

Zeandale, Riley County
or
Corn Valley: A Glimpse of our Humble Past

Paper for History 558

By

Leota Boisclair

Fall, 2011

Zeandale, to many who have lived in Riley County, Kansas, for any length of time, is just that one road to the east that one rarely finds reason to take. Turning on to Zeandale Drive, I found myself in this exact position, unable to bring to mind any other reason I would be making the journey if not for research. The road wound to the east, and the trees surrounding the road caused me to reconsider if I had made the right turn; it certainly did not look like “Corn Valley.” Pressing on, I realized that I could not even be certain of what I was looking for. All the accounts of Zeandale had mentioned that it was a small farming community but had mentioned no truly distinctive features, monuments, or even a business to landmark. I was chastising myself for not bringing a map when the trees faded from the roadside and fields of drying cornstalks rolled into view, all the way to perceivable horizon. Just a few minutes drive from Manhattan lay many fertile cornfields, a stark difference from what lay only seven miles to the west.



Figure 1: Photo Entering Zeandale, a small farming community in Riley County, Kansas. Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ccraven/2489667668/>

Zeandale was first settled in 1854, slowly growing with the aid of the New England Emigrant Aid Company and the famous Mr. Pillsbury among the settlers who gave the town its name. “Corn Valley” is the real meaning of the name Zeandale; Josiah Pillsbury invented it from the Greek word for corn, “zea” and the English word for valley, “dale.”¹ It was originally included as part of Wabaunsee County but became absorbed into Riley County in 1871. Over the years, despite the natural beauty in the area, no one would call Zeandale a “booming” town, at least not by population standards. The town first shows up in the 1880 Census with a total of 26 residents recorded, seven of those claiming their profession as farmers or farmhands, and the rest recorded mainly as housewives or children. Fifty years later in the 1930 census the township did grow to 515 residents, but this pales in comparison to nearby Manhattan’s growth from approximately 3,914 to 10,183.² Even today the town itself could be missed in the blink of an eye, a couple of intersections the only evidence that there is indeed a community and not just an open expanse of farms. Zeandale chose to stay unincorporated.

A community church stands in close proximity to a community center in the heart of the more densely populated part of the old village, containing houses with yards instead of fields. In the beginning, people worshipped under some trees at Pillsbury Crossing. They eventually founded the Zeandale Christian Congregational Church. Local labor and donations allowed a church building to be dedicated in 1887. A church has stood there ever since, a piece of persisting history that still serves the religious needs of the township.³ Its continued existence is testimony to the early Zeandale settlers’ focus on religious health, being the immediate focus for the town after food and housing had been

established.⁴ Mr. Pillsbury desired to devote his time to discovering religious truth, a desire that helped shaped the outcome of the town and its devotion to the small church that still stands.⁵



Figure 2: Zeandale Community Church. Services have been held here since 1887. Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/courthouselover/5949386308/>

It may be easy to stop here and chalk the rest of the town's history up to continued focus on religion and farming, but that would be denying the impact of Dr. Blasing. In the early 1880s, William Blasing discovered that his Zeandale well seemed to make those who drank from it feel healthier and more vital, and he sent his water off to be tested by Kansas State University, then known as Kansas State Agricultural College. Once confirmed that the water was indeed safe, he made a name for the town by opening a hotel and marketing his water as a miracle medicine. This was known as Blasing Springs. People flocked from all over for his miracle water, even prompting him to boil down the water and sell the resulting powder to those who wished to keep some with them. The business flourished from 1882 to 1943 until the building was destroyed by weather.⁶ No real signs persist to prove that a bustling, fairly famous business ever existed in the

township -- its past is overshadowed by the sprawling cornfields residents hold dear. Over those fields, even as they stood brown and withering before the coming fall season, I could almost feel a tangible sense of history. The exact view I had of the fields against the stormy sky could have been that of any approaching fall day in the past 150 years. There may be power lines and the occasional car passing by, but the essence of the love and dedication to the land is still evident. Despite having only a few remaining farms and homes, Zeandale fields are proudly worked, the farmhouses freshly painted and maintained and the church lovingly up-kept and updated. It may be tempting to drive right through a town like Zeandale, but doing so is passing by a chance to understand and see the story of how many towns in our state began, a history that may go forgotten.

¹ Winifred N. Slagg, *Riley County Kansas: A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers* (Riley County: Winifred N. Slagg, 1968), 90-92.

² Census of 1880, Heritage Quest Online. Last accessed September 18, 2011, <http://persi.heritagequestonline.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/hqoweb/library/do/census/browse>

³ “History of Zeandale Community Church,” last modified February 5, 2011, <http://www.zeandalecc.org/history>

⁴ Slagg, *Riley County Kansas*, 92-93.

⁵ Josiah Pillsbury’s Diary, Pillsbury Family Papers.

⁶Slagg, *Riley County Kansas*, 102-111.

Bibliography

Census of 1880. Heritage Quest Online: <http://persi.heritagequestonline.com.er.lib.kstate.edu/hqoweb/library/do/census/browse>, accessed September 18, 2011.

“Digital Library,” KSGenWeb, <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/>, accessed September 17, 2011.

“History of Zeandale Community Church.” <http://www.zeandalecc.org/history>, accessed September 15, 2011.

Pillsbury, Josiah H. Diary, 1858-1860, Pillsbury Family Papers, Kansas State University Library.

Pillsbury, Josiah H. Survey Records, 1860, Pillsbury Family Papers, Kansas State University Library.

Slagg, Winifred N. *Riley County Kansas: A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflower*. Riley County: Winifred N. Slagg, 1968.