

A True Testimony of the American Dream:
Bodaville, Mayday Township of Riley County,
Kansas, 1885 – 1967



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Summary:

Bodaville as a town is the perfect embodiment of rural Kansas villages during the late 19th and early to mid 20th centuries. With the heart of the town being the general store, Bodaville was able to serve as both a home and stopping point for travelers. As with many of these western towns, the very things that kept the towns going would also be what brought them down, and Bodaville was no exception. This study includes sources such as interviews, newspapers, maps, photographs, and first hand accounts of the town of Bodaville.

You leave the shade and go down a shallow step and feel the cool, soft breeze brush by your face with the glare of the midday sun in your eyes. You look north and all you can see are bare, rolling hills and a simple road with two narrow, dirt ruts leading the way. You then look around in the other directions and see the exact same thing: a seemingly endless ocean of predominately-untouched prairie. What you just imagined is exactly what the people of Bodaville would have seen, and these rural towns were the heartbeat of the western United States all the way through the 1930s. Bodaville and other small Kansas towns alike were home to some of the most ambitious people this country has seen, but now most of these towns have become lost to history. For Bodaville, the presence of a store in the town, access to a church, relatively close proximity to a railroad, and numerous other aspects gave life; but some of these characteristics would be both the gift and the curse of Bodaville. This paper will highlight and focus on how Bodaville embodied the very essence of rural towns during the late 19th and early to mid 20th century, how it prospered, and what led it into its decline.

Bodaville is located in the northwest part of the Mayday Township in Riley County, Kansas and sits at the crossroads of Mayday Road and Boadville Road. The landscape surrounding Bodaville is primarily flint hills, which means that much of the land has rocky soil that is unsuited for farming. As such, many people, but not all, turned to raising cattle, which could graze on these prairie grasslands. Additionally, Bodaville was in the Blue River watershed of small streams and tributaries, a critical asset to those who settled there.

It all started with William Boda, a Prussian born immigrant, who is believed to have settled in Kansas around 1870 at only 26 years old.¹ In addition to being in a new country

¹ U.S. Federal Census of 1870, Riley County, Kansas, p. 8

and living in a new landscape, it appears Mr. Boda and his family were surrounded by an unusually high concentration of Swedish immigrants.² Despite the hurdles, William Boda was able to make more than a name for himself and create a legacy that would long live past him. The Boda family, consisting of William, his wife, and six children settled on a farm four miles north of Mayday and one mile south of Washington County around 1885.³

The first order of business was to have a building constructed, which would serve as a general store in the front and a home for the Bodas in the back. Mr. Wienck, a long time resident of the land around Bodaville, can recount times as a child when he visited what was then the Woehler general store with his friends to grab some ice cream or a nice cold drink.⁴ Additionally, he noted that the store would sell fresh meat almost daily. From the fond stories of Mr. Wienck as a child at the general store and the knowledge of how important having fresh meat would be for people, it's hard to not believe this was the center of the community and potentially one of the strongest forces holding Bodaville together. Coupled with the general store, there was a post office in the same building that ran for around 10 years from July 26, 1895 to December 31, 1905.⁵ While the addition of the post office would be highly useful to isolated Bodaville residents, it would also draw new people to settle Bodaville, too.

Later on, more buildings would be built such as a church, school⁶, barbershop, and a blacksmith shop, all of which helped bring people as day visitors to the town.⁷ One example of people being drawn to Bodaville is when a Mrs. Dahm and a Mrs. Fullerton drove to

² U.S. Federal Census of 1870.

³ Winifred N. Slagg, *Riley County Kansas*. Manhattan: Winifred N. Slagg, 1968.

⁴ Ivan Wienck, Ivan, informal Interview by author, Bodaville, Kansas, April 22, 2015.

⁵ Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas*.

⁶ *Standard Atlas of Riley County, Kansas*. Chicago: George A. Ogle & Co., 1909, p. 25.

⁷ *Salina Evening Journal*, April 27, 1908.

Bodaville in order to attend church services in 1921.⁸ While these women in particular had not moved to Bodaville, they probably brought business to the general store and took news of Bodaville happenings west into the communities of Clay County, where they lived. The presence of a barbershop and a blacksmith shop further suggest that Bodaville's town center likely served as more than just a place for the immediate residents to visit. With word of Bodaville spreading and access to a store, barbershop, and blacksmith, it's plausible that Bodaville served as a stop over point for people traveling by. The town site of Bodaville in addition to evidence of a church, school, and store can be seen in Figure 1 on the following page.

While it may begin to seem that Bodaville's purpose was simply as connecting point for people traveling from other small towns in Kansas, that couldn't be any further from the truth. Having around 50 people at its peak in 1910 may seem underwhelming today, but oral traditions and local newspaper accounts suggest that Bodaville was a strong community whose influence extended beyond the Riley County borders.⁹ A true testament of the sense of community and united nature of Bodaville is evident in the fact that they had a baseball team.¹⁰ The humbly sized town of Bodaville had a school team that would travel all the way out to Fact, located in Goshen Township of Clay County, Kansas, and may have played other school teams in the area as well.¹¹ Additionally, there are many accounts of regular visits to and from Bodaville for agricultural purposes, such as Henry Woehler and

⁸ "Fact," *Clay Center Times*, September 29, 1921.

⁹ Frank Wilson Blackmar, *Kansas*, (Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912).

¹⁰ Fact," *Clay Center Times*, June 2, 1910.

¹¹ Angela Schnee, *Ghost Towns of Clay County, Kansas*. Map. Chapman Center for Rural Studies, KSU, 2011.

Daniel Damm, farmers who “went over in an auto” to Clay Center in 1909, likely to attend a stock sale.¹²

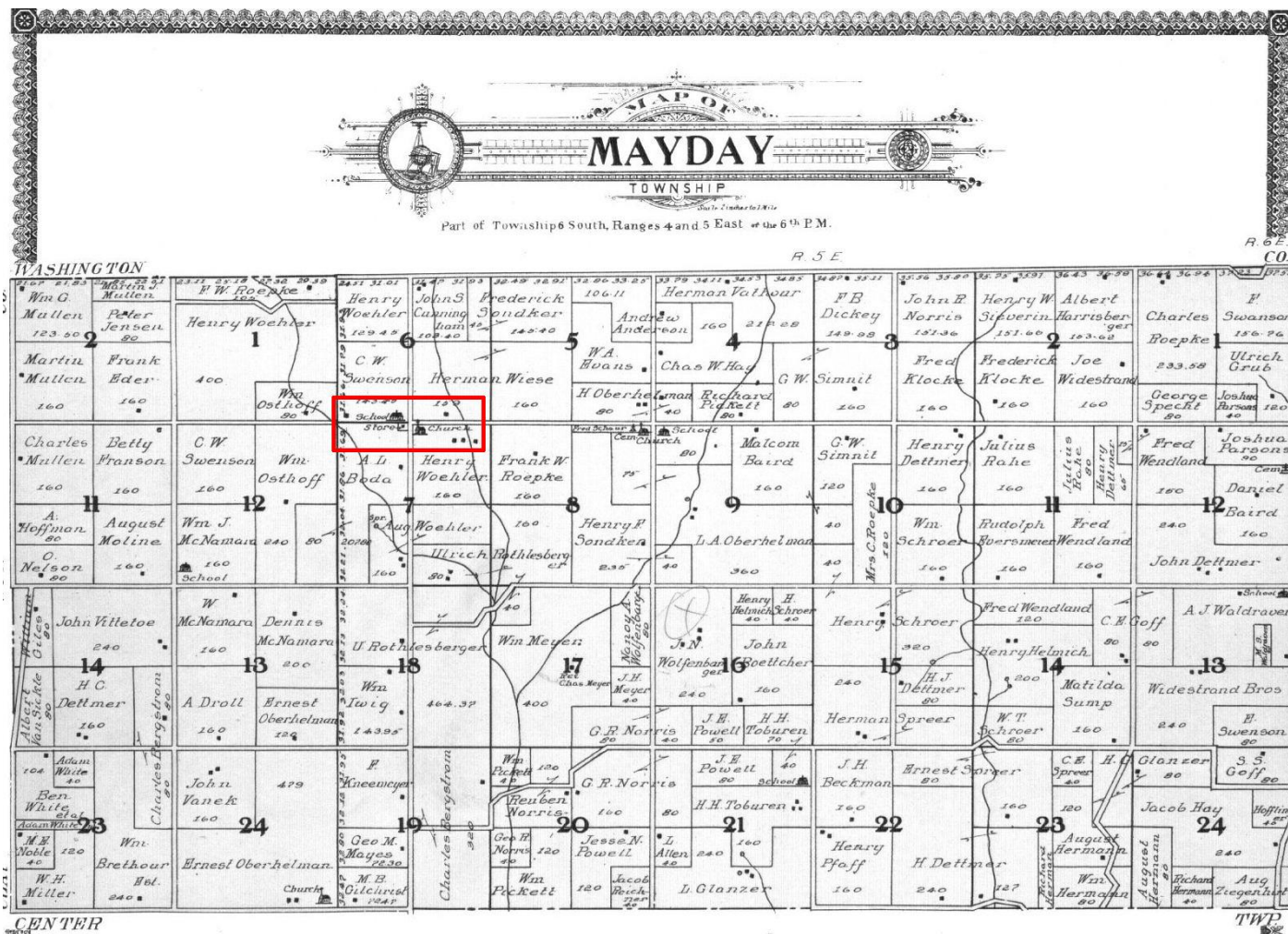


Figure 1: Map of Mayday Township in Riley County, Kansas showing the town-site of Bodaville in the northwest corner. Source: “Standard Atlas of Riley County, Kansas” Geo. A. Ogle & Co., comp. & publisher, Chicago, 1909. This plat map shows the location of Bodaville between sections six and seven on the map. A.L. Boda owns land just south of the town, showing there was still a Boda family presence in 1909. Note that there is also a store, school, and church marked in the town of Bodaville.

Connections can thus be made between Bodaville and countless areas around the town. These areas, to the west in Clay County in particular, had a uniquely dense

¹² “Fact,” *Clay Center Times*, Thursday, May 20, 1909.

population of Swedish settlers¹³, and on the 1909 map in Figure 1 there is a significant number of Swedish last names. It would appear that, from these connections, Bodaville was part of a larger Swedish settlement belt and had connections with other Swedish towns, such as Fact and Swedesburg, Clay County, Cleburne, Randolph, and Walsburg, Riley County, and Mariadahl and Olsburg in Pottawatomie County.¹⁴ This, in part, must be a critical reason why all these years after the last building of Bodaville was torn down, its presence as a landmark of memory is so strong.

While Bodaville had a baseball team, blacksmith shop, general store, church, school, and a post office for a perhaps three decades, it still went largely unsettled compared to other towns in northern Riley County. Because it was principally centered around a crossroads general store, Bodaville was largely supported first, by horse and wagon traffic and then by automobiles. A rail line never passed through or near Bodaville; but the store and local people probably depended on the town of Lasita about ten miles to the south -- and on its railroad.¹⁵ The Leavenworth, Kansas & Western Railroad, later sold to the Union Pacific Railroad, serviced Lasita from around 1881 until it was discontinued in 1935.¹⁶ The discontinuation of the railroad (see Figure 2 on the page below) certainly had deleterious effects on not only Lasita but also on the other towns that relied on it -- such as Bodaville.

¹³ James Shortridge, *Peopling The Plains: Who went Where in Frontier Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 107.

¹⁴ Personal communication from Ivan Wienck, April 22, 2015.

¹⁵ For a good sketch of Lasita, see Jeremiah Van Gilder, "Little Town on the High Prairie: Lasita, Riley County, Kansas, 1880-1935," Chapman Center for Rural Studies Lost Towns Archive, 2011.

¹⁶ Clayton, Donald. "Kansas Central Railroad." *QalaBist.com* (blog), May 14, 2011 (11:50 a.m.).

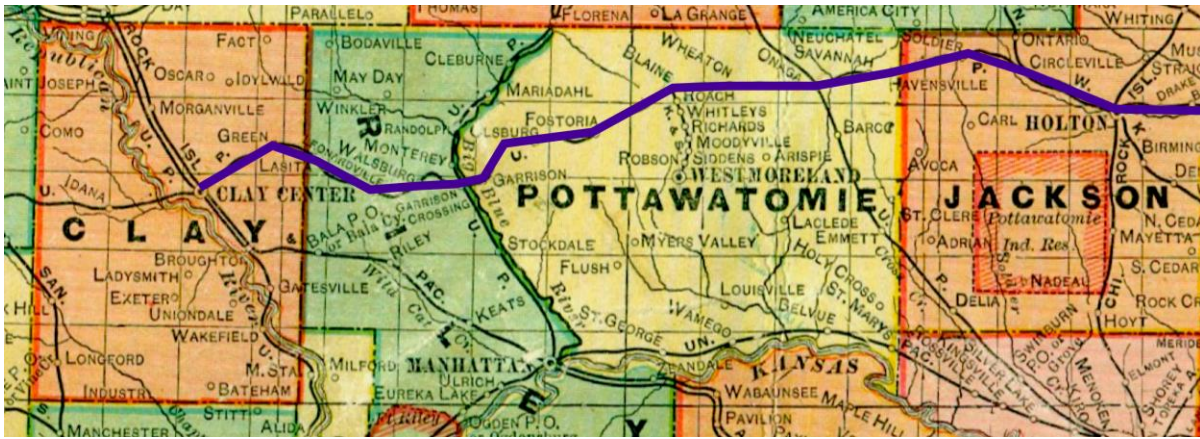


Figure 2: A map showing the Kansas Central Railroad before it became the Leavenworth, Kansas & Western Railway going through eastern Kansas. C. 1881 Source: Clayton, Donald. "Kansas Central Railroad." *QalaBist.com* (blog), May 14, 2011 (11:50 a.m.). Bodaville is visible in the top left corner of Riley County and the thick line crossing through the map represents the railroad. As visible through the map, once this railway was discontinued, it had a significant effect on Bodaville, eventually forcing the store out of business.

Some of the many challenges Bodaville would face during its time as a town included natural disasters. Bodaville's location, being in the northeast region of Kansas, meant that many of the tornados originating in the southwestern part of the country would typically move towards the town. As such, tragedy struck north-central Kansas on May 20th, 1896 when a tornado first roaring through Palmer, Washington County, became large enough to veer south towards Bodaville. It partially tore down the store and some buildings.¹⁷ This tornado in particular may have played a pivotal role in Bodaville's history not only because it was a major event preserved in records but also because it showed that Bodaville's persistence was stronger than the forces of the tornado. The funneling winds partially tore down the store and may have incited moments of discouragement, but the community of Bodaville displayed persistence and perseverance through this trying time. Although some Kansas newspapers reported that the "hamlet of Bodaville" was "entirely swept away," the tornado did not destroy the community.¹⁸ It actually showed the strength

¹⁷ "Churches Wrecked," *Humboldt Union* (Humboldt, KS), May 23, 1896.

¹⁸ See, for instance, the account in the *Salina Daily Republican Journal*, May 18, 1896.

of the local people who rebuilt. People died in Washington County, but none in Bodaville, and this may have helped the town survive.

In Bodaville's heyday it served a thriving Swedish farming landscape, and the town's influence stretched well past the people of Mayday Township. Experiencing damaging storms and tornado(s), losing access to a close railroad, and also losing critical buildings and businesses began to chip away at the little crossroads town. While the tornado didn't completely destroy it, such catastrophes did weaken it. Additionally, the loss of a nearby railroad during the Great Depression after the early loss of the post office in 1905 led Bodaville downhill (in 1905 local mail services were re-routed to Barnes in Washington County).¹⁹ As if that weren't enough, a fire burned down the Bodaville barbershop and blacksmith shop in 1908 after a gasoline stove exploded in the barber shop. This further compromised the appeal of Bodaville to outsiders; there is little evidence to suggest these businesses were rebuilt.²⁰ Today, Bodaville is a rural area marked only by a crossroads sign and with not much to show of what used to be a predominantly Swedish farming community with a church, store, and other small businesses. According to historian Melvin Bruntzel, the last building – the store – was torn down in the winter of 1967.²¹ Yet the people who live around Bodaville today remember it. Some of the land is still owned by members of the Boda family and by descendants of other early settlers such as the Woehlers.²² These people still carry the legacy and memories of the town, as they could

¹⁹ Melvin D. Bruntzel, "Bodaville," in *Quick Reference to Kansas, Lost—Found – Missing Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths*, Volume 2 (Belleville, Kansas: The Print Schop,, 2010).

²⁰ *Salina Evening Journal*, April 27, 1908.

²¹ Bruntzel, "Bodaville," *Quick Reference to Kansas*.

²² Personal communications to author, Ivan Wienck and the Henry Woehler family, Manhattan, Kansas.

guide the author right to it and share memories of it in its last decades. A photograph of what Bodaville looks like today can be seen below in Figure 3. In the end, the land remains, and for so many immigrants, land ownership in the New World was the core of the American Dream.



Figure 3: A picture of Bodaville on April 22, 2015. Photograph by author. This corner shot shows what modern day Bodaville looks like. Fields lie waiting for spring planting behind what used to be the town store. There is only around an acre left of the old town site, and some cement foundations signal the old store. All that marks the community is a small sign and a rock with the word, “Bodaville,” engraved on it (not visible in photograph).

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