

COMPETITION FOR SUCCESS BRINGS FAILURE

ST. CLERE, POTTAWATOMIE COUNTY, KANSAS 1874-1953



Figure 1: Historical Plat map of Saint Clere, Kansas, Pottawatomie County, in 1887. SOURCE: Official State Atlas of Kansas 1887, L.H Evans and Co. Notice the small size of St. Clere.

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Lost Kansas Communities

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This study illustrates the founding, growth, and decline of the small town of St. Clere in Pottawatomie County, Kansas. Included within the study are maps, pictures and information about what lead to the demise of the small agricultural town.

St. Clere, Kansas, a small town in Pottawatomie County, was established in the early 1870s and then vanished by the mid 1950s. It definitely passed through changes and challenges throughout the time it persisted. Driving through the town site, present day, there is no evidence left of a town ever existing. The land on which the town was built was given by John Le Clere, a Frenchman. Its original name was Le Clere. The old log cabin where John Le Clere lived is still standing but is now in the postal code of the neighboring town of Emmett. Yet at one time, St. Clere included two stores, two blacksmith shops, a hotel, barber shop, harness shop, livery stable, school and church.¹ The original St. Clere school was east of the bridge and on the north side of the main road. Its first teacher was Hattie Murphy. There were only five months of schooling during the year, because the older boys and girls were needed to help on the farms.² Located on the east side of Pottawatomie County over some of the most fertile soil in Kansas, St. Clere was a very popular place for farmers to call home -- until an unfortunate series of events struck St. Clere, ultimately leading to the demise of the entire town. Although there is not very much information to be found about this small Kansas village, throughout this paper I am going to explain and discuss some factors important to the start of St. Clere and also, those ultimately leading to its collapse. In the beginning, across the 1870s and into the 1880s, St. Clere was known for its great orchard lands and most of its residents lived on farms. In the peak of St. Clere's time, its most important claim to fame was being boxing legend Jess Willard's birth place. Within the last years of St. Clere's existence I found that many residents moved to neighboring town Emmett as rural crime rates started to rise.

¹ James W. Mace, *The Life and Times of Jess Willard* (Rock Creek Valley Historical Society, 1966), 3; Melvin Bruntzel, "St. Clere, Pottawatomie County," in *Quick Reference to Kansas*, Volume 2 (Belleville, Kansas: The Print Schop, 2010).

² Mace, 4

The Dream of Orcharding

During St. Cleres's first years of existence, probably as early as 1874, water was plentiful and conditions were perfect for orcharding, especially for apples, and but these conditions could not last forever for St. Clere. The 1890s was the first time St. Clere had to face drought conditions. As a historian of drought has noted, "The period between 1877 and 1890 was wetter than usual, leading to unrealistic expectations of land productivity. The amount of land required to support a family in more arid regions was already larger than the amount that could realistically be irrigated by a family, but this fact was made more obvious by the drought, leading to emigration from recently settled lands."³ Yet back in 1871, Kansas grown apples won the highest award at an exhibition of the New Jersey Horticultural Society.⁴ Knowing this information, it is easy to imagine just how strong this orcharding life style was within Kansas. Below is a historical sketch of a farm located in St. Clere. The farm is depicted in 1887, right before the drought of 1890.



Figure 2: Historic sketch of a farm in St. Clere, Kansas, Pottawatomie County. 1887. Notice the tree lines in rows in a very orchard like manner. SOURCE: Official State Atlas of Kansas 1887, L.H Evans and Co.

³ Paul, Homewood, "A history of drought on the great plains" www.notalotofpeopleknowthat.Com Accessed may 2015

⁴ R.J., Barnett, "Growing an Orchard in Kansas," *Kansas Agriculturalist*, October 31, 1901.

By 1896, farms with orchards started to go up for sale. When looking at the *Topeka Daily Central* I found that there are many advertisements for farm sales, such as the following: “FOR SALE: Farm in Pottawatomie County Kansas twelve miles due north of St Mary’s, ½ mile from post office, school, church, blacksmith shop and store. 191 ½ acres. 100 acres #1 Bottom, balance timber and pasture; abundance of water that never fails or freezes. 6 room house and frame barn 24 by 40, corn crib, granary and orchards. Come and see it.”⁵ The terrible drought caused many farmers to try to sell their land so they did not become bankrupt due to the low yields. The *Kansas Agriculturalist* states, “Orcharding came to a definite end about 1915.”⁶ All of the old trees destroyed by drought, diseases and insects such as the coddling moth were not replaced with new trees due the lack of rain fall.⁷ These factors completely destroyed the orcharding industry in St. Clere, causing many families to lose their farms. This contributed to making the small town a hostile environment.

The Willard Family

The Willard family may have been one of the first settling families, moving to St. Clere in 1873 and playing a very important role in the establishment of the town.⁸ Myron Willard opened up and operated a general merchandise store. Although not documented, Myron was also reported to have handled the post office and was a deacon in the Baptist Church.⁹ The Willard family lived on a farm on the east side of St. Clere where they raised Shorthorn cattle and hogs and produced crops of corn and some wheat; they also owned a large orchard on the north end of

⁵ *Topeka Daily Central*, February 2, 1996.

⁶ Barnett, 4.

⁷ Information on coddling moths courtesy of Thomas D. Morgan, USDA entomology technician, April, 2015.

⁸ Mace, 1.

⁹ Mace, 2

Cross Creek.¹⁰ In the year 1881, Myron and Margaret gave birth to son Jess Willard who would go on to achieve boxing fame.¹¹ The early 1900s was a time of change for sports. The sport of boxing became a social event more than just illegal underground fighting and gave new opportunities to people who wanted to accomplish the American dream.¹² Jess Willard became involved in boxing at a very early age. Willard's first fight was at Scapula, Oklahoma against Louis Finke.¹³ Soon after his career started, he took the name "The Pottawatomie Giant" and was a well-known boxing superstar. Jess Willard is pictured at right in full boxing attire (Figure 3).

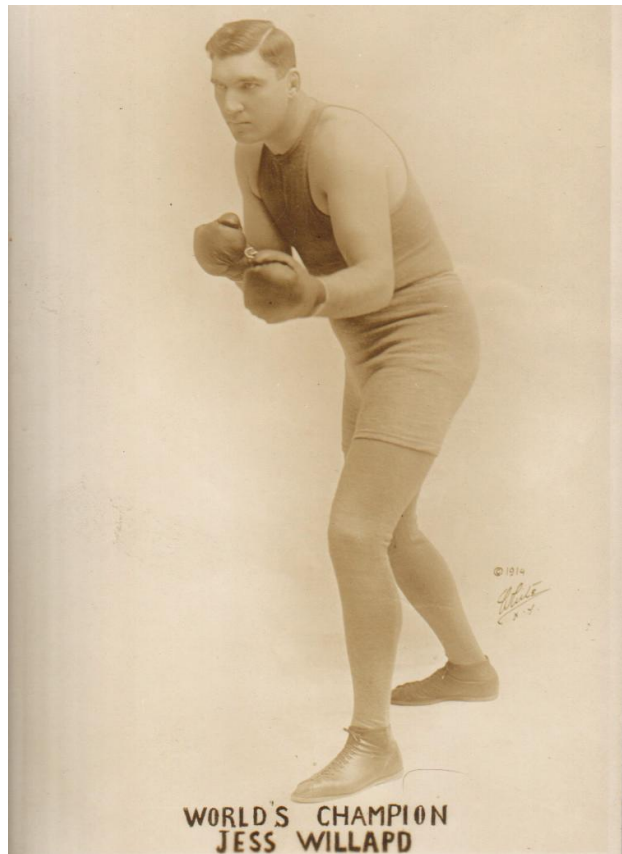


Figure 3: Photograph of professional boxer Jess Willard. "The Pottawatomie Giant," born in St. Clere Township, Pottawatomie County, Kansas. 1914. SOURCE: Boxrec.com biography of Jess Willard.

Neighboring town Emmett claimed that Jess Willard was born there, but then so did St. Clere. Back in 1919, while visiting Emmett, and before his loss to Jack Dempsey, Jess had given his old home town address as Emmett. Oliver Reynolds of St. Clere said there was a reason. He intimated that a few bullet holes in the side of an old building might have told the story. Emmett folks, however, said that it was because St. Clere was not on a railroad, while Emmett has the

¹⁰ Mace, 5.

¹¹ Tracy Callis, "The Pottawatomie Giant" *Cyberboxing.com*. Last accessed April 29, 2015.

¹² Scott Levenson, "1920's boxing," *www.Pro-boxingfan.com*. Last accessed May 6, 2015.

¹³ *The Emmett Citizen*: March 2, 1911.

distinction of being included on the Union Pacific time table.¹⁴ When driving through Emmett today, St. Clere Road intersects with Jess Willard Road (see Figure 4 below).



Figure 4: Photograph of road signs depicting Jess Willard Rd. and St. Clere Rd. in Emmett Township, Pottawatomie County, Kansas, 2015. Photograph by author.

Moving to Emmett

The locale of St. Clere today is too small to have its own postal zone, falling rather in the jurisdiction of the town of Emmett.¹⁵ When two towns are very close to each other we often find that one of the towns shuts down because the competing town takes its resources. There is not

¹⁴ Mace, 5

¹⁵ Mace, 3.

enough revenue going through the weaker town to have a stable economy. I strongly feel that St. Clere and Emmett have this type of relationship because they have had to compete for all resources such as residents, power and revenue. Emmett is located south of St. Clere, but they are very close together, as depicted by townships named for them on the map below (Figure 5). The town of Emmett was laid out in 1905 and was home to a lumber yard, bank and grocery store.¹⁶

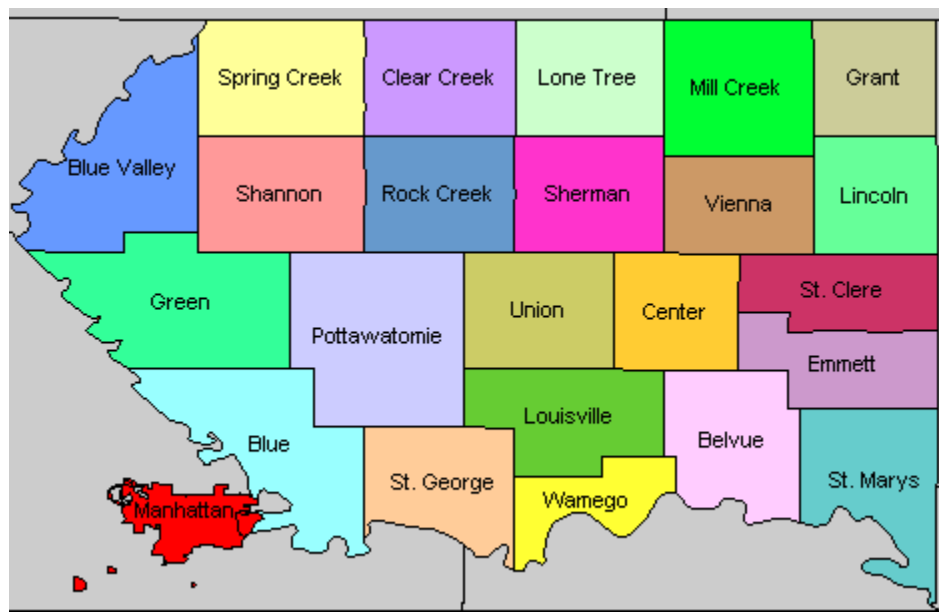


Figure 5: Map of Pottawatomie County, Kansas. 2010, SOURCE: Kansas Counties, Pottawatomie County, KSHS.com. You will find St. Clere and Emmett Townships on the eastern side of Pottawatomie County, Notice how close they are together.

Later in 1905, the Union Pacific railroad made its way through Emmett.¹⁷ On the following page is a map of the Union Pacific Railroad in relation to Emmett (Figure 6). According to historian Chris Butler, “By 1900, railroads had virtually revolutionized overland transportation and travel, helping to create a higher standard of living.”¹⁸ When Emmett was selected to have the railroad

¹⁶ Melvin Bruntzel, “Emmett,” in *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost, Found and Missing Towns and Places*, (2010).

¹⁷ Bruntzel, “Emmett,” and “St. Clere,” Pottawatomie County, in *Quick Reference to Kansas*.

¹⁸ Chris Butler, “The Flow of History For Railroads,” www.flowofhistory.com, accessed April 2015.

go through, many St. Clere residents moved there to be closer to the tracks. St. Clere had a post office until the railroad arrived in Emmett.¹⁹ Once the post office relocated south, town residents followed, causing economic turmoil within the small town of St. Clere. The general stores closed their doors.

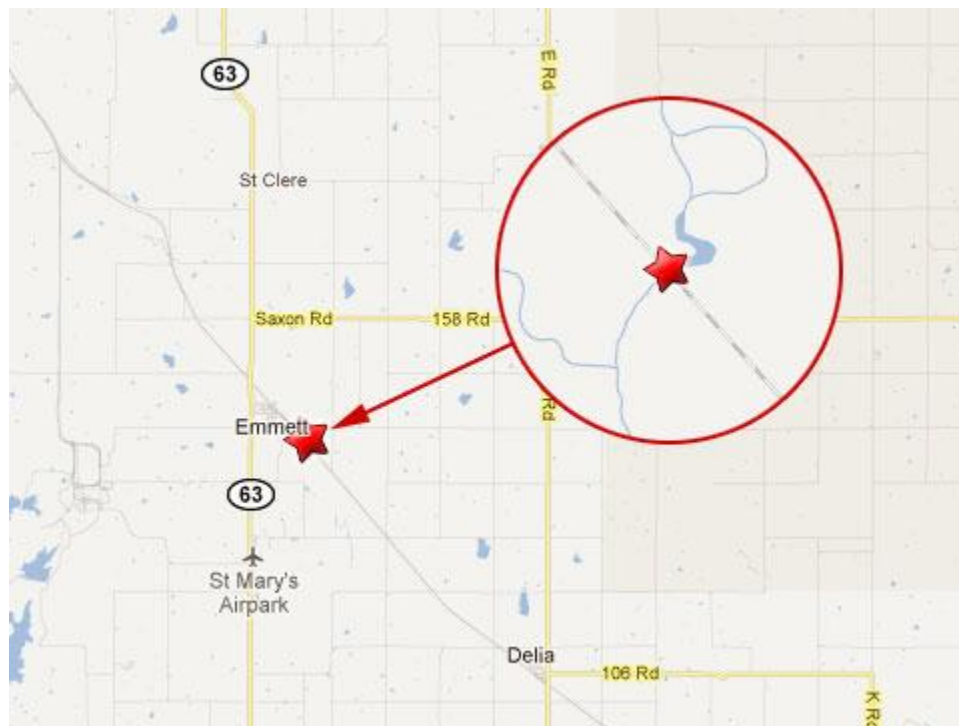


Figure 6: Map depicting the Union Pacific Railroad running diagonally across Pottawatomie County, Kansas. 2011. SOURCE: Union Pacific Coal Train, Emmett, Kansas, Gordan-elias.com. Notice how the Union Pacific railroad tracks run right through the small town of Emmett, Kansas, Pottawatomie County.

By the year 1920, the elections for St. Clere took a turn in a negative direction. St Clere had a trustee, treasure, clerk and a committee member, but two of the four were from Emmett.²⁰ The elected officials who represent a town are a large driving source for the strength of a town. Since the officials elected for St. Clere were from Emmett, it shows that the power and leadership of St. Clere were shifting to Emmett.

¹⁹ Mace, 3.

²⁰ *Onaga Herald*, July 29, 1920.

Crime in a Small Town

Crime was another factor that took a toll on St. Clere's livelihood. As I was looking through newspaper articles I found one to be extremely shocking, posted in *The Onaga Herald*: "Another St. Clere tragedy what may prove a fatal wound was inflicted on Jess Willard of St Clere, Kansas."²¹ It appears that Jess Willard was in the grocery store when he was attacked "Fennell entered and in fun pinched Willard's leg. The latter, who was in no mood for joking kicked at Fennell, at the same time making an insulting remark. Fennell drew a large knife and plunging it into Willard's side drew it across the abdomen, inflicting a terrible gash."²² Willard was then rushed to the hospital of Topeka. As early as 1901, it seems, writers were noting, "St. Clere is becoming notorious for its crime."²³ After reading this I looked deeper into the crime rates in St. Clere and although it was a very small town, the crime rate was noticeably high. According to the Chapman Center at Kansas State University Crime Map Project, the crime rates were high in Pottawatomie County from 1890-1930, which is nearly all of St. Clere's time of existence. Pictured on the following page is a map of the crime rates within Kansas as a whole; you will see the high numbers within Pottawatomie County (Figure 7). This crime rate almost certainly caused many residents to move from St. Clere to other locations.

²¹ *The Onaga Herald*, October 31, 1920.

²² *Kansas Agriculturalist*, October 31, 1901.

²³ *St. Mary's Star*, November 1, 1901.

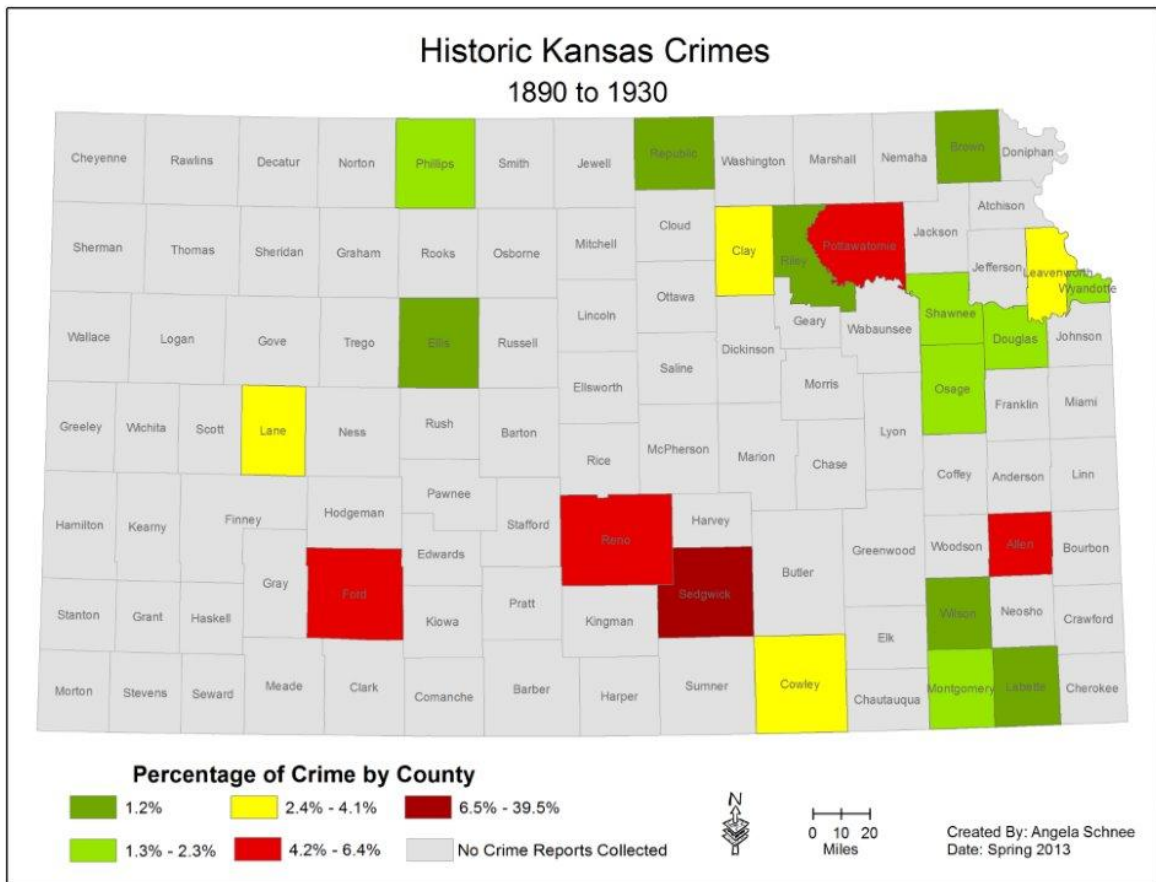


Figure 7: Map of crime rates within Kansas from 1890-1930. Notice that Pottawatomie County is in the 4.2%-6.4% of crime within the area. SOURCE: Schnee, Angela. Historic Kansas Crimes, 1890 to 1930. Chapman Center for Rural Studies Cartography Collection.

The history of vanished places like St. Clere help us better understand why settlers came to small town Kansas. These people had hopes and dreams of a better life and despite the hardships, St. Clere was a successful town in its peak before World War I. The general store, church and school help represent what was important to citizens of this small place. Looking at the old town site of St. Clere today, you can still feel the strong love for agriculture the past residents felt: there are yet beautiful fields filled with crops and pastures full of livestock. St. Clere may be gone forever, but the significance of St. Clere to Kansas history will not be forgotten.

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