

# “Laclede, Pottawatomie County, Kansas, Unincorporated: A Community of Family”

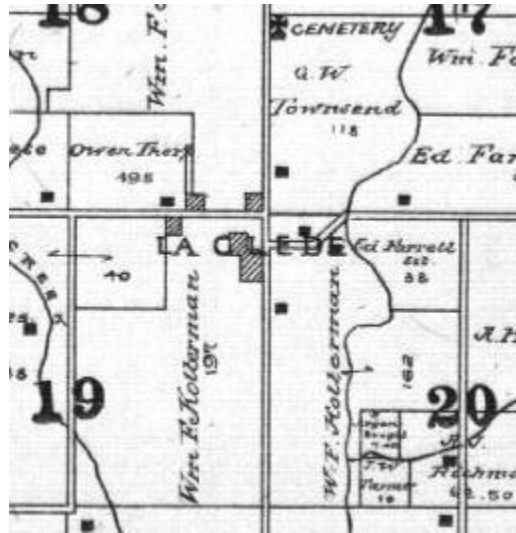


Figure 1: Portion of the 1905 plat map showing the town of Laclede located in Center Township, Pottawatomie County, Kansas. As can be seen Laclede never grew to more than a small village. Source: Kansas Memory.org

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This study describes the unique evolution of the small community of Laclede in Pottawatomie County, Kansas. Laclede transformed from a failed town to a preserved historical community owned by a single family. The study includes a personal interview, fieldwork, maps and photographs.

Small towns all over America have failed for many different reasons, ranging from limited access to necessary goods to widespread fatal disease. In Kansas, a common factor in a town's demise is failure to attract a railroad. The history of Laclede, Pottawatomie County, Kansas demonstrates a different tale: its major reason for rapid decline was not the railroad but an interstate highway. Through a description of the town, its people, and an analysis of reasons why it failed but also uniquely managed to persevere, a different picture will be painted of a faded Kansas community. Laclede is located between the Vermillion River and Coal Creek in east central Pottawatomie County, Center Township, as shown in the map below.



Figure 2: Map of Pottawatomie County, Kansas circa 1899.

Source: <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/counties/PT/>

Although Kansas is commonly known as a flat state, the area around Laclede debunks this myth. Rolling green hills stretch as far as the eye can see on both sides of Onaga

Road, the main road leading to the old town site. This was originally prairie land.<sup>1</sup> The landscape is speckled with a few houses and light poles, providing a visual break from the vast miles of open farmland. The landscape is extoled in the work of poet William Karnowski, who resides near Laclede. He has written six books full of poems about the area and Kansas in general. One of these books is titled *Catching the Rain*, and contains a chapter dedicated to “The Hills of Laclede,” which includes the poem below:

“Kansas”

“In my land  
Of flush excess,  
I only dare  
And have elected,  
To speak frankly  
From the start.

Here I stand  
My sweet princess,  
I lay it bare  
And unprotected,  
So walk gently  
Upon my heart.”<sup>2</sup>

After roughly ten miles of viewing this lush landscape, driving north from Highway 24 on Onaga Road, one will run into the Laclede town site. A plat map published in 1905 shows evidence that the town once boasted a general store, hotel, schoolhouse, and several homesteads.<sup>3</sup> A post office, which was originally called the Eagle Post Office, operated from 1874-1904.<sup>4</sup> Still, in 1912 Laclede was described as a “hamlet” having

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<sup>1</sup> Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> William J. Karnowski, "Hills Of Laclede." *Catching the Rain*. (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2007), 54.

<sup>3</sup> *Standard Atlas of Pottawatomie County, KS*, (Chicago: Geo A. Ogle and Co., 1905), p. 74.  
<http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209420/page/1>

<sup>4</sup> "Kansas Post Offices, 1828-1961." Kansas Historical Society.  
[http://www.kshs.org/geog/geog\\_postoffices/search/county:PT](http://www.kshs.org/geog/geog_postoffices/search/county:PT)

76 people, one general store and one drug store.<sup>5</sup> One hundred years later, all that remains of a hopeful town are a sign, two family farms, a two-acre cemetery (founded in 1906), and the Tannerville School, recently renovated into a private residence.<sup>6</sup> The old schoolhouse was active until the late 1970s, when Louisville, Belvue, and Laclede students were all sent to schools in Wamego, a larger town and a consolidated school district. Shown at the end of this essay is two photographs of the schoolhouse and students; one is an early image and the other was taken after renovations were completed in early 2005.

Laclede never became more than a small farming community. Although it boasted a few businesses in the beginning, the town never took off, and little evidence of the existence of these businesses remains. Without a store and post office, area residents fulfilled most of their needs in either nearby Belvue or Wamego. The two surviving farms belong to the White and Peterson families, who now consider themselves members of the Belvue community.<sup>7</sup>

Despite not having a commercial district to keep residents connected, residents of Laclede maintained strong relations. According to Mike White, a farmer who was born and raised in the area, “It was always just a big family place. We all went to school together and worked together.”<sup>8</sup> The White family has extensive roots in Laclede. They first settled on a plot of land south of the Laclede town site in the mid-1870s when John White Sr. relocated, along with his wife and three children, from western Kansas. He had

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<sup>5</sup> *Kansas: a cyclopedia of state history, embracing events, institutions, industries, counties, cities, towns, prominent persons, etc. ... / with a supplementary volume devoted to selected personal history and reminiscence.* Edited by Frank W. Blackmar. Volume II (Chicago: Standard Pub. Co., 1912), p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> "Obituary: Charles Leo Hargrave." *Topeka Capital Journal*, July 15, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Mike White, Interview by author. Personal interview. White home, Laclede area, March 19, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

decided to start a cattle farm closer to the booming Kansas City cattle shipping industry. Many of his descendants remain in the area and still own the same land.<sup>9</sup> The current White property includes five houses, a cattle yard, the old Laclede Schoolhouse, the Vermillion Valley Equine Center, and acres of farm land and ponds. John White's original shack still stands and is used a storage shed for the White farms today. It can be seen, in its state before undergoing a total renovation in the 1990s, in Figure 2 below.

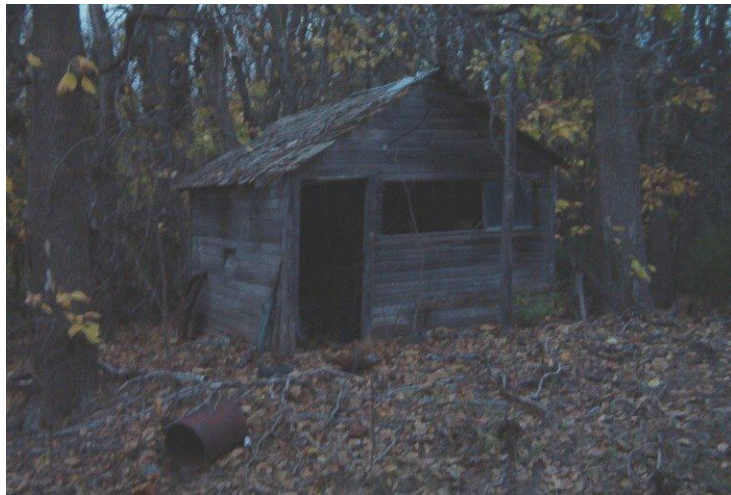


Figure 3: Photograph of John White's original shack, taken c. 1985. Source: White Family Personal Collection

Numerous factors contributed to Laclede's failure to blossom. First, the post office closed in 1906. Once a post office left, most small towns failed to survive.<sup>10</sup> Secondly the town was snubbed by a railroad, the Kansas Southern and Gulf, which in 1899 chose to build a line to Westmoreland instead of running a line through southern Pottawatomie

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. M. J. Morgan, "Factors of Community Survival." Class lecture, Lost Kansas Communities, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, February 2010.

County.<sup>11</sup> Yet, despite these factors, Laclede did not immediately fail. This is probably due to the close-knit bond Laclede residents had formed. Laclede also competed with nearby Louisville and Belvue. Both communities still have steady populations, are within ten miles of Laclede, and boast businesses attracting Laclede community members.<sup>12</sup> All of these factors contributed to the failure of Laclede but did not bring about its final decline. The map and discussion below pinpoint the major impact on Laclede.

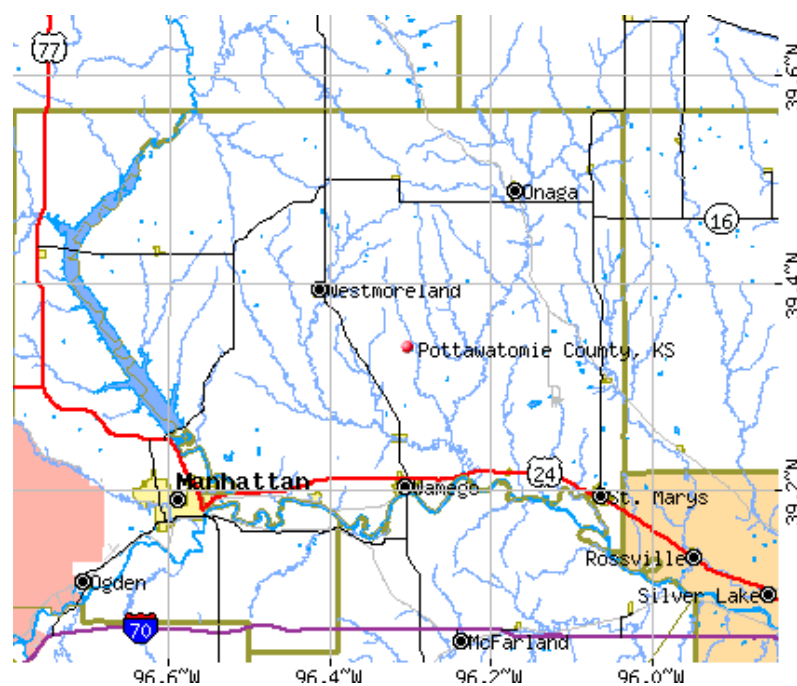


Figure 4: Map of Pottawatomie County, Kansas riverways. Source: "Pottawatomie County, KS," *City-Data.com*, 20120,

[http://www.city-data.com/county/Pottawatomie\\_County-KS.html](http://www.city-data.com/county/Pottawatomie_County-KS.html)

<sup>11</sup> Personal communication, Nola Wilkerson, Rock Creek Valley Museum and Historical Society, Westmoreland, Kansas, July, 2012. This information is also in Michael Zabel, *Go West More Land -- The Early Years of Westmoreland, Kansas*, self-published, 2005, pp. 104-113.

<sup>12</sup> "Pottawatomie County." Blue Skyways Library.

The red line in the map above traces Highway 24, the ultimate killer of the small town of Laclede. Highway 24 runs right through Wamego and Belvue, Laclede's main competitors. This highway was built more than ninety years ago and sealed the fate of Laclede.<sup>13</sup> Other small towns such as St. Clere, Myers Valley, and Broderick were similarly affected.

Without direct access to the highway, Laclede could not attract the businesses that were needed to form a thriving town. Highway traffic would have supported revenue-generating businesses such as filling stations, restaurants, and grocery stores. Those businesses were opened in Silver Lake, Rossville, and Wamego instead. Upon realizing that Laclede would never grow, the White and Peterson families bought up the majority of the land surrounding the tiny town site.<sup>14</sup> Yet even today, although Laclede may be considered a lost Kansas town, it does not lack a sense of community. The people of Laclede today are true farmers and ranchers, just like their fathers and grandfathers. They may have to travel a few extra miles to purchase many of their goods, but they like it better that way. Laclede has a much happier story than many Kansas towns, which have ended in destitution, drought, or anonymity. Laclede simply became a big family home.

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<sup>13</sup> "Pottawatomie County." Blue Skyways Library.

<sup>14</sup> Mike White, personal interview by author, March 19, 2010.



Figure 5: Children in front of Laclede School House, c. early 1900s, Laclede, Pottawatomie County, Kansas. Source: Mike White Personal Collection



Figure 5: Laclede Schoolhouse renovated, Laclede, Pottawatomie County KS, c. 2007. Source: Mike White Personal Collection



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