

**Lost in the Sands of Time:
Elbow Community, Blue Township, Pottawatomie, Ks**

1864-1928

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Defining a Community

Precisely what defines a community? Is it based on location? And if so, what locations and how big are the areas? Is it based on common beliefs or practices? Certainly we know what towns and cities are. But how does one classify an area in which there are no post offices, white-picket fences, or Main Street? Where the nearest neighbor is a half-hour long walk.

Often, they are referred to as “areas” or “townships”, but these terms are amorphous, they lack any real meaning or accuracy. A township has geographical classifications as well as civil classification. In every state in America there are counties, and in every county there are Survey Townships. Townships, in the more colloquially understood sense, are areas that are defined as “units of local government”. These are called Civil Townships. However, in recent years there has been discussion on what to call an area that is smaller, or less organized, than a town or township. These are often denoted as “communities”. But what is a community?

Of the many definitions of community, the most accurate one from Dictionary.com defines community as “a social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government, and often have a common cultural and historical heritage.”¹ The “often share a common cultural and historical heritage” portion of that definition is key to defining what a community is compared to a town or city. Community is precisely what defines the lost community of Elbow Creek. Elbow Creek of Blue Township in Pottawatomie Kansas is in the truest sense of the word, “lost”.

Unlike the uncountable towns throughout the history of the United States, communities are

1 Dictionary.com, “Community,” *Dictionary.com Unabridged* (Random House, Inc.), accessed December 5, 2010, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/community>.

estranged from the normal. These phenomena are more rare than they are common. Settlement was often (but not always) centered for viability and persistence. In a town or early settlement, farms were often laid out one after another with a road passing nearby. Communities like Elbow were often different.

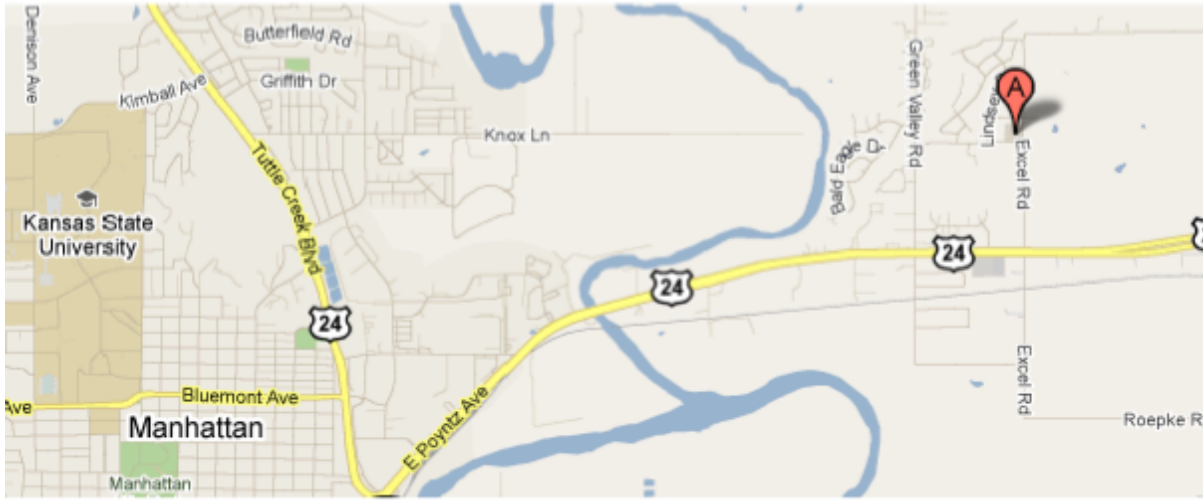


Figure 1. Map denoting the location and distance of the lost Community Elbow Creek in Pottawatomie County from Manhattan Kansas. Circa Current Day.
SOURCE: Google Maps “St. Patrick Cemetery Manhattan KS”.

The Elbow Creek Community in Blue Township, Pottawatomie County, resided approximately five miles from Manhattan, Kansas near the border between Riley County and Pottawatomie County. Point “A” in Figure 1 represents the approximate location of the Elbow Community. Elbow was “settled” in the 1860's, and would officially die with the abandonment of the St. Patrick Church in 1928. The abandonment of St. Patrick's was not one of the reasons for its death, but it signified the end of the community.²

It is infrequent that a town or township, or in this case community, disappears for one reason.

² Emil C. Fischer, *Churches of Manhattan and Vicinity*, Manhattan Area Bicentennial Commission (Topeka, Kansas: Graphic Arts Inc., 1975), 38.

Elbow's demise was multilayered, unlike Broughton in Clay Center, Kansas, which was demolished due to the extreme risk of flooding and endangering lives. Elbow died due to its close proximity to Manhattan with a trickling out of population, and Highway 24.

Although Figure 1 is current day, it tells an interesting story. Being only five miles Manhattan, the Elbow Community was well within the area of what is sometimes referred to as the “One Day of Travel Rule”. Towns and communities will usually persist due to being within ten miles of one another, or one full day of travel to and from. The advent of the automobile would eventually change this model.

Town

early Elbow Township. as well as running community. C. Ekart, *St. (Manhattan, Genealogy*

earliest settlement

Community.

settlers of Elbow was the Dempsy family³. The majority of the settlers in the Elbow Community were Irish Catholic. These families moved to Kansas due to the potato famine in Ireland.⁴ St. Patrick's, an



Settlement and History

Figure 2. This is an sketching of the Community in Blue Note the Blue River the Elbow Creek through the SOURCE: Sylvester Patrick on the Elbo KS: Riley County Center), 332.

The 1860s is the known of the Elbow

One of the first

³ Sylvester C. Ekart, *The Elbow Community and Blue Township* (Manhattan, KS: Riley County Genealogy Center, March 2010) , accessed December 8, 2010.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

Irish Catholic Church built in 1864, helps to date its founding.⁵ According to Emil Fischer's record of St. Patrick's Church, it was built in 1864 by Irish Catholics. This is confirmed by two other references. The first being that the 1878 Biennial reports that Pottawatomie County had three Roman Catholic churches in 1878 with St. Patrick's being included in this report.⁶ Then, in *William G. Cutler's History of the State of Kansas*, it is confirmed under Blue Township that, "On Elbow Creek, in this township, is a neat church building erected by the Catholics, situated near the dwelling of Mr. Richard Sheehan, one of its most earnest patrons."⁷ According to an Ancestry.com search, there was a Richard Sheehan who lived and died in Blue Township in Pottawatomie, Kansas from 1855-1925⁸. This is most likely the Richard Sheehan mentioned in *Cutler's History of the State of Kansas*. His age seems appropriate, and the above reference seems to be about the rebuilding of the church some years later. Since St. Patrick is one of three Catholic churches during this time period, and the only Catholic church mentioned on Elbow Creek, this is the exact location of the lost Elbow Community.

Elbow Creek is referenced in three separate ways. The first is "Elbow Creek". This was spelled exactly as Elbow Creek in Pottawatomie County newspaper, *The Recorder*.⁹ This also appears the same way in *Cutler's History of the State of Kansas*.¹⁰ However in *Churches of Manhattan and Vicinity*, it is listed as Elbo, omitting both the "w" as well as "Creek".¹¹ Sylvester Ekart lists the Elbow Creek area as

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶ Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *First Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture to the Legislature of the State of Kansas, for the Years 1877-8* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., Printers and Engravers, 1878), accessed Blue Skyways: KSGenWeb Project Version on December 1, 2010, <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1878/pottawatomie.shtml>.

⁷ William G. Cutler, "Other Towns and Villages," in *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883), accessed December 4, 2010, http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/pottawatomie/pottawatomie-co-p8.html#OTHER_TOWNS.

⁸ Ancestry.com, "Richard Sheehan," accessed December 8, 2010, http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?gl=ROOT_CATEGORY&rank=1&new=1&so=3&MSAV=0&msT=1&qid=1fe50a96039b435bafd2f78167a9a0a0&gss=ms_f-2_s&gsfn=Richard&gsln=Sheehan&mswpn__ftp=Pottawatomie+County,+KS&uidh=000&=y&=0.

⁹ "County Correspondence," *The Recorder*, April 26, 1906, Section E.

¹⁰ Cutler, "Other Towns and Villages."

¹¹ Fischer, *Churches of Manhattan and Vicinity*, 38.

Elbo Community.¹² Each name describes the same place regardless of omission of letters or words.



Figure 3. A sketch of St. Patrick's Church in Elbow Creek in Blue Township in Pottawatomie County. Note the proximity of the cemetery to the church suggesting the cemetery was directly next to the church. Circa 1890's. Source: Emil Fischer's *Churches of Manhattan and Vicinity*. Manhattan Historical Museum.

The St. Patrick's history is an interesting one. As previously stated, St. Patrick's was built in 1864, sometime shortly after the area was settled. Built by Irish Catholic's¹³, the church was initially a wood structure. However, in 1883 the church was demolished and then rebuilt as a stone structure. According to records, in 1886, one of the higher years of population for the Elbow Community, seventy families were attending church. The information suggests that the Elbow Community was larger than

¹² Ekart, *The Elbow Community and Blue Township*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

initially anticipated.¹⁴ This is depicted as such in the picture above. Then in 1907, St. Patrick's roof was struck by lightning and caught on fire. The church burned down and was rebuilt, and was in use until it was officially abandoned in 1928. In 1939, St Joseph's Church in Flush purchased the remaining wood and stone of St. Patrick's Church for additions and repairs¹⁵. The cemetery remains intact.

As previously mentioned before, the Dempsy family was one of the first families in the Elbow Community. Margret Dempsy, who was an Irish Catholic, was born in Ireland in 1793. She and her family moved to Kansas because of the potato famine in Ireland.

The name of Elbow Creek has a rather interesting if not confusing past. Elbow takes its namesake from Elbow Creek, which is sometimes but rarely referred to as Elbo Creek. Elbow Creek feeds into the Big Blue River. Whether or not the settlers of the Elbow Community chose the name Elbow Creek, or it was given to them to describe their geographical location seems to be uncertain.

Mrs. Wilkerson from the Rock Creek Valley Historical Society stated that, "I have never heard of Elbow Creek, but I have heard of Elbo Lake, that must be where this newspaper correspondence [*The Recorder*] was from."¹⁶ As it turns out however, that is not the case. Elbo Lake is a man-made reservoir. It was created in 1949 and is a private lake. Its current size is a good indicator that Elbow Creek was not particularly large.¹⁷ Rather, the actual location of the community is seen in Figure 1 from above. An Ancestry.com search showed that the few inhabitants of "Elbow Community" are listed as either deceased, or that they have married and moved away.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵ Ekart, *The Elbow Community and Blue Township.*, 9.

¹⁶ Nola Wilkerson, interview by Josh Beauchaine, Rock Creek Valley Historical Society, Westmoreland, KS, September 2, 2010.

¹⁷ FindLakes.com, "Lake Lake Elbo Club, Inc., northeast Kansas," accessed December 4, 2010, http://findlakes.com/lake_lake_elbo_club_inc_kansas-ks02061.htm.

What made Elbow an interesting community was that any news that dealt with residents was big news. One correspondence from *The Recorder* in Pottawatomie County is particularly interesting. Interesting not because it was exciting, but it described the close-knit community despite the lack of a town, such as “Fred Baird spent Sunday with his sister Mrs. Ed in Manhattan visiting Charles Butler of the Young Brothers.” Correspondences like this were common throughout smaller towns and communities. In some small towns like Fredonia in Wilson County, Kansas, similar articles sometimes still appear in the newspapers.

The Death of Elbow Creek

St. Patrick's closed in 1928, just one year before the stock market crash. The community did not die because of the church's closing, rather the church closed due to “significant decline in population” according to *Churches of Manhattan and Vicinity*. What killed Elbow was a combination of two factors: a close proximity to Manhattan with a trickling out of population, and Highway 24.

The ironic aspect of Elbow Creek was that one of the factors in its settlement would also partially be the reason why it became a “lost town”. As mentioned previously, Elbow lays five miles from Manhattan. Manhattan, which was settled in 1855, was roughly nine years prior to the building of St. Patrick's. If the church followed the trend of previous settlements, and arose shortly after the main settlement waves, then St. Patrick's could not have been built more than a few years after settlement. Manhattan's location would seem logical to be how and why that specific location was settled. As it would turn out however, Manhattan was not the reason for settlement. It was actually Fort Riley in Riley County. Throughout Kansas settlement history, locations were chosen often to their close proximity to carrying-trade routes as well as forts. The early settlers of Elbow, and much of the areas surrounding Fort Riley were homesteaders. In Elbow Creek's case, it led to the founding of a

community, rather than a town. According to Ekart’s book, *The Elbow Community and Blue Township*, “Fort Riley hastened the settlement of Elbo Community and surrounding areas”.¹⁸

It is also likely that as Pottawatomie County was being settled, the proximity of Manhattan was a more attractive idea. This seems to ring true when looking at the census data for both 1870 and 1880.

POPULATION-FEDERAL CENSUS.

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Belvue Township.....      1870  1880
Blue Township.....         ....  734
Blue Valley Township.     ....  742
Center Township.....       ....  681
Clear Creek Township.     ....  509
Emmet Township.....        ....  657
Greene Township.....       ....  522
Lincoln Township.....      ....  504
Lone Tree Township...     ....  459

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Table 1. The table is an excerpt from census data. This does not include all of the townships in Pottawatomie. Note that Blue Township is the important statistic as well as the lack of settlement in other townships. SOURCE: William G. Cutler, “Population,” in *History of the State of Kansas*.¹⁹

This table denotes two very important statistics. The first is the lack of settlement in other townships. Since Blue Township is one of the oldest townships, then it is logical that Elbow was one of the first settled areas in Pottawatomie. Again, it seems logical that people in Elbow would have settled closely to Manhattan if it were one of the first townships. The second statistic is the 200 person growth in Blue Township in ten years. Again, Manhattan's location seems the logical reason why. As people

¹⁸ Ekart, *The Elbow Community and Blue Township*, 40-50.

¹⁹ William G. Cutler, “Population,” in *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1883), accessed December 4, 2010, http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/pottawatomie/pottawatomie-cop1.html#MAP_AND_POPULATION.

began to move to the Manhattan area, farmers would have gone outside of the town. This is also what led to its decline added by the slow burn, or trickling out of population. With less of a reason to settle near Elbow Creek, it stumped the population growth. Manhattan's larger size and close location slowed the growth of Elbow Creek as it became increasingly irrelevant.

This was also compounded by the building of Highway 24 outside of Manhattan. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the manufacturing of the Model T car. Because Kansas had the most cars per capita for farmers than any other state in the Union, the car in Kansas reduced the need for people to live farther away, and began to increase moving toward larger centers of population. For Elbow Creek, this was Manhattan.

As the loss in population grew, Manhattan began to absorb more and more of Elbow Creek. Today, what was left of Elbow Creek has now been absorbed into Manhattan. The St. Patrick Cemetery still remains, but the church is gone. Figure 4 below shows mostly new gravestones as well as a beautiful photo of the Dempsey family gravestone. Some older gravestones prior to the 1930s still exist, but they are in the minority. The photo also shows some houses around the cemetery. That area is now



all new development, with no sign of what once was Elbow. Elbow Community is lost, but not forgotten.

Figure 4. A photograph of the Dempsy family gravestones. They remain among the first to be buried, and one of the oldest families in the Elbow Community. Source: Photograph taken by author.

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[+ks&aq=&sll=39.193283,-96.577549&sspn=0.035322,0.090895&ie=UTF8&hq=st+patrick](#)

[+cemetery&hnear=Manhattan,+Riley.](#)

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