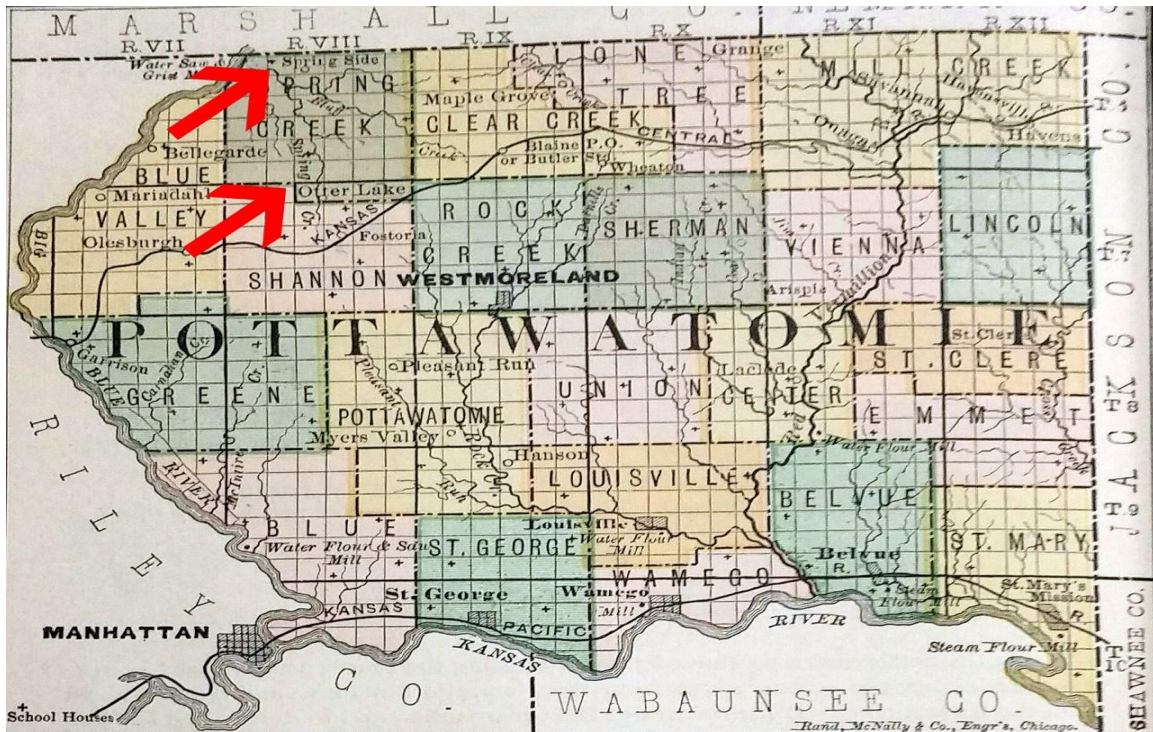


Competition on Spring Creek: Otter Lake and Springside, Kansas, 1870 to 1920

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History 589
Fall 2016
Chapman Center for Rural Studies



Above: An 1881 map of Pottawatomie County from the 1887 *State of Kansas Atlas*. Note the locations of Springside in Spring Creek Township and Otter Lake in Shannon Township. Note the locations of both Springside and Otter Lake marked by red arrows. Copy of atlas located at Riley County Genealogical Society, Manhattan, Kansas.

Otter Lake and Springside were two post villages in northwestern Pottawatomie County, Kansas locked in competition for hinterland resources and community perseverance along the Central Line of the Union Pacific Railroad. These twin towns struggled to survive. This study tracks this story between 1870 and 1920.

This study uses period appropriate newspapers, Polk business directories, and books on Pottawatomie and Marshall counties. The main conclusion of the study finds the failure of Otter Lake and eventually Springside.

Thank you to Riley County Genealogical Society for the use of their extensive library and relevant knowledge in contribution to this study.

In the brutal early days of life on the frontier, towns would pop up about one day apart by wagon from each other. Competition was fierce, and towns of similar size, founded about the same time were known as “Twin Towns”, defined by their rivalry with their neighboring community. Often, they would share a geographic feature, such as different sides of a hill or different points on a river. Usually these relationships end with a victor, a surviving testament to the dedication and good fortune of one settlement over the other.¹² The strange case of Otter Lake and Springside, about five miles apart in northwest Pottawatomie County, Kansas, is a stark contrast to this with both towns vanishing completely despite brief periods of success during their lifetimes.

Their shared feature was the lifeblood of a farming community, precious water. Melvin Bruntzel’s *Quick Reference to Kansas* pinpointed the village of Otter Lake on Spring Creek, while competing community Springside was fed by the tributary Bluff Creek.³ The Polk Business Directories list both opening post offices in 1870, a trademark of competing communities.⁴ In these carrying trade days, life was defined by horse and foot travel over roads and trails, not railways, but in a lucky twist both communities later hosted shipping stops on the Central Branch Union Pacific Railroad, though Springside enjoyed its benefits for a longer period.

The hinterlands around a community only have so many resources to offer, and with the two towns in such close proximity, it should be no surprise that competition grew quickly. Both

¹ Schnee, Angela, “A Thin Line Between Love and Hate Leonardville and Riley: The Evolution of a Small Town Rivalry,” *Chapman Center for Rural Studies*. Online, Fall 2010.

² Chun-fen Lee, “Twin Cities of Waterloo and Kitchener,” *Economic Geography*, Volume 22, 1946.

³ Melvin Bruntzel *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing, Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths*. (Belleville, Kansas: The Print Schop, 2010).

⁴ R. L. Polk & Co. *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1878.

communities vied for the support and business of area farmers and residents, though the short distance between the two limited the amount that could be pulled from the surrounding area.

To look at the Polk Directories, Otter Lake reveals a bizarre tale of sudden growth and desiccation, within a period of roughly ten years. The 1878 directory lists it as no more than a post village, but just two years later we see incredible economic growth.⁵ The 1880 directory lists a blacksmith, meat market, plasterer (indicating a large amount of construction), wagon maker, shoemaker, and Justice of the Peace.⁶ This paints a picture of a thriving frontier town, but it can't be verified by any local paper, as the first issues of the *Westmoreland Recorder* available begin in 1885. Ironically, this is the same year the Polk Directory gives a surprisingly short analysis, listing just tri-weekly mail and a schoolhouse. The shipping point by 1885 is listed as Blaine, indicating the end of railway stops in Otter Lake.⁷

The absence of Otter Lake in anything but obituaries and state papers marking the changing of postmasters is a frustrating barrier to research, but some small morsels of information can still be gleaned from what is available. The October 31, 1878 issue of the *Weekly Commonwealth* out of Topeka has a list of "Post office Changes", with the relevant entry showing "Otter Lake, Pottawatomie County, Mrs. Hattie Shehi".⁸ This essential piece of evidence proves there was competition, as the Shehi family grew into prominence later in Springside. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Shehi was later buried in the Spring Creek cemetery, indicating her own move to Springside at some point before her death. The migration of settlers from one village to the next is perfect evidence that a community cannot persist if its founding

⁵ R. L. Polk & Co. *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1878.

⁶ R. L. Polk & Co. *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1880.

⁷ R. L. Polk & Co. *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1884/5.

⁸ "Post office Changes," *The Weekly Commonwealth*, 31 October, 1878.

families fail to remain. Springside was pulling residents directly from the limited pool of settlers in Otter Lake. This could also be found in the nearby town of Fostoria to some degree.



Above: Tombstone of Hattie Shehi in Spring Creek cemetery, former postmistress of Otter Lake. Photograph taken by author, November 26, 2016.

C.K. Stevens, the Otter Lake Justice of the Peace in 1880, is mentioned occasionally as a Fostoria resident through the rest of his life. He seems to have been present at the founding of that town, as his "Eagles Lodge" hotel is listed as the first building built in the town, about 1884.⁹ This means his efforts in Otter Lake were abandoned very suddenly, as he had moved on within four short years to a new town entirely. His new town of Fostoria was a growing railroad community a few miles south of Otter Lake, northwest of Westmoreland, the county seat. He operated the hotel for 22 years, adding a general store as business grew. According to the detailed history of Fostoria available, Mr. Stevens also served as the postmaster of that town for nine years.⁹

⁹ Hazel Roberts, Helen Richter, Annabeth Strifler, Bernice Hedlinger, and Dale Webster. *Fostoria, the Little Town--"Time Forgot" 1882-2000*. Kansas: Self-Published, 2000.



Above: The stone of John Shehi, early area settler. Photograph taken by author, November 26, 2016.

The mystery of Otter Lake persists after the 1884/1885 Polk Directory mentions it for the final time. The next available issue, 1894, leaves it out entirely.¹⁰ Any of the few newspaper mentions list only brief points of settlement in an obituary, or temporary weekend visits to remaining relatives. The absence of other factors is troubling, but the available evidence indicates that first losing a stop on the railway, followed by the exodus of settlers to Springside and nearby Fostoria ended the once flourishing prairie town.

Springside is easier to track. While at first it seemed the victor in the twenty-year struggle to overtake Otter Lake, it barely lasted another twenty years before signs of decline began to appear. It was marked by a handful of prominent families, mainly the Dunlaps, Jones and aforementioned Shehis. A great many Shehis can be found in the Spring Creek cemetery, indicating they stayed on and encouraged their families to do the same, but the Dunlaps and

¹⁰ R. L. Polk & Co. *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1894.

Jones both appear to have struck out for greener pastures. Mr. John Shehi, first known settler in Spring Creek Township and father-in-law to Hattie, rests in the cemetery there. Springside enjoyed a weekly gossip column in the *Westmoreland Recorder* from the first available issue until at least the Great Depression. Already, Springside had held on longer than Otter Lake, but its demise can be traced to a few key events.

The Central Branch Union Pacific Railroad suffered throughout its life, as it had never left Kansas despite aspirations to move into Colorado and the open West. Competition forced the line to stop in Waterville for many years, before Union Pacific went bankrupt in the Panic of 1893, with the line entering receivership. It's likely this resulted in the closing of the Springside shipping point, as the next year's Polk Business Directory lists no shipping point where there had been one previously.¹¹

Springside struggled on with a hardy pioneer spirit for many years, but the troubles were hardly over. The year 1903 saw severe flooding and the washout of the Irving Bridge, their lifeline to the larger world (particularly the tri-weekly mail stage).¹² While it was rebuilt, the new bridge washed out again in 1908 and there is no record of a third attempt.¹³ The *Recorder* describes every farmer being "behind on his work" due to the incessant rains. April 8, 1904 marked a severe blizzard, with the loss of many hogs, cattle, and other livestock.¹⁴ This was likely the most painful cause for residents to abandon the village.

The town was quietly slipping away during this period. While the school soldiered on, indicating there were still children within two miles, church attendance dropped off. The church (likely Presbyterian, as listed years earlier in the Polk directory) switched to quarterly

¹¹ R. L. Polk & Co. *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1894.

¹² "Springside" *The Westmoreland Recorder*, 18 June, 1903.

¹³ "Springside" *The Westmoreland Recorder*, 5 June, 1908.

¹⁴ "Springside" *The Westmoreland Recorder*, 15 April, 1904.

community meetings instead of weekly service, the true sign of a dying community. In 1912, Irving, a town in nearby Marshall County, welcomed Catholics from Springside to join their newly constructed church with Rev. August Redeker presiding over the congregation.¹⁵ In 1919, the Springside church was disassembled, leaving nothing but memories.¹⁶ Research has failed to confirm the denomination, however, this was likely the same Presbyterian church listed by R.L. Polk years earlier. Most residents were probably on to greener pastures by this point, but the gossip column held on for those few families left in the shell of the community. It's likely that a few homesteads remained in the area, but most families seemed to be migrating to growing Fostoria or Irving.

The idea of two towns “twinning” is that they could be marked by competition, and eventually, the success of one and sad failure of another. A glimpse of this can be seen in the study of Otter Lake and Springside, as the brief boom of Otter Lake was cut short by the sharp competition up the creek. Before long, however, the loss of a rail connection and the recurring natural disasters chased off the majority of the population from emergent Springside, painting an unusual portrait of the prevailing town falling apart under the constant stress of disaster-stricken life on the prairie. Spring Creek still trickles past both empty town sites, indifferent to the struggles that plagued the Pottawatomie County pioneers.

¹⁵ Emma Elizabeth Calderhead Foster. *History of Marshall County, Kansas: Its People, Industries, and Institutions*. (Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen, 1917).

¹⁶ “Springside” *The Westmoreland Recorder*, 27 November, 1919.

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