

# **Goff, Kansas: From a Crossroads to a Pass-Through 1894-2013 Nemaha County, Kansas**



**Figure 1.** Photograph of a bird's eye view of Goffs (sic), Kansas, looking north on Stahl Street, c. 1905. Today, the bank on the corner of Stahl Street and Second Street (now Highway 9) is the only remaining original structure, including the railroad tracks, seen in the photograph. SOURCE: Special Collections and University Archives-Wichita State University Libraries

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This study illustrates the founding, growth, and decline of the small town of Goff, Kansas in Nemaha County. Originally located at the crossroads of the Central Branch of the Missouri Pacific Railroad and the Kansas City, Wyandotte and Northwestern Railroad, the town once ran the largest industry in the county. This study includes an interview, early plat maps of the town, and photographs of early and present-day Goff.

Today, empty streets, abandoned buildings, and an almost 90 degree curve in the road at the east edge of town are what travelers see as they drive through the town of Goff in Harrison Township of Nemaha County, Kansas. Most have no idea that the town was once a crossroads for two busy railroads, or that it was chosen to be the home of the largest industry in the county for over 30 years. They do not realize that statistically, the little town should not have been able to hold out as long as it has with such a small population. Without people like Roy Bell, a former rural mail carrier, postmaster, and fire chief of the town, the history of Goff would likely be easily forgotten by new generations. Over the years, Bell realized that someone needed to gather together his town's stories so they would not be lost over time. With Mr. Bell's help, the following story shows a town that formed around its railroads in the 1870s, growing and carving out niches in the land surrounding the tracks and then digging in to face decades of changes and losses to its economy.

## **The Settling of Goff**

Situated in the middle of a V-shape formed by Spring Creek on the west and an unnamed creek on the east in the Harrison Township of Nemaha County, Goff rests among rolling hills.<sup>1</sup> Today, the Nemaha County seat of Seneca is about 19 miles to the northwest, and the town of Sabetha sits about 33 miles to the northeast. According to the *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, the vegetation in the region where Goff was plotted was mainly Bluestem Prairie.<sup>2</sup> This means that the rolling, treeless hills of this part of the state were covered in tall grasses

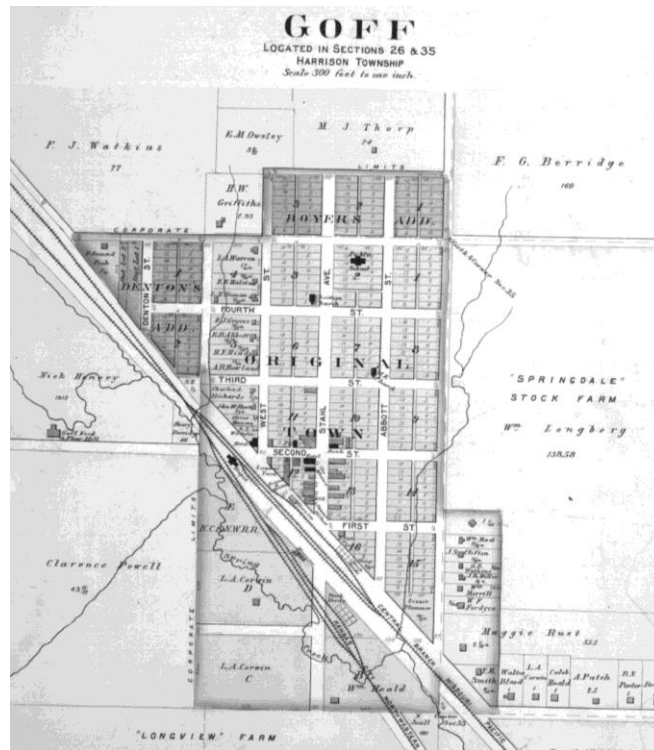
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<sup>1</sup> Residents of Goff claim they don't remember the stream as ever having a name. They refer to it as more of a ditch that eventually feeds into Spring Creek south of town.

<sup>2</sup> *Native Flora of Kansas* [map] Scale not given. Ln: Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, p. 5

characterized by a blue coloration at the base of the plants.<sup>3</sup> A different map in the atlas shows that the town was also laid out in the Glaciated Region of Kansas, meaning that while there was fertile soil for farmers, there was also a large amount of rocks to dig up out of fields.<sup>4</sup>

Built as a railroad town, Goff became a crossroads for the Central Branch of the Missouri Pacific (eventually Union Pacific) and the Kansas City, Wyandotte Northwestern (eventually Kansas City Northwestern) railroads. As the town grew, it expanded to the north and also the west along the railroad tracks, creating property sections with sharp angles that paralleled the rail lines. The tracks, as well as the two creeks, formed the main boundaries of Goff, as seen in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 2.** Plat map of Goff, Kansas, 1908. Notice the shaded additions to the west and north, showing the town's expansion since its original plotting a few decades before. SOURCE: Plat Book of Nemaha County, Kansas, 1908; <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209442/page/21>

<sup>3</sup> "Big Bluestem," USDA, accessed February 2, 2014, [http://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg\\_ange.pdf](http://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg_ange.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> *Landforms of Kansas* [map] Scale not given. Ln: Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, p. 3

George C. Stahl, from Iowa at the time, bought from his father in 1870 the land which would eventually be used to develop the town of Goff. Stahl then took up an offer from Major Downs, superintendent of the Central Branch of the Missouri Pacific Railroad, to sell sections of the land to the railroad in order to build a station. In exchange, the railroad would build a depot and a hotel along the tracks, as well as plot a town for Stahl.<sup>5</sup> When exactly the town was plotted varies by source, ranging from 1877 to 1882. An article in the *Goff Advance* from 1923 quotes an interview with Stahl. "It was the next year in 1877 before the town was platted and buildings completed."<sup>6</sup> It is important to note, however, that Stahl would have been at least in his late seventies, and apparently had not been in Goff for a few decades at the time of the interview. These details, and the fact that the plot may not have been officially recognized for a few years, could explain why Stahl's date is earlier than others recorded.

How Goff received its name is an interesting story. At first, Stahl planned to name his new town Stahlville. However, Major Downs again made a deal with the landowner, suggesting that Stahl name the town after his friend, Edward H. Goff. In a letter submitted to the *Goff Advance* in 1939, Stahl explained his decision. "...Downs said if I would let him name it he had a party who would bring a colony of people from Boston and start the town in good shape. He said to call it Goff, after the man who would bring the people, so I consented. But he lied. No one from Boston came."<sup>6</sup> For a while, the fledgling town went by the name of Goffs, but when it became incorporated in April of 1894, residents dropped the "s" and the town became Goff.

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<sup>5</sup> *Goff Advance*, November 1, 1923, n.p.

<sup>6</sup> "Goff Instead of Stahlville: Principal Founder of Goff Gives Version of Naming Town," *Goff Advance*, March 2, 1939, n.p.

However, it was 1926 before the railroad would recognize the change. There is also no apparent record showing Mr. Goff ever visiting his namesake.

As for the people who settled in Goff, as of 1887, most men registered as businessmen identified as coming from other states in the United States.<sup>7</sup> By 1890 however, large groups of people identified as German and German Russian immigrants were settling in the Goff area.<sup>8</sup> Upon further research, it appears that these immigrants were likely some of the three million Germans who left their country during Bismarck's reign as the minister president of Prussia.<sup>9</sup> These people came to America to search for land and job opportunities that were not available in their own country. Because of Goff's railroads, many jobs were available in addition to the land sought after by farmers. The railroads offered positions in stockyards, freight-loading, and railroad repairs, as well as various other jobs. In addition to the railroad employees, Goff's business owners needed help in their own establishments to keep up with the expanding town.

## **Goff in its Golden Age**

Only about a decade after the Missouri Pacific went through Goff in the 1870s, the Kansas City, Wyandotte, and Northwestern Railroad was built through the town on its stretch from Kansas City, Missouri, and Virginia, Nebraska.<sup>10</sup> The two sets of tracks crossed paths on the western edge of town, with the depot serving both. According to *Reflections of Nemaha*

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<sup>7</sup> Dunham, J.R., *Meacham's Illustrated Atlas of Brown and Nemaha Counties, Kansas*, J.H. Meacham, 1887, p. 124. <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/223979>

<sup>8</sup> *Group Colonization in Kansas* [map] Scale not given. Ln: Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, p. 42

<sup>9</sup> "Causes and Effects of Emigration from Germany (1970s-1880s), German History in Documents and Images, accessed December 18, 2013, [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1739](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1739)

<sup>10</sup> "Kansas City Wyandotte Northwestern Railroad," accessed December 18, 2013, [http://www.skyways.org/museums/bancroft/Railroad/KC\\_Wyandotte.html](http://www.skyways.org/museums/bancroft/Railroad/KC_Wyandotte.html)

County, Kansas, by 1913, the small town of Goff had 12 passenger trains and four freight trains roar to a stop there each day.<sup>11</sup> “There was quite a bit of noise. I think you just get used to it, you know,” said Bell.<sup>12</sup> This large amount of train traffic kept the community busy, and supplied the town’s newspaper, *The Goffs News* (later, the *Goff Advance*) with plenty to talk about. There was even a section entitled “Local Links: Neighborhood Gossip Dished Up in a Readable Form.”<sup>13</sup>

While the railroads furnished the town with a steady stream of business, Goff’s location at a crossroads brought in an industry which provided residents with even more jobs. According to Bell, when G.E. Hanna of Atchison decided to expand his poultry and egg business, he chose Goff as the perfect location. “He said he chose Goff because it was the most centrally located railroad town in northeast Kansas,” said Bell.<sup>12</sup> Built in 1917 at the south end of Abbott Street, Hanna put his plant right next to the railroad tracks for easy shipment. The plant quickly grew to be the largest industry in Nemaha County, employing about 100 people.<sup>11</sup> Bell also gathered from his own research that only a few years after the plant opened, there was a shortage of housing due to the large number of employees needed for the business. Evidence of the Poultry and Egg Plant’s influence can also be seen in Goff’s school system. The original mascot for Goff Rural High School was the Gorillas, but by the 1929 school year, it was changed to the “Chanticleer,” a breed of chicken. Bell stated that according to those in school at the time, Hanna Poultry and Egg Co. paid for new uniforms with rooster emblems, like in Figure 3 on the next page, in honor of the new mascot.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Reflections of Nemaha County, Kansas*, Dallas, Texas: Curtis Media Corporation, 1992, p.111

<sup>12</sup> Roy Bell, Interview by author. Roy and Patsy Bell home, Seneca, Kansas, December 13, 2013

<sup>13</sup> *The Goffs News*, November 1, 1882



**Figure 3.** Photograph of a Goff High School men's basketball warm-up suit, featuring the school's mascot, the Chanticleer. The mascot was chosen to promote Goff's most prominent business, the Hanna Poultry and Egg Co. SOURCE: Personal collection of Roy Bell

One landmark that is still easily located today is the Great White Way that winds through the town. Now more commonly referred to as Highway 9, the road took over the town's original Second Street in the early 1920s, and served as a stop along one of the state's first auto trails. The highway became the busiest road in the town, and eventually was referred to as Main Street, instead of Stahl Street, which runs north and south in the center of Goff. The Great White Way received its name because of the bands of white that were painted on alternating telephone poles along the road, serving as guide for early automobile drivers on

roads without any other identification.<sup>14</sup> The road was gravel until it was paved in the 1930s. At the time, roads were graded out using blades pulled by a team of horses before gravel was eventually poured, as seen in Figure 4 below.



**Figure 4.** Photograph showing a road being built near Goff, Kansas, c. 1915. Roads like the Great White Way would have been built in a similar way, with the poles in the distance painted with bands of white to serve as a guide for drivers. SOURCE: Personal collection of Roy Bell

## The Town's Decline

While the town of Goff seemed to grow for quite a few years, the town never recorded a population of over 500 people. In fact, the largest population reached by Goff in a federal census was 437 people in 1930.<sup>15</sup> According to statistics, towns with a population of less than 500 people are not expected to last more than a few decades. However, Goff persisted and prospered for much of its existence. The explanation for this, said Bell, was the railroads.

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<sup>14</sup>Tom Parker, "Dispatches from Kansas: Hopes and Dreams on the Great White Way" (Washington County News, Washington, KS, posted February 3rd, 2006) Accessed December 19, 2013

<sup>15</sup> *Reflections of Nemaha County, Kansas*, Dallas, Texas: Curtis Media Corporation, 1992, p.111



“Absolutely they depended on the railroad. The railroad and the poultry plant. And the poultry plant was only there because of the railroad. Once they pulled out, the employment was gone,” said Bell.<sup>16</sup> Evidence of railroads sustaining a small community can also be seen in the former town of Broughton in Clay County, Kansas.<sup>17</sup>

Like Bell said, the town of Goff relied on its railroads and poultry plant, so when times changed and companies cut back, the town suffered. The Kansas City, Wyandotte and Northwestern Railroad was the first to go. The line struggled for years and was eventually bought by the Missouri Pacific Railroad in 1894, who renamed it the Kansas City Northwestern Railroad. However, eventually even the larger company could not afford the extra expense, and the railroad officially stopped service in 1919. The track was taken up a few years later.<sup>18</sup> Next to suffer was the Hanna Poultry and Egg Plant. Despite warnings from the managers that voting in a union would make the company unable to pay wages, employees voted anyway in 1945. The company closed down in 1949, causing a huge hit to Goff’s economy.<sup>19</sup> Today, the Henry Brothers brome plant stands at the bottom of the hill where Hanna’s employees once worked. Once the plant closed, a large portion of the town’s population had to leave to look for work. This caused a drop in enrollment in Goff’s high school, eventually leading to its close in 1966.<sup>16</sup> Goff High School consolidated with nearby Wetmore, and today the district is consolidated with Sabetha, forming USD 113 Prairie Hills. The school building was torn down in the early 1980s, and now Goff City Park stands in its place. Last to leave Goff was the Missouri Pacific Railroad.

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<sup>16</sup> Roy Bell, Interview by author. Roy and Patsy Bell home, Seneca, Kansas, December 13, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> M.J. Morgan, Research Director, “Broughton, Clay County,” *Lost Kansas Communities*, accessed December 19, 2013, <http://lostkscommunities.omeka.net/items/show/47>.

<sup>18</sup> “Kansas City Wyandotte Northwestern Railroad,” accessed December 18, 2013, [http://www.skyways.org/museums/bancroft/Railroad/KC\\_Wyandotte.html](http://www.skyways.org/museums/bancroft/Railroad/KC_Wyandotte.html)

<sup>19</sup> *Reflections of Nemaha County, Kansas*, Dallas, Texas: Curtis Media Corporation, 1992, p.111

The line was officially bought out by the Union Pacific Railroad in 1982. The new owners calculated that running through small towns like Goff was too much of an expense, so that year marked the last train through the town. By 1990, the rails were taken up, as seen in Figure 5 below.



**Figure 5.** Photograph showing the Missouri Pacific Railroad’s tracks being taken up right outside of Goff, Kansas, 1990. The only evidence left of the tracks are the raised, flattened stretches of land where the rails once lay. SOURCE: Personal collection of Roy Bell

## **Goff Today**

As of 2013, the town of Goff is still incorporated and has a running post office. The town’s bank is housed in one of Goff’s original buildings at the corner of Stahl Street and Highway 9. A new community center was built within the past decade, and there are still two working gas stations. One of the stations also serves as the town’s grocery store and body shop. The railroad depot was eventually moved and became a house. It is painted white and sits on the south end of Abbott Street, near the brome plant. Each year since 1953, the Goff Lions Club

has held a Fourth of July parade and firework show at the center of town. The event continues to draw a crowd. A profiting liquor store was built just south of the big curve on Highway 9 at the edge of town. The Goff Rural Fire Department, of which Roy Bell was the first fire chief, is still in operation as the first rural first department in the county. As stated earlier, the Henry Brothers brome plant was built at the south end of town. According to the 2010 Census, the population of Goff was 126.

## **Roy Bell**

Roy R. Bell was born on a farm four and a half miles northeast of Goff. He attended Morning Star Grade School, which was a one-room country school. Bell attended high school at Goff High School, where he graduated in 1949. He worked at White Way Garage in Goff after graduation, and following his drafting into the US Army for the Korean War. Throughout his 21-month tour, Bell earned multiple medals, including the Combat Infantryman Badge. This badge is often referred to as the most prestigious award for infantrymen, after the Medal of Honor. Bell and his wife, Patsy (Richard) were married on May 16, 1954 at Patsy's parents' farm north of Goff. The couple lived in Goff, eventually moving into the home of Goff's former doctor, who delivered both of the Bells in that very home. The couple's birth certificates hang proudly on the wall in their sitting room, framed with the doctor's bills from their delivery. "It cost \$25 for me to be born. And my parents paid with, let's see, a colt," said Bell when asked about the house's history, "Nobody had any money at the time, so they paid with other things they had."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Roy Bell, Interview by author. Roy and Patsy Bell home, Seneca, Kansas, December 13, 2013.

The Bells loved their house and its history so much, in fact, that when they decided to move to nearby Seneca, they brought their house with them. Bell's interest in history becomes apparent when asked about Goff. Over the years, Bell began to collect interviews and information about the town to try and record a history of the town. "I found out in a short time that you couldn't take people's word for it. People forget, or get confused," said Bell about his research. It was then that he began reading through newspapers, including 30 years of papers which were bound together by the editor, Ray Ingalls.<sup>18</sup> Throughout his research, people would send him pictures, which he would quickly copy, document, and send back to their owners, giving him a large collection. Eventually, Bell compiled enough information to write a book, which he titled, *Goff: The First Hundred Years*.<sup>21</sup> Among his historian and carpentry hobbies is also a love of building doll houses and scale models of real buildings, like Figure 6 and Figure 7 on the next page. The Bell home is full of these miniature structures, including models of the Morning Star Grade School and the family's home, as well as models of the homes Roy and Patsy were raised in. Each structure is filled with tiny furniture hand-made by Bell, created to look exactly like the originals. The amount of history recorded and preserved by the Bell couple far exceeded this author's expectations, and could easily provide enough information for, well, a book.

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<sup>21</sup> Bell, Roy, *Goff: The First Hundred Years*, (Holton, Kansas: Bell Graphics, 1990)



**Figure 6.** Photograph showing a scale model of the Morning Star Grade School, formerly near Goff, built by Mr. Roy Bell. Each of Bell's models sit on a turn table for multiple viewing angles and also have functioning doors, as well as trap doors in the roofs, to look into the insides of the buildings. SOURCE: Personal collection of Roy Bell



**Figure 7.** Photograph showing the student desks in Mr. Roy Bell's scale model of Morning Star Grade School. Bell constructed each desk by hand, as well as the teacher's desk and chair and blackboard, which can be seen from another angle. SOURCE: Personal collection of Roy Bell

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