There But Unrecorded

Island, aka Valley City, Neosho County, Kansas 1869-1925
Tyler Beardmore

Hist 533: Lost Kansas Communities
Chapman Center for Rural Studies
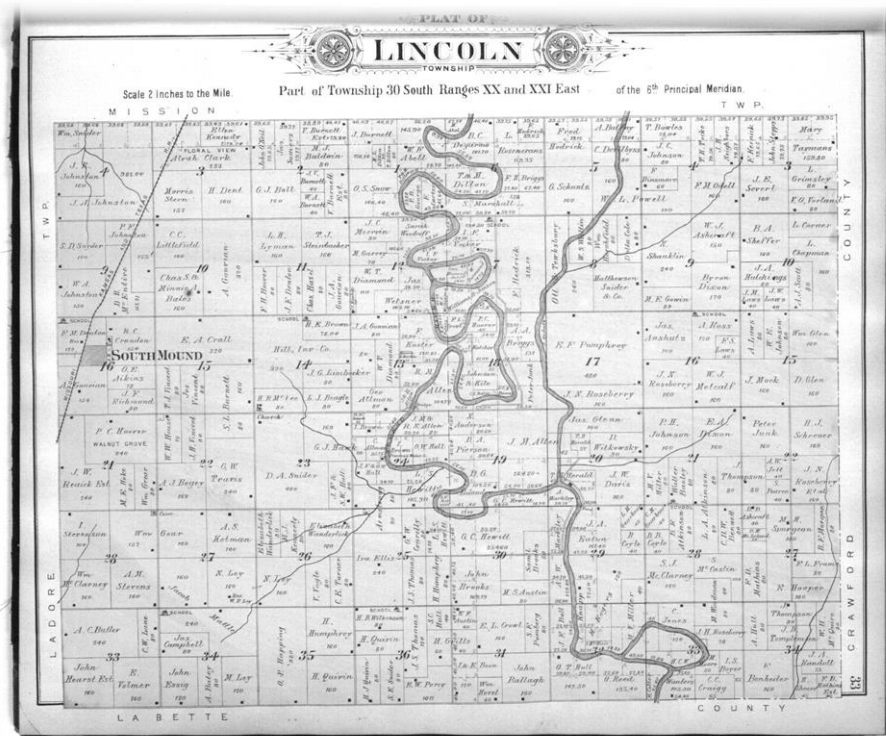Kansas State University
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Figure 1. Plat Map of Lincoln Township in Neosho County
Source: *Standard Atlas of Neosho County Kansas, 1906.*

While it may be unrecorded, Island, Lincoln Township, Neosho County, Kansas, is still talked about today. This study discusses the factors that played a role in the collapse of Island, mostly due to its location and geography. I used county histories, newspapers, and census data.

Environment-Geography

Stretching from Morris County, Kansas, to Muskogee County, Oklahoma, through its many twists and turns, the Neosho River is home to many communities, both still surviving today and disappeared. Roughly seven miles southeast of St. Paul, Kansas, and 15 miles northeast of Parsons, Kansas, the Neosho River splits, creating a unique island of land containing more than 3,000 acres, as seen below in Figure 2. Nestled on and around the island within the valley of the Neosho River once sat a small, vanished community called Island, formally known as Valley City and commonly referred to as Big Island.

Figure 2. Photograph of the outline of the island
created by the Neosho River
Source: Google Maps

While located in the valley of the Neosho River, most of the terrain is today forested upland, rising from river banks. Approximately 20 percent of the county is deemed

bottomland, with a large part of Island fitting in this category. Nearly the entire county is fertile and produces excellent crops. Native forests also line the streams and river. In 1870, Neosho County had a population of 10,206. Five years later, the population rose to 15,131. Neosho County was founded in June of 1861, and Erie was chosen as the county seat in 1864.[1]

The Unknown

While southeastern Kansas was home to many small, rural communities, many were left unrecorded, as was Island. With Island, located entirely inside the bends of a river, mobility was a major issue in the lack of records on the community; Island was known, but with the floods and lack of bridges, in wasn't an easy place to visit. The first settler of Island was a Southerner; it is evident the early community did not easily form into a surveyed town. First settlers and farmers to Island lived apart from each other. With the community being located on an island, it was easy to know who was entering, but also, hard for people to enter. Local accounts say that several bridges were built across the Neosho to Island, but there was often flooding and they washed out. With travel not being easy and Island not containing a grocery store, there was no attraction to settling in the community. Nearby towns like St. Paul and Jacksonville did have grocery stores, which drew people in; Island was no competition to them.[2] Also, with the school

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[1] Cutler, William G. "Neosho County," in *History of the State of Kansas*, Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883.
[2] *The Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory* for 1878 lists two grocery stores in Jacksonville.

closing in the early years, those who valued education and had children to educate were forced to leave.

What Was Island?

Island was first settled in 1869 by Lafayette Rogers, born in Tennessee and eventually coming to Kansas from Nebraska. Despite Rogers' high hopes, Island's largest population was roughly 40 citizens and the community was virtually nonexistent following the mid-1920s. Yet Island was one of the first, if not the first, trading points in east Lincoln township.[3] Shortly after arriving in Island, Rogers built a steam-operated sawmill and a gristmill in 1873.[4] This is the only information documenting attempts at running a mill on the Neosho near Island. It was likely destroyed by flooding. The few surviving records indicate that education and religion were both important to the Island community. In 1867, the first school, District 19, was built in Island, simply named Valley City School; the one-room school was built from logs but prior to 1867, the children of Island were taught at home. The first teacher at Island was Henry Howard and he was paid 20 dollars a month for three months; no teaching certificates were required. After only 25 years, in May of 1892, the school closed. After the first schoolhouse was built, it moved locations two times, with the final school constructed from lumber, and as is common in many frontier areas, it was also used as a church. The

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[3] Graves, W. W. (William Whites), *History of Neosho County, Volumes 1 & 2.* (St. Paul: Journal Press, 1949-1951).
[4] Federal Census of 1880.

first preacher of the church, Reverend J.P. Witt, was a Christian who was engaged to preach in July of 1888.

The post office at Island had a very up and down history, making it quite difficult to track. In July of 1867, the first post office was established with George T. Shepherd as postmaster. Then the post office changed postmasters three times until it was discontinued in October of 1869 because members of the community did not want it, so it was moved to Jacksonville, south of Island (Jacksonville is today also a lost community). The post office was reinstated in December of 1869 with John Sylvester as postmaster but was once again discontinued in September of 1871.[5] In December of the same year, it reopened and again changed postmasters three times with Parurisos H. Johnson becoming the final one in July of 1874.[6] Through the 1880s, Island was continuing to hang on as a community, because in June of 1884, a cemetery was chartered, named Valley City Cemetery. As pictured below in Figure 3, the cemetery still stands today.

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[5] Graves, W. W. (William Whites), *History of Neosho County, Volumes 1 & 2.*
[6] See "Appointments of U.S. Postmasters, 1832-1971,"ancestory.com database; http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1932. see also "Kansas Post Offices, 1828-1961," Island and Valley City, at kshs.org.

Figure 3. Photograph of the Valley City Cemetery
Source: Photograph by Tyler Beardmore, December, 2015.

While Island was a very small, mostly quiet community, it drew in many visitors. In the early 1900s, an amusement resort was built near Chanute, Kansas, which is also in Neosho County. At the resort, steamboat rides were popular, costing 10 cents per round trip from the resort to Island.[7] Tragedy struck the community in August of 1914 when Harold Cravens drowned in the river while on vacation with his aunt and uncle at a cabin in Island. Shortly after onlookers realized Cravens was under water, he came back up so people thought he was pretending to drown; tragically this was not the case.[8] With Island

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[7] "New Amusement Place," *The Sun,* August 19, 1902. https://www.newspapers.com/image/79693991/?terms=%22New%2BAmusement%2BPlace%22
[8] *"Died With Help Near."* (1914). *http://www.newspapers.com/*

being surrounded by the Neosho River, floods made a huge impact on the community's ability to survive. There were many attempts to keep the island location from flooding by building levees, but the levees would either break or the water would rise over them. For example, in December of 1902, commissioners and a surveyor met in Island to discuss a proposed levee to be built which would protect the entire north end of the island.[9] This shows there was a desire to keep the community safe from floods. Also, in May of 1915, heavy rain caused the river level to go over the levee for a distance of about a quarter of a mile. Ultimately, floods created the end of Island.

While Island was a small, resilient community for about fifty years, fate and its geography were reasons for its fall. In its time, there were no means for easy transportation across the river, as bridges washed out, and floods were nearly impossible to control. By the time of the last *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1912*, neither Island nor Valley City appear. Today, all that remains is the cemetery; however, the area is still referred to as "The Island." It is now nationally known as excellent hunting land; but with just a little rain, it continues to flood today. While Island was largely unrecorded, locals today still know it was there.

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[9] "Some County Gossip." *The Chanute Daily Tribune*, December 20, 1902. https://www.newspapers.com/image/58363282/?terms=%22Some%2BCounty%2BGossip

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