

The Surviving Memories of Winkler

Riley County, Kansas 1857–1961
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Figure 1. Photograph of Winkler. ca. 1958
Source: Private Collection of Steven Dreith
One of the last images of the hamlet before it was demolished
In 1961 to construct Tuttle Creek Reservoir.

The Path of Winkler Begins

The population of Winkler, Kansas in 1910 stood only at 18 people.¹ By this time the town site was at least 30 years old and contained a school, post office, general store, church, blacksmith, few houses, and perhaps a saloon. Why did Winkler have so few people in 1910? Winkler is located in northeast Riley County, Kansas. The small community is nestled at the foot of the limestone hills that surround the Fancy Creek river valley. The town itself is not located on Fancy Creek but rather north of the creek at the baseline of the hills. In the 1850s the rich, fertile creek valley sat dormant with the big bluestem prairie grasses which covered the entire surface of the Flint Hills region like a blanket. The prairie lands in the valley have been there for thousands of years in an ecological cycle which created the dark, rich top soil. All that was needed to tap into this resource were some settlers willing to open the sod to the riches down below. The area also contained patches of trees which hugged along creek beds meandering down the valley. The largest of these creeks was Fancy Creek, which drains towards the east into the Big Blue River, located in what is known as the Blue River Valley.

The Fancy Creek Valley started to change when in 1854, a settler named August Winkler from Germany homesteaded in the vicinity of what would become the town of Winkler.² The small town did not even last 100 years, even its small population in 1910 tells us that the town

¹ Frank W. Blackmar, *Kansas: a cyclopedia of state history, embracing events, institutions, industries, counties, cities, towns, prominent persons, etc. Vol. II.* (Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912), 926, accessed Fall 2010. <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1912/w/winkler.html>.

² Riley County Genealogy Society. *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie. Kansas Counties: Clay, Geary, Marshall, Pottawatomie, Riley, Wabaunsee, Washington* (Manhattan, KS: Riley County Genealogy Society, 1976), 492.

itself was doomed to fade away. It is hard to determine exactly when the village transitioned from a growth-potential town to a stagnant, dying town. When this transition time occurred determines the strength and survival of the memory of the town of Winkler. This paper will focus on the memories that survived after Winkler began to seriously decline. Those memories form the living legacy of a tiny Kansas place once believed to be forever permanent.

Ironically the town of Winkler and I share the same name, but this is not the only reason why this particular town should be remembered. The town of Winkler is more than just a collection of buildings, or a name slapped on a map. The town was a community. It was a place of identity, a regional symbol which was created to support those who lived around in the area. The town was a place for gathering, a place for learning, a place for shopping, a place for spiritual worship, a place of memories, and a place called home. The community may have been small, but was large in terms of the impact it had on the local citizens in the area. It is important to preserve the memories, because some day those memories may be forever lost, and with them the community of Winkler.

The Early Years

The surviving memories of Winkler first begin with the establishment of the famous Winkler Mill. The early memories of the town area starts with August Winkler, a German miller who settled in Fancy Creek in 1854, the same year Kansas was opened for territorial settlement.³ Later in 1857, August built one of the only grist mills in the area off of Fancy Creek.⁴ One could assume that the fertile soils of the valley made it possible and feasible to build a mill in that area. “The building of the dam and mill race not only provided extra work for other settlers but made

³ John E. Chambers. “Historic old town almost buried, still cherished.” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, July 11, 1997.

⁴ Emogene Winkler “Winkler History,” personal reminiscence (Wamego, KS, 1998), 1.

it possible to operate the mill within the year.”⁵ The construction of the mill drew settlers to the area, which helped with the settlement of the surrounding lands. The grist mill became so successful that a few years after its completion the mill drew people who lived as far away as twenty miles.⁶ With the mill booming with business, many travelers came to the area which became known as Winkler Mills. Richard Burke decided to capitalize on the business the Winkler Mill brought into the area, so in 1871 he opened the first mercantile business in the area.⁷ The mill brought early prosperity to the region. In 1870 School District No. 25 was established, in 1874 the Winkler Mills post office came into being, and in 1889 St. John’s Lutheran church was organized.⁸ Without the mill being present in the area, the small community of Winkler would have not even existed. The photograph below is of the famous Winkler Mill. It stands as a hollow reminder of a time when the Winkler community was flourishing. With an establish town center growing, why did Winkler only have 18 people in 1910? Given the population of the hamlet in 1910, the decline of the town most likely would have occurred prior to 1900.

⁵ Winifred N. Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas: A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers* (Brooklyn, NY: Theo. Gaus' Sons, 1968), 239.

⁶ Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas: A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers*, 240.

⁷ Nell and Otto Haller Jr. “Winkler: A Part of the Community 1854 to 1962,” personal reminiscence, (available at Riley County Historical Society, 1963), 1.

⁸ Riley County Genealogy Society. *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie. Kansas Counties: Clay, Geary, Marshall, Pottawatomie, Riley, Wabaunsee, Washington*, 492.



Figure 2. Photograph of the old Winkler Mill, ca 1958
Source: Private collection of Steven Dreith

Factors of Decline

Winkler was dealt a hand full of factors which limited the persistence of the town. The first was migration into the area. Plat maps from 1881 and from 1909 were used to study migration into the Winkler area. The earliest settler in the region was August Winkler in 1854. By 1881, twenty-seven years later, there was barely a single piece of un-owned land in existence within a 4 mile radius around the town site.⁹ This becomes problematic because how can more people move into an area if all the land is owned? The only way for new migrants to move into the area is if the owner of the land moves, dies, or sells off extra land. By comparing the two plat maps, it becomes apparent that the land just changed hands within those families that lived in that area. It also appears that the average acreage owned under one family name also increased. From the 1881 plat map, it appeared that the Winkler brothers owned at least 1200 acres of land

⁹ Riley County, Kansas, Plat Map, 1881. Copy available at Riley County Historical Society.

in the area, especially in the fertile Fancy Creek valley.¹⁰ The Gebhardt family also owned over 600 acres to the north of Winkler in 1909.¹¹ Other large landholding families found in both plats within the area include Kunze, Welzig, Bucheim, Teske, Polson, Niehenke, Soller, Schwartz, Johnson, Larson, and Carlson.¹² If there is no in-migration from new families then the population growth in the area becomes stagnant. This may have limited the growth of Winkler creating a premature decline of the town.

An additional factor that influenced the decay of Winkler was the loss of not having a railroad run through the town site. A railroad running through a town almost guarantees growth and survival for small towns in Kansas. Glen Stockwell, a local resident near Winkler during the 1930s, remembered that originally the Leavenworth-Kansas-Western railroad planned on running a line up Fancy Creek, through Winkler.¹³ However, the plan fell apart and the line was sent down to Garrison, then to Leonardville.¹⁴ Instead of running through Winkler, "...the narrow gauge tracks of the Kansas Central Railway were completed in Riley County in the fall of 1881."¹⁵ The starting point of the decline of Winkler could have started as early as 1881. Having no railroad meant that supplies had to be picked up by the closest railroad town and hauled back to Winkler. Railroads could also transport commodities from the rural towns to urban town markets providing revenue and growth for the small communities. From a hindsight view, the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Riley County, Kansas, Plat Map, 1909. Copy available at <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209449>

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Glen Stockwell, personal interview by Brendan Winkler, Riley KS, November 19, 2010.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Phyllis M. Swanson, *City of the Plains: A Story of Leonardville* (Manhattan, KS: Ag Press, 1982).

small community lacked the factors needed for continuing prosperity. The town lived on for decades later, however the town transitioned early over into the realm of a stagnant, dying town.

Surviving Memories

The surviving memories of the small village acquaints us with the kind of experiences and impacts the town had on the lives of those who had the privilege of being around the community when it still existed. Glen Stockwell was a local resident around Winkler during the 1920s and 30s. Glen remembers as a child, “sliding on the hill next to the school when it snowed, we bragged about who would get down the hill first.”¹⁶ On Tuesday and Thursday nights people gathered at the store to smoke cigars and eat ice cream.¹⁷ Glen was also a member of the famous Winkler Band and played baritone or bass drum.¹⁸ Usually on Wednesday night the band practiced in the band hall.¹⁹ “Everyone thought the Winkler Band was wonderful.”²⁰ However, the “band pooped out during the war because the band director couldn’t come down because of the gas and tire shortage.”²¹ Mr. and Mrs. Otto Haller, Jr. remembered that the Winkler Band played at churches, ice cream socials, surrounding towns, “...at the American Royal in Kansas City Missouri, at the Topeka State Fair,” and “...at the notification ceremony...” for Alf Landon’s “selection as Presidential candidate...in 1936.”²² Glen remembers, “a platform was built in Winkler, where the band could play on, and people drove up in their cars to watch the

¹⁶ Stockwell, personal interview, November 19, 2010.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Stockwell, personal interview, November 19, 2010.

²² Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas: A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers*, 243-244.

band and honk horns instead of clapping.”²³ The photography down below is a snap shot of the Winkler Band. “It was organized in 1933 to provide constructive interest and pastime during the drought years.”²⁴



Figure 3. Photograph of Winkler Band, ca. 1936
Source: Private collection of Glen Stockwell

The memories mentioned thus far are quite detailed. When researching the town, there were not many detailed memories of Winkler prior to the 1920s, suggesting that the survival of the memories of the town hangs on the shoulders of those who are still living or those memories recorded. A memory map of Winkler found on page 10 was produced by Glen Stockwell and was redrawn by Brendan Winkler. The drawing helps paint a clearer image of what the town site would have appeared like during the 1920s and 30s. The memory of Winkler serves as a

²³ Stockwell, personal interview, November 19, 2010.

²⁴ Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas: A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers*, 243.

reminder that this small village did in fact exist and was a lively in spirit. Showing the true character of the surrounding landscape, this was the Winkler community.

The Path of Winkler Ends

The journey for the small community nestled on the edge of the Fancy Creek valley ended when it “was obliterated by the building of Tuttle Creek Dam and Reservoir which was completed in 1961.”²⁵ However, the decline of Winkler occurred many years before its physical destruction in 1961. Many local residences hated to watch a part of their history be demolished in front of their own eyes. “It was a shame when they put the reservoir in.”²⁶ “Very few liked the building of the dam.”²⁷ Despite the demolition of Winkler, surviving memories of the village still live on even today. Memories of the town can never be taken away from those who witness and experience Winkler first hand. Emogene Winkler remembers the community as being a “beautiful valley.”²⁸ Steven Dreith recalls, “working in a field with hay, and going across the field to get a cold bottle of pop at the store.”²⁹ “It was quite a time,” were the memories Glen Stockwell had of Winkler when he was growing up.³⁰ The town of Winkler is more than just a collection of buildings, or a name slapped on a map. The town was a community that has physically been erased, but the memories and experiences of the town live on. Winkler survives only as a memory of what was once a great thriving community. The photograph below is of the old Winkler School house in 2010. The area that surrounds the school is full of old memories of a

²⁵ Winkler, “Winkler History,” 3.

²⁶ Steven Dreith, interview by Brendan Winkler, November 22, 2010.

²⁷ Emogene Winkler, personal interview by Brendan Winkler, Wamego KS, November 21, 2010.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Steven Dreith, interview by Brendan Winkler, November 22, 2010.

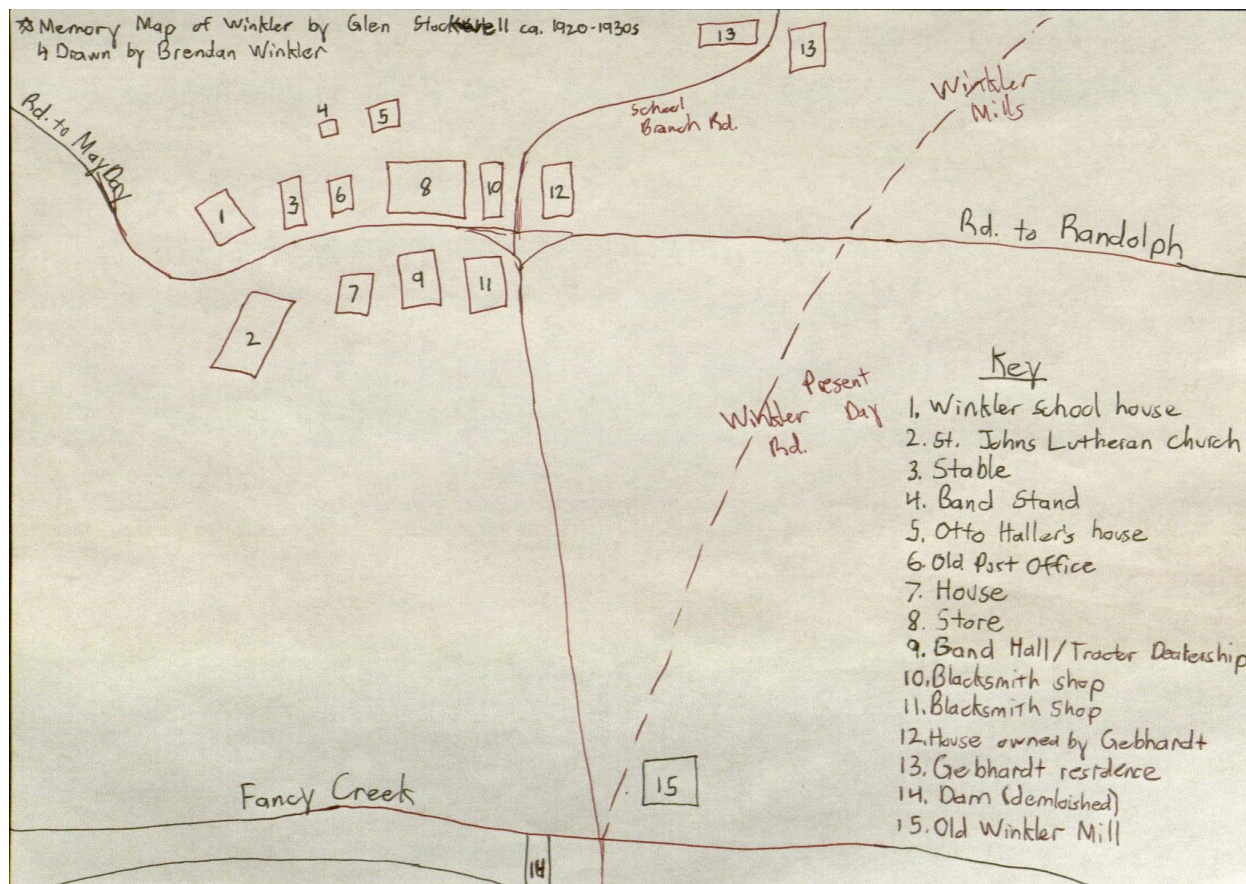
³⁰ Stockwell, personal interview, November 19, 2010.

time in which the town was a place for gathering, a place for learning, a place for shopping, a place for spiritual worship, and a place called home. “Just about the only thing left other than the old school building, are the memories of the beautiful valley and the little village at the base of the hills called Winkler.”³¹



Figure 5. Photograph of Winkler School, 2010
Source: Private Collection of Brendan Winkler

³¹ Winkler, “Winkler History,” 3.



Memory map of Winkler, produced by Glen Stockwell and redrawn by Brendan Winkler.

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