

# **Oneida: Finding Roots in a Small Town**

## **Nemaha County, Kansas**

**1872–2015**



**Figure 1.** Early Main Street of Oneida, Kansas. This picture was taken at the south end of town looking north on what is now known as the Goff-Oneida road (Q road). Today the only original building still standing is the second building on the left which started out as the bank until it failed in 1929. Currently it is Oneida's Post Office. Source: Nemaha County Historical Museum.

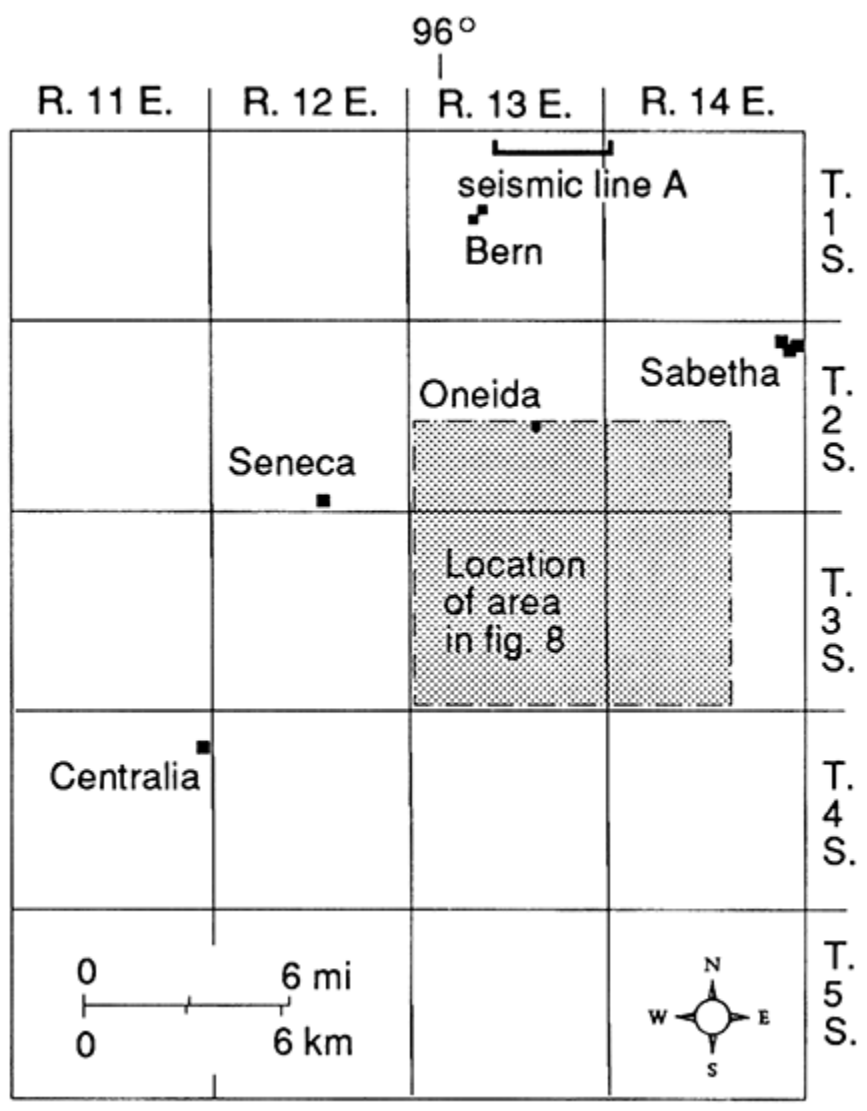
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Today in Kansas more and more ghost towns are appearing, so it's important to find your roots. I will be telling the story of Oneida, a disappearing town in Nemaha County, Kansas. This study explains the founding, growth, and decline of this small town. It includes various interviews, early plat maps of the town, and photographs of early and present day Oneida.

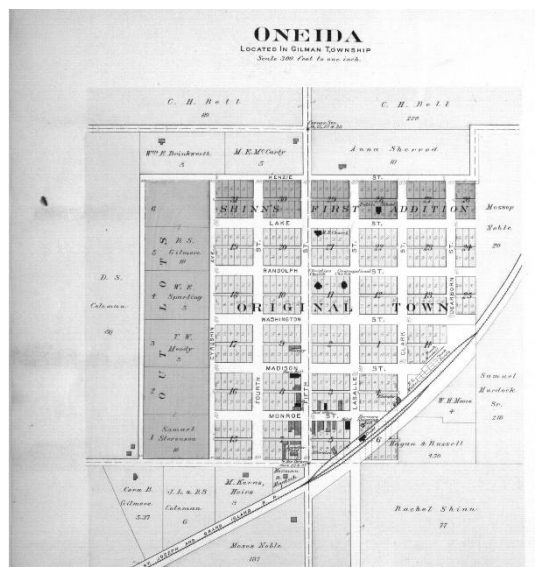
Nestled midway between two twin towns, Seneca and Sabetha, Oneida is located six miles northeast of the county seat of Seneca and 16 miles northwest of Sabetha, as seen below<sup>1</sup>.



**Figure 2.** Map of Oneida’s location between Sabetha and Seneca. Source: Kansas Geological Survey. <http://www.kgs.ku.edu/Publications/Bulletins/226/Steeples/> . 31-52

<sup>1</sup> William G. Cutler's *History of the State of Kansas in 1883* (Chicago, Illinois: A.T. Andreas, 1883).

Oneida is located in the north central portion of Nemaha County, in Gilman Township. In 1908 a town plat map revealed its layout, as shown below in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Plat map of Oneida, Kansas in 1908.  
 SOURCE: Plat Book of Nemaha County, Kansas, 1908;  
<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209442/page/25>

Thanks to the efforts of Col. Cyrus Shinn, a southerner from West Virginia, Oneida was founded in 1872 near the St. Joseph & Western Railroad. This railroad was eventually bought by the Grand Island railroad. In an election held to name the town, two choices were given. One was Oneida, the name of the existing post office, and the other was Shinntown, after Col. Cyrus Shinn. Oneida won the contest.

From its early years, Oneida was a strong patriotic town. Since there was no band in Oneida for their ten-year celebration, residents invited a brass band from the nearby community of Albany to perform. This was announced in the *Hiawatha*, Brown County newspaper on July 6, 1882: “The Albany brass band will play at Oneida tomorrow for Col. Schinn’s big celebration.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Hiawatha World*, Brown County, Kansas, July 6, 1882.

Many businesses were started in Oneida. A few would include two churches, a school, cheese factory, blacksmith shop, Land Office, an Opera House, furniture and hardware store, Hyde Park, two general stores, two drugstores, lumberyard, livery stable and a restaurant. There was only one requirement to settle in Oneida on the Shinn lots. The settlers were asked not to sell liquor or allow it to be sold on the premises. As a result of this request, there were no saloons established in Oneida and there was never a drunken brawl within the town limits. Gilman Township was the only township in Nemaha County that did not have a saloon. The cheese factory became the most famous in the county; its sales extended from St. Joseph to Denver and thrived until the cheese trust caused the other cheese factories close by to shut down. This fame for Oneida helped solidify the establishment of the town.<sup>3</sup> As of the early 1880s, Oneida's population was 163.<sup>4</sup> However, by the end of the 1880s, at least six trains were passing through the town every day, with some runs being express. The following time card from the St. Joseph & Western Railroad was printed in a Hiawatha, Brown County newspaper on July 20, 1888. "St. Joe & Grand Island Rail road timecard: 1. Daily: 1:39am, 2. Daily: 4:07pm, 3. Exs 1:14am, 4. Exs 2:44pm, 5. Exs 8:53pm, 6. Exs 7:15am at Oneida, July 20, 1888."<sup>5</sup> The rail traffic served to build the town.

With Oneida rapidly growing in population, people decided that it was time to build a public school. "Prof. I.R. Morgan went to Oneida Saturday to deliver an address at the dedication towards building and opening of a school building. His school at Sabetha commenced last Monday, September 6, 1895,"<sup>6</sup> reported the *Hiawatha World* in Brown County. A little over a year later, a major church was dedicated: "The Oneida Congregational Church will be dedicated

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<sup>3</sup> Ralph Tennal, *History of Nemaha County Kansas* (Lawrence, Kansas: Standard Publishing Company, 1916).

<sup>4</sup> William G. Cutler's *History of the State of Kansas in 1883*.

<sup>5</sup> *Hiawatha World*, Brown County, Kansas, July 20, 1888.

<sup>6</sup> *Hiawatha World*, Brown County, Kansas, September 6, 1895.

on Sunday, December 13, 1896,”<sup>7</sup> reported the newspaper. School and church buildings are signs of the growth of Oneida in this time period.

In the early part of 1906, Oneida built a baseball field. “The Sabetha baseball team is getting in motion. July 6, they will be playing at Oneida,”<sup>8</sup> reported the *Hiawatha World* on June 26, 1906. The town could now support a baseball team. Tracing the continued history of this little town through later decades reveals road and highway construction. During the 1920s the federal government decided that Kansas needed main highways. One of the first highways to be constructed was Highway 36, shown below in figure 4



**Figure 4.** Old Highway 36 curving west into Oneida. Source: Picture by Alena Pfrang.

Old Highway 36 wove its way from Sabetha through Oneida to Seneca and continued on west. This new road helped bring people to settle in Oneida and brought work to the town. After the Great Depression, Highway 36 was paved. A few years after the pavement process, pot holes

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<sup>7</sup> *Hiawatha World*, Brown County, Kansas, December 11, 1896.

<sup>8</sup> *Hiawatha World*, Brown County, Kansas June 26, 1906.

began to form on the road. People started to complain about how rough the road had become along with how long it took to drive Highway 36. My grandpa, Edward Karns Pfrang, along with other farmers who lived and drove the highway, spoke up to have Highway 36 relocated. Six years after World War II, in 1951, the government decided to move Highway 36 one half mile south of the original highway. It was going to be a straight highway instead of winding and curving. Old Highway 36 was turned into a dirt road, but it was also kept maintained and was used as a detour whenever the new highway was worked on.<sup>9</sup> See figure 5 below of new Highway 36.



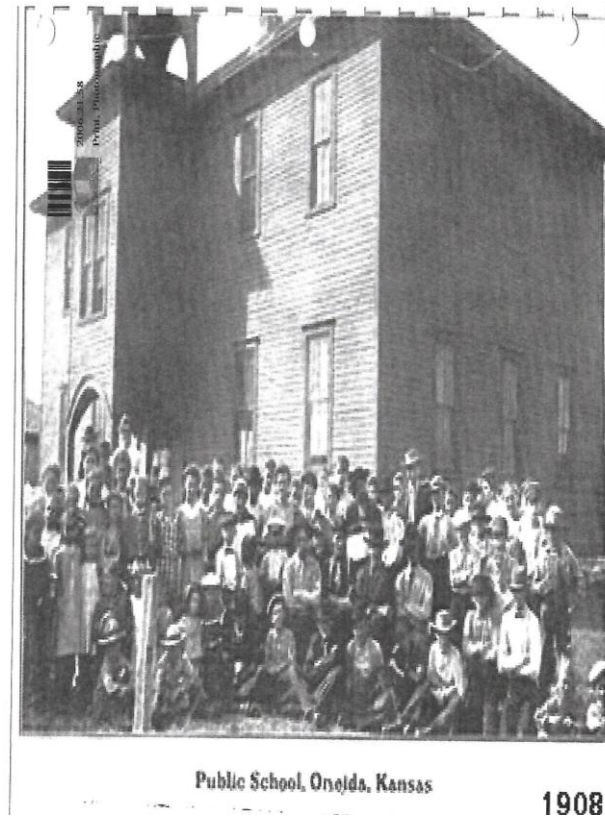
**Figure 5.** Present day Highway 36, intersecting the Goff Oneida road six miles east of Seneca.

Source: Picture taken by Nicole Pfrang

With changes in roads and highways came changes in the look of the town. As stated earlier, in the early 1900s Oneida built a public school. It was a large two story wooden sided building that held grades K-12, as seen in figure 6 on the following page.

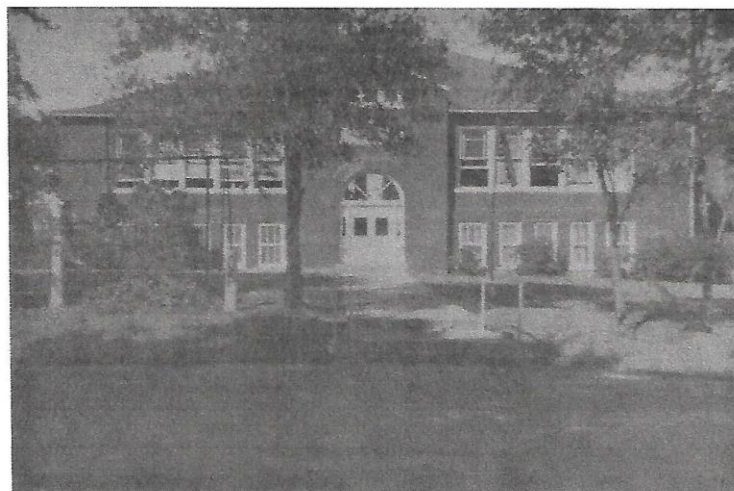
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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Doug Metzger, long-time Oneida resident, April 12, 2015.



**Figure 6.** Oneida Public School, 1908. Source: Nemaha County History Museum.

In 1917 the school was torn down and a new brick school was built in its place; see figure 7.



Oneida Grade School Building

**Figure 7.** New Oneida Public School. Source: Nemaha County History Museum. *Yearbook*

*Memories* 59-60, pg. 1.



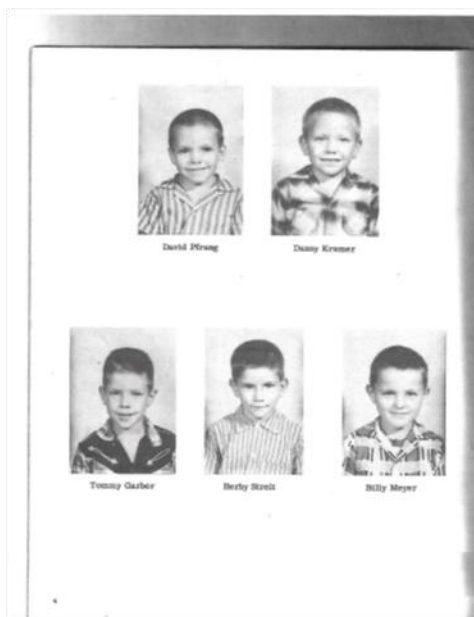
As a young boy my father and his two other siblings attended this school. The Oneida school was known for being a modern one with sports and agriculture-related classes. Their mascot was the Cardinal, and their school colors were red and white. Figure 8 is a picture of a uniform.



**Figure 8.** Oneida's old basketball uniform. Source: (L) Doug Metzger; (R) Nemaha Co. History Museum  
*Yearbook Memories* 59-60, pg. 10

As the populations and expansions of the nearby twin towns of Seneca and Sabetha grew, more and more people began driving to those towns to do their trading and buying of supplies. Being nestled in the middle of these two towns hurt Oneida's population along with its businesses. In 1961 something happened that all small towns dread. The school of Oneida, Kansas was closed down. Kansas school consolidation forced major change. All the children were sent to different schools. Figure 9 on the following page is a picture of some of the children who attended Oneida town school, including my father, David Pfrang. The children who lived in the north part of Oneida were sent to school at Bern. The children who lived on the east side of Oneida went to Sabetha, and the children from the west side went to Seneca.





**Figure 9.** Oneida School first graders in 1958. Class number was nine pupils. Source: Nemaha County History Museum, *Yearbook Memories* 59-60, pg. 4.

Despite declining population in Oneida, a summer movie theater opened in the 1940s and continued for 20 years.<sup>10</sup> This outdoor theater was one means of entertainment that my dad remembers when he was growing up. He still tells the story of when he and his siblings were young. They talked their mother into taking them to see a scary movie at the drive-in. The movie was so scary that they started crying and begged their mother to take them back home! My grandma, Eldred Lela Pfrang, refused to leave and ended up winning \$20 worth of groceries when their spot was selected for a drawing!<sup>11</sup>

Some reasons for the decline of Oneida include the fact that Oneida was located between two larger towns. The re-routing of Highway 36 also hurt the town. Both of these factors led to the final blow of the school closing. When the 2010 population census came out, Oneida had 75

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Doug Metzger, April 12, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with David Pfrang, May 2, 2015.

residents living in the town. While the Union Pacific Railroad still sends trains through Oneida, they are no longer passenger trains. Today, Oneida has only a Methodist Church, a community building, a post office, a garage sale store, and the town park, Hyde Park. The days of baseball rivalry and a small-town school basketball team have passed forever. As David Pfrang states, "When the school closed, it was just the writing on the wall of what was to come. It did not mean that much to me at my young age. But memories of Oneida baseball games, drive-in movies, and friends from grade school will be with me for a long time."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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