

Little Town on the High Prairie:

Lasita, Riley County, Kansas 1880-1935



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¹ Cover photo: Lasita, Riley County, Kansas, ca. 1908. SOURCE: Alfin Backlund, from the Hemme Backlund *Martin* Collection, courtesy of Donald Clayton and Qala Bist.com.

Lost Kansas Communities, Dr. M.J. Morgan

How does a town get its name? Often it gets named for a famous person or person important to the town founders, or geographic feature, or it gets named for a place that reminds people of home. But what about something someone says when they get to the town site? Well the story of Lasita begins with how the town got its name. The main story of Lasita, though, is like so many other small towns that were established in Kansas in the late nineteenth century, it lived and died by the post office and railroad. This paper will focus on Lasita as a case study for a typical turn of the 20th century rural town where the railroad influenced the establishment and prosperity of the town, and the automobile and Great Depression influenced the demise.

Lasita was located in Fancy Creek Township in western Riley County, Kansas, shown in Figures 1 & 2. The area is in the Flint Hills and bluestem prairie region in Kansas, an area of rolling hills cut by small streams and dominated by the tall Big and Little Bluestem grasses.² This area relatively devoid of any wooded areas, except around the larger streams and rivers, and so the view from a high point, such as the Lasita town site, would have been open such that the land could have been seen for miles. It is not hard to imagine then that when the town founder, Michael Senn, and his family arrived, one of his daughters, according to local explanation, would exclaim “What a site!”³ This exclamation would devolve into “The site” and eventually to the name of the town, “Lasita,” (pronounced “La-site-a”) which is French for “The site.” The town site and original Senn homestead sit atop Oswego silt loam, which is common to the high prairie

² Homer E. Socolofsky & Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), Map 5.

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

where Lasita sits and is a type of dark rich soil that very good for agricultural use.⁴ This area would have been a prime location for farmers, and so the needs of those farmers, especially grain storage/shipping and post and merchandise needs, would have made having a nearby community with those assets quite useful.

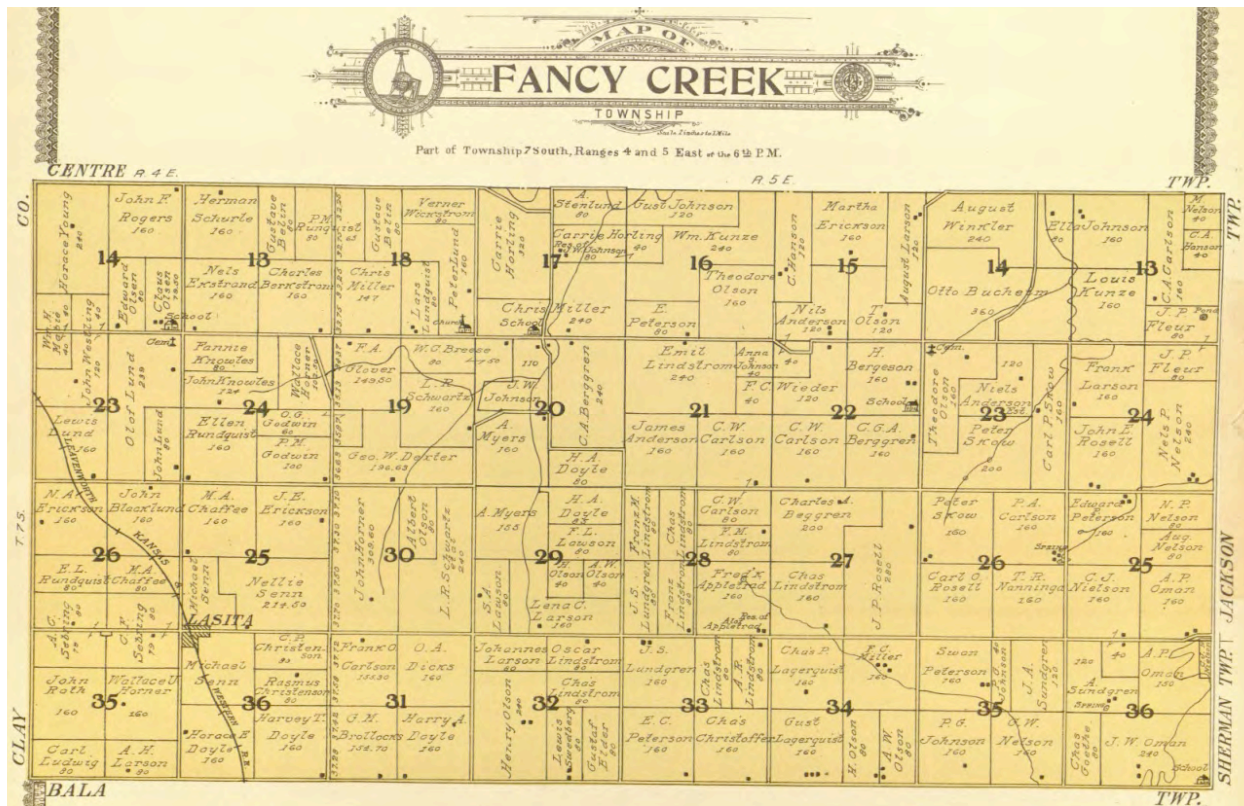


Figure 1. Fancy Creek Township plat map, Lasita is in the lower left. SOURCE: “Standard Atlas of Riley County, Kansas” George A. Ogle & Co., comp. & publisher Chicago, 1909.

⁴ William T. Carter, jr. and Howard C. Smith, “Soil Survey of Riley County Kansas,” in *Field Operations of the Bureau of Soils, 1906: Eighth Report*, by Milton Whitney, Chief (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908) 924-927. And: Clayton, Donald, “Mapping Lasita, Kansas,” *Qala Bist.com*, last modified April 30th, 2011, <http://qalabist.com/?p=1431>.

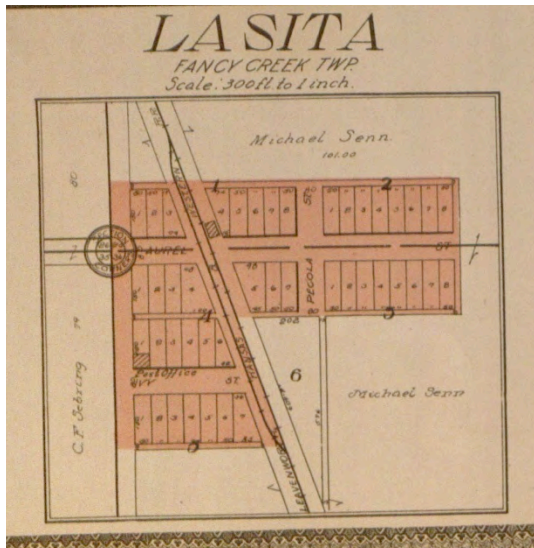


Figure 2. Lasita town plat map. SOURCE: “Standard Atlas of Riley County, Kansas” George A. Ogle & Co., comp. & publisher Chicago, 1909.

Luckily for the farmers, Michael Senn was an entrepreneur with business-building experience. He had come to Kansas in 1858, moving to Enterprise in Dickinson County where he had relatives already living. After serving in a Kansas regiment during the American Civil War, he returned to Enterprise and established a store in 1869. In October of 1877 he purchased that land where Lasita would be established and named about 1880. He opened a general store on his property, shown in Figure 3, southeast of the cemetery and across the road from the schoolhouse, which were already present when Senn arrived, and then convinced the Kansas Central Railroad Company to run their line, already en route to Clay Center to the west, through his newly formed town.⁵

⁵ All Michael Senn biographical information from: Mary F. J. Roberts & Elaine W. Olney, *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie* (Manhattan: Riley County Genealogical Society, 1976), 452.



Figure 3. Senn Store, Lasita, Riley County, Kansas, Interior showing merchandise and Frank Lund, ca. 1906. SOURCE: Alfin Backlund, Photographer, from the Hemme Backlund *Martin* Collection, courtesy of Donald Clayton and Qala Bist.com.

Having a railroad line through town helped Lasita, like so many other small towns on the prairie, prosper. The railroad line, completed through Lasita in 1881, allowed for the town to be useful to the local farmers. For example, an elevator and mill was built to serve the storage, shipping, and livestock feeding needs of the locals. The elevator, as seen in Figure 4, also provided coal and flour for sale.⁶ Also built were stockyards, a creamery, a blacksmith shop, and an expansion of the Senn store.⁷ The growth even allowed for the construction of a new two-story schoolhouse in 1892, seen in Figure 5, built by a local farmer and a few hired hands.⁸

⁶ Donald Clayton, e-mail message to author, April 28th, 2011. And: Donald Clayton, "Lasita, Kansas," *Qala Bist.com*, last modified April 28th, 2011, <http://qalabist.com/?p=1408>.

⁷ Town growth information from: Roberts & Olney, *Pioneers*, 452.

⁸ Donald Clayton, "Lasita, Kansas – Buildings," *Qala Bist.com*, last modified April 29th, 2011, <http://qalabist.com/?p=1422>.



Figure 4. Lasita, Riley County, Kansas, ca. 1908, looking northeast through town, “Shell Mill & Grain Co.” elevator in background. SOURCE: Alfin Backlund, Photographer, from the Hemme Backlund *Martin* Collection, courtesy of Donald Clayton and Qala Bist.com.



Figure 5. Schoolhouse #47, in Lasita, Riley County, Kansas, ca. 1897. SOURCE: Alfin Backlund, Photographer, from the Hemme Backlund *Martin* Collection, courtesy of Donald Clayton and Qala Bist.com.

Having a railroad through the town coupled with the growth and prosperity of the town allowed for the successful petition for a post office in Lasita. The Lasita post office was

established on May 2nd, 1892 with Charles Sebring being the first postmaster.⁹ The post office was built on the south side of Lasita near to the general store and on the north-south road through town.¹⁰ It was a small post office but did offer money orders and daily mail service because of the railroad.¹¹ By the end of the 19th century, with the addition of the new school and post office, Lasita had become a prosperous little community.

Even with the services located there, Lasita was never truly a town. Few people actually lived in Lasita, mostly just those who owned or operated the services there; in 1910, at the height of prosperity, only 35 people lived in Lasita.¹² Lasita was really just a community of the local farmers, useful because it was close and convenient and because their children went to school there. Even the school remained small throughout its life, never reaching above 30 students.¹³ It became unlikely that Lasita would grow much bigger, because there were more services offered in the nearby towns of Leonardville in Riley County and Green in Clay County. These towns and others also nearby, had larger urban populations and offered services like banks, restaurants, hotels, and churches-all services that Lasita would never have. Even so, the town of Lasita hung on into the 20th century, past World War 1 and into the 1930's. But the arrival of the automobile and the Great Depression would signal the end of Lasita.

⁹ Baughman, Robert W., *Kansas Post Offices: May 29, 1828-August 3, 1961* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1961), 71.

¹⁰ *Standard Atlas of Riley County, Kansas* (Chicago: George A. Ogle & Co., 1909), 65.

¹¹ Frank W. Blackmar, ed., *Kansas: A Cyclopedia of State History, Embracing Events, Institutions, Industries, Counties, Cities, Towns, Prominent Person, Etc.* Volume II (Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912), 106.

¹² *Ibid*, 106.

¹³ Jim Bogart, et. al., *Rural Schools of Riley County Kansas* (Manhattan: Riley County Historical Society, 2004), 162, 165, 168.

The rising availability of automobiles in the early 20th century caused changes in how rural people operated. They were no longer bound by how far a horse and buggy could take them in a day or how far they could walk. Autos allowed the rural people to travel rapidly to towns that used to be a train ride away, and on their own schedule. For Lasita, this meant that nearby Green and Leonardville with their greater services, and even the city of Manhattan, became much more appealing. For example, the local farmers could now take their grain to bigger markets more easily, and while there patronize the other services in those towns that Lasita could not offer them. The auto also changed how the post office operated, with consolidations becoming common.¹⁴ The Lasita post office hung on into the 1930's but was officially closed on March 30, 1935.¹⁵

The Great Depression also caused significant problems for the railroad companies and Lasita. Railroad operations were cut back across the country, and non-main lines were cut down to save money. The rail line through Lasita was one of those cut. The railway through Lasita had never been intended to be a main-line track and had been constructed as a narrow gauge line, but was soon widened to standard gauge track, although the widening caused problems with speed and freight reductions because it was done poorly.¹⁶ By the 1910's the railroad was having trouble competing financially with other rail lines in the area, and by 1934 service on the line

¹⁴ Automobile information from: Berger, Michael L., *The Devil Wagon in God's Country* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979), 36-102.

¹⁵ Baughman, *Kansas Post Offices*, 77.

¹⁶ Harold Crimmins, *A History of the Kansas Central Railway, 1871-1935* (Emporia, Kansas: Kansas State Teachers College, 1952), 4-30.

through Lasita had been reduced to just three times per week each way.¹⁷ The final service for the line that had operated since 1881 occurred on January 10, 1935.¹⁸

Without a railroad to serve the elevator, and a post office to draw residents, Lasita rapidly declined. The school survived only a short while longer, but by 1945 declining enrollment caused the remaining students to be sent to another school in the area the school closed officially in 1949.¹⁹ The closing of the school signified the final end of the town of Lasita.

In 2011, all that is left of the town of Lasita (located at what is now the intersection of Lasita Road and Senn Road) is the cemetery and the elevator which sits unused, shown in Figure 7 and 8. There is a historical marker near the cemetery that was placed in 2005 by the Riley County Historical Society, shown in Figure 9.

Lasita, like so many other rural towns at the turn of the 20th century, lived and died by the railroad. It began with the idea of providing convenient services to the local farmers, and a community for people to gather and associate themselves with.

¹⁷ Crimmins, *A History*, 32-34

¹⁸ Crimmins, *A History*, 34.

¹⁹ Bogart, *Rural Schools*, 72, 174.



Figure 7. Elevator in Lasita, Riley County, Kansas, looking to the northwest, April 30, 2011. SOURCE: Photograph by Author.



Figure 8. “Lasita” sign, Lasita, Riley County, Kansas, looking southwest, the store and post office would have been seen in the background, April 30, 2011. SOURCE: Photograph by Author.



Figure 9. Historical marker at the southeast corner of the cemetery, Lasita, Riley County, Kansas, April 30, 2011. SOURCE: Photograph by Author.

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