Ottis and Henry Vorse remains unknown, but on August 25, 1873, 160 acres of land were purchased in John Wilsey's name from the M., K., & T., Railway Co. This acreage was the NE quarter of Sec. 29, T 16 S R 7 E. After spending a decade making sure his new oar factory was up and running strong, and that his son could handle the factory on his own, John Wilsey, came out to Morris County from Bloomville, Ohio. Shortly after his arrival in May of 1884, using the land he had purchased in 1873, he, along with George W. Coffin, Matson Otis, and Henry Vorse, Sr. laid out the town. They surveyed twenty blocks leaving a section for a park which would be in the center of the business district.¹⁴ This is represented on the map below.

¹³ United States Federal Census, Ottumwa, Kansas, 1870. Acquired on 8/3/2012 from: http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/print_u.aspx?dbid=7163&iid=426...

¹⁴ Marc Evans, (2007).



Fig. 3 Plat map of Wilsey, Elm Creek Township, Morris County. SOURCE: Standard Atlas of Morris County Kansas, 1923, pg 12. Can be found at Morris County Historical Society. Map altered by author. Original plat of town outlined in blue.

Now Mr. Wilsey was not one to just sit around and wait for things to happen. He was a man of action, so he went out and found businessmen willing to come and start a business in his new town. They would receive a free lot on which to build. Most of the businessmen who came were those who had been in business elsewhere for many years, so they knew not only what it took to start a business but also how to keep a business going. Because of this free lot policy, by the end of 1884, the town of Wilsey had three general stores, a drug store, a doctor, a livery stable, and a lumber yard.¹⁵ Wilsey also had a post office which was moved to town from where it had been originally established in 1878, and the name was changed from Mildred to Wilsey post office.¹⁶ John Wilsey also extended his free lot offer to church groups that brought to Wilsey first a Christian Church, quickly followed by a Methodist Church and a Presbyterian

¹⁵ John Campbell, (1990)

¹⁶ Kathy Weiser, editor (n.d.). "Wilsey", *Legends of Kansas*. Accessed on April 14, 2012, from: <http://www.legendsofkansas.com/morriscountytowns2.html>

Church.¹⁷ On April 9, 1885 John Wilsey sold a piece of land to the Topeka, Salina, and Western Railroad Company for use as a railroad depot for the proposed line that was to run from Council Grove through Wilsey.¹⁸ This depot is pictured below.

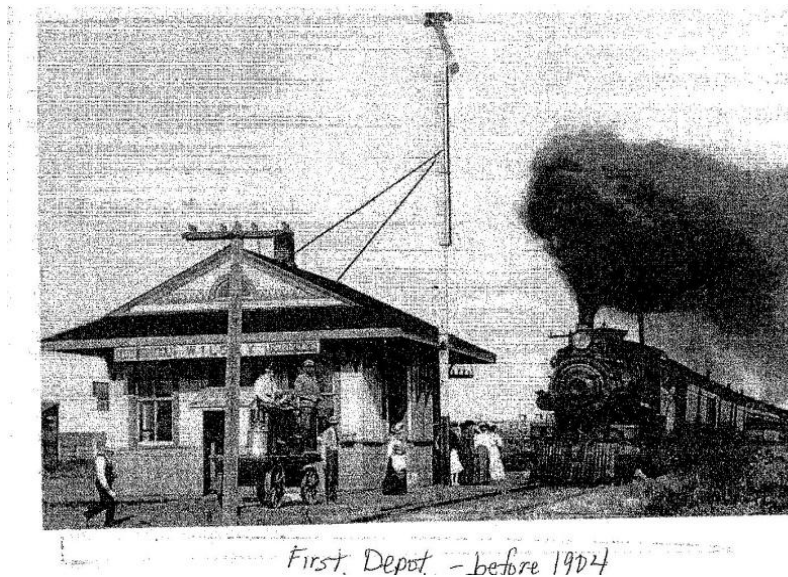


Fig. 4 First depot of Wilsey, Kansas taken before 1904. SOURCE: *1884-Wilsey* by Mark Evans. Located at Elm Creek Library, Wilsey, Kansas.

Development continued at a rapid pace. In 1887, a cemetery was established on land owned by John B. Doner. In 1893, the residents of Wilsey dug a town well. The pump, windmill and tank were placed at the center of Fifth and Lyndon Streets and provided the townspeople fresh water until 1903.¹⁹ These facts alone give us a look at the reason why Wilsey was able to survive: the town leadership was strong enough to help this community through any rough spots. The first rough spot, however, came soon after the town's founding when the promised railroad did not make it to Wilsey, but ran out of money just a few miles east of the

¹⁷ John Campbell,(1990)

¹⁸ Marc Evans, (2007)

¹⁹ John C. Campbell (1990)

town. The Topeka, Salina, and Western railroad experienced money problems and was bought out by the Missouri Pacific Railroad. During this two year period, the town of Wilsey found different means to keep viable and growing. It was at the end of 1886 that the railroad finally made its way through Wilsey. It is without question that the railroad did help the town's growth, but it was the town's leadership that cemented Wilsey's future, pictured below in Figures 5 and 6.²⁰

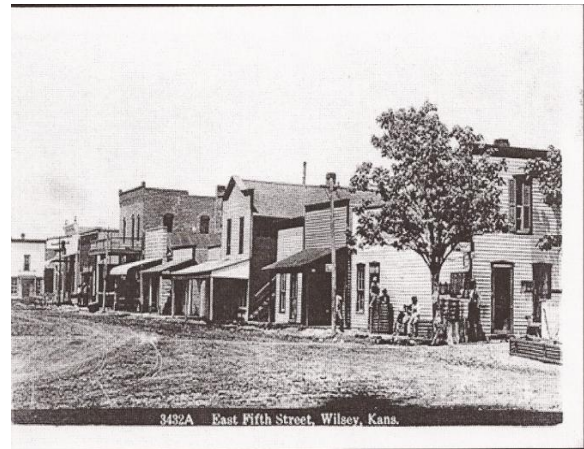


Fig. 5. West side of 5th Street, Wilsey, Morris County, Kansas, 1907.

Fig. 6. East side of 5th Street Wilsey, Morris County, Kansas, 1907.

SOURCE: Images of Kansas Towns and Cities Collection, Special Collections, Wichita State University Libraries.

Some of this leadership came from the first settlers to the area. One of these first settlers was Henry H. Vorse, John D. Wilsey's brother-in-law. Henry H. Vorse was from originally from Pennsylvania, marrying into the Ottis/Wilsey clan in 1866.²¹ Henry and his wife Ellen raised seven children, the youngest five of whom were born in Morris County: Ora, John D., Amy, Alice, Henry, Bessie, and Harriett. In 1870, Henry Vorse was noted as being a farmer in Ottumwa, Kansas.²² By 1875, his family was listed in Elm Creek Township, Morris County,

²⁰"Communities", *Historic Council Grove, KS: 8 wonders of Kansas Winner in History & Cuisine*, 2011. Council Grove Chamber of Commerce. Accessed April 24, 2012, from: <http://councilgrove.com/communities-of-morris-county/>

²¹Jessica Gardner, Public Family Tree. Ancestry.com. acquired on 10/5/2012 from:

<http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/7012901/person/-564559106/print>

²²United States Federal Census, Ottumwa, Kansas, 1870. Accessed on August 3, 2012, from:

Kansas.²³ Henry and his son Ora helped John D. Wilsey in platting, naming and laying out the streets of Wilsey in 1884.²⁴

The next first settler who had an impact on the town's future was Matson Ottis. His sister Calphurnia was married to John D. Wilsey; Matson joined the family's relocation to Kansas. He married Martha Sheldon around 1866,²⁵ and the family moved to Kansas between 1870 and July 23, 1871, when a son, Henry M. Ottis was born.²⁶ Matson purchased land in Elm Creek Township, Sec. 20, T 16 S R 7E -- next to the acreage that would be purchased by his brother-in-law John Wilsey for the purpose of constructing a town.²⁷ The Wilsey-Ottis clan continued to drive the growth of the community, as Matson and his son Ora helped to stake out and name the streets of Wilsey in 1884.²⁸ Matson was an enterprising man in his own right and knew of the importance of having a livery stable in this new town. Since his land was right next to the new town, it was easy for him to set up and operate the livery stable on the edge of his own land. With the help of his sons, Matson ran this business until the coming of the automobile put him out of business.²⁹

Brief portraits of other early settlers help to explain the dynamism and growth of this tiny Kansas town. John B. Doner was also one of the first settlers in Wilsey, born in 1855 in Canada.³⁰ As recorded in the June 3, 1881 *Kansas Herald*, John married Sadie A. Myers in

http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/print_u.aspx?dbid=7163&iid=426...

²³ State of Kansas Census, Elm Creek Township, Morris county, Kansas, 1875. N.d. Accessed on March 12, 2012, from:

http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/print_u.aspx?dbid=1088&iid=ks1875_14-0286&pid=6...

²⁴ John C. Campbell, (1990).

²⁵ Jessica Gardner, public family tree

²⁶ State of Kansas Census, 1875

²⁷ Marc Evans (2007).

²⁸ John Campbell (1990).

²⁹ Marc Evans, (2007).

³⁰ Byer Family Tree, Public Family Tree. www.ancestry.com., accessed on August 4, 2012, from:

<http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/9596984/person/-460408654/print>

1888, meeting and marrying her on his way “west” – in Brown County, Kansas.³¹ John and Sadie moved out to Wilsey in 1884, where he was given land to start a lumberyard. Mr. Doner was a carpenter by trade, so a lumberyard was appropriate for him as a business. In 1885, his daughter Delta became the first white child born in the new town of Wilsey.³² John Doner purchased a section of land west of town, and on August 20, 1887 he platted out a cemetery, completed on August 28, 1887. In 1903 he sold the cemetery to Matson and Martha Ottis because he and his family had moved to Arizona.³³ He wanted to make sure that someone in Wilsey would take care of the cemetery.

Another early settler of Wilsey was George W. Coffin from Morgan, Illinois. George married Sarah Maria Ray,³⁴ and eventually had a large family of ten children. This family moved to Elm Creek Township, Morris County, Kansas where the last five were born. George was one of the four men who helped to lay out the town of Wilsey and was also their first postmaster. In 1885 he opened the third general store in town. He continued to run the store up to the time of his death.³⁵ The staying power of many of these early settlers shaped Wilsey and gave it some its character as an enduring, early Kansas community.

John M. Brown, born in Pennsylvania in 1846, came to Elm Creek Township, Morris County, Kansas in 1873 at the bequest of John D. Wilsey, his cousin. He had worked for John in his saw mill in Bloomville, Ohio. In 1877, he moved his wife Rosa and their son Frank to his land in

³¹ United State Federal Census, 1880, pg. 17. Hamlin, Brown County, Kansas. Accessed on August 10, 2012, from: http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/print_uaspdx?dbid=6742&iid=4241241-00182&pid=3464059...

³² John C. Campbell, (1990).

³³ Marc Evans, (2007).

³⁴ Shelden-Hills Coffin-Smith Family Tree, Public Family Tree. www.ancestry.com. Accessed on August 10, 2012, from:

<http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/24354882/person/2016488435/print> and Michael Mitchell Family Tree, Public Family Tree. www.ancestry.com. Accessed on August 10, 2012, from:

<http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/223150791/person/1216078774/print>

³⁵ John Campbell, (1990).

Morris County, Kansas.³⁶ The family added four more sons, Cobb, Claudie, Freddie, and Jesse. They also had one daughter Daisy.³⁷ When the railroad finally reached Wilsey, the land owners were offered \$225 for right of way access. John Brown refused their offer and held out for a final price of \$1,000.³⁸ This price made him a rich man, yet unpopular; because, the people in the area blamed him for delaying the laying of track out of town.

Cornelius R. Francis was another businessman who responded to John Wilsey's proposal of free land for any person who would start a business in the new town. After receiving his section, Cornelius Francis built the first general store in Wilsey. When it became apparent that the business district of the town would be along 5th Street instead of the streets surrounding the park, he moved his store. At this time he also took on a partner, his son-in law, Frank Riegel. The new two story general store became known as, The Francis-Riegel General Store. This store had readymade clothes for men, women, and children; farming supplies; dry goods and groceries. In 1920 a gas pump was added, for Standard Gasoline, in front of the store.³⁹

Mr. Francis was a person who cared for his community and its people. This was evident in the way that he did business. If someone was unable to pay a bill, he would take some of their corn as payment. He would store it out back in a corn crib and when the prices went up, he would sell it for a profit. If someone made a payment, he would send home a bag of candy for the kids.⁴⁰ After Cornelius Francis died, his partner Frank Riegel continued his practices of involvement in the community and of helping out those customers who worked as hard as possible but still had trouble making full payments of their monthly grocery bills. As late as 1940 a customer could bring in their grocery list, leave it with a clerk, and go about day to day

³⁶ Marc Evans, (2007).

³⁷ State of Kansas Census Records, 1885. Pg. 15

³⁸ Marc Evans, (2007).

³⁹ Marc Evans, (2007).

⁴⁰ *ibid*

errands. The clerk would go throughout the store and collect their order, putting the items into an egg crate. He would total up the amount and put that with the customer's name on the crate. The customer would come back later to pick up and pay for their groceries. The store closed in 1959 and was moved to Herington over the county line in Dickinson County.⁴¹ These partners are two examples of the leadership that this community had through its early years and through its troubled years. As with the other businessmen who answered John Wilsey's call, they knew what was necessary to keep a town going through good times and bad times. They had successfully run other businesses before coming to Wilsey, and Mr. Riegel continued to run a successful business even after it was moved to Herington in Dickinson County.⁴²

Below is a picture of that store that had a positive impact on the city of Wilsey because of the leadership and compassion of its owners.

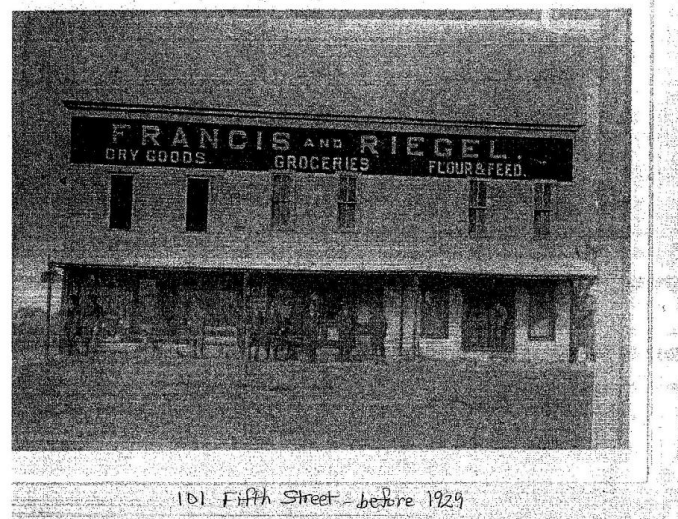


Fig. 7. Francis and Riegel General Store on 5th Street taken before 1929, in Wilsey, Kansas. SOURCE: 1884- *Wilsey* by Mark Evans, 2007. Located at Elm Creek Library, Wilsey, Kansas.

⁴¹ Marc Evans, (2007).

⁴² Mark Adam, personal interview with author, 8/5/2012.

Mr. Wilsey also had a vision for the need of places of worship. He gave free land to religious groups willing to start a church in Wilsey. The first to respond to this offer were the people of the Christian Church. This church is one of two that still remain today. Other congregations that came and were promised lots once they had organized, raised the funds, and were ready for building were the Methodists and the Presbyterians.⁴³

The Methodist Episcopal Church organized on April 17, 1886 at the home of George W. Coffin (Sr.). The church at that time was added to the Herington circuit with Rev. W.W. Kendall as their first pastor. One year later they established their own circuit that included, Delavan, Highland, Olive Branch, and Wilsey. Around 1890, Canning Creek was formed as a branch of the Wilsey church and after Rev. John Helmick left the town of Helmick, it was serviced by the Wilsey pastors.⁴⁴

The Wilsey Methodist Church held services in the Presbyterian Church until 1890. For two years people held services in the school and for the period from July, 1892 to September 24, 1893, they rented the old Christian Church house for \$60 a year. A new 32x50 foot church was built and they held their first service on September 24, 1893. The church was established as debt free in memory of Emma A. King, a former member of the church. The congregation was able to enlarge their church, in 1911, to include a basement with a kitchen and furnace room, a league room, two classrooms, a choir-pulpit loft and two vestibules. This also was done debt free, which was quite a feat for the time period. The congregation built the parsonage during 1903-1904.⁴⁵ This is the same parsonage that was enlarged in 1925 with material from the Helmick Methodist church which was disbanded. Three rooms were added to the parsonage using the

⁴³ John Campbell, (1990).

⁴⁴ Marc Evans, (2007)

⁴⁵ ibid

lumber and other objects from the Helmick church.⁴⁶ The Wilsey Methodist church still remains today as one of the two original churches that came to Wilsey in answer to John Wilsey's free offer. Below is a picture of the church with the parsonage off to the left.



Fig. 8. Photograph of Methodist church taken in 1911. The parsonage is on the left. SOURCE: *1884-Wilsey*, Mark Evans. Located at Elm Creek Library, Wilsey, Kansas.

Wilsey was the end point for cattle shipments for many years. The safety of its citizens was a matter of concern for the town's leaders. In 1905 the longhorns were still being driven to the stockyards in Wilsey. Whenever the dust clouds were sighted that indicated an approaching herd, everyone rushed indoors and stayed there. It was during this time that "stopping points" were used to help keep their children safe. If herds were being brought in, the children upon dismissal from school would run to the nearest house where the woman of the house would let them in. She would then check for any signs of the cattle; if she saw none, she would send them

⁴⁶ "Original Wilsey Methodist Church Still Serving its Congregation." *Council Grove Republican*, May 2, 1986. Article found in scrapbook at Elm Creek Library, Wilsey, Morris County, Kansas.

on to the next house. This ingenious method made sure that the children of the town of Wilsey got safely home despite the herds of longhorns that were driven through the town.⁴⁷

Despite vigorous leadership and an initial leap in population, Wilsey grew slowly.

According to statistical data for Morris County, the population remained in the high hundreds to the low two hundreds until the years 1906-1907, where it made a leap to the high three hundreds.⁴⁸ This growth led to the incorporation of Wilsey as a third class city in 1910.⁴⁹ This was an important period of time for most rural cities as the use of the automobile was growing fast. Wilsey was situated only a mile off one of the first graded and later paved roads across Morris County.

Wilsey was not only easy to reach, but it was also easy for farmers to bring farm products or other items made in town to market. The business leaders of Wilsey added pumps in front of the mercantile store to make it easier for the townspeople and travelers alike to use the automobile in their town. They also had an auto mechanic in town, drawing in people in need of help with the “new-fangled” invention.⁵⁰ Here again the visionary leaders of Wilsey helped them to make the transition as technology increased as it had from its beginning.

⁴⁷ Marc Evans, pg. 39, (2007).

⁴⁸ “Schedule 2—List of Inhabitants,” *Abstract of Statistical Rolls, County of Morris, Kansas*. 1891-1909, copy available at Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas

⁴⁹ Coffin, 1925

⁵⁰ Marc Evans, (2007)

Wilsey, 1945 to the Present: A Tale of Wells and Water

After World War II, Wilsey like many other small towns in Kansas population started to decline. Today Wilsey maintains a population in the mid hundreds.⁵¹ All the businesses left for larger cities, but a new Bible School has opened its doors in what was once the Wilsey High School.⁵² In 1997, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment formally identified the town of Wilsey as “The Wilsey Ground Water Contamination Site.” Laboratory results of well water samples taken previously showed that many of their wells had nitrate levels that exceeded the safe drinking water standards. Here again the determination of the people of Wilsey and the town’s leaders came into play. In 2005 the town had a new water system installed. The town’s leaders wanted to have it installed correctly, efficiently and under budget. They knew the importance of keeping the new municipal wells free of contamination, so they set out to devise plans to protect the water in these two new wells.⁵³

Since the new wells were close to the old Missouri Pacific Railroad right-of-way, they decided to ask permission to lay the pipe lines along this right-of-way to deliver water from the wells to the town. An agreement was made for Wilsey to pay to have water stations put in along the route for thirsty hikers to use on the proposed Flint Hills Nature Trail, which would be along the Missouri Pacific Railroad right-of-way from Herington, in Dickinson County, to Ottawa in Franklin County. This is an ongoing project headed by the Horseman Foundation, an investment group organized to find ways to use the land of the right-of-ways where the trains no longer run and the tracks have been removed. After many hours of negotiation and compromise, the two

⁵¹ “2010 Census date for Wilsey, Kansas.” Accessed on April 10, 2012, from: <http://www.zip-codes.com/city/ks-wilsey-20132-census.asp>

⁵² “Wilsey, Kansas” *Council Grove Chamber of Commerce, 2011*. Accessed on August 5, 2012 from: <http://councilgrove.com/communities-of-morris-county/>

⁵³ “Wilsey Come...and get it” *Get Rural Kansas*. Accessed on October 5, 2012, from: <http://getruralkansas.com/wilsey/238index>

parties reached an agreement beneficial to all. The Horseman Foundation as part of the agreement with Wilsey promised to make the prevention of illegal dumping and keeping the use of herbicides along the route down, two of their highest priorities. By agreeing to do this, the Horseman Foundation would help insure that the towns' new water system would be kept free from contamination and that the new trail would be kept clean and useful for the hikers. This agreement shows that the leadership of Wilsey is still strong and they continue to think of their town's future. Even though the residents of Wilsey are weary, they continue their fight for survival which is seen in plans that have been made to add a new grocery store, a new church and a diner in the near future.⁵⁴ These additions will sit alongside their library, community building, and their beautiful park that has been there since the town was platted in 1884. They also have two churches and the cemetery, which have been there since earliest days. Below is a picture of how Fifth Street looks today.



Fig. 9. Wilsey today, taken looking down Fifth Street. Photograph taken by author August 20, 2012.

⁵⁴ ibid

History of Helmick

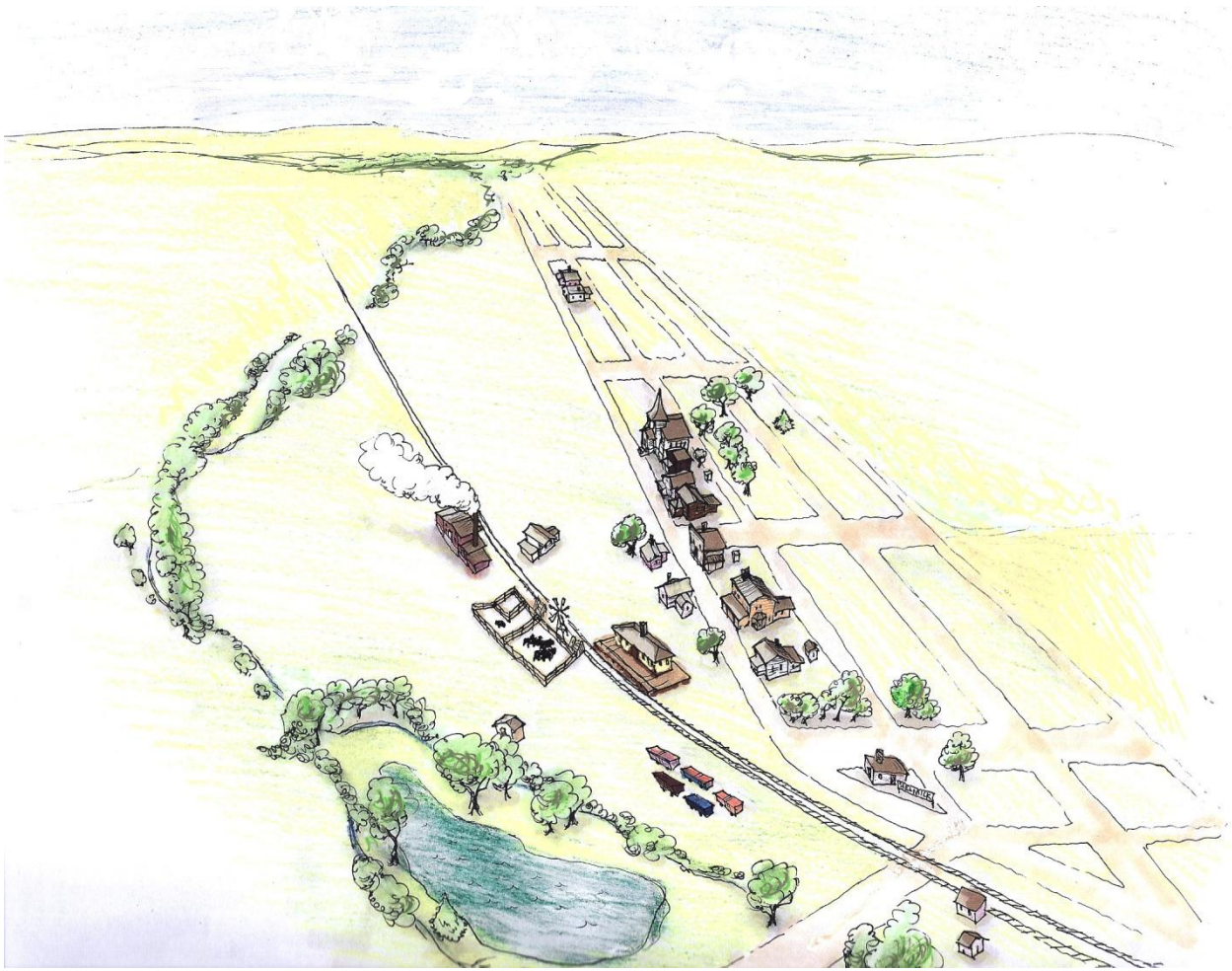


Fig. 10 A reconstructed sketch of Helmick, Kansas, by Edward Epps, artist, for Chapman Center, October, 2012. No known photograph of the town exists. This sketch approximates what is known about Helmick, representing hours of painstaking research by Janet Adam.

Shifting our attention to the town of Helmick, we find a story of a town that struggled from the beginning to win its fight for survival. The land in Elm Creek Township, where Helmick eventually developed, was purchased by John W. Helmick in 1878 from the Missouri, Kansas, &

Texas Railroad. He purchased 320 acres of land for \$600.⁵⁵ John Helmick was born in 1831 in Ohio, to Eli Helmick and Rachel Villars. He was a circuit rider in his later years and three of his brothers were also circuit riders in different parts of Kansas. In 1878 when Rev. Helmick purchased the land in Morris County, Kansas, he actually lived in Illinois. He had three daughters from his first wife and a two year old son by his second wife at the time that he purchased the land.⁵⁶ John Helmick did not follow the pattern for most circuit riders in the mid-to-late 1800s. Most circuit riders were younger men, single, and usually very poor.⁵⁷ Through research it was found that John Helmick was not listed as a minister until his late fifties or early sixties, he was married and had four children, and he was a rather wealthy man, owning property in Illinois.⁵⁸ This wealth made it possible for him to buy the land in Kansas on which he eventually plotted the town of Helmick. No available records indicate that he bought the land for the Methodist Church, for the planting of a church. The records do indicate that he purchased the land in his and his wife's name, and that they were the parties who sold the land or deeded it over to their son and son-in-law. Though the land was purchased in 1878, Helmick did not move to Kansas until around the time that he platted the town of Helmick in 1886. His son Milton P. Helmick (nicknamed Parker) attended District #19 school and was listed on the school roster for the year ending July, 1886.⁵⁹ In that year, John and his wife Mary platted the town named for

⁵⁵ Land Deed #3524. Land Commissioners Office State of Kansas, 1878, Register of Deeds, Council Grove, Morris County, Kansas

⁵⁶ *Illinois State Census*, 1870, Blount Township, Vermilion County, State of Illinois pg. 5 Accessed on April 14, 2012, from:

http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/print_u.aspx?dbid=7163&iid=4263277_00009&pid=17...

⁵⁷ Kansas Methodism, Family Album, Vol. 1(Circuit Riders). Accessed June 2, 2012, from:

<http://www.kansasheritage.org/um/circuit05.html>

⁵⁸ *Illinois State Census*, 1870

⁵⁹ J. O. Roach, Clerk District #19, Morris County, Kansas. *Annual Report of School District No. 19 Morris County, 1886*, copy available at Morris County Historical Society, Council Grove, Morris County, Kansas

them.⁶⁰ Since he was not listed on the 1885 census records for Elm Creek Township, Morris County, Kansas, he and his family moved to the area sometime after the census was taken in 1885.⁶¹

Although he founded and named the town, Rev. Helmick lived in Helmick for only a short period of time. He was listed on the census reports of 1895 as being in residence in Baldwin City, Douglas County, Kansas with his wife, Mary and his son, Milton.⁶² Milton shows up on District #19's school rosters from 1886-1892.⁶³ When Rev. Helmick moved to Baldwin City, he left the new town with no real leadership, so the infant community had no one to help it avoid the hits that came its way.

Some of the first settlers tried to get the town up and running, but they were mostly farmers and did not know how to negotiate with the railroad nor did they know how to attract settlers or businesses to the struggling town. Wilsey had had the good fortune to attract men who had developed and run businesses. One such person who does appear in Helmick's record was James O. Rochat, a hay dealer. He shipped out large amounts of hay on the railroad. He also opened up a large flour mill that made use of seven horses to turn the millstone. These horses were used until sometime after 1900 when Rochat purchased a huge power unit to replace them.⁶⁴ James Rochat was born in Indiana in 1853, marrying Samantha Lindsay in 1878.⁶⁵ They had six children; the youngest two were born in Kansas. Census records show that Harlan Lindsey

⁶⁰ John & Mary Helmick, City of Helmick(Plat map, Sept. 7, 1886). Available at Land Office, Register of Deeds, Council Grove, Morris County, Kansas

⁶¹ *State of Kansas Census*, Elm Creek Township, Morris County, Kansas, 1885, n.d. Accessed March 20, 2012, from: http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/print_u.aspx?dbid=1088&iid=ks1885_93-0263&pid=&...

⁶² *State of Kansas Census*, Baldwin City, Douglas County, Kansas, 1895, p.14. Accessed April 14, 2012, from: http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/print_u.aspx?dbid=1088&iid=ks115_41-0396&pid=7...

⁶³ School District #19 School Records, 1886-1892, Records found at Morris County Historical Society, Council Grove, Morris County, Kansas.

⁶⁴ Hugh Wilson, "J.O. Rochat Flourmill at Helmick" Photo by Mable Rochat Wilson. (d.n.) Found in scrapbook at the Morris County Historical Society, Council Grove, Morris county, Kansas.

⁶⁵ Soulos Family Tree, Public Family Tree. www.ancestry.com., Accessed on October 24, 2012, from: <http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/6148468/person/1209354450?ssrc=>

Rochat was born in Indiana in 1885, but Edna Clair Rochat was born October, 1888 in Kansas.⁶⁶ This tells us that that this family came to the area of Helmick sometime after the census was taken in 1885 and before 1888 when Edna was born. Descendants of this family lived in the area of Helmick until its final defeat around 1950. The great grandson of James Rochat was listed on the final District #19 school roster in 1949.⁶⁷ The picture below shows J. O. Rochat standing on the tracks looking at his flour mill, with the stock yards in the background.

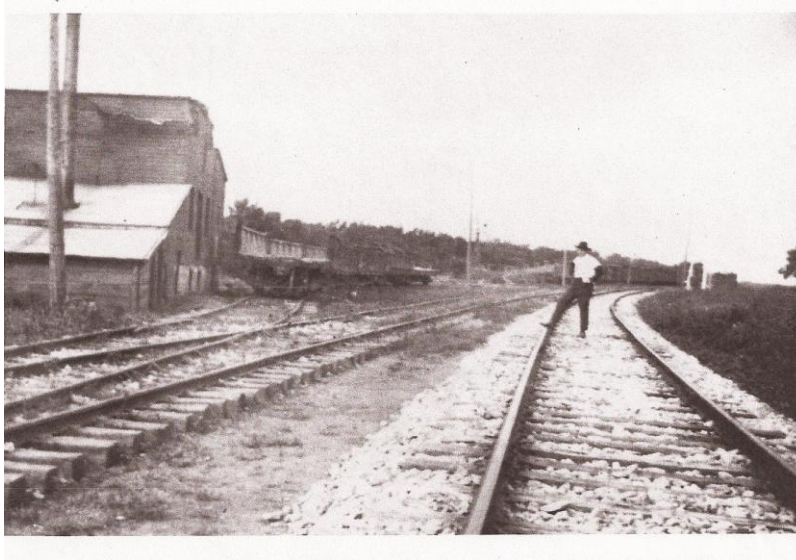


Fig. 11 J. O. Rochat standing on the Missouri-Pacific track looking at his flour mill in Helmick, Morris County, Kansas. Stockyards are in the background. Circa 1900. SOURCE: Located at Morris County Historical Society, Council Grove, Morris County, Kansas

Another person of extreme importance to the town of Helmick was James H. Smart. He was born in Wisconsin, to Robert A. Smart and Euphemia McArthur. In 1884 he married Clara Lu Gough. Smart was a farmer with aspirations of becoming a wealthy businessman.⁶⁸ This he accomplished by starting a horse and mule trading business as well as a rock crushing business

⁶⁶ *U.S. Federal Census*, Elm Creek Township, Morris County, Kansas, 1900, p. 214A, Accessed April 14, 2012 from: http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/print_u.aspx?dbid=7602&iid=00435&pid=4...

⁶⁷ School District #19, Morris County, Kansas, *Report of the School District Census*, 1949, copy available at Morris County Historical Society, Council Grove, Morris County, Kansas

⁶⁸ Catherine Long, Public Family Tree, www.ancestry.com, Accessed on April 10, 2012 from: <http://www.ancestry.com>

on land he had purchased.⁶⁹ He also was the owner of hundreds of acres of farmland in Morris County, according to plat maps of the time.⁷⁰ His business adventures did well enough for him to be able to send his son, Arthur, to college in Washington D.C. to become a lawyer.⁷¹ Mr. Smart and his family did not live in the Helmick area until somewhere between 1910, when his residence was listed as being in Council Grove, Morris County and 1915, when his residence was listed as being in Elm Creek Township, Morris County.⁷² In 1901, he owned land in section 36 Township 16 Range 7 but did not move onto it until after 1910.⁷³ After arriving on his land that included the rock quarry, he added a two story addition to the stone house that was there, built in 1868. He also added a large barn with a stone foundation and an office for his businesses. The quarry by this time was in full operation.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Kenneth McClintock, Local Historian, Personal Interview 3/24/2012 by author, in Council Grove, Kansas

⁷⁰ 1901 Plat Map, Standard Atlas of Morris County, Kansas. Pg. 15, Accessed on April 14, 2012 from: <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209382/page/8>

⁷¹ Julia Anderson, tape recording, (1984).

⁷² *U.S. Federal Census*, Elm Creek Township, Morris County, Ks., 1910, Accessed on March 24, 2012 from:

http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/print_u.aspx?dbid=7884&iid31111_4328344-00574&p... ;

State of Kansas Census, Elm Creek Township, Morris County, Ks., 1915, Accessed on March 24, 2012 from:

http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/print_u.aspx?dbid=1088&iid=ks1915_163-0032&pid=...

⁷³ 1901 Plat Map, Standard Atlas of Morris County, Kansas, Pg. 23, Accessed on March 24, 2012 from:

<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209382/page/12>

⁷⁴ Rita Johnson, Personal Interview April 7, 2012 by author, Delevan., Morris County, Kansas

Below is a picture of J. H. Smart, his wife Clara, and their son.



Fig.12. J. H. Smart, his wife Clara and their son Arthur, Janesville, Wisconsin. SOURCE: Located at www.ancestry.com. Contributed by catherinelong1

From 1910 to 1925 the rock quarry served as the major employer for the area. Also during this time, the town boasted a grocery store, a hotel, an ice house, a Methodist church, a pool hall and a train depot. Most of these buildings either were constructed by Smart or came about through him. The hotel in the town was usually full of stone workers, and there was a box car community between the railroad tracks and the Rock Quarry. Reminiscences from former residents give us a picture of ‘Hispanic gangs’ and ‘Negro gangs’ living down by the railroad. The town also had section houses for the railroad workers.⁷⁵ In the mid-1920s, Mr. Smart started having health and financial problems, which caused him to sell his quarry and land to the bank; his son was not interested in taking the important job of running the quarry and being a leader for

⁷⁵ Taped interview with Julia Anderson and other previous residents of Helmick, Kansas. Council Grove, Kansas, 1984, tape loaned to author by Rita Johnson.

the community. Mr. Smart died in 1930 leaving behind a town struggling to get up after the loss of this man.⁷⁶

The Clark family is the next family that we will explore for their part in the history of Helmick. David and Lucinda Clark were first identified with Elm Creek Township on the 1880 census records. They had nine children, all of them born in Illinois.⁷⁷ David and Lucinda's son William eventually married Orillia Bell Helmick, the daughter of J. W. Helmick and his first wife Maria.⁷⁸ On December 29, 1903, John W. Helmick and his wife Mary compiled a quit claim deed to transfer the land where Helmick stood to their son-in-law, William F. Clark and their son Milton P. Helmick. This deed included all of Helmick except for those sections already owned by other people.⁷⁹ Their son-in-law William also owned the farmland directly north of the town.⁸⁰ William Clark and Milton Helmick sold town sections in 1904, helping the town's growth.⁸¹ By 1910, William's health was taking a turn for the worse so he had an auction and sold all of the farm implements and animals; but the land was sold to G. A. Hall. G. A. Hall was an absentee landlord and it was said that he never lived on the land.⁸²

The Stover family was also one of the first in the area; they arrived in 1858 while the state was still a territory. Hezekiah Stover was born much earlier in the century, 1802, in St. George, Maine. He married Mary Pillsbury and they had 13 children. Ten of these children came with them to Kansas Territory. One son, Elias Stover, became the 7th Lt. Governor of Kansas in 1873. Another of his sons took a homestead claim in what became the Elm Creek Township. John P.

⁷⁶ Catherine Long, Public Family Tree. www.ancestry.com

⁷⁷ State of Kansas Census, 1885,

⁷⁸ Kenneth McClintock, personal letter to author.

⁷⁹ J. W. Helmick et al, Quit Claim Deed to W. F. Clark and Milton P. Helmick, for land in Elm Creek Township, Morris County, Kansas, 1903

⁸⁰ Plat Map 1901

⁸¹ W.F. Clark and Milton P. Helmick, Deed Record, General Warranty, No. 72 & 73, to Peter Bersuch, Elm Creek Township, Morris County, Kansas, 1904, Register of Deeds office, Council Grove, Morris County, Kansas.

⁸² Julia Anderson, 1984, tape recording

Stover was born in Tenants Harbor, Maine on June 22, 1827. He married Elmira B. Wall.⁸³

Because this family had homesteaded early, they lived among the Indian tribes. One of the stories that they shared among the family was that every time their mother baked bread she had to bake extra because the Indians would show up on baking day and expect their bread. Another story was that the cellar was not just used for storing of food, or for storms; it was also used as a place for the children to hide if there was any unusual activity from the Indians in the area. The Indians were not the only danger that the Stover children faced. In one story passed on by the granddaughter of J.P. Stover, a large pack of coyotes once chased her aunts on their way to a neighbor's farm and they had to release the horses and turn the wagon box upside down. They climbed under it and waited for their parents to find them several hours later.⁸⁴

The Stover family had several family members who were deaf-mutes and then in later years also blind. Willie J. Stover, one of John and Elmira's sons, was a deaf-mute, and he attended the Olathe School for the Deaf and Dumb in the 1880s.⁸⁵ It was there that he met his wife Cora D. Butcher, born in Indiana in 1878.⁸⁶ Willie Stover played on the Olathe Baseball team, called the Clippers.⁸⁷ There he became friends with two special people. One was Luther Taylor, who went on to play for the New York Giants and later coached baseball at the Deaf School.⁸⁸ The other was his best friend, Ortho Ashwill. They were part of the 1894 Champaign team and they also got to play a practice game with the New York Yankees.⁸⁹ Although he was deaf, Willie maintained a focus on education. After completing the required courses at the Olathe school,

⁸³ ibid

⁸⁴ ibid

⁸⁵ ibid

⁸⁶ McCarthy/Butcher Family Tree, Public Family Tree. [www.ancestry.com.](http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/15202645/person/18924890781?ssrc=), Accessed on October 5, 2012 from: <http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/15202645/person/18924890781?ssrc=>

⁸⁷ Julia Anderson, tape recording, (1984).

⁸⁸ "Deaf Baseball Players who Made the Major Leagues." *Sound Foundation*. Accessed on June 10, 2012 from: http://www.infobarrel.com/Deaf_Baseball_Players_Who_Made_the_Major_Leagues

⁸⁹ Smith Family Tree. Public Family Tree. [www.ancestry.com.](http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/30987733/person/12492301832?ssrc=), Accessed October 5, 2012, from: <http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/30987733/person/12492301832?ssrc=>

Willie and his new bride returned to his home town of Helmick, where he settled down and became a farmer as his father before him was. Willie and his wife Cora had two children, Berchard R. born in 1904 and Julia born in 1909. Berchard was killed by a horse in 1908 at the age of 4.⁹⁰

Helmick's early history has some fascinating connections to these enterprising deaf settlers. Ortho Ashwill, Willie's best friend, also found his bride at the Deaf School in Olathe. In 1902, he married Bessie Hatch from Osage County, Kansas.⁹¹ They lived close to Ortho's family until after their second child Ruth was born. Before 1913 they moved to Helmick and joined their friends Willie and Cora.⁹² These two families combined, with their children, created a little deaf community of their own. The children learned how to sign so they could speak with their parents. Ortho went to work for J.H. Smart at the quarry, and they rented a house on the J.O. Rochat farm. Then tragedy struck: Ortho Ashwill was killed by an east bound train as he was returning from a Wilsey shopping trip to buy his youngest daughter Della her first pair of shoes.⁹³ The Coroner's report stated that the train's engineer blew the whistle and tried to stop the train, but because he could not hear the whistle, and his back was to the train, the train struck him causing a severe head injury that resulted in death.⁹⁴

We can see a pattern forming for this town: most of the owners of land who had an impact on Helmick were either short- term residents or absentee owners. This had an effect on the ups and downs that this town encountered. When the owners of the farms and the businesses were present and an active part of the town, the town economy saw an upswing, as we saw for the

⁹⁰ Julia Anderson, tape recording, (1984)

⁹¹ Adam Family Tree, personal information from author

⁹² Smith Family Tree, Public Family Tree.

⁹³ *ibid*

⁹⁴ B. E. Miller, Coroner of Morris County, Kansas, July 31, 1917. Available at Morris County Historical Society, Council Grove, Morris County, Kansas

period of 1910-1925 when the Smart Quarry was in full swing. It was during these times that the town of Helmick actually looked like it would make a comeback. Then, when owners would sell out and move on, the town experienced a period when it was down and almost out, that is, until strong, active owners were once again living in and working for the betterment of the town and the surrounding area.

This next family persisted longer than most of the others that we have looked at so far with the exception of the Stover family. The Loomis family moved into the area when Ralph Loomis of Diamond Springs purchased from the bank in 1927, land that had been owned by J. H. Smart. This included the quarry, rock crusher, the stone house, and the barn.⁹⁵ The Loomis family tried to run the rock crushing business but as the Great Depression got worse, the need for crushed rock lessened; they closed the business sometime in the early to mid-thirties. According to Ralph's daughter Rita, her family tried to help the other families in the area after the quarry closed, but they were having trouble themselves during the Depression.⁹⁶ She recalled that her mother used to cook for the quarry workers with the help of a woman named Hannah. She remembers that her father had some interest in the finances of the grocery store because when it closed, the merchandise that was left was inventoried and then it came to her house. She especially liked a set of green glass dishes that was a part of the merchandise left.⁹⁷ Today Ralph's grandson Jason and his wife Cheryl, along with their children, live on the land. Jason uses the large barn that was built in the early 1900s, and his cattle graze the same area the cattle that were shipped out on the train, did during that same time period. Jason's wife Cheryl was instrumental in the restoration of the house to as close as possible its original state. They have taken out the false ceiling inside, exposing the beautiful beams that were originally there. They

⁹⁵ Rita Johnson, personal Interview, April 7, 2012

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Ibid

have also been able in recent years to purchase the land where the town of Helmick had once sat.⁹⁸ In Figure 9 below, we see the stone house built in 1868 as it appears today.



Fig. 13. Stone house: section on the right built in 1868 and the section on the left added in the early 1900's. SOURCE: Elm Creek Township, Morris County, Kansas, Photograph taken by author, April 7, 2012.

It seemed like Helmick was down and out after the quarry and rock crusher closed during the Depression. Many of the buildings were removed, including the hotel, but Helmick was to have another chance. In the early 1940s, the quarry and rock crusher were re-opened to produce crushed rock for road work during the war years.⁹⁹ Helmick again experienced a short-lived prosperity, only to be knocked down, this time for good when after World War II, in the late 40s; the quarry was once again closed. All the remaining buildings were taken down and removed, leaving an empty field with stone foundations and steps sitting in it.¹⁰⁰ The Loomis family took down the buildings along the track in the 50s.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Cheryl Loomis, personal interview, March 24, 2012 by author, Helmick Rd., Morris County, Kansas

⁹⁹ Barbara Booth, *Diamond of the Flint Hills*, pg. 60, 1993, self-published, copy available at Council Grove Library, Council Grove, Morris County, Kansas

¹⁰⁰ Julia Anderson, (1984)

¹⁰¹ Rita Johnson, (2007)

The town of Helmick, however, despite its ragged growth pattern, was more than just a few buildings and a few families. This town was full of happenings and interesting stories that were experienced by those families. People grew up there, lived their lives, and some died there. Past residents have remembered some of their experiences and we will pass them on here for others to enjoy.

Stories of Helmick

During the course of Helmick's ups and downs, one business remained constant and that was the grocery or general merchandise store. It had many owners and managers, like Sylvester Taylor, Arthur Smart, and Ralph Loomis. While the store was under the management of Sylvester Taylor, he opened up one morning in 1907 for his early risers and found that during the night, someone had broken into the store. After taking inventory Mr. Taylor found that over \$300 worth of merchandise had been taken. The authorities tried to follow the trail left by the thieves but they lost it somewhere north of the county line. This event was talked about throughout the county. There were a lot of theories bandied about as to who could have robbed the store. Some thought it could have been a former quarry employee who thought he had been cheated, while some thought it might have been a man who was down and out and needed to feed his family; but whoever it was, they got away with it.¹⁰²

When the automobile became a constant, the grocery store added a pump in the front of the store. The grocery store was the meeting place for all the farmers, and on a rainy day they would all drop in to get their fill of the local gossip. The grocery store also provided home delivery of groceries to nearby farms before it finally closed down. The mail was dropped off at the grocery

¹⁰² Julia Anderson, tape recording, (1984).

store where it was then picked up and delivered to the community's residents. This was after the post office closed in 1907, having been opened in 1887.¹⁰³

Next to the grocery store were the scales, and next to them, the two story hotel built to accommodate the quarry and the railroad men. During its peak in the 1920s, Julia Anderson recalls it having 30-40 people, mostly men staying there.¹⁰⁴ Rita Johnson grew up in Helmick during the 1930s, and she remembers the hotel being there, but does not remember people really staying there.¹⁰⁵ Given this information we can assume that when the quarry closed because of J.H. Smart's health and financial woes, the hotel was no longer needed to house the quarry workers. The hotel was removed sometime in the late 1930s.¹⁰⁶

Julia Anderson gives an account about an interesting discovery she found one Sunday morning during the early part of 1927. She was accustomed to getting up early and going out to feed the animals every morning, but this morning she spotted some men coming out of their large barn. She stopped where she was and started counting them as they just keep coming. She counted, 10....., 20....., 30....., 50....., 75....., 100. One hundred hobos came from the barn and headed off down the track. Later that day her father discovered that the train had made a stop at the depot during the night and swept the train for tramps, rail-riders, and hobos. The evicted men found the closest place to stay warm for the night, which was their barn. Julia stated that they often had encounters with hobos, but they usually didn't want plain-fare food; they wanted pie and cake. She said that some of them would offer to work, but usually all they knew how to do was chop wood. The hobos usually would stop at the Carpenter farm up the tracks, because they

¹⁰³ Kathy Weiser, editor, "Helmick", *Extinct Towns of Morris County, Kansas*. Accessed on April 14, 2012 from: <http://www.legendsofkansas.com/morriscountyextinctowns.htm>

¹⁰⁴ Julia Anderson, tape recording. (1984).

¹⁰⁵ Rita Johnson, personal interview, (2007).

¹⁰⁶ Emporia Gazette, June 30, 1942: NewspaperArchive.com. Accessed on April 24, 2012 from: <http://newspaperarchive.com/the-emporia-gazette/1942-06-30/page-5>

said they got good grub there. The hobos even put a mark on the track by the Carpenter's farm so every hobo would know that it was a good place to get food.¹⁰⁷

Finding snakes in your sewer system can be a scary event, but finding 500 of them -- that is a nightmare. That is what happened in 1932 in Helmick. The sewer system that ran off the main line to the Loomis house became stopped up. So a plumber was called from either Wilsey or Council Grove and when he opened up the sewer, he found snakes. Calling for help, men started removing the snakes. Luckily, they were snakes of the non-poisonous variety. They counted the snakes as they removed them to containers. The final count was 500. The snakes had crawled into the sewer and built a nest to make it through the winter.¹⁰⁸

The Missouri Pacific Railroad came through Helmick. In 1931, there was a wreck that embedded itself on the memories of former residents. This wreck was caused by the engineer of the train trying to take the curve by Helmick too fast, which resulted in several of the cars flipping over and spilling their contents along the track bed. This train happened to be carrying crates of fresh fruit, mostly grapes. The wreck itself brought the town's residents and area farmers to the scene, and they were allowed to take for themselves the fruit that had been spilled. For several days after the wreck the citizens of the Helmick area enjoyed fresh fruit. The children had fresh fruit not only with their meals but also for a snack, whenever they were hungry.¹⁰⁹ This was well-remembered at a time when the Great Depression left many hungry.

The Missouri Pacific Railroad and the citizens of Helmick saw conflict almost from the beginning of the town. In 1888 over one hundred citizens of the Helmick area petitioned the Kansas Board of Railroad Commissioners to compel the Missouri Pacific Railroad to fulfill its obligation and build a depot alongside the track in Helmick. According to the petition, Rev.

¹⁰⁷ Julia Anderson, tape recording, (1984).

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*

¹⁰⁹ Julia Anderson, tape recording, (1984).

Helmick had agreed to give one half of the town's lots to the railroad if they would establish a depot. The petitioners argued that this had not been done and that the railroad would not leave freight or express at the town. The Commission's decision was that Helmick was a flag station (a station with no scheduled stops) and thus, there was not enough trade to warrant a depot. They suggested that a stockyard would put them in a better position, so the townspeople put in a stockyard, loading ramps, and a water station.¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, there are no records of the Missouri Pacific ever having built a depot at Helmick, but we know from eyewitness accounts that there was a depot at Helmick. Where did it come from? One possible answer is that like the stockyard, loading ramps and water station, it was built by the residents of the Helmick area, or by J.H. Smart himself. The latter would make sense because it was the Loomis family that bought the land Smart had owned and they are the ones who took down the depot in the 1950s.¹¹¹ This depot was constructed somewhat like the one in Wilsey, but it was larger. It had a large room used for storing the cream, butter and eggs waiting for pick up from a local freight train; it also had a waiting room where people would wait for the flagged passenger train, and it had a locked room where the station master sat. From here he would collect the mail bag left on the hook outside his window by the train engineer, or he would put out the flag to let the engineers know that freight was waiting to be picked up: a different color for local or long distance. The long distance freight usually consisted of either hay, cattle, or crushed stone. Passengers had to put out the passenger flag if they wanted it to stop and pick them up. There were no regularly scheduled stops in Helmick, as everything depended on what flag was on the hook as to what train would stop.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Kansas Board of Railroad Commissioners, *Annual Report of the Board of Railroad Commissioners, for the year...* Issue 6, pg. 77.

¹¹¹ Rita Johnson, personal Interview, (2012).

¹¹² Rita Johnson, personal Interview, (2012).

Another building of mystery in Helmick was the Methodist Episcopal Church. Everyone seems to agree that it was built by Rev. Helmick, but nobody knows exactly when. They do know that after he left around the early 1890s, the church had no permanent pastors. It was serviced by pastors from neighboring churches. For instance, from Wilsey they shared Rev. Henry and Rev. Skinner. They would have their services in their home church in the morning and then go to Helmick and hold services in the afternoon.¹¹³ Religion during the late 1800s was very strict, and many people in Elm Creek Township would go to their home church in the morning, eat a cold lunch and then come to the afternoon services at Helmick. As people's views on how to spend Sunday changed, so did the attendance at the Helmick church. In 1925 the church was closed and disbanded. Townspeople removed the church to Wilsey, where it was used to add three rooms onto the parsonage of the Wilsey Methodist Episcopal Church.¹¹⁴

As previously stated, Helmick had an icehouse that was situated between the tracks and Elm Creek. Every winter blocks of ice were cut from the creek and stored in the icehouse. The blocks were covered with thick layers of sawdust to keep them from melting as the weather warmed. The area had another icehouse that was built of stone. It was situated on the Carpenter's farm. Friends and neighbors of the Carpenter's would help with the ice in the winter, knowing in the summer they could then go to either icehouse for some ice. The favorite thing for the residents of the area was to make ice cream during the long hot summer days.¹¹⁵

James H. Smart was a smart business man; he knew how to keep his employees happy. He also knew how to keep their families happy. One spring he decided that it would be productive to build a dam across the creek and direct some of the water into a manmade lake between the tracks and his quarry. This became known as Helmick Lake and was very popular during the hot

¹¹³ Julia Anderson, tape recording (1984).

¹¹⁴ Council Grove Republican, 1986

¹¹⁵ Julia Anderson, tape recording (1984).

summer days. Just about every weekend in the summer it drew people from the entire township for a day of swimming. In this busy time there was only one tragedy that people remembered, and that was the drowning of Alvin Martin.¹¹⁶ Other than this one negative recollection, the people of the area remember Helmick Lake with fondness. At Helmick one can still see bits and pieces of this dam along the banks of Elm Creek.

The town of Helmick also had two schools associated with it. The first school was built in 1880. It was made of stone and had an enrollment of close to 70 students by 1886 when the town of Helmick was platted.¹¹⁷ This was a large building and it stood the test of time, as it was dismantled in the early 1950s after District 19 school district was closed for good. It was somewhere between 1901 and 1923 that a new school building was built from wood. It was in addition to the stone school and was built just a half mile southeast of the stone school. Both these schools were called Fairview, but rumor has it that families from Helmick would no longer send their children to the stone school and families west of the stone school would no longer send their children to the new school; therefore, a division in education methods was created within the district.¹¹⁸ The wood school building was modified after the district closed and was purchased and used by different families for their home.¹¹⁹ Below are pictures of the two schools.

¹¹⁶ *ibid*

¹¹⁷ Annual Report of School District #19 of Morris County, Kansas, 1886. Available at Morris County Historical Society, Council Grove, Morris County, Kansas.

¹¹⁸ Rita Johnson, personal Interview (2012)

¹¹⁹ *ibid*

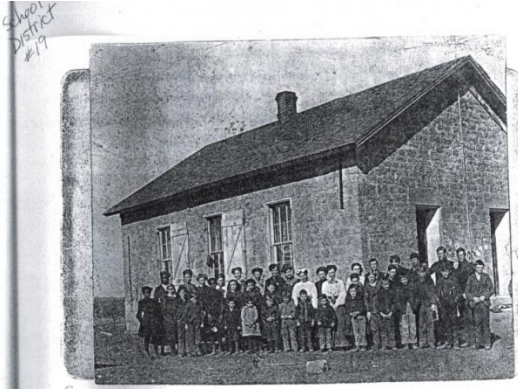


Fig. 14. Stone school house built in 1880. Circa 1900. Located at the Elm Creek Library, Wilsey, Kansas.

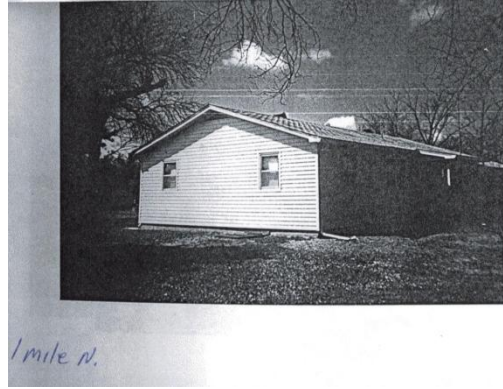


Fig. 15. Wooden school built after 1901 and before 1923. Circa 1915. Located at the Elm Creek Library, Wilsey, Kansas.

Conclusion

In looking at the twin towns of Wilsey and Helmick together, some similarities and differences can be seen. These are the factors that could mean victory or defeat between twin towns. As previously stated, both towns had founding fathers that purchased the land they were platted on, and the towns were named for them. They both had depots, stockyards, and watering sites on the Missouri Pacific railway. Each town had a hotel, a grocery store, a church, schools and businesses. Each had a post office, at least for a time, and the local farmers supported both of them. They were both settled by Caucasian groups of North Midland State emigrants.

The main differences between the two towns were the ease of access, the general business sense, and the strength of leadership. Also, if we take a look at the towns' plat maps, it is apparent that Wilsey was platted as a city, because space was left for public areas and business centers. Mr. Wilsey gave to the city areas for a park and baseball field. On the other hand, Helmick was laid out mostly as a paper town with no public areas and very little space for businesses. This gives the impression that Mr. Helmick platted the town for the purpose of

enticing the railroad to build a depot, and that the rumors of his deal with the railroads might have been true. Most of the business area in Helmick was centered on either side of the tracks or by the quarry. Most of Helmick consists of buildings developed in the early 1900s by Mr. Smart for his employees' benefit.

The ease of access clearly made Helmick the underdog in this struggle, because the residents had only the train which they had to flag down, or dirt roads to get to or out of Helmick. There were two roads coming into it, but they both remained dirt roads that became almost impassable when it rained.¹²⁰ The fact that Helmick was never more than a flag stop for the railroad was a disadvantage to the town's growth. After the automobile became the most widely used method of transportation, Wilsey had the definite advantage, having a paved road only a mile from the town. They also had a mechanic in the town so people in the area would come to Wilsey if they needed auto repairs. As far as having a business sense, it is apparent who won most of the rounds here. Wilsey had many visionaries in their corner of founding settlers. Mr. Wilsey set out to fill up his town with businesses and churches. He and his extended clan, the Wilsey-Ottis group, set aside an area for a cemetery and dug a well for the town to provide fresh water. The residents of Wilsey planted trees along their streets to provide shade and add to the aesthetic looks of the town. All this aided in the growth of Wilsey. The townspeople worked together when tough times came and knew they could rely on their leaders for help and support.

Helmick struggled to attract businesses and to keep them. It had men who tried to succeed by starting businesses they thought the town needed, but most of them were farmers and did not have the ingenuity, vision, or craftiness that true businessmen needed. No one started a cemetery so they shared Wilsey's cemetery, and no one thought of digging a town well to provide water for the town's businesses. The water from Elm Creek was their main water supply for many

¹²⁰ Rita Johnson-personal interview

years. The trees in Helmick were mostly along the creek, though some trees were planted around the Methodist church where the town would gather for picnics and such on special occasions.

Below is a picture of a picnic taken on the 4th of July, in the year, 1900.



Fig. 16. Fourth of July picnic in Helmick. Located in *Communities of Morris County* at the Morris County Historical Society, Council Grove, Kansas.

We can make a few assumptions based on what is known. It may be possible that Rev. Helmick purchased the land for Helmick in 1878, as stated earlier, in response to proposed railroad routes through Morris County, and his purpose was to establish a church in the area for the railroad workers as well as for the settlers in the area. He would not have known that John Wilsey intended to establish a town on land that he had purchased just four miles northwest of the purposed site of Helmick. Why he waited eight years from the time he purchased the land before he established the town we may never know, but the fact that the railroad stopped laying track just west of his property for two years might have been the deciding factor as to why he chose 1886, the year that the Missouri Pacific bought the floundering M. K. & T railway, to lay out the town of Helmick. We also know that according to some residents, he had made

agreements with the railroad to insure that the town had a depot, but this never happened. Most of the buildings that might have been considered railroad property were actually built by the people who lived in the area, because there are no records that indicate that the railroad ever built any buildings at Helmick.

Another question we could ask about why he established Helmick would be- was this where he planned to retire? In the 1895 census records for Baldwin City, Douglas County, Kansas he was listed as being a retired minister.¹²¹ If this was his plan, what changed, and why did he move on after such a short time? Could the citizens of the area have been upset with him because they found out that there never was an agreement with the Missouri Pacific for a depot and so he decided not to retire in the town named for him? There are a lot of unanswered questions as far as Rev. Helmick is concerned, but we do know that his lack of leadership and commitment left the town of Helmick an open target and vulnerable to knockdowns, which led to its final defeat.

In conclusion, of these two twin towns, Wilsey was the obvious winner; due to the strength of the leadership available to the town; yet Helmick did not go down quickly. Research shows that the residents of Helmick fought hard for survival, and it took many knockdowns before they finally succumbed around 1950 and a TKO was declared. Through research, however, it has been found that the history and the spirit of this small town and its people, like thousands of such places across Kansas, is now and forever alive.

¹²¹ Census record, 1895, Baldwin City, Douglas County, Kansas

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