

# Rayville, a Town that Could Not Last: Environment, Timing, and Transportation



Figure 1 Where Rayville once stood. Photo by Hannah Hutchinson, present day.

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This study examines the town of Rayville in Almena Township, Norton County, Kansas. It lasted from 1885 to 1902. By networking with surrounding communities and research at Norton Historic Society I could find more about this small community than I thought existed. My study includes maps, atlases, newspaper articles, personal photographs, and field work.

## Rayville: The Early Years

Imagine looking for a new place to call home with all the necessary resources to support your community and family, including water and land. The town you find is surrounded by tall prairie grass, a creek, and rolling Kansas hills. This is Rayville, a tiny town in Almena Township, Norton County, settled in 1885 by Dutch immigrants.<sup>1</sup> Rayville was settled twenty-five miles northeast of Norton and eight miles northeast of Almena on the Kansas-Nebraska line. During the late 1880s, settlers moved west looking for a new life and new opportunities. Three factors a town needs to survive are the right environment, proper timing, and reliable transportation. Regrettably, Rayville did not possess these characteristics and quickly disappeared.

During Rayville's seventeen years of existence, a nearby water source supplied the community. This was a contributing factor in the choice of settlement location. The water source is named the Prairie Dog Creek on the Kansas side and the Republican River on the Nebraska side.<sup>2</sup> Raysville's location can be found eight miles northeast of Almena, off Highway 383 and north on Rd 13. Today the address is off Road A on the Nebraska border. According to Melvin Bruntzel's, *Quick Reference to Kansas* there is nothing left of the town though the residents once had a general store, a millinery store, blacksmith shop, and a drug store (the latter on the Nebraska side).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Kansas Memory," <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/200086/page/851>.

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

<sup>3</sup> Melvin D. Bruntzel, "Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost—Found—Missing, Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths," *Quick Reference to Kansas*, <https://kansasquickref.omeka.net/items/show/1>.



Figure 2: Raysville, Kansas, looking west off 1300 Rd. Photo by Hannah Hutchinson, November 26, 2017.

### **Deciphering Rayville's History**

The United States Postal Service played a significant role in the expansive growth of the nation. Local newspapers were closely connected to the postal delivery system and provided updates about changes in the postal system. The newspapers allowed me to construct a timeline of the post office in Rayville, including post master changes, and office openings and closings. The newspaper *The Manhattan Nationalist* on April 24, 1885, provided a record under "*Post Office Changes*" in Kansas; a post office was established in Rayville, Norton County, and the first postmaster was George W. Rhanny.<sup>4</sup> Newspapers also provide a record of life in

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<sup>4</sup> "Kansas State News." *The Manhattan Nationalist*, Manhattan, KS, April 24, 1885.

Rayville. The September 8, 1887 edition of *The Logan Republican* records a roster of soldiers, including one with a home address in Rayville.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 3: Rayville, Kansas now a part of Long Island, Kansas. Photo by Hannah Hutchinson, November 26, 2017.

I have dated the beginning and ending of Rayville based on the life of the post office however the town of Rayville still lives on in the memory of residents of Alma. This area of Kansas gained my interest because my mother grew up in Alma, and my uncle currently owns Alma State Bank and resides in Alma. Teresa Chandler, who also grew up in Alma, described how her mother talked about small towns consolidating schools early 1920s, because of the failure of small town businesses.<sup>6</sup> Rayville did not last even that long. In 1902, the Rayville post office was discontinued and the citizens started to pick their mail up in Alma. By

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<sup>5</sup> "Republican Supplement." *The Logan Republican*, Logan, KS, September 8, 1887.

<sup>6</sup> Teresa Chandler, interview by Hannah Hutchinson, December 3, 2017.

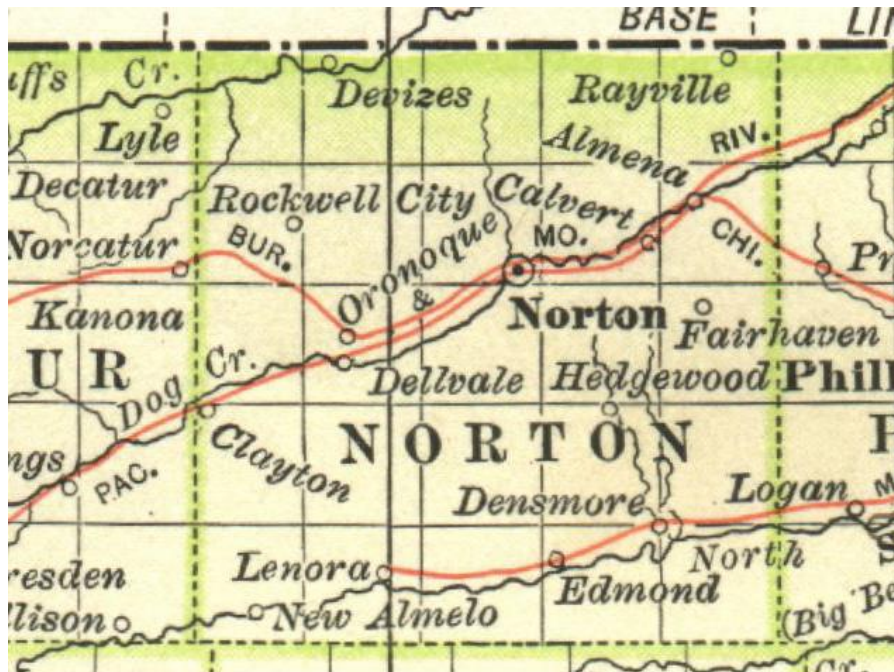


1929 there was no trace left of Rayville; the location of the former town is now a part of Long Island, Kansas.



Figure 4: Rock Island and Burlington Railroads. Photo by Hannah Hutchinson, November 26, 2017.

### Location within Norton County



## **Conclusion**

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, railroads became the center of the United States economy and transportation. Rayville was founded at the height of the railroad boom but was not established along the railroad lines. Because of the location, Rayville could not grow like towns closer to railroads. There are no records explaining the exact downfall of this small Dutch town; it just ceased to exist. Although Rayville had American spirit as indicated by its military involvement and the important businesses to sustain growth, it lacked the three factors needed for successful community. There was nothing in its environment to attract new settlers. The town disappeared before the automobile and baby boom of the post-World War II era could have increased the population. The town was not established with easy access to the transportation methods that did exist at the time. Based on my research the lack of these important factors led to businesses and schools closing and, finally to the decrease in population and end of the town.

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