

From Limestone to Gravestone: The Story of Bigelow, Kansas

Marshall County, Kansas 1881-1960

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Figure 1: Photograph taken by Thomas D. McCavoy, *Life Magazine* 1960

McCavoy did a series of photos documenting the removal of citizens from the Blue River Valley Source:
<http://www.backroadstouring.net/phpBB/viewtopic.php?t=495&sid=949fbac6f59db99b89c92e7fd1245997>

This study examines the unique factors that influenced the development, progress, and eventual destruction of the lost community of Bigelow. This study includes fieldwork of the former town site, photographs, scholarly journals, and historical documents to examine the short lived history of this proud town.

Intro

Today the town of Bigelow is nothing more than a stone marker commemorating its existence and founder, Jacob Inman; however, remnants from the town of Bigelow may be seen across the state in the beautiful limestone building structures that stand to this day. Bigelow is located at the intersection of 17th and Zenith Road in Bigelow Township, Marshall County, Kansas. The town was favorably located nestled between the Flint Hills in the Black Vermillion River Valley. The beautiful rolling hills are highlighted by the Twin Mounds just a few miles south of the former town site. These hills can be easily seen from Highway 99 and local legend has it that there was once a large Indian battle on the hill. Numerous flint arrowheads have been found at this location adding to the speculation of a battle that may or may not have occurred.¹

The founding of Bigelow was relatively late compared to the neighboring towns. Frankfort, located seven miles northeast of Bigelow, was formed in 1867. Blue Rapids, located six miles northwest of Bigelow was founded in 1869. By the time Bigelow was founded in 1881, Blue Rapids had a population of 830 and Frankfort had a population of close to 900 people. The likelihood of Bigelow becoming a successful town was not good, considering the success of its nearby neighbors; however, Bigelow had a unique resource that would spark immediate growth and success for the community.²

¹ Emma Foster, *History of Marshall County Kansas: Its people, Industries and Institutions* (Indianapolis, IN: B. F. Bowen and Company, Inc, 1917) 94, 155.

² Census of Population and Housing 1880, United States Census Bureau, accessed November 10th, 2012, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1880.html>

Inman's Quarry and Vision

The commemorative marker for the lost Bigelow town site states "Bigelow, Kansas. Town and Quarry founded by J. Inman 1881".³ This is significant because without the quarry, there would be no town site. The sole reason for Bigelow ever existing was the opening of a limestone quarry by Jacob Inman in 1881.⁴ The area around Bigelow prior to the opening of the limestone quarry consisted of scattered family farms and houses. The area itself holds some historical significance. It is believed that the first Marshall County native was born a mile northeast of Bigelow at the community site that would be named Elizabeth. George H. Thiele was born at this site on September 14th, 1855. Also it is believed that John C. Fremont crossed the Black Vermillion River on June 20th 1842 on his way to the Rocky Mountains just four miles northeast of Bigelow where the town of Barrett would be founded in 1855.⁵

Why was Bigelow getting such a late start if there had been settlers in the area since 1855? Often, towns do not simply come to be without the help of outside factors. The area was starting to receive recognition by the Central Branch of the Missouri Pacific Railroad for having high quality magnesium limestone for the construction of the abutments used for railroad bridges.⁶

"..At Elizabeth are fine magnesium limestone quarries. The rock with which the abutments of the Leavenworth Bridge are built, were wrought from this quarry." - C.C. Hutchinson author of "Resources of Kansas, Fifteen Years Experience"

³ Observed at Bigelow Town Site, Broxterman, Jordan. November 5th, 2012 Bigelow, Kansas

⁴ Frank W. Blackmar, *Kansas: A Cyclopedia of State History Embracing Events, Institutions, Industries, Counties, Cities, Towns, Prominent Persons, Etc.* (Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912), 180

⁵ Emma Foster, *History of Marshall County Kansas: Its people, Industries and Institutions* (Indianapolis, IN: B. F. Bowen and Company, Inc, 1917) 94, 155.

⁶ C.C. Hutchinson, *Resources of Kansas: Fifteen Years Experience* (Topeka, Kansas, Published by Author, 1871) 224



Figure 2: The Great Kansas and Missouri Bridge from the March 1873 issue of *Scientific American*. The stone abutments in the water were built from Bigelow area limestone.
Source: <http://bridgehunter.com/ks/leavenworth/fort-leavenworth/>

Jacob Inman realized there was a business opportunity presenting itself and opened a limestone quarry near Elizabeth. Inman understood that he would need to employ a number of people to help extract limestone from his quarry, so he plotted 40 acres of his own land to be made into town lots. Jacob Inman sold the land for a very low price to attract workers to the area. Inman had a unique contract for individuals looking to move in: people building a house on a town plot would receive an adjacent town plot for free. Inman also reserved ownership of every corner lot in the town; this was known as “Inman’s Addition.”⁷ The new town was named Bigelow after General Alfred Bigelow, a prominent railroad official for the Missouri Pacific Railroad.⁸

⁷ Emma Foster, *History of Marshall County Kansas: Its people, Industries and Institutions* (Indianapolis, IN: B. F. Bowen and Company, Inc, 1917) 163

⁸ Ibid

Soon after the plotting of the town, houses, businesses, and other community structures were built. A post office was built in November of 1881 and the Central Branch of the Missouri Pacific Railroad built a depot in Bigelow.⁹ Bigelow developed rapidly during the next decade and according to the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, “The best buildings in all of the cities are built of this material and it is extensively shipped to Omaha, St. Joseph, and Kansas City markets”.¹⁰



Figure 3: Map of Marshall County from *History of Kansas*, Noble Prentis, (Winfield: E.P. Greer. 1899)
Source: <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/counties/MS/>

⁹ James Coder, *Memories Triggered by a Visit to Bigelow*, (Topeka Capital Journal, posted August 16th, 2002) Accessed November 10th, 2012 http://cjonline.com/stories/081602/ksp_coder.shtml

¹⁰ State Board of Agriculture 1891-1892, *Eight Biennial Report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, to the Legislature of the State* (Topeka, Press of the Hamilton Printing Company) 152

The development of the railroad across the state contributed to Bigelow's success. In 1883 a schoolhouse was built and in 1884 Christ Church was built. There was also a blacksmith shop, doctor's office, jewelry store, drug store, two general stores, a bank, a lumber and coal dealer, a hotel, and a grain and stock buyer. The town also had express and telegraphs offices.¹¹ In just a few short years Bigelow had established itself as a thriving and growing community that could compete with the neighboring towns of Frankfort and Blue Rapids. However this immediate success was short lived. Before long the railroads were fully developed and the demand for quality Bigelow limestone was not as great. After the mines closed in 1899, people stopped moving to Bigelow.¹² Residents in Bigelow stayed, however their children and future generations settled elsewhere. In the 1910 Census the population of Bigelow was listed at about 200 citizens.¹³ Bigelow took another hit when The Great White Way Highway was completed in 1914. This gravel road was one of the first highways organized in Kansas and it ran directly through the neighboring towns of Frankfort and Waterville, completely bypassing Bigelow.¹⁴

¹¹ Emma Foster, *History of Marshall County Kansas: Its people, Industries and Institutions* (Indianapolis, IN: B. F. Bowen and Company, Inc, 1917) 163

¹² James Coder, *Memories Triggered by a Visit to Bigelow*, (Topeka Capital Journal, posted August 16th, 2002) Accessed November 10th, 2012 http://cjonline.com/stories/081602/ksp_coder.shtml

¹³ Census of Population and Housing 1880, United States Census Bureau, accessed November 10th, 2012, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1880.html>

¹⁴ Tom Parker, *Dispatches from Kansas: Hopes and Dreams on the Great White Way* (Washington County News, Washington, KS, posted February 3rd, 2006) Accessed December 10th, 2012

This highway would later be known as Highway 9. With almost no reason for travelers to visit Bigelow, the town was doomed to last as long as its living residents did, most of which, including Jacob Inman, are buried at Antioch Cemetery located at its original site a mile west of the former Bigelow town site.

Bigelow Limestone

Bigelow limestone was unique and described by Robert Hay, writer of *Geology and Mineral Resources of Kansas*, as “a buffy white, but in places becomes a lavender blue, which is very handsome.”¹⁵ The limestone was so unique, in fact, that in 1934 the term “Bigelow Formation” was recognized as a geological term.¹⁶ There is a complex system for categorizing different materials, and Bigelow Limestone was categorized as being found in the Forest City Basin area in the Lower Permian Series of the Permian System. It was further sub categorized as being in the Gearyan Stage in the Council Grove group. Within the Council Grove Group, Bigelow Limestone was featured as a rock formation that included Blue Rapids Shale, Crouse Limestone, and Funston Limestone as members categorized within the Bigelow Formation. Bigelow Formation was named after the town of Bigelow and Blue Rapids Shale was named after Bigelow’s neighboring town to the west, Blue Rapids.¹⁷

¹⁵ Robert Hay, *Geology and Mineral Resources of Kansas*, (Topeka, Hamilton Printing Company 1893) 51

¹⁶ G.E. Condra, *Nebraska Geological Survey: Geologic Cross Section, Forest City, Missouri to Du Bois, Nebraska*, (Published by State of Nebraska 1935) 4

¹⁷ Howard G. O'Connor, Doris E. Zeller, Charles K. Bayne, John Mark Jewett, and Ada Swineford, *Kansas Geological Survey Bulletin 189: Stratigraphic Succession in Kansas*, (State Geological Survey of Kansas 1968)

Bigelow Formation became a geological term in 1934; however, by 1941, it was determined that Blue Rapids Shale, Crouse Limestone, and Funston Limestone should be recognized as formations and that the name Bigelow Formation be dropped as a geological term.¹⁸



Figure 4: Photograph of the former Washington County Jail in Washington, Kansas Circa 2011
This Jail was made from Bigelow Limestone built in 1899. It is listed on the National Historic Register.
Source: <http://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/james-c-holland/16802>

¹⁸ Grace Keroher, *Lexicon of Geologic Names of the United States for 1936-1960* (United States Department of the Interior, Washington D.C., United States Government Printing Office, 1966)

Town Destruction

It is known today that the town of Bigelow no longer exists. It was destroyed when the citizens were forced to move by the Army Corps of Engineers for construction of the Tuttle Creek Dam. Bigelow would have been in the flood plain area of the proposed dam, so citizens were given an allotted time to move and relocate, being compensated for their losses. The dam was very unpopular among Blue River Valley citizens at the time.¹⁹ The literal destruction of the town of Bigelow is 1960; however, I believe the town's true death occurred nearly 60 years earlier when Inman's limestone quarry closed. The closing of the major town employer was detrimental to the town and ended any further growth as a community. It was only a matter of time before the town would be gone; the Tuttle Creek Dam simply accelerated the process.

¹⁹ Anthony Crawford, *K-State Keepsakes: "The Tuttle Creek Story" and the Velen Sisters*, (Posted March 26th 2008) accessed December 6th, 2012, <http://ksulib.typepad.com/talking/2008/03/k-state-keepsak.html>

BIGELOW

IN CLEAR FORK TWP.
Scale 200 ft. to one inch.

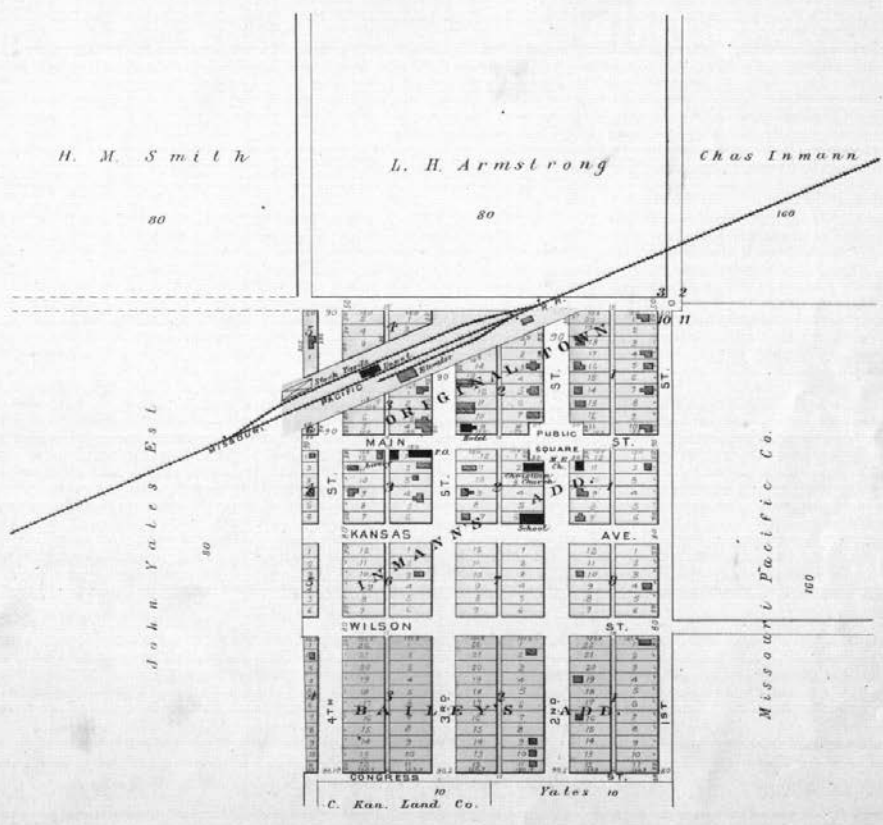


Figure 5: This Plat map features the town of Bigelow in 1905. Notice the text that says “Inman’s Add.” and the location of businesses on corner plots. Inman reserved the rights to corner plots for this purpose. Source: <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209410/page/8>

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