

From Prairie to Pasture

May Day, Riley County, Kansas 1857-1969
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Figure 1: Photograph of May Day school house circa. 2012
Source: Personal Collection of Andrew Garver
An image of what is left of the one room schoolhouse that
was built for the children of Northwestern Riley County near the town of May Day.

This study is about the small town of May Day, Riley County, Kansas. It includes interviews, early maps of the town site, and photographs of how the town stands right now.

The Beginning of May Day

Imagine a sea of grass that goes on for miles, cresting and waving in the strong winds of the mixed prairie. The only trees you can see are peppered along a small creek, twisting and turning through the hills like a snake slithering across the jungle floor. Beneath your feet lies the thick, dark, mineral rich soil of the Blue River Valley. Above you is the seemingly endless sky, as blue and clear as a mountain creek. This is where the first settlers of May Day, Kansas decided to stop and begin a community. Little did they know that the place in which they chose, though beautiful, would lead to their little town's ultimate demise.

Frank Droll and Ralph Niehenke were the first to settle near the future site of May Day in 1857¹. Settling near the crossroads of two wagon trails near the west branch of Fancy Creek in northern Riley County, Kansas, these two German immigrants were soon followed by several other pioneers looking for a spot near the creek. The area around Fancy Creek was blessed with rich topsoil that had slowly built up its fertility over thousands of years. According to legend, Fancy Creek was named because the water was so clear that it looked as if it danced across the rocks². Primarily living in dugouts until better housing could be provided, the settlers of May Day were farmers. Resting two and a half miles east of the Clay County line and five miles south of the Washington County line, the town of May Day was born. Although not named until 1871, there were always people around the town site. The trails that criss crossed through this part of the county soon gave way to roads, which meant that traffic would be more abundant. In 1871 the first general store was built by Solomon Weichselbaum on the northwest corner of the crossroads. Soon after, John Sebring built a competing general store on the southeast corner of

¹ Slagg, *Riley County Kansas, A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers* (Manhattan, Kansas: Winifred N. Slagg, 1968), 244-245.

² Landon, Jan. *The Topeka Capital Journal*, May 1 1996, .

the crossroads³. These two stores would prove to be the lifeblood of May Day in the coming years.

May Day officially became a town as defined by the state of Kansas on May 1st, 1871⁴. The story of how the town got the name “May Day” is an interesting and somewhat drawn out story. The people that had settled around the town site and were engaging in commerce with the local general stores decided that they needed to have a post office. Mr. Asahel Edgerton, one of the first to settle near the west bend of Fancy Creek, began writing to the United States postal department. Mr. Edgerton was a veteran of the Civil War and a prominent farmer/rancher in the area. In 1876 he was elected into the State legislature. Originally the town or post office was to be named Stanton. The government denied that name due to the fact that it was already in use. Next, they submitted the name Edgerton after Asahel. That too, was the name of another town in Kansas. So the town’s people got together and Mr. Edgerton suggested the town be named May Day due to the fact that the post office would open on the first of May, 1871. With great pride, the people of the town of May Day would claim the only town of that name in the entire country. Winkler, a town that was situated five miles east of May Day, was also trying to get a post office as well. The people of Winkler petitioned the postal service about how close the two post offices would be, but to no end. Both eventually became post offices.⁵

Accompanying the two stores in the beginning were three houses including a two story house owned by a Doctor Silverthorn, the doctor for the area⁶. Dr. Silverthorn would go on to make a name for himself by becoming the Rock Island Line (railroad in the area) division

³Riley County, Kansas, Plat Map, 1881. Copy available at Riley County Historical Society.

⁴ Slagg, *Riley County Kansas, A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers* (Manhattan, Kansas: Winifred N. Slagg, 1968), 244-245.

⁵ Slagg, *Riley County Kansas, A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers* (Manhattan, Kansas: Winifred N. Slagg, 1968), 246-247

⁶Ibid.

surgeon⁷. The town was set around the crossroads of county highway number 376 (now Fancy Creek Road) and 1600 Road West (now May Day Road) which was pivotal for the commerce of the small town. The May Day school was built in 1867 being dubbed District # 28⁸, and is to this day the only structure left standing from the small hamlet. The school is located about one mile east of the town site on Fancy Creek Road. Two churches were in the area. The United Brethren Church was located one mile west of the crossroads and had a cemetery next to it⁹. It has since been destroyed. Located a mile north and half mile west was The Wesley Chapel (Methodist) and was sold and moved to Belvue, Kansas.

Coming of the 20th Century

Painting a picture of the hamlet of May Day, Kansas just before the turn of the century is that of a sleepy little town with a few shops and a couple of houses nestled in the endless sea of wheat and prairie. The home of the Byarlay's stood on the northeast corner of the crossroads and just north of that was Dr. Silverthorns two story office/house. In 1884, Mr. Weichselbaum's store on the northwest corner of the crossroads burned to the ground. This left the store of John Sebring as the only store until 1898 when Nataniel Osborne bought it and moved it to just north of the Weichselbaum corner and built a large store¹⁰. These few buildings that served hundreds of people for fifty years were about to get a technological boost that would mean the beginning of the end for this small town.

⁷ Morrow, Darnell, . *Wichita Eagle*, 1971.

⁸ Slagg, *Riley County Kansas, A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers* (Manhattan, Kansas: Winifred N. Slagg, 1968), 246-247

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Slagg, *Riley County Kansas, A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers* (Manhattan, Kansas: Winifred N. Slagg, 1968), 246-247

With the advent of the automobile, the Kansas small town would be changed forever. The automobile came onto the scene in the early 20th century and warped the small town lifestyle considerably. It took away the wagon ride day, which was when you only had a day to get into town to get supplies, so the town needed to be close enough to get there and get back within a day. The automobile made this a thing of the past. With a car you could travel farther and faster than in a horse drawn buggy/wagon¹¹. Not everything about the automobile hurt the town of May Day. Having a better way to get food in and out made the town a hot trading spot during the 1920's and 30's. Farmers would come and sell or trade cream, eggs, and poultry to the store owners who would ship them out to Clay Center to be sold¹². Mrs. J.M. Byarlay started a store out of the bottom of her house in 1909 that sold everything, including gas¹³. This created a stop on the road between the small towns and farms and the largest closest town, Clay Center made May Day a stopping point as well as a hangout for the people of the Northwestern part of Riley County. Even during World War II, convoys headed west would stop off and get gas and snacks in the little hamlet of May Day¹⁴. This process took a few decades but once the automobile became widespread throughout the country and the county, the small town die off began.

¹¹ M.J. Morgan, class lecture notes, History 533, Kansas State University, February 2012

¹² Shaner, Sue Lynne. "Country store fades into past." *Manhattan Mercury*, November 23, 1969.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Janeil Sullivan, interview by Andrew Garver , Riley, Kansas, April 28, 2012.

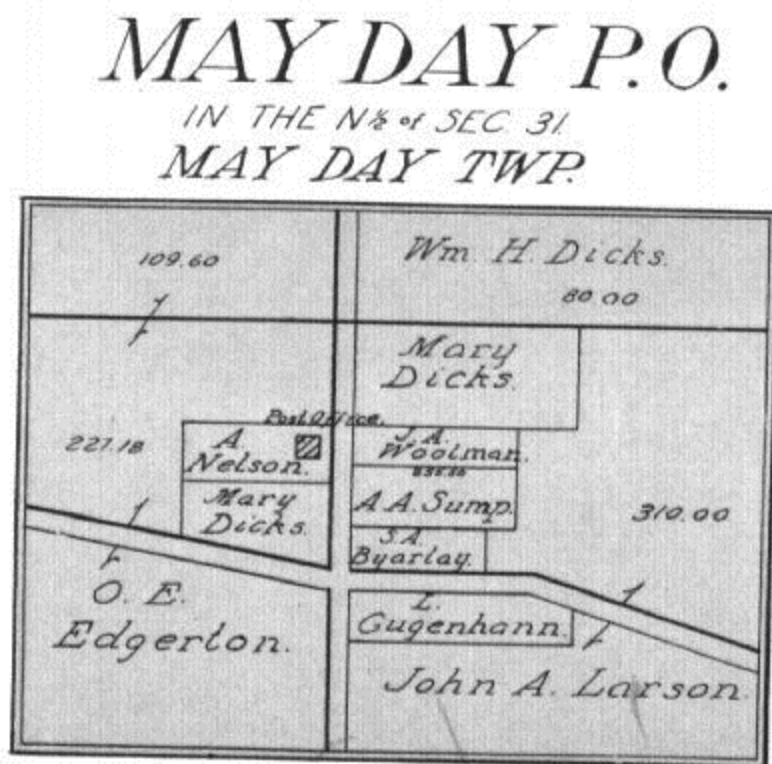


Figure 2. May Day Plat Map. circa 1909

Source: Standard Atlas of Riley County, Kansas" George A. Ogle & Co., comp. & publisher Chicago, 1909

This is the Plat map of May Day in 1909. Notice the crossroads that make up the town, this was how MayDay was built from day one.

Water was scarce in this part of the county as it is on the high plains, and only a few babbling brooks and small streams twisted and turned throughout the rocky hills. Water for the town was drawn from May Day springs, just down the hill from the town site. This spring is still there today and feeds a creek that runs into Fancy Creek.

The beginning of the end

The entrance of the automobile created a void in the town of May Day's commerce that was truly the beginning of the end for the small town. May Day was fading as a town. With all the land being owned around the town and in the Center Township, migration of new people had all but stopped in 1909, as in accordance with the 1909 Plat Map¹⁵. With no one new coming to settle, the lines were drawn.

In 1951 the Big Blue River flooded in July. The Kansas River basin received an average of eight inches of rain over a four day period affecting over 116 cities and towns up and down the basin. This catastrophic event caused the Army Corps of Engineers to draw up a plan to build a series of dams along the Kansas River basin to combat floods of this magnitude for years to come. Construction of Tuttle Creek Dam was started in the fall of 1952 and by its completion date in 1962 the dam had taken out ten towns in the Blue River Valley. Winkler, which was five miles from May Day was one of them¹⁶. This began a chain reaction that could not be stopped. The removal of Winkler and the peoples of the area made May Day one of the only small towns in this part of the country.

The son of Mrs. J.M. Byarlay, Linn Byarlay, was appointed postmaster of May Day in 1928. He held this position until the office was closed down on February 15, 1954¹⁷. In an interview with the Manhattan Mercury in 1969, Mr. Byarlay told how every May 1st the post office would be flooded with mail from all over the world. Collectors would send letters to pass through the small town post office for the name, May Day¹⁸. Mr. Byarlay would be up at

¹⁵ Riley County, Kansas, Plat Map, 1909. Copy available at Riley County Historical Society.

¹⁶ Army Corps of Engineers, "History." Last modified 07 July 2011. Accessed May 1, 2012. <http://www.nwk.usace.army.mil/tc/History.cfm>.

¹⁷ Shaner, Sue Lynne. "Country store fades into past." *Manhattan Mercury*, November 23, 1969.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

midnight on April 30th sorting and marking the mail for delivery the next morning¹⁹. Being the only town in the country with the name May Day really brought the post in, but there is no record of there ever being a May Day celebration in the town.

Surviving Memories

Being on the site of where this little town once stood is like standing on the crossroads of a country. This town, at its peak was a place where local farmers could come and catch up, sell their goods, and get supplies. Nothing remains in the original town site, but if you go a half mile west there is a cemetery with many old headstones tucked into the rolling Kansas fields. A mile to the east is the one room schoolhouse that was part of the 1965 Unified Districts act that collaborated all of the one room schools into a larger area²⁰. This proud structure is a testament to the pioneers that came and settled this area. The last building left in May Day was the old Byarlay store which closed in 1969²¹. It was torn down and a new road was built over it. May Day was a cumulative community filled with farmers and entrepreneurs that fell because of the progress our society experienced in its 83 year existence.

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¹⁹ Landon, Jan. *The Topeka Capital Journal*, May 1 1996, .

²⁰ Slagg, *Riley County Kansas, A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers* (Manhattan, Kansas: Winifred N. Slagg, 1968), 246-247

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