

Henry Moehlman's Dream: Moehlman Bottoms, Riley County, Kansas, 1854-1951

Katie Brummett

History 533

Lost Kansas Communities

Dr. M. J. Morgan

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

Kansas State University

Fall 2011

This paper chronicles the story of Henry Moehlman and the development of Moehlman Bottoms in Riley County, Kansas. Includes effects of natural disasters, early Kansas rural education, historical photos, and present day maps and pictures of Moehlman Bottoms.

Imagine yourself a new immigrant to the United States of America in the late 1840s. As a vibrant teenager, you start your journey to America. After a seven-week voyage across the Atlantic, you are in a young, prosperous country full of possibilities. However, the land you have come to is very different from your homeland of Prussia.<sup>1</sup> The opportunities abound, yet you search to find the perfect place to settle and live the life you have always dreamed. These are the footsteps and memories of many immigrants, but those of Henry Moehlman in particular. In 1854, he arrived in the southern part of Riley County, Kansas. This area of Kansas is known as the Flint Hills, which stretch from north to south across the state.<sup>2</sup> For a narrow section in eastern-central Kansas, the native vegetation is that of the Northern Floodplain Forest, which scrapes through the southern part of Riley County.<sup>3</sup> These two things create an undulating landscape with several trees, beneficial to some farming, especially in the river lowlands. The precipitation in this region also contributes to farming and subsistence with approximately 30 to 32 inches of annual rainfall.<sup>4</sup> Climate and geography obviously play a large role in settlement, but for Kansas, one should not forget the presence of trails and military roads. Settlement falls along these paths due to the continual presence of people. The Ft. Leavenworth-Ft. Riley Military Road proceeds just next to Manhattan, creating the possibility of other Riley County settlements and a way to move westward from Kansas City and eastern states.<sup>5</sup> While this may

---

<sup>1</sup> *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie*. Manhattan, KS: Riley County Historical Society, 1976, pg 406.

<sup>2</sup> Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988. Map 3: Landforms of Kansas.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, Map 5: Native Flora of Kansas.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, Map 4: Precipitation in Kansas.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, Map 17: Trails Through Pre-territorial Kansas

seem like common sense when it comes to settlement patterns, it is important to explain because it mirrors Henry Moehlman's reasons for settling where he did, just south of Manhattan. The rationale behind his choice for the location of what became Moehlman Bottoms and the effects of his presence in that area, such as architecture and schools, provide a familiar, yet unique tale of an immigrant in America.

### **Bottomland Geography**

There are many important factors for where people choose to settle; geography is one of the most influential. Geography includes terrain, water resources, and climate, all of which help a newcomer determine whether a certain area is fit for survival. There are many different geographical situations deemed worthy of settlement, including productive land next to or near a water source. An example of such an area is "bottomland". Bottomlands are "low-lying land along a watercourse"<sup>6</sup>, making excellent farmland. Many times, pioneers decide on the name of a newly settled place by using the geography as a guide (e.g., "Mount" or "Mt." for a mountain). These places are referred to as "toponyms". Therefore, Moehlman *Bottoms* refers to a geographical area where there is low land next to water. Along the Kansas (Kaw) River, there are plenty of these fertile sites; however, these locations are desirable in the Flint Hills because they are most suitable for farming (i.e., they are flat and have a water source nearby). Moehlman Bottoms is south of Manhattan, Kansas, and north of the river. This area is flat and hills border the region, as seen in the in Figures 1 and 2 on page 3 and Attachment A on pages 10 and 11. The Riley County bottomlands are particularly unique because not only are they easy to farm, but also because high-quality clay and limestone could be quarried. These materials are the early

---

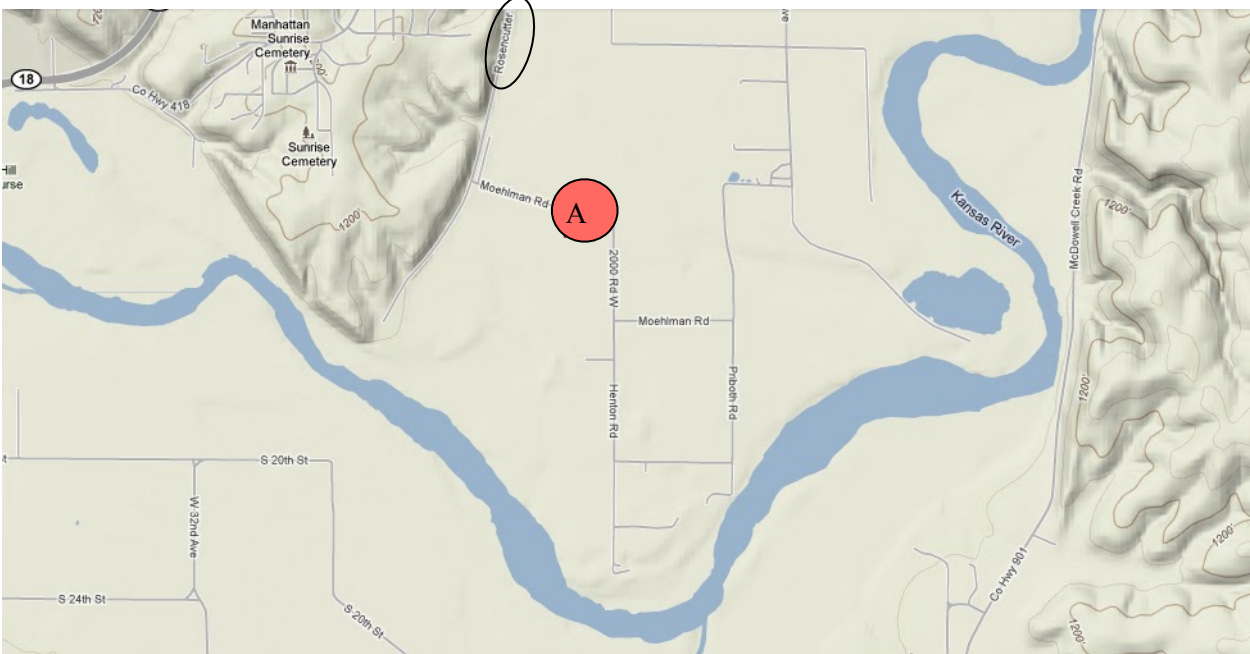
<sup>6</sup> Merriam-Webster. "Bottomland - Definition."

construction materials of Moehlman Bottoms and Manhattan.<sup>7</sup> While the closeness of the Kansas River proves to be suitable to farming, there is the very real threat of flooding in a low-lying area. This is evident by the numerous floods Moehlman Bottoms, and even Manhattan, experienced. The two most devastating floods for the region were in 1903 and 1951. The flood of

**Figure 1.** A terrain map of Moehlman Bottoms, present day.

SOURCE: Google Maps

Note: The red "A" dot marks the site of Moehlman Bottoms, near Moehlman Road and Rosencutter Road is circled near the top.

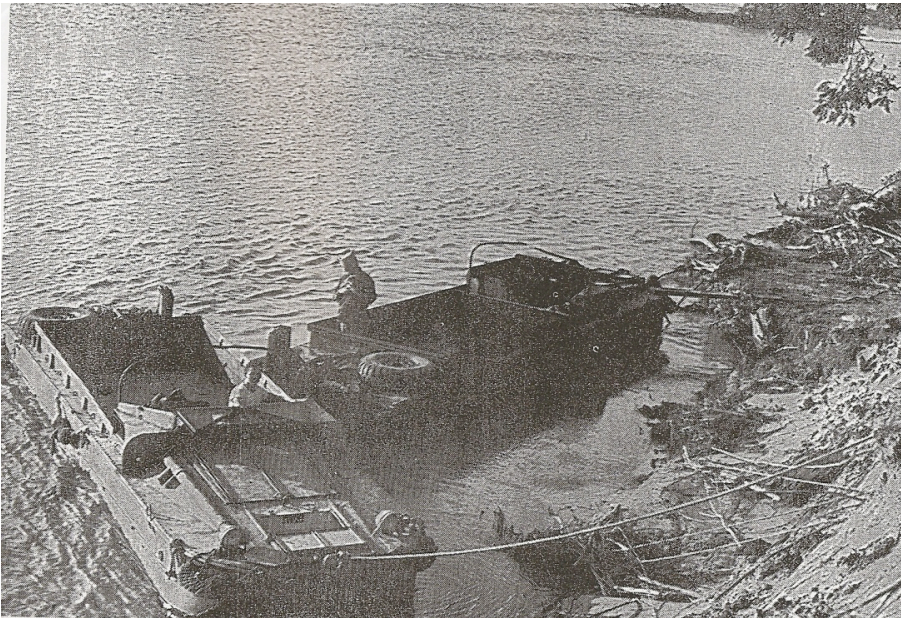


**Figure 2.** A photograph (by author) of Moehlman Bottoms looking east, December 7, 2011.

Note: The flat fields have been plowed for farming and there are hills behind them.

---

<sup>7</sup> United States Department of the Interior National Park Service. "Nineteenth Century Development of Manhattan, Kansas: 1855-1900." p. 4.



**Figure 3.** A photograph of two Army Engineer land and water "ducks" helping rescue stranded livestock in Moehlman Bottoms immediately after the 1951 flood.

SOURCE: A Picture Record of the Great Flood of 1951(book)

Note: The engineers are docked at an island with flooded farmland around them.

1903 affected many houses and the school to the point of necessary repairs for operation. This same flood also caused the Kansas River to move, changing the landscape enormously. The 1951 flood caused more destruction than many previous floods in this area. During this one, the

Moehlman Bottoms School was wiped out. Much of the farmland was destroyed due to mud and sand deposits and livestock had to be saved, as shown in Figure 3 on this page. After natural disasters such as these, it is not uncommon for people to move away. This occurred with Moehlman Bottoms.<sup>8</sup> Even though it is still farmland, it is no longer a community like the one it used to be.

### **Henry Moehlman**

As portrayed earlier, Henry Moehlman immigrated to the United States as a teenager seeking out a better life. He was born in the Kingdom of Prussia (now what is considered Germany) in 1829 and his journey to the U.S. began in the late 1840s.<sup>9</sup> He voyaged to New Orleans, where he travelled up the Mississippi River to St. Louis. He worked as a cook in a hotel and a steamboat, but after a couple of years, he boldly decided to move to the newly opened Kansas Territory. Henry arrived at the Manhattan area on June 17, 1854 and bought 160 acres of bottomland to build his homestead. It was near this homestead that Moehlman Bottoms was founded. Along with owning a farm, Henry drove freight wagons to western Kansas. He also signed up for the Union when the Civil War broke out and returned to his farm after three years of service. Henry had a brother named William in Germany who eventually joined him in Kansas.<sup>10, 11</sup> William was a stonemason and thanks to the building materials located in Moehlman Bottoms, he was able to construct many buildings in and around Manhattan. Some structures include a large stone house belonging to the Rosencutters (another early Moehlman

---

<sup>8</sup> Jim Bogart, et al. *The Rural Schools of Riley County Kansas*. Manhattan, KS: Riley County Historical Society, 2004, p. 94-95

<sup>9</sup> It was June 19 of either 1847 or 1848. The year is disputed among sources.

<sup>10</sup> *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie*, pg 406.

<sup>11</sup> "Moehlman Bottom Early Settlers Saw Redskins." *The Manhattan Mercury*, December 15, 1934.

Bottoms family) and the first territorial capital located on Ft. Riley military base.<sup>12, 13</sup> The house belonging to the Rosencutters is still present on Rosencutter Road near Moehlman Bottoms, as seen in Figure 4 on page 6 (refer to Figure 1 for a map of Moehlman Bottoms with location of Rosencutter Road at the top of the map). Henry Moehlman married Hannah Wilhelmina Vogelsang and they shared six children together, including five boys and one girl.<sup>14</sup> Their fourth child, Herman, died right after his 2nd birthday. Their son, Charles, was born soon after Herman's death in 1878 and a short time later, the family took a formal portrait, as seen in Figure 5 on page 6. Henry and his family were crucial to the survival of Moehlman Bottoms. The whole family actively participated in the community and two sons, Henry and Frederick, stayed in the area after their parents had passed away, both around 1890.<sup>15</sup> The presence of the Moehlmans is still there today due to the maintenance of buildings and the permanent change of the landscape due to settlement and farming.

---

<sup>12</sup> United States Department of the Interior National Park Service." p. 30-32.

<sup>13</sup> *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie*, pg 406.

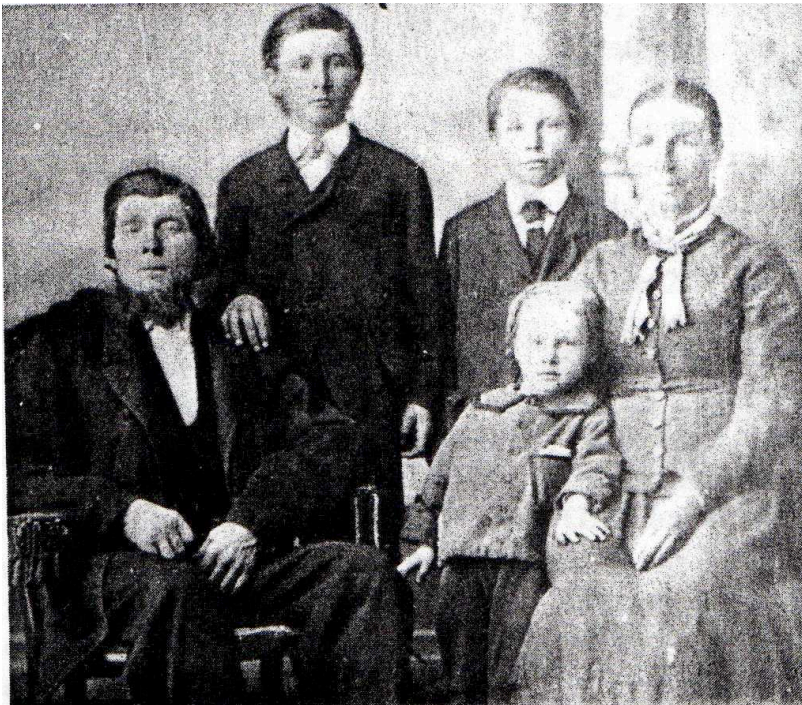
<sup>14</sup> Records are unclear for the girl, Hannah, and their last boy, Herman (the 2nd).

<sup>15</sup> *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie*, pg 406.



**Figure 4.** A photograph (by author) of the Rosencutter house built by William Moehlman, December 7, 2011.

Note: The house is largely made of stone (most likely limestone) and is situated on a farm.



**Figure 5.** A photograph of Henry and Hannah Moehlman, and their sons Henry, Frederick, and Charles, circa 1880.

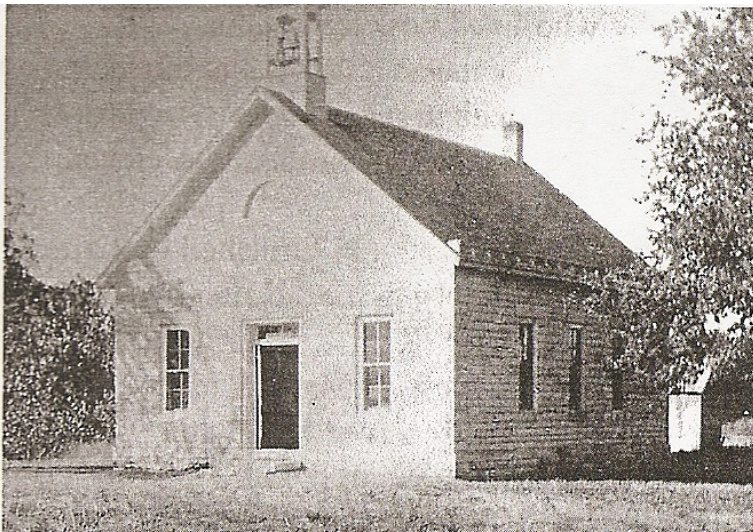
SOURCE: Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie (book)

### **Moehlman Bottoms School**

Education is an important presence in a community. Unless parents or family members were well schooled and could teach (this was not common if they lived on a farm and/or were poor), families needed to live within a short distance to a school for their children. If this was not possible, families either moved or risked their children being uneducated. Soon after the town of



Moehlman Bottoms started to grow, a teacher was employed by the local families to go from house to house for instruction. In 1884, the community erected a more permanent, stone schoolhouse.<sup>16, 17</sup> While it was damaged in the 1903 flood and subsequently repaired, it endured until it was totally destroyed in the 1951 flood, as seen in Figure 6 on this page. Many of the teachers boarded with families in Moehlman Bottoms and were fresh out of high school. The school district was considered small, as seen in Attachment B on page 12, but the school's monetary value compared well to other rural schools. The school ran about seven to eight months out of the year and generally had less than 30 students attending<sup>18</sup>. Most importantly, the school



**Figure 6.** A photograph of Moehlman Bottoms School.

SOURCE: *The Rural Schools of Riley County Kansas* (book)

Note: This picture was most likely taken between the 1903 and 1951 floods, after repairs had been made, but there is no record.

was a center for gathering. The building accommodated for school programs, a parent-teacher association, track meets, spelling bees, dinners and socials, and Sunday school.<sup>19</sup> Even though the population of the area may have been in decline before the 1951 flood, that event caused a

<sup>16</sup> "Moehlman Bottom Early Settlers Saw Redskins."

<sup>17</sup> Carolyn Jones.. *The First One Hundred Years: A History of the City of Manhattan, Kansas, 1855-1955*. Manhattan, KS: The Manhattan Centennial, Inc., 1955.

<sup>18</sup> However, during the first year of operation, there was an enrollment of 40 students.

<sup>19</sup> Jim Bogart, et al. *The Rural Schools of Riley County Kansas*, p. 94-95, 161.

huge shift in Moehlman Bottoms. The flood removed a place of gathering. At the school, people learned what it meant to be a community. That, along with the absence of an education system in the region after the flood, contributed greatly to population dispersal. While the houses could have been rebuilt, the sense of community left and changed the region to the condition it is in today.

Finally, as a settled immigrant, you look around at the place now considered home. There are many ways to make the area "yours", to feel like you truly belong: working the fields, building the homes of your neighbors, creating a community. After the journey to where you are now, you realize you are not so different from the other people who also immigrated and are just trying to make a new life. The story of Henry Moehlman and the neighborhood he brought together is really the story of many immigrants. His dream to create a new life was not unusual, but it had an enduring effect on the history of Riley County and an example for the state of Kansas. Henry Moehlman is a fundamental part to the understanding the life and dreams of an immigrant in America.

## Bibliography

Bogart, Jim, Roger Brannen, Doris Setterquist, Charles Setterquist, and Doug Tippin. *The Rural Schools of Riley County Kansas*. Manhattan, KS: Riley County Historical Society, 2004.

Google Maps. "Moehlman Bottoms, KS." Last accessed December 5, 2011.

Horlings, Albert, ed. *A Picture Record of the Great Flood of 1951: Manhattan, Kansas*. Manhattan, KS: Manhattan Tribune-News. n.d. Non-circulating reference material at Manhattan Public Library.

Jones, Carolyn. *The First One Hundred Years: A History of the City of Manhattan, Kansas, 1855-1955*. Manhattan, KS: The Manhattan Centennial, Inc., 1955. Non-circulating reference material at Manhattan Public Library.

Merriam-Webster. "Bottomland - Definition." Last accessed December 5, 2011. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bottomland>.

"Moehlman Bottom Early Settlers Saw Redskins." *The Manhattan Mercury*, December 15, 1934.

*Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie*. Manhattan, KS: Riley County Historical Society, 1976. Microfilm 240 at Manhattan Public Library.

Socolofsky, Homer E., and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. 2nd ed. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service. "Nineteenth Century Development of Manhattan, Kansas: 1855-1900." Last accessed December 5, 2011. <http://ci.manhattan.ks.us/Document View.aspx?DID=4680>.

Attachment A. Photographs (by author) of the Moehlman Bottoms area, December 7, 2011.

Note: Used farmland, looking southeast.



Note: Farmland with Rosencutter Road in front of the hill, looking southwest.



Note: Farmland, Rosencutter house in the distance, and Rosencutter Road in front of the hill, looking north.



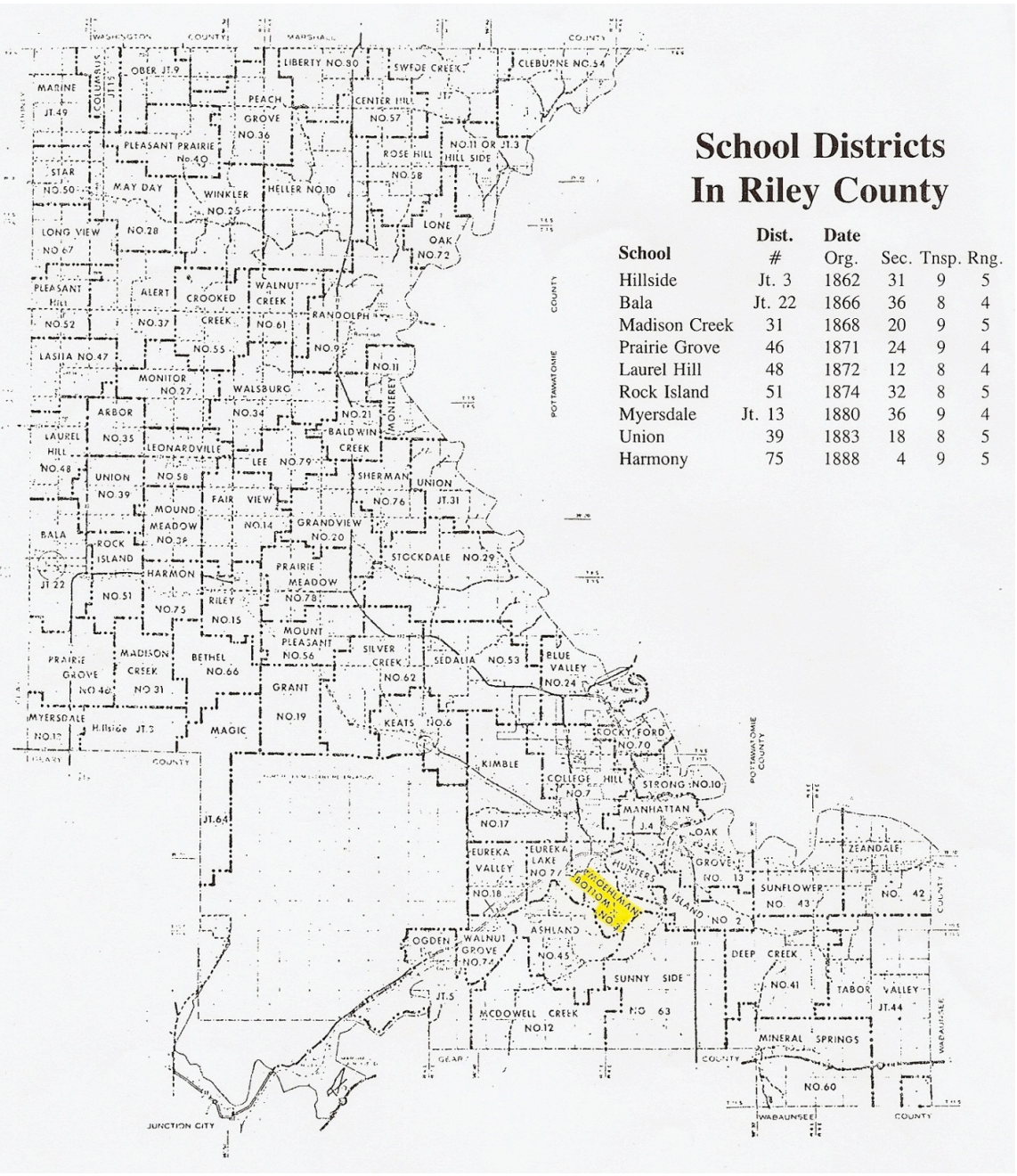
Note: Farmland, looking northwest.



Attachment B. A map of Riley County school districts. Circa 1920.

SOURCE: Riley County Schools (book).

Note: Moehlman Bottom School District No. 3 in southern Riley County is highlighted in yellow.



## School Districts In Riley County

School	Dist. #	Date		Tnsps.		Rng.
		Org.	Sec.	9	4	
Hillside	Jt. 3	1862	31	9	5	
Bala	Jt. 22	1866	36	8	4	
Madison Creek	31	1868	20	9	5	
Prairie Grove	46	1871	24	9	4	
Laurel Hill	48	1872	12	8	4	
Rock Island	51	1874	32	8	5	
Myersdale	Jt. 13	1880	36	9	4	
Union	39	1883	18	8	5	
Harmony	75	1888	4	9	5	