

A Glimpse of Wheaton, Kansas, Pottawatomie County



Figure 1: Picture of Stone in front of Wheaton School. Taken By Cameron Barnes

Chapman Center for Rural Studies
By: Cameron Barnes
9/19/11

Every town generally follows the same pattern of formation: a person or group of people settles a portion of land, businesses are established and the town expands, both physically and culturally. But, all towns have their own

unique history. The town of Wheaton, Kansas in Pottawatomie County is considered to be one of Kansas' lost towns.



Figure 2: 1899 Map of Pottawatomie Kansas. Source:<http://www.skyways.org/counties/PT/>.

Wheaton is a town that once thrived, but over the years the population has declined, causing it to fall off the modern map. What follows provides a glimpse into Wheaton and its unique history.

Individuals of German heritage founded Wheaton in 1881.¹ Past Wheaton newspapers give the sense that it was truly a town on the rise. The town had three newspapers in its early years, The Exponent, The Monitor, and the Wheaton Tribune. These papers were full of not only local news, but also news from around the world. Articles discussed topics ranging from the work of the

Red Cross to Russian politics. Even a small Kansas town could stay connected to world happenings.

Wheaton was a growing town in the early 20th century. A 1903 newspaper article discussed the arrival and installation of telephone poles. This new technology allowed Wheaton to keep in touch with its neighboring towns and was also a sign of the changing times. That same year, Wheaton received another piece of technology that is often taken for granted today, a gasoline-powered engine to be used as the town's generator. Technological gains like these helped facilitate Wheaton's development.

Wheaton also flourished commercially during its prime. All three Wheaton newspapers were packed full of ads for a wide variety of local businesses, including ads for physicians, surgeons, blacksmiths and eye doctors. The early twentieth century papers also advertised items that are uncommon today, such as Winchester ammunitions and horse drawn carriages. Another advertisement promoted a business still in operation today, The Kufahl Hardware Store.

The hardware store has been in the hands of the Kufahl family for over a century. The Kufahls also own other local businesses still in operation today, such as the Kufahl Funeral Home. Reading through the old newspapers and talking to people from the town of Onaga, which is just a short drive from Wheaton, indicates that the Kufahl name has been synonymous with Wheaton from the beginning.

Another important business with Kufahl family connections is the Wheaton State Bank; a Kufahl family member served on the board at one time. Although small— in 1903 individual deposits totaled around fifty thousand dollars—the bank was able to give out loans and handle small investments for members of the community.

In 1909, Wheaton opened its first school in the vacated Baptist Church building. After consolidating with the Onaga School District in 1966, the Wheaton School closed, but the building still stands today. Wheaton students participated on men's and women's basketball teams, a football team, and a baseball team. On Thanksgiving Day 1921, the Wheaton High School football team lost to Onaga in the only game they ever played.

Perhaps the football teams early defeat was an omen for Wheaton's future. Although the town experienced rapid growth in the decades after its founding, it was unable to sustain this pattern of expansion. Eventually, businesses were shuttered and residents moved away, searching for better opportunities elsewhere. Wheaton's history tells the story of many Kansas communities. They began with giant spurts of growth and optimism, and then slowly began to wither away. This does not diminish their significance or make it any less important to tell their stories and record their histories. Without communities like Wheaton, Kansas would not be the same place it is today.

End Note

¹ “Local News,” Exponent, October 2, 1903, Reel Number W 2841, Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, KS.

² “Local News,” Exponent, October 9, 1903, Reel Number W 2841, Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, KS.

³ “Local News,” Exponent, October 2, 1903, Reel Number W 2841, Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, KS.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Local News,” Exponent, May 6, 1904, Reel Number W 2841, Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, KS.

⁶ “Local News,” Exponent, May 13, 1904, Reel Number W 2841, Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, KS.

⁸ Wheaton High School: Memory Book 1913–1966, 1983, Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, KS.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Sources

“Local News.” Exponent, October 2, 1903, Reel Number W 2841, Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, KS.

“Local News.” Exponent, May 6, 1904, Reel Number W 2841, Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, KS.

“Local News.” Exponent, May 13, 1904, Reel Number W 2841, Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, KS.

State Library of Kansas. Blue Skyways. Pottawatomie County. <http://www.skyways.org/counties/PT/>.

Wheaton High School 1913–1966. Kansas, 1983. Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, KS.