

Flushed Away by Rail: Flush, Pottawatomie County, Kansas, 1854-1914

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Lost Kansas Communities

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This paper explores the effects of transportation on the community of Flush, Pottawatomie, County, Kansas from 1854 to 1914. The paper will demonstrate how transportation was related to the rise and fall of Flush. It utilizes books, interviews, Platt maps, and websites.

A Chance at a better life away from “famine, depression, and heavy taxation”¹ is what six settlers from Grossheubach, Germany dreamed of when they initially settled in the Rock Creek Valley. They had received letters advertising affordable land in Kansas.² They would eventually found the town of Flush in Pottawatomie County Kansas, in the northeastern corner of the state. As they neared the townsite, the six men would make their way through waist-high bluestem prairie grass,³ a tall and thick grass resembling wheat. The date of their arrival was on Thursday, August 24, 1854.⁴ The location was chosen for many reasons. One was that its fertile valley plains were next to bubbling creeks but far from flooding rivers, which had been a problem in Grossheubach.⁵ The second was that the area had a Catholic influence, St. Mary’s Indian Mission.⁶ The third was that they wanted to settle far enough into Kansas to be away from the violence and fighting near the Kansas and Missouri border.⁷ As Flush’s most distinguished resident, the Reverend J.E. Biehler states, the “timber grew dense along the creeks”⁸ and that was exactly what the settlers needed to get their homesteads underway.

¹ Ball Kloppe Geradine, *Progress and Decline Amidst Adversity: A History of St. Joseph’s Parish, Flush, Kansas, 1854-1998* (Manhattan, Kansas: Kansas State University, 1998), 13.

² Ibid, 16

³ Socolofsky, Homer E, and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, (1988)

⁴ Biehler J.E. Rev, *100 Years in Rock Creek Valley: A history of St. Joseph Parish at Flush, KS* (Topeka, KS: Capital OK Printing Inc, 1973), 13

⁵ Ball 23

⁶ Ibid, 23

⁷ Biehler, 39

⁸ Biehler 26

Five of the first six people of Flush traveled with their families via ship from Germany to the port of New Orleans, Louisiana.⁹ Their willingness to be mobile and adapt with the current modes of transportation was what brought them to the area. Unfortunately, as will be evidenced, the town of Flush failed to grow and persist because of an inability to continually adjust to current transportation. Flush grew from an initial six brave settlers to a town that showed great promise, thriving from its determination and faith but eventually falling just shy of reaching its objectives. Flush found it difficult to adapt quickly to the rapid new forms of transportation.

German settlers by the surnames of Dekat, Floersch, Repp, Noll, and Ebert landed in New Orleans, then traveled up the Mississippi to the Missouri river and headed west to Weston, Missouri and Leavenworth, Kansas.¹⁰ We know for certain that Michael Floersch “boarded the Queen Victoria, at the port of LeHavre, France” and “the ship's passenger list documents the ship's arrival at the Port of New Orleans on 10 July, 1843, with Johann, his wife, and 7 children”.¹¹ The family acquired land in Weston, which served as a supply station and starting point for immigrants seeking farm lands”¹² They lived there as a complete family unit until 1854 when Michael Floersch went ahead of them to their new homestead in Kansas.¹³ Floersch and the four other German settlers met up with a

⁹ Ball 16

¹⁰ Ball 23

¹¹ “Michael Floersch,” Tom & Carolyn Ward, last modified 2006. <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1918ks/biof/floersmNotes.html>.

¹² Ball 16

¹³ “Michael Floersch”

fellow German who was working for the U.S. government driving wagons from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Riley; that man was Henry Haid. This kind of group travel while others are left behind would become a theme for the early inhabitants of the community.

The routes they took while leaving their German homeland would be the most advanced travel they encountered for many years to come, The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act opened up land for them to settle, and with the help of Haid, they followed the old military road by an oxen team.¹⁴ They “crossed the Vermillion River and followed the Pottawatomie Indian Trail northwest”;¹⁵ eventually all party members settled in Rock Creek Valley within a mile of each other.¹⁶ Thus began the cultivation of the Flush community. The settlers built meager dwellings to last themselves through the winter; then they could head back to Weston and Leavenworth for their families in 1855.¹⁷ Five of them departed via oxen team for their families and provisions, leaving Repp behind with food and a gun.¹⁸ The party was gone, and Michael Repp found he had no ammunition’ he was forced to bluff away a group of Indians with the weapon.¹⁹ The trip required at least one week each way²⁰ and Repp was down to a few coffee grains upon

¹⁴ Biehler 27

¹⁵ Ball 22

¹⁶ Ibid, 24

¹⁷ Biehler 27

¹⁸ Ibid, 27

¹⁹ Ibid, 27

²⁰ Ibid, 36

their return.²¹ These settlers may have saved much time and trouble if they owned horses, but at this time horses were much more expensive and required more upkeep than an oxen team. The early settlers of Flush needed to save every last penny and were both forced and determined to sacrifice time and safety to further their settlement.

On their journey to Weston, the team passed over the Louis Vieux Bridge along the Oregon Trail near the Vermillion trail in Pottawatomie County.²² Vieux, who was a Pottawatomie Indian with French ancestry, ran a toll bridge. We know that at times he had 500 patrons a day²³ on this road so the travelers were relatively safe from being stranded on their journey. This kind of determination and sacrifice of the group as a whole would connect them to their surrounding community, especially the Catholic community, for the next fifty years.

Much of the traveling these devout Catholic Germans did was with a religious purpose early on. The only way for the Flush community to have access to Mass was to set out for Saint Mary's Indian Mission. The priests in that area were to care for the Indians, but others were more than welcome join if they could make the journey.²⁴ The impressive thing about this is that they would *walk* across the broad prairies because they had no horses, and taking an oxen team took just as long as walking.²⁵ This seems to have

²¹ *Ibid*

²² "Louis Vieux" Bob Walter, Last modified January 30, 2011. <http://www.skyways.org/history/vieux2.html>.

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ "History of St. Joseph Church Flush, Kansas" Father Tom Hesse, Last modified September, 2000.

²⁵ Biehler 32

built pride in the community by unifying them in faith by hardship. I think that this point in Flush history put an indelible stamp on the area; making it devoutly Catholic through tribulation would help its growth. The tightness of community was strengthened through shared travels and encouraged other Germans Catholics to the area.

By 1857 Father Lager arrived and used mainly a horse to travel around the Parish of Rock Creek.²⁶ It was the infancy of horses in the area as “the roads were little more than cow paths.”²⁷ It is now important to note that the factor of faith, which was central to the community, was now mobile in its reach. This marks a time when the Parish and the Flush community were growing due to an influx of immigrants who were like-minded both in faith and in goals. The ability for the Catholic faith to broaden meant a larger safe haven upon which the community could build itself.

Perpetuating this spread of Catholicism and community building was Father Weikmann around 1890. Father Weikmann served both the Rock Creek and Wamego parishes.²⁸ He was able to have Mass for both parishes each Sunday by traveling in his horse and buggy.²⁹ During this same time, the people in the township experienced the ability to trade with neighbors such as Fort Riley.³⁰ Flush community members melted down limestone and sold lime for mortar.³¹ They also sold their surplus corn as a cash

²⁶ Biehler, 48

²⁷ Ibid, 48

²⁸ Ibid, 60

²⁹ Ibid, 60

³⁰ Ibid, 34

³¹ Ibid, 34

crop.³² Again this is an advance in the traveling technology and ability for the community of Flush to expand through faith and now commerce. Flush was now connected to other societal groups, enabling them to spread their faith and goods. It was certainly a time that looked promising for the future of Flush.

The Golden Age of Flush came with Father Heer in 1909.³³ Father Heer was known for his buggy and two horses, Dick and Daisy. By 1911 he converted to an automobile called a Flanders 20; it was one of the town's first automobiles³⁴. As Reverend Biehler notes, "This was the day and age of the railroad expansion. The automobile had not yet arrived with full force, although it was on its way."³⁵ The incongruity between Reverend Biehler's comments and Father Heer's car ownership demonstrate that Father Heer was progressive. He was ahead of his time in terms of understanding the importance of mobility. He knew that it helped him better serve his parishioners and created an even larger community of faithful Catholics than would have been possible with a horse and buggy.

Father Heer's greatest endeavor was trying to develop a means to have railway access in Flush. In 1912, 129 people signed a petition to have the rail come through the Parish.³⁶ This is a good idea of how many people were in the Flush community at the

³² Ibid 34-35

³³ Biehler, 91

³⁴ Ibid, 93

³⁵ Ibid, 95

³⁶ Ibid, 97

time because almost all of the community would have been faithful German parishioners and have likely voted in favor of a railway passing through Flush. The benefits would mean continued success and long-term stability. An amount of \$500 per every 80-acre tract of land was to be paid to those who stood to lose land from the railway, but the money had to be raised by the people of the community.³⁷ “This proved to be a very limited source of income,”³⁸ notes Reverend Biehler. The people of Flush had a town Platte drawn up in 1912 expecting a boom from the railway.³⁹ In Figure 1, you can clearly see the kind of transition this town expected the railway would bring. They expected to transition from a group of farmers, congregating solely for church purposes, into a centralized town where people could live, shop, eat, and worship in one area.

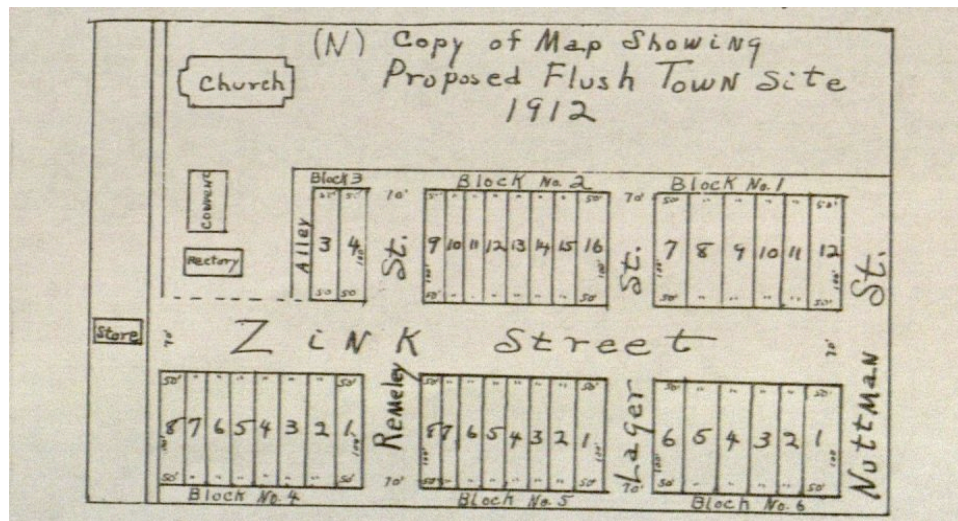


Figure 1. Platte showing the proposed Flush Town Site. 1912. Note that the Church, Rectory and Convent in the Northwest corner are the only structures today that would correspond with this plat; the rest is vacant farmland. SOURCE: Biehler J.E. Rev, *100 Years in Rock Creek Valley: A history of St. Joseph Parish at Flush, KS* (Topeka, KS: Capital OK Printing Inc, 1973)

³⁷ Ibid 97

³⁸ Ibid 97

³⁹ Ball 62

The railway had started digging the trenches for the rocks and track to be laid. Mr. Sumners states, “You can see where they dug [...] but they didn’t get the funds and it fell through.”⁴⁰ This falling through of the proposed railroad happened in 1914.⁴¹ Now all there is today is a scar of what would have been the saving grace of Flush. Reverend Biehler observes, “with the failure of the railroad, the ‘Town of Flush’ became an unrealized dream.”⁴² This was Flush’s all in poker hand to become a town, but they were trumped by the cost to play the game. As Mr. Sumner explains, “It wasn’t really a town [...] if the Church hadn’t have been there.”⁴³

The pity is that so much of their current equity was tapped to provide for a brighter tomorrow. Robert Sumner also pointed out that the Floersch family had a mill built equipped with a depot for the train. That structure still stands today as a reminder of what this lost mode of transportation would have meant for Flush.⁴⁴ The period from 1909 to 1914 was the fundamental formative years that would determine the future of Flush. Unfortunately, they failed to find a financial means to facilitate the funding of the railway and it faded away.

⁴⁰ Sumners, Robert. Field notes by Tim Dunham, Westmoreland, KS, April 27, 2011

⁴¹ Biehler, 97

⁴² Ibid, 97

⁴³ Sumners

⁴⁴ Ibid

Flush was a town born from great travels. It did provide a fertile land for the original settlers. Their influence in the area had a very distinct German Catholic flavor that was a beacon for more of the same. However, after Flush's failure to bring in a railway, their way of life was fast fading. The people of the Flush community were on the brink of a major breakthrough and finished just shy of realizing a full-fledged town. The faithful foundation they laid would continue, but the community they hoped to build would never be erected because Flush's ties to the industrializing world were too few.

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