

CHAPMAN CENTER FOR RURAL STUDIES, FALL, 2013

# Neighborville: Where the Streets Have No Name

---

Calvert, formerly known as Neighborville, Norton  
County, Kansas 1872-1888

**Jennifer L Milnes**

**12/19/2013**

**Chapman Center for Rural Studies**

I chose to write about this town to show that a town can persist as long as the people stay connected. The history is still among us, we just have to dig a little deeper sometimes. By talking and networking in surrounding communities, I was able to find out more about this persistent town than I thought was possible. My study includes maps, personal photographs, and information collected through informal interviews.

## Neighborville: Where the Streets have No Name

What do the terms postmaster, Bieber, and unincorporated have in common? All three represent a piece of history of Neighborville, a tiny town in Emmett Township of northeastern Norton County, Kansas. It sounds like an extremely friendly town, right? Whenever you can find someone, it sure is! Visualize yourself for a moment traveling across the Great Plains of western Kansas in the early 1870s looking for a place to call home. You never know from one day to the next if the temperature is going to rise or fall 10 or 20 degrees, or if the wind is going to be gusting 30 miles per hour, or perhaps you get lucky and it will be a calm day out on the prairies. Maybe it was a mild winter day when Charles Bieber and his family came across the land that is now present day Calvert and he thought to himself, “This would be a wonderful climate for farming!” There is a saying most Kansans are familiar with that goes, “If you don’t like the weather, wait 10 minutes. It will change.” And from experience, this saying holds true.

First settled in 1872 by Charles Bieber, Neighborville, Kansas survived as a town for 16 years.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, it was platted on 16 January 1888 as Calvert, Kansas and the population as of 2013...approximately 16 in the immediate vicinity. If you are fortunate enough to find a resident to talk to it means they are either finished farming for the day or they are home from one of the surrounding towns. The Norton County seat, Norton, rests six miles to the west of Calvert on US Highway 36. Heading five miles northeast of Calvert along Kansas Highway 383 you will run through the south end of Almena. Means of survival of the quaint town of Calvert rely greatly on the facts that over 100 years after the initial mining began, there are still shipments from the silica mines that are loaded and sent out monthly by train, and a few of the families that remain here still farm the surrounding land.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ancestry.com <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ksncgs2/Towns/calvert.htm>



Figure 1. Platted map of Calvert, Kansas and surrounding areas circa late 1880s. Source: Almena Centennial History book. Map is late 1880s or early 1890s due to Seth being platted in 1887 and Neighborville being platted as Calvert in 1888 when the railways were building through the area.

Neighborville was settled less than a mile south of Prairie Dog Creek which winds its way through five counties of Northwest Kansas and into Nebraska.<sup>2</sup> This creek helped supply water for timber and vegetation in the surrounding areas and kept this typically drier part of the state fertile enough to support local farms. Imagine trying to maintain crops with the use of a small creek and an average rainfall for the entire county of Norton between 20 to 22 inches per year!<sup>3</sup> With only scattered rolling hills and trees winding their paths along the creek, a majority of the area appears relatively flat to the average passerby. However, this town was placed on the north end of a small hill that falls between what is now US Highway 36 and Kansas Highway 383. As the town started to grow and settlers farmed more land, the town expanded north of

<sup>2</sup> Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. Pg. 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 4

Highway 383 and farm land also took over the east and west ends of the original settlement. Only four residences are what remain of the properties directly north of the highway, today considered Calvert.

From the beginning of its origins, Neighborville has always had a strong sense of family bonds. Charles and wife, Eliza, were born in Pennsylvania and Ohio, respectively. Before moving on to Kansas, they resided in Indiana where their sons were born.<sup>4</sup> Three short years after establishing their place of residence in Neighborville, Charles named Abraham Bieber postmaster for the town in 1875. Unfortunately Mr. Abraham Bieber passed away before taking his commission as the postmaster. He is buried in a small family plot on the south end of the family's piece of land. Although the fence has seen better days and weeds have overtaken much of it, the family gravesite still remains on the south end of the Bieber lot at present. After Abraham passed, Charles took over duties as postmaster for the next eight years.<sup>5</sup>

As luck would have it, I was driving through the town to snap a few pictures, and good fortune was on my side that day. I saw someone outside hanging Christmas lights! When stopping to see if this lady knew any history of the town, she initially said no, but that she had a picture overlooking the town in the early 1900s. As we continued our talk she told me she grew up in Calvert and had recently moved back. Growing up here, there were still descendants of the Bieber family who resided across the dirt road from her family. The Bieber property still had a sod house on one of the lots that Mr. Bieber had built a barn around this soddie to protect it from the elements. Apparently he would let people in the barn to tour the old, run down house but he was selective of whom he allowed in. Donna Jones, the Calvert resident whom I stopped to chat

---

<sup>4</sup> Kansas State Census. March 1, 1885. Emmett Township.

<sup>5</sup> F.M. Lockard. *History of Norton County*. Pg. 6, 7. Courtesy of Sharon Schultze.

with, said that as a child her siblings would go in and look at the ‘soddie’ but that she always opted out of the opportunity. At some point after *this* Mr. Bieber had passed away, and unfortunately, his wife had the barn and soddie torn down.<sup>6</sup> According to Ms. Jones, there is still one family of Bieber descendants that also own a house on the north end of their family property in Calvert. They return only a few times a year.



Figure 2. Photograph of Abraham Bieber family plot looking west toward Calvert, December 1, 2013. Photograph by author. The white house toward the right center of the photograph is still the property of another Bieber descendant.

---

<sup>6</sup> Donna Jones. Informal interview, Dec. 1, 2013, Calvert, Kansas.

To the south end of the town, starting up the hill, begin the silica mines. Volcanic ash was not discovered here until 1900; mining began shortly after. Owned by the Miller family of Norton, Kansas, Jasper Miller mined the volcanic ash in the teens.<sup>7</sup> Freight cars from the railways that run parallel along the north side of the highway are still used to this day to export the ash. Although mining has slowed significantly, the dilapidated train depot still functions for the shipments about once a month or slightly more infrequently than that.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 3. Miners loading silica for shipment at Calvert Mine. Photograph taken in 1912. Source: “From a Covered Wagon Ride to Community Pride” Norton Centennial.

---

<sup>7</sup> Norton Centennial. “From a Covered Wagon Ride to Community Pride”. Pg. 150

<sup>8</sup> Donna Jones. Informal interview, Dec. 1, 2013, Calvert, Kansas.

At the time the Chicago, Burlington, Quincy and the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific railroad companies were building through Norton County is when it was decided that Neighborville would change its name to Calvert. In 1888, Calvert was platted for the first time after 16 years of previous existence as Neighborville.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Neighborville ceased to exist. This would have been approximately the same time that School District No. 9 probably changed its name from Bieber School house to the Calvert school house. It is marked in the platted map in Figure 1, but the newest structure still exists in its original location. Nearly four decades ago the closed down school house was converted to a home of residence. I know this all too well because it is the house I grew up in.



Figure 4. Formerly known as the Calvert School house, now a private residence. Photograph taken September 8, 2013. By author.

---

<sup>9</sup> Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. Pg. 36

Growing up here, there were several occasions when random people would stop by on the weekend and ask for a tour because it was where they went to grammar school. There have been stories of the original wooden structure burning down so the school was rebuilt out of red brick. It caught fire a second time as well. Some 10 to 15 years ago, two ladies who reside in Colorado now stopped by for a tour. They said, as children, the school caught fire and the students had to help in the rebuilding process by scrubbing the soot from the bricks so that they were red again. In either the 1950s or 1960s, the school finally closed its doors and consolidated with the Almena school district.

As you can see, there are numerous factors affecting the end of Neighborville and the beginning of Calvert. From creeks and weather helping determine the settling of the slightly rolling hills of western Kansas to the introduction of railroads and discovery of volcanic ash, these factors helped determine the outcome of this tiny town. Had it not been for the mines or railways, it is quite possible that this town would not even exist today as an unincorporated town. Family persistence is unmistakable: in the 141 years after the foundation of Neighborville, there are still residents of the Bieber family living nearby. It may be impossible to find the exact reason why Charles Bieber chose this exact location to settle in 1872, but several of the shaping factors are still evident today.



## Bibliography

Ancestry.com. Accessed November 29, 2013.

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ksncgs2/Towns/calvert.htm>

“From a Covered Wagon Ride to Community Pride.” *Norton Centennial*. 1872-1972.

Jones, Donna. Informal interview by Jennifer Milnes. December 1, 2013.

Kansas State Census of 1885. Norton County Historical Society, Norton, Kansas.

Lockard, F. M., *History of Norton County*. May 1967.

Socolofsky, Homer E., and Self, Huber. *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.