

Walsburg

Walsburg, Riley County, KS, 1891-1953
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Figure 1. Photograph of the Walsburg sign as you turn onto Main Street. Photo taken by Tamar Adcock, 2012.

As the sun set in the distance and I toured what was left of the once-thriving Walsburg community, I was suddenly amazed by what has been given to us on Earth. The sun setting in the west provided an indescribable, picturesque view of the rolling grass hills of Walsburg, Kansas. As I continued to drive down the old gravel roads and up and over the hills in awe of the view, I ended up following a feed truck. Following this truck as it rattled down that gravel road, I witnessed a sight that I will never forget. Cows began coming from everywhere, pouring out of the grass hills silhouetted in the Kansas sunset. It was at this moment I felt as though I could picture what life must have been like for those early Walsburg settlers. The beauty and the bounty of the grass hills must have looked just as beautiful to them when they made their decision to settle in Walsburg and build their homes and their futures.

Settling in Walsburg

In 1866, the Ekblad brothers, in search for free land in the Blue River Valley, found that most of the land was claimed around the city of Randolph, Riley County, KS. They kept traveling until they came to Walnut Creek and decided to settle in the rolling grass prairies there. The Ekblad brothers must have been desperately searching for unsettled land, as the new Walnut Creek settlement was rough country. The soil was shallow and the water supply was dwindling, as there was little rainfall during the year. Although the Ekblad brothers were the first settlers in the Walnut Creek settlement, which later became known as Walsburg, 1868 brought six more families to the area and several more in each year following. Most of these early families were Swedish and all of the Lutheran faith, which later gave way to a historic church. Once the settlers became accustomed to the land, the area became a fertile upland farm country that was rather prosperous for the new settlers. By 1873, no fewer than twenty families had settled in the area, and, because of the Swedes' love for coffee, Walnut Creek became known as "Coffee

Creek” for a short period of time.¹ The town name was then coined in 1873 when the first church was organized by taking the first three letters of Walnut Creek and adding “sburg.” To put Walsburg in perspective, the present day location of Walsburg is twenty-five miles northwest of Manhattan, KS. The actual outlines of the town are spread over three townships: Fancy Creek Township, Bala Township, and Sherman Township, with the Main Street of Walsburg in the Sherman Township.²

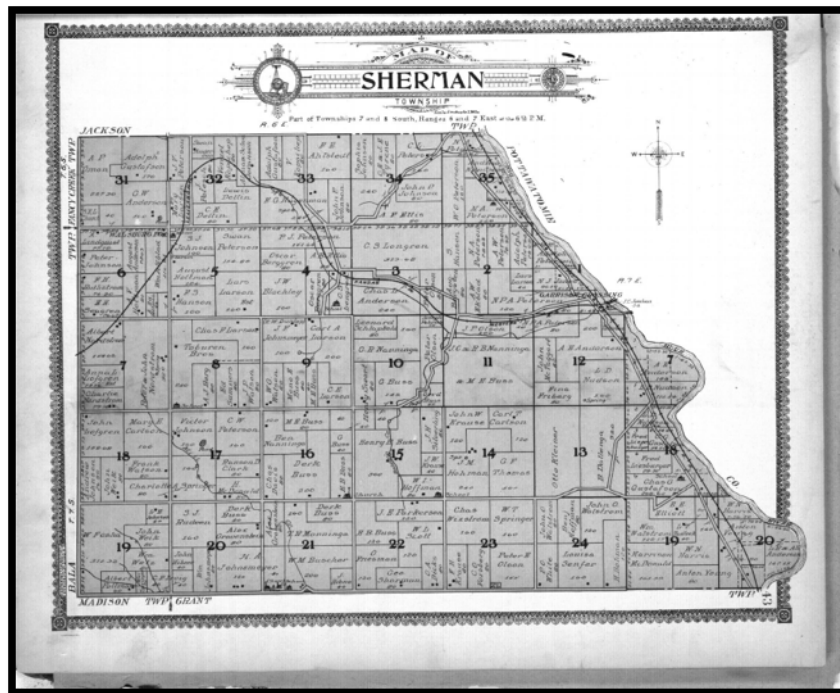


Figure 2. Map of Sherman Township ca. 1909. Walsburg is located in the northwest corner of the map. Notice how the UP railroad bends through the town. Map from www.kansasmemory.org/item/209449/page/17.

As the town continued to grow, the Union Pacific/LKW Railroad was built through Walsburg in 1881. Walsburg then established a depot along the tracks and, just like many towns in the past, a community began to thrive because of the new method of transportation that could

¹ Winifred Slagg, “Walsburg,” in *Riley County Kansas, A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers* (Manhattan, KS: Winifred Slagg, 1968), n.p.

² Kevin Larson (former Walsburg resident), interview by Tamar Adcock, Riley, KS, December 5, 2012.

connect this small town with many others across the country.

Early Homesteads of Walsburg

As the town continued to grow, more and more Swedes came together to settle in what had become a well-established little community. In 1873, the settlers began to make permanent establishments in this newly-developed community called Walsburg. There were plenty of trees and stones along the creek to build structures. Some families, however, chose to live in dugouts.³ According to an interview with Mr. Larson, a past resident of Walsburg, as well as a graduate of the last student body to go through Walsburg School, the Swedes established that they had “financially arrived” when they built extravagant houses. Right on the edge of town, and still standing today, is the Nordstrom Place. It was built in 1873 and cost \$20,000.



Figure 3. Photograph of Nordstrom Homestead. Notice the detailed structure of the house; keep in mind this was all done by hand. Photo taken by Tamar Adcock, 2012.

Mr. Larson explained that this house was extremely rare for the time period, as it was very fancy and included an attic as well as leaded glass in the doors on the bookcases that lined the walls by the fireplace. The house included china cabinets and detailed oak woodwork, as

³ Slagg, “Walsburg,” in *Riley County Kansas*, n.p.

well as indoor plumbing and central heating, which was very rare at that point in time. Mr. Larson explained that his family did not receive indoor plumbing until 1917.⁴ Across the street and just up the road a few meters, stands the Berggrem Homestead. The house, again, was one of the more extravagant homesteads during this point in time. Barns surround the house itself with a few trees scattered in the yard. There are several interesting stories that revolve around this homestead. For example, the head of the Longren family, who at one point in Walsburg history ran the general store in town, grew up on the Berggrem Homestead, and Mr. Longren became the first man to fly a Kansas-made airplane.⁵

Life in Walsburg

Life in Walsburg was like life in any other town during that time period. As stated above, Walsburg was settled in 1866, and 1881 brought the Union Pacific Railroad or LKW Railroad, commonly called the Little Kansas Wiggler, through the town. Although Walsburg was growing as a community, opportunities for employment were very limited. Employment for Walsburg residents had to be found in other towns such as Manhattan, Junction City, and Abilene, and sometimes families would have to travel even farther. Because of the limited employment opportunities closer to Walsburg, the men of the family that decided to find work elsewhere would leave the home Sunday evening, walk 25-30 miles to work, and then return home the next Saturday with supplies for their family for the next week.⁶ The village of Walsburg, before it disappeared in 1935, had grown to include a railroad depot, general store, post office, foundry, creamery, blacksmith shop, broom factory, filling station, and stockyards near the railroad.⁷

⁴ Larson, interview.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Slagg, "Walsburg," *Riley County Kansas*, n.p.

⁷ Larson, interview.

The post office was established on July 27, 1891.⁸ The railroad depot in Walsburg was built right along the “Little Kansas Wiggler.” A permanent depot building was never established; the depot was housed in an old railroad boxcar.



Figure 4. Photograph of Walsburg Railroad Depot ca. 1930. The depot in Walsburg was housed in an old boxcar; notice how temporary the depot appears. Photo courtesy of Riley County Historical Society.

This avenue of transportation allowed the people of Walsburg a way to connect with the rest of the country, unlike before. Residents were able to ship cattle to Kansas City to the packers, or even ship other supplies to neighboring communities.⁹ Although I am not sure where the rest of the Walsburg businesses were exactly located, I can be fairly certain that most of them were located on the “Main Street” of Walsburg. The remains of the filling station are still located in town and have been turned into a salvage yard. On Saturday evenings, the town was bright and busy as everyone came into town to shop. The men would sit outside the general

⁸ Kansas Historical Society, “Kansas Post Offices, 1828-1961,” *Kansas Historical Society*, accessed December 12, 2012, http://kshs.org/geog/geog_postoffices/search/placename:walsburg/county:/begyr:/endyr:/submit:SEARCH.

⁹ Larson, interview.

store and play cards; as the weather got colder, the men would move inside next to the fire while they waited on their wives.¹⁰ The general store, which I can imagine was located near the filling station, was unique. The store was two stories, with a doctor's office on the top floor.



Figure 5. Photograph of the general store ca. 1930. Notice there are two floors—the doctor's office was located on the top floor. Photo courtesy of Riley County Historical Society.

According to Mr. Larson, his father always thought that the doctors that were located in the general store were “quacks,” as they claimed that they had come up with the newest and best “cures” for any kind of disease. For example, he said his dad remembered they once claimed they had a machine that could cure cancer. The general store also had a delivery/transfer system that the people later gave the nickname the “Walsburg Express.” This cart would haul different goods from place to place around the town.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.



Figure 6. Photograph of the Walsburg Express ca. 1930. Notice the cart was “man-powered” and the general store is in the background. Photo courtesy of Riley County Historical Society.

Walsburg was also home to a man by the name of Indian John. Indian John was a white man that claimed to have been raised by the Native Americans. Indian John could make medicine from the weeds. People would come from all over and line the streets of Walsburg to receive his cures. It was said that he was so good at prescribing cures that you could lay a handkerchief over the sick person’s face and he could prescribe a cure just from the handkerchief.¹²

The town was also home to a couple of country schools. Lee’s School was located on the southeast corner of the village. Present day, the school itself has been torn down; the entrance to the school still stands and has been turned into a junkyard. The other school, Walsburg School, was located on the far southeast corner of the Fancy Creek Township. Mr. Kevin Larson, a

¹² Kevin Larson, interview.

member of the last student body to go through the Walsburg School, said the school was a two-room schoolhouse that taught people of all ages. Adults might be in the same class as the children, as their education took longer because they were not able to go to school year round like everyone else.¹³ When the schoolyard came up for auction after the town diminished, two farmers bought the location and it is now rolling grass pasture. All that remains of the Walsburg School is the steps for the entrance and the school bell. The bell is now located in the churchyard across from the original location. Although it seems as though life in Walsburg was nice, the Swedes still felt they were missing one thing. Since most of the settlers were all of Lutheran faith, they wanted to get back in touch with their faith of origin and decided that a church would be in the village's near future.



Figure 7. Photograph of the Walsburg School Bell. Photograph taken by Tamar Adcock, 2012.

¹³ Ibid.

Walsburg Lutheran Church

The Walsburg settlers decided that they wanted a church near their homes and offered to add \$125 to the salary of the pastor of Manadahl Church if he would come to them for services as much as possible. At first, services were given in the homes of different people, and then they were held in the schoolhouse in 1870. A Sunday school organization was established in 1875. Finally, a plot of land was obtained to build an actual church building to house the services for Walsburg. Mr. G.L. Ruthstrom, a Civil War veteran, gave a 10-acre tract of land for the cemetery and church. He also gave \$100 to start the building fund.¹⁴ In 1877, the church was built right across from the Walsburg School.



Figure 8. Photograph of the church in 1877. Notice the structure of the building and realize that this was done without modern equipment. Photo from *Walsburg Lutheran Church, Leonardville , Kansas, 1873-1973*.

¹⁴ Slagg, "Walsburg," *Riley County Kansas*, n.d.



Figure 9. Photograph of the Church ca. 1907, Notice the steeple and how tall it is; again realize this was built without modern equipment. Photo from *Walsburg Lutheran Church, Leonardville , Kansas, 1873-1973*.

All services were conducted in Swedish until the first sermon was given in English around the year 1918. The church was renovated in 1907 and many new church furnishings were added, such as stained glass windows, pine floors, a metallic ceiling, and a coal furnace.¹⁵ Over the next several years, the church faced several hardships in the form of drought, grasshoppers, and pastor sickness. On May 22, 1918, a visitor from California who was staying at the Berggrem Homestead saw lightning strike the steeple of the church. It is said that the resident of the house then ran across the pasture to the church as it was too muddy for the Model T Ford to drive.¹⁶ The church then burned and all was consumed except for the stone walls, which the people of the church would use as starting point to build a new place of worship.¹⁷ In 1923, the new church was open for services and, with just a few additions and renovations, the framework

¹⁵ Walsburg Lutheran Centennial Committee, *Walsburg Lutheran Church, Leonardville , Kansas, 1873-1973*, (n.p.: n.p., 1973), 6-16.

¹⁶ Larson, interview.

¹⁷ Ibid.

of that 1923 church still stands today, a mile west of the Main Street of Walsburg.¹⁸



Figure 10. Photograph of the church after the lightning strike ca. 1918. The stone walls were all that were left after the fire. Photo from *Walsburg Lutheran Church, Leonardville, Kansas, 1873-1973*.

Members of the church still gather there every Sunday as, not only is it still in existence, it is also in operation. The church is impeccable, with unmatched stained glass windows, artwork in the sanctuary, and a pipe organ on a balcony in the back of the sanctuary.¹⁹

¹⁸ Walsburg Lutheran Centennial Committee, *Walsburg Lutheran Church*, 6-16.

¹⁹ Larson, interview.



Figure 11. Photograph of the Walsburg Lutheran Church still in operation today. Notice the big stained glass window. Photograph taken by Tamar Adcock, 2012.

The End of the Walsburg Village

In 1935, the Little Kansas Wiggler, or the Union Pacific Railroad, was taken out and Walsburg lost its method of connecting with the rest of the country. Soon after, Walsburg would diminish as a village. The post office shut down on January 15, 1935, and Walsburg was officially deemed a “lost Kansas community.” All that remains of the town are a few of the original homesteads, signs of the filling station and schools, and the beautiful Walsburg Lutheran Church. Although we can reminisce and study the beginning and end of the Walsburg village, the actual stories and feeling of living in Walsburg while it was at its peak will forever be hidden in the rolling grass hills of what used to be a thriving community.

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