

How One Road Can Change Everything:

The construction of Route 40 in Kansas and
the decline of LaClede, St. Clere and Flush,
Pottawatomie County, in the 1930s

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Lost Kansas Communities Class

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When you think of Kansas, most people think of the *Wizard of Oz*. You think of a small town girl who dreams about things over the rainbow and out in the world. As you watch the movie or read the stories, Dorothy sets out on her adventure on a Yellow Brick Road that leads her to the Emerald City, so she can get back to Kansas. Along the way she meets some new friends and goes on an incredible journey. Now what would happen if Dorothy came to a fork in the road where she could either stay on the Yellow Brick Road or take this new Platinum Road? Many of us would say she would stay on the Yellow Brick Road because that is what the munchkins told her to do. In this case though, she decided to take the new Platinum Road. It is so new and shiny, and there are so many different views on this road. This is a faster way to get to the Emerald City, and more people can travel on it at the same time. What would happen to the Yellow Brick Road if everyone started taking the same road that Dorothy picked? What would happen to the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion if everyone took that new road? This paper will discuss the impacts of the construction of Route 40 in Kansas and how it brought inevitable doom to the towns that were not located on it. The old roads of Kansas remained Yellow Brick Roads, less traveled and fading.

The Emerald City in this paper is Pottawatomie County and the Platinum Road is Route 40. Pottawatomie County is located in the northeastern corner of Kansas. Once part of Riley County, Pottawatomie County became its own county in 1857. In 1870 it had a population of 7,848 and rose to 16,250 by 1880.¹ This county has 21 townships.² Passing through five of those townships is a highway called Route 40. Located in the southern part of Pottawatomie County are Blue, St. George, Wamego, Belvue and St. Mary's townships. In this area, the variety of elements in the soil makes it a leader in Kansas for the raising of grain and of stock.³ Many of the early settlers were here before the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill.⁴ With the opening of Route 40 in 1929, many of the small towns that were not located in those five townships had a hard time making ends meet. They depended on the traffic from the state or rural roads on to bring in business. Many of the settlers were small town farmers that needed those roads to help bring in supplies to their farms and to also ship out more of their product.

¹ A. T. Andreas. *History of the State of Kansas Vol. II*. Chicago, 1883. pg. 974

² Ibid, pg 975

³ Ibid, pg 974

⁴ Ibid.

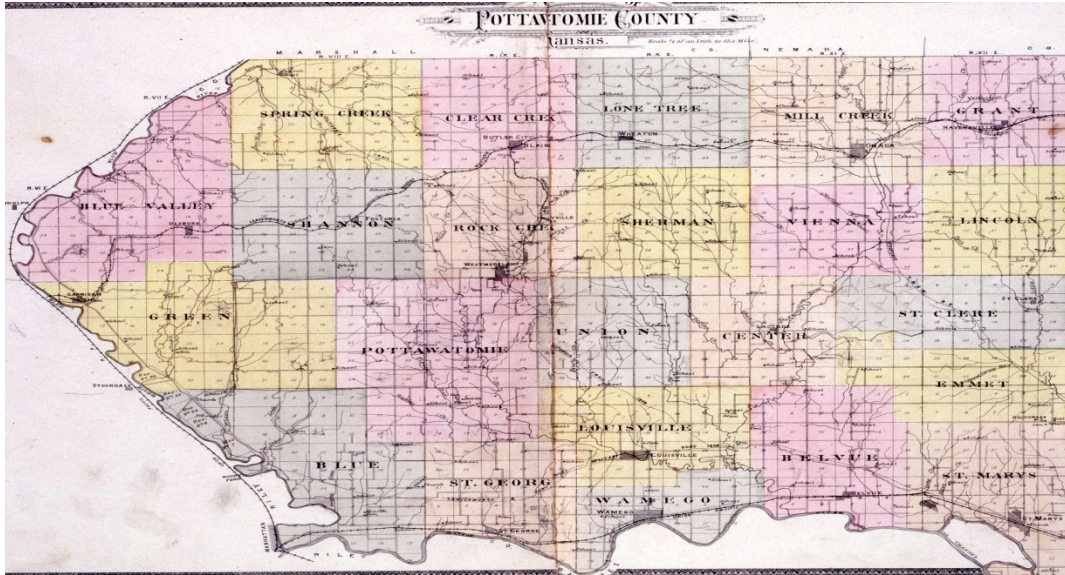


Figure 1: Map of Pottawatomie County, Kansas

The townships that Route 40 runs through are Blue, St. George, Wamego, Belvue and St. Mary's, located at the southern portion of the county. Center, St. Clare and Pottawatomie townships are the ones that contain LaCleda, St. Clere and Flush.

SOURCE: Standard Atlas of Pottawatomie County Kansas 1905 pgs 8 and 9

The southern portion of Pottawatomie County will be my main focus of discussion as shown in the map above in Figure 1. Center, St. Clere, and Pottawatomie townships were the three most affected by Route 40.

Due to the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916, the states had the opportunity to build roads with the help from the federal government.⁵ The bill provided the following to the states: \$25 million annually was to be appropriated for road construction or maintenance of rural post roads; the federal share was to be not less than 30 percent but not more than 50 percent; to receive federal aid after 1920, each state must have a State Highway Department to administer funds; locations and standards were to be agreed upon by the secretary of agriculture and the states, and finally, construction and maintenance of the aided roads would remain under state control.⁶ Not only did this law give the states the power and money to construct roads, it also brought in jobs. This also might have brought in new people to the area to work on the roads, in turn raising the population of the area.

⁵ Dale Jost. *A History of Federal Aid for Highways (A Kansas Perspective)*. Topeka, Kansas.: University of Kansas Capitol Complex Center, 1991.pg 23

⁶Ibid, pg 24

In 1921 the federal government passed a new act that strengthened several other provisions of the 1916 act.⁷ The two important additions to the 1921 Act were first, that states' share of the construction, reconstruction and maintenance of all federal aid highways within the state must have provisions for funding, and second, that the funds were under the direct control of the State Highway Department before any project was approved by the secretary. It also provided funds for forest roads and trails for the fiscal years 1922 and 1923.⁸ This made sure that the states had enough money to build these highways, and it also helped with the preservation of forest roads and trails that were part of the state's history.

In 1929 Route 40 was completely paved across Kansas.⁹ This was the start of the end for those small Kansas towns that were not on Route 40. Many of those towns are on rural country or state roads; if you did not just happen to drive past them, or know that they lay in hidden parts of the townships, you would not know they existed. In the 1930s, also the decade of the Great Depression, towns not located on Route 40 started to decline. What made it even worse was in 1936 when the four lane portion of Route 40, which we call Highway 24, was paved.¹⁰ This portion of the highway stretches from Manhattan to Wamego. Not only did it take business away from those small towns, people could now move away from those towns into the cities and work. They no longer needed to work out on the farm or make their once a week trip to the city. All they had to do was move, and they could commute much more easily to different areas for more diverse work opportunities.

⁷Ibid, pg 38

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid, pg 72

¹⁰Ibid, pg 73

Three small towns in particular were affected by the paving of Route 40. All three once had a growing population; many of the settlers were farmers and merchants looking for a new start.

LaClede was located on Onaga State Road, a road that intersects with Route 40 just past the eastern side of Wamego. The village is 15 miles from that intersection. The town was formed in 1880, with a population of 509, and started to die off around the time of the construction of Route 40.¹¹ LaClede was the business center of the Center Township. The town contained a drug store, blacksmith shop, general store, restaurant, grist-mill and school.¹² LaClede once had a post office. It started in January of 1871 under the name Eagle Post, but in December, 1874, was changed to LaClede. In July of 1906 it closed due to competition from the other small towns.¹³ L.C. Prunty, a large land owner and miller, was the first appointee of the post office followed by A.B. Davis, a farmer and merchant, in 1878.¹⁴ Almost all of the settlers who stay in and around LaClede were farmers. They all bought land in the area and began building up the town and supporting it with tax dollars. On May 14, 1870 the first school was formed with John C. Soupene as the first teacher.¹⁵ They also had a church. In 1870 John W. Tanner from Ohio was a Methodist Protestant minister who formed the church. They used the upper level of the school to

¹¹ Andreas, “*History of the State of Kansas Vol. II*”, pg 974

¹²Ibid, pg 984

¹³ Robert W. Baughman. *Kansas Post Offices May 29, 1828- August 3, 1961 Second Ed.*. Topeka, Kansas: Postal History Society, 1977. pg 37; Baughman, “*Kansas Post Offices ...*”pg 69

¹⁴ William E. Connelley. *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans*. Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company. 1918 pg 2113; Baughman, “*Kansas Post Offices ...*”.pg 217; Andreas, “*History of the State of Kansas Vol. II.*” pg 984

¹⁵ William Lester Hauldren Jr., Alice Russ Hauldren, William Lester Hauldren III, Lisa Guenther Hauldren. *Three Dorney Brothers of Ohio-Kansas-Oklahoma Their Ancestors and Descendants*. Paola, Ks: Miami County Publishing Company. 1985 pg 14

hold church service. In April of 1906, the LaClede Baptist Church began and is still in use to this day.¹⁶ You can see the school, general store and the post office on the map below in Figure 2.

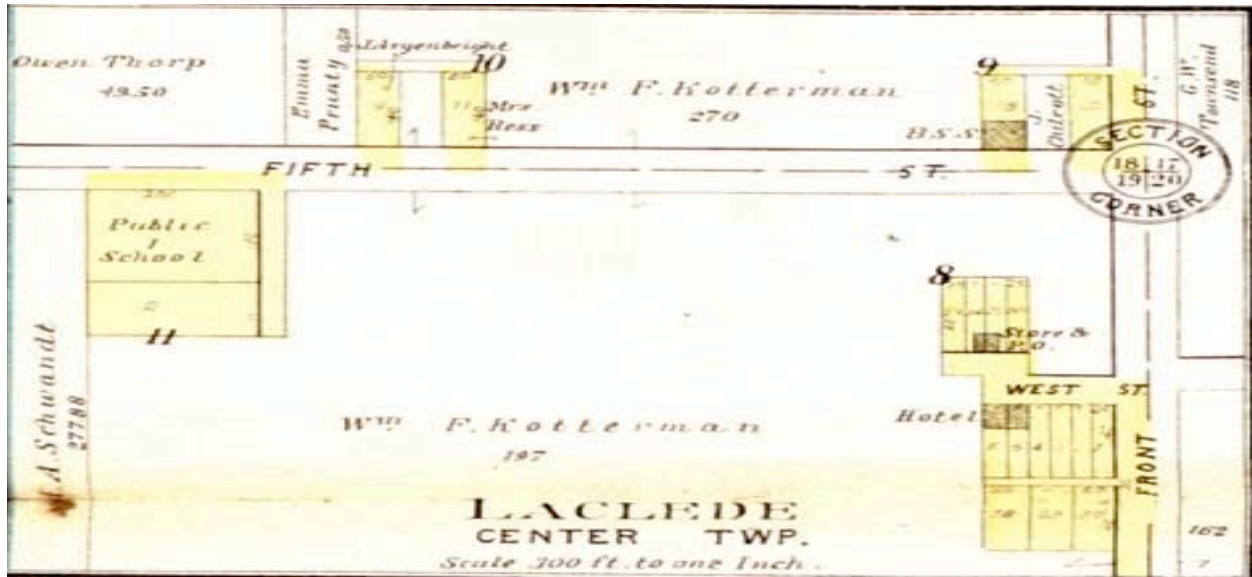


Figure 2: LaClede in Center Township
This is a map of LaClede in 1905. This shows the school, store, post office and hotel.
SOURCE: Standard Atlas of Pottawatomie County Kansas 1905 pg 74

¹⁶Ibid.

Another town affected by the paving of Route 40 was the tiny village of St. Clere in the township by the same name. The old town site was located on St. Clere Road right off Highway 63 which intersects with Route 40 in the middle of St. Mary's. In 1885, the town had about 75 people.¹⁷ St. Clere consisted of a school, church, and a hotel which, except for the hotel, are all on the map below in Figure 3. St. Clere also had a merchandise dealer, two blacksmiths and two druggists.¹⁸ As with LaClede, there was once a post office. Out of all three of the towns, this post office lasted the longest, in use from August 1874- October 1953.¹⁹ In 1885, four teachers taught in the school, which is three more than LaClede.²⁰ Many school children lived in St. Clere or walked in from the surrounding farms.



Figure 3: St. Clere in St. Clere Township

This is a map of St. Clere in 1905. This shows what the original town was and what was added on.

¹⁷ The *Westmoreland Recorder*, Thursday, January 7, 1885. Copy available online at <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/pottawat/newspap2.html>

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹ Baughman, "Kansas Post Offices...". pg 113

²⁰ The *Westmoreland Recorder*, Thursday, December 17, 1885. Copy available online at <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/pottawat/newspap10.html>

SOURCE: Standard Atlas of Pottawatomie County Kansas 1905 pg 75

Flush was the smallest of the three towns. Located in the Pottawatomie Township, on Flush Rd, which intersects with Route 40 in between Manhattan and Wamego, it is nine miles southwest of Westmoreland. It had a local telephone exchange and a money order post office with one rural route. Yet the population in 1910 was still only 23.²¹ Now, as with LaClede and St. Clere, Flush had an established post office before it became an official town. June, 1899, was when the post office opened, lasting until November, 1927.²² Just like LaClede, the post office closed in the 1900s. In 1912, the founders of Flush drew up a map of the town to prepare for the Wamego and Rock Creek Valley Railroad to come through, as you can see below in Figure 4.²³ Flush had a magnificent prairie Catholic Church, St. Joseph's, which is still standing, and a store.

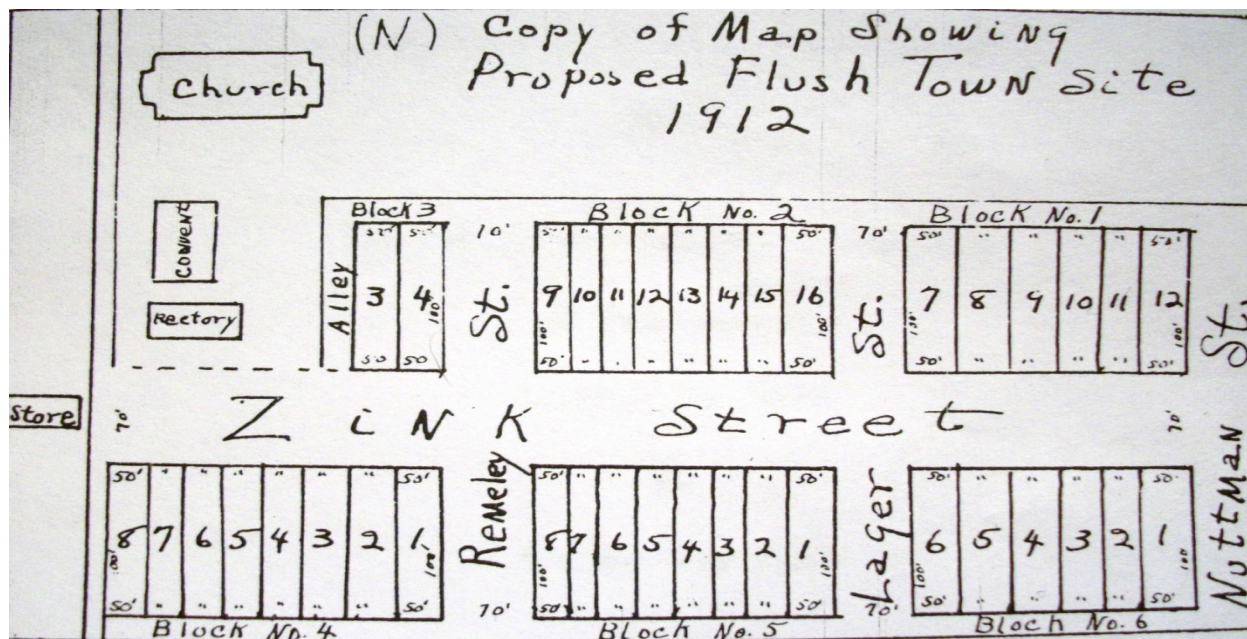


Figure 4: Flush Town Site in Pottawatomie Township
This is a copy of the map showing the proposed Flush Town Site in 1912.

²¹ Frank Wilson Blackmar. *Kansas: A Cyclopedia of State History, Embracing Events, Institutions, Industries, Counties, Cities, Towns, Prominent Persons, Ect..with a supplementary volume devoted to select personal history and reminiscence. Vol. II.* Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912. pg 650

²² Baughman, "Kansas Post Offices..." pg 45

²³ J.E. Biehler. *One hundred years in Rock Creek Valley: A history of the St. Joseph parish at Flush, Kansas.* Manhattan, Kansas.: Ag Press, Inc 1985. pg 95

SOURCE: *One hundred years in Rock Creek Valley* By. J.E. Biehler. pg 95

Looking at census data from 1930-1950 you can see a population shift from Pottawatomie County. In 1930 the population was 15,862; 1940 was 14,015; and by 1950, the county stood at 12,344.²⁴ I compared this data against Riley County, located on the west side of Pottawatomie, and Jackson County, located on the eastern side. I found that over this twenty year period the population of Riley County grew as Jackson and Pottawatomie Counties declined. Some might want to make the argument that the population growth of Riley County is due to Kansas State University. This likely was a strong factor, but the way that people to the east can reach Kansas State University is now by Route 40. The curving, often dusty country roads are avoided.

Flush, St. Clere, and LaClede no longer had reliable business from passers-through. Gas stations, car repair shops, restaurants, grocery stores, even hardware stores – all lost business quickly. All three places once had a growing population. In the 1880's, until the start of the construction of Route 40, they were in their prime. Looking at when the post offices closed, it is clear that not much longer after that, people started to move. By the 1950s, population loss was well established. Today, very little remains of these three communities: a church in Flush, an old school in LaClede. Busy main streets once dotted the rural landscape of southern Pottawatomie County. Each was a distinctive place. It is important to discover relationships among small places close together: how they were alike but also, how they were different. Each has a history worth telling, even if they all faded out the same way.

²⁴ Richard L. Forstall. *Kansas Population of counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990*. Copy available online at <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/ks190090.txt>

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