

The Rise and Fall of Wild Cat in Wild Cat Valley

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12/14/2010

HIST 533 Lost Kansas Communities

Fall 2010

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Kansas State University

Northwest of Manhattan, Kansas, in Riley County is the location of a valley not only filled with beautiful trees and rolling hills but with the quietness of a community that was once inhabited by many. The abundance of wildlife fills the vast prairies providing natural hay and wooded forests including the vicious, short-tailed cat that the valley -- and township -- were named after. The strong Kansas winds that blow fresh air through the Wild Cat Valley tell a story of the rise and fall of a community rich with pride but of small numbers. Throughout its delicate countryside filled with trees, streams, and dreams, the Wild Cat Valley tells a story not only about hard times and tribulations that settlers faced but the enduring effects that railroad production had on small Kansas towns. Kansas is ranked number two for the highest number of ghost towns, behind only Mississippi. The Wild Cat Valley, located in Riley County, Kansas, is home to a town that has had quite the journey.

Wild Cat Valley inherited its name from the natural spring-fed creek located in the southern part of the valley. Wildcat Creek banks were high and steep, making passage near impossible. The creek was dangerous because of the fast currents. In the early years of settlement, bridges and well-graded roads were not available. "Instead of building bridges, community members would scrape down the steep banks and cover stones laid in the creek." ¹ This

¹ Keats School in the Early 1900's (unknown author), 1.

system worked well until the rains came in the spring and normally wiped out the makeshift bridge. Dawn Murphy, a young teacher trying to cross the creek in the early 1900s, demonstrates the terror of the dangerous creek.

“A young teacher of the early 1900s, Dawn Murphy, was teaching at Elm Hollow, a rural school south of Keats that was closed several years ago. A nice rain came into the valley and the stream was flowing swiftly. Miss Dawn, a young teacher on her way to her school, did not understand the danger of high water so she urged her one horse to cross the stream which proved to be strong enough to pull the buggy off the eroded crossing into deep water that caused huge waves over the buggy floor. The horse saved himself by getting up on the closest bank, but he could not get the buggy up that bank nor get himself free from the buggy, so he stood there hitched to the floating buggy while waves washed Miss Dawn’s feet.

The frightened young teenager screamed with terror until Joe Taylor, a farmer who was on his way to Keats with a team and a wagon, heard shouts and came to her rescue. “In all of my life, said Taylor, I have never heard a girl scream as that poor girl did.”²

Before settlement, gullies and ravines located on the hilltops of the valley were merely treeless. These gullies and ravines remained treeless, due to lightning fires and campfires, until settlers planted seeds. Mother Nature’s rich, fertile soils filled the valley and blessed the plants with a healthy life. Wild life was abundant and allowed settlers to feast on fish and game harvested from the Wildcat Creek and Valley.

The Wild Cat Valley provided a natural highway to the hunting grounds in the buffalo plains. The valley was most likely a place for American Indians

² Ibid. pg.2.

because of the location of Wildcat Creek south of the valley. When Kansas was Indian Country, many American Indians lived along the Kansas River and would travel through the valley to reach their hunting grounds. This route was the fastest and most direct route to locate the numerous buffalo that called Kansas their home. Wild Cat Valley was also a thoroughfare when Indians in Nebraska made their yearly migration to Oklahoma and back. Numerous artifacts have been discovered, including earthen lodge sites, flint knives, clay pottery, scrapers, arrow points, and spear points made from flint. Indians never showed violence to the settlers of the Wild Cat Valley, only annoyed them with their nonstop begging.

When Kansas opened for settlement in 1854, many settlers came to Kansas in search of a new beginning. But the number of settlers coming to Kansas dramatically increased after the Homestead Act of 1862 was passed by United States Congress. The Homestead Act provided “homesteaders” a payment of a nominal fee for five years of residence.³ Furthermore, land was also acquired after six months of residence at \$1.25 per acre. Early settlers to the Wild Cat Valley area purchased their land from the United States government land office located at Ogden near Fort Riley and later in Junction City. Many Civil War veterans purchased land with soldier bounties. These bounties were certificates rewarded for military service and valued at 160 acres

³ “Wild Cat Creek and Keats” Author unknown. Riley County Historical Society. Three pages.

of unoccupied public land. Not only did veterans come to Kansas but also abolitionists who wanted Kansas to enter the Union as a free state and not a slave state. Most abolitionists were sponsored by churches in the New England area.

The beauty of the Wild Cat Valley caught many settlers' attention while in search of farm land, including that of Samuel Dexter Houston. Samuel Dexter Houston was President Lincoln's right hand man. Lincoln appointed Houston as the public moneys receiver for Junction City's Federal Land office.⁴ Houston was not just another one of Lincoln's appointed officials, but he helped make Kansas a free state. Samuel Houston was an ardent anti-slavery man and was very well educated. His opinion was accepted by fellow citizens, and he was appointed the first state senator from Riley County. Houston served from 1860 to 1862 in the state legislature.⁵ Houston built his home two miles up the Wild Cat Valley, west of what is now Manhattan. Mr. Houston, along with missionaries and government employees, were the only known white people in the Wild Cat Valley until 1854 when numerous settlers decided to start a life there.

⁴ Slagg, Winifred N. Kansas: A Story of early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure skies and sunflowers. Manhattan, KS.,1968. 136-138.

⁵ William E. Connelley, "A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans." Secretary of Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka. Lewis Publishing Company. (1918), 1871-1872

The earliest known white settlers arrived in the Wild Cat Valley in 1854. Most of these settlers came from Pennsylvania, New York, Michigan, Maine, and Ohio. Tunis Roosa, William Monahan, Henry Eubank, and Cypress Knapp were some of the first settlers to arrive in the Wild Cat Valley in search of farmland.⁶ After settling down, in what they named Grant Township, other settlers joined in the prosperous valley. One year later the Blodgett family arrived to the Wild Cat Valley and homesteaded the north portion of the valley. John W. Stephens, an entrepreneur, arrived in the Wild Cat Valley in October, 1857. Three short years later, John Stephens went out on a limb and opened a general store that created the town of Wild Cat. All other settlements began to develop around J.W. Stephen's General Store. Stephens obtained supplies from Manhattan and Leavenworth. A team of oxen and a wagon was used for the transportation. The Wild Cat post office was established nine years later and located in J.W. Stephen's General Store. Before Stephens opened his store, the town's makeshift post office was located in the home of C.W. Knapp. A youngster from Manhattan would deliver the mail on horseback. His route consisted of Manhattan, Clay Center, and Clifton. The boy traveled his route merely once a week.⁷

The town of Wild Cat was a quiet and peaceful little valley until 1887. The Rock Island Railroad Company from Chicago, Illinois purchased Wild Cat

⁶ Ibid. pg. 9

⁷ "List of Information," Author Unknown. Riley County Historical Society Museum.

Township in order to expand their railroad lines westward. H.M. Morgan gave the company the deed, and a simple little township began to see enormous changes. The Rock Island Railroad Company laid out lots and sold them to

Figure 1: Rock Island Railroad Depot.



various settlers. In 1889, Rock Island decided to change the name of Wild Cat. A railroad official enjoyed the writings of a well known poet, John Keats, and decided to make the permanent name of the town Keats.⁸ In 1892, Keats consisted of five houses, one blacksmith shop, one general store, and a cheese processing building.⁹ One of the first things that the Rock

Island Company did was open a general store.

The general store provided a place for the foreman to rest and also provided meals for workers. The general store was composed of two box cars, stacked up to make a two story structure. At the bottom of the building there were railroad ties to help support the building. The Rock Island Railroad pushed forward the Wild Cat Valley, and population was quickly increasing.

⁸ Nida Roper Chapman, "Church and Sunday School records"(1979-1989).

⁹ Ibid, Pg.27

Instead of middle-class farming settlers coming into the Valley, many working class workers started to arrive. There was always a foreman and a selected crew stationed at Keats in case of derailments. Derailments were a common problem since maintenance was not done enough. The railroad was the main source of transportation for not just people but for goods. Livestock was seen frequently on the railroad cars. The railroad was the main source of travel for people until the advance of automobiles and highways were built in Keats. There were six passenger cars daily, two local freight cars, and an extra freight car in the evening to take livestock to Kansas City.¹⁰ Livestock was shipped to Kansas City and processed for food. Stockyards were located on railroad property. Pens, scales, and shipping equipment were used for buying, selling, and loading of livestock into railroad cattle cars.

Limestone rock was also very abundant in the valley. The largest quarry was located north of the Military Crossing close to the creek. Rock Island Company built a spur track that carried the limestone rock from the quarry to the main railroad line. Large numbers of men worked in the quarries, loading limestone into various railroad carts. Most of these workers were Bohemians who came to Keats from Omaha, Nebraska. Bread was fed to the Bohemians and came in three foot loaves. The loaves were unwrapped and merely dumped into wagons. Locals also sold gardening produce to the Bohemians.¹¹ Railroad

¹⁰ Ibid, Pg.8-9

¹¹ Rock Island Railroad. Riley County Historical Society. Author Unknown.

cars were used for housing sections and were mainly occupied by immigrant workers. The railroad cars, filled with limestone rock, were then moved to various towns to construct buildings. The average yearly freight bill for hauling limestone was around \$20,000. Many of the courthouses built in towns around this time were made of limestone from the Wildcat Valley.

With the arrival of so many people to Keats, new businesses began to quickly open. By 1910, Keats' population was 79 people and over 29 different businesses had opened. Dave Thomas opened a hardware store on the west side of Main Street. The store was bought by George Danner and ran until 1912. Later, the lumberyard handled the town's hardware supplies.



Keats Lumberyard was located on the east side of Main Street and was run by John W. Whitacker. Keats Barbershop was located inside of the lumberyard.

There was also a barber shop on the south side of town next to the post

office, but this changed locations several times. The barber shop started in a room at Zeller's Store and was later moved into Chapman's house across from Chapman's filling station.

Figure 2: State Bank Keats. Robbed by five outlaws in 1923.

Keats State Bank was established June 5th, 1911. Lee McChesney was the first bank owner and had a capital of \$10,000. In 1923, the first big crime occurred in the peaceful town. The State Bank of Keats was robbed. Five robbers came into Keats around one or two in the morning. The robbers broke into the bank and blasted the vault with eight charges of nitroglycerine. The blast was loud and woke up Thomas Wood, who lived across the street from the bank. Wood looked outside to try and figure out what was going on and was immediately fired upon by the robbers' look out. The shots fired, missed Woods but hit a window in his house. Woods retreated to his basement and proceeded to fire fifteen shotgun blasts at the robbers. The robbers returned fire and several windows were shot out. Town members rushed to the bank but were held up by the armed robbers. Two to three hours later, the robbers cut down telephone wires. Bruce Wilson heard the blasts two miles away. After finding his phone dead, Bruce walked to the Simmons Farm. Bruce then called the sheriff in Manhattan, but by the time sheriff arrived, the armed robbers had already made a get-away in a touring car that they had hidden southwest of town, by the Wildcat Creek. The robbers got away with \$1,500 of bonds, \$200 in cash, and \$200 in stamps.¹² The State Bank of Keats closed in 1931 due to poor management and bad loans. The building was torn down years later.

¹² Ibid,15-16

Another improvement to the Keats Township was a grain elevator. Roy and Louisa operated the elevator from 1919 to 1937. Along with all of the new businesses, Keats also saw modernizing improvements. Electricity was first brought to the community in 1923. “The Hulse Lumber Company installed an electric lighting system in the hardware store, the lumberyard, and the dwelling home last week. Improvements to Keats will never cease.”¹³ After the increase of automobiles in the state, the Chapman Family opened Chapman Gasoline Station. It was located on the west edge of Keats, built with limestone.

By the early 1900s Keats was a town full of activities. US Highway 24 was built and ran east and west, to the north of town. Keats became a stopping point for many folks traveling on the highway. Business excelled from having the highly traveled highway that ran from Michigan to Kansas City and west through Keats. Yet by the mid -1900s Keats started to see a decline in population. US Highway 24 was rerouted around Manhattan and up through Riley. The old highway was named Anderson Avenue and traffic was sparse. Keats resident Alberta Whitmore explained, “This town was thriving at that time. After they moved the highway, that really hurt them.”¹⁴ Today, Keats, once Wild Cat, is a small, unincorporated town. Although Keats may always be located where it sits today, it will most likely end up being part of Manhattan. Keats, Kansas is a prime example of how transportation in the early 1900s can

¹³ Author unknown, “KERAHS School newspaper,” May, 1923.

¹⁴ Alberta Whitmore, conversation.

generate a town. Manhattan has been growing more populated every year and one day will spread northwest into the historical town of old Wild Cat.

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