

SYLVIA, KANSAS: AN EARLY HISTORY

1874-1929

Ethan McCary

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

October 20, 2018

Located in eastern Reno County, KS, lies a small town of roughly 200 people.¹ It sits nestled in dense trees and shrubbery, surrounded by fields. A single railroad line passes through the town, as does a single paved road. A tall grain elevator dominates from above, with its smaller sibling, the town water tower located nearby. It is named for the wife of a railway vice-president. It has a character of its own with stories to match it. Its history is like that of many Kansas towns, but remains its own. What makes this town unique are the individuals, institutions, and events that have existed through its history. This town is Sylvia.

Following the Civil War westward expansion boomed. Kansas became a destination for those with agricultural pursuits. Along with the settlers who were establishing townships and developing an organized state was the railroad. Northwest of Wichita, a town in Reno County with the name of Hutchinson in was founded in 1871. Hutchinson, which initially was supposed to be an endpoint to the line, would serve as a junction for rail lines.²

On April 30, 1874 thirteen land claims were made in the Peace Creek Valley.³ Some of the names of the first were Wid Clothier, Chauncey Clothier, James Byron Clothier, Henry Marshall, Isaiah Wilhite, and Doc Steward. At the time of their arrival Sylvia was merely a sand mound. The area was previously home to buffalo hunters and natives. It was described as a place where “Acres of diamonds” would be found. That’s how Fred Yust, who arrived on October 25, 1874 described it. Yust was a Civil War veteran of the north and would be one of many to first settle, claiming a quarter of a 160-acre section.⁴ In 1884 expansion began. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Co. acquired the deed for the location of the township. Its namesake is that of Sylvia Robinson. Mrs. Robinson was the wife of A.A. Robinson, the vice-president of the

¹ United States Census Bureau, 2017 Population Estimate

² Kansas Historical Society, Railroads in Kansas

³ “History of Sylvia” by Eunice Brown and Lorene Lavielle, The Sun, Sylvia, KS, May 30, 1929

⁴ Fred Yust: Kansas Pioneer A Biographical Sketch by William Fredrick Yust, 1937

Santa Fe railroad at the time. In 1886 it was subsequently transferred to the Sylvia Town Company. The Hutchinson News referred to it as “taking the lead of all the new towns on the line” and “one of the best farming and stock countries in Kansas.”⁵ A petition to formally establish the town was signed by fifty-three individuals. It was incorporated the following year with T.J. Talbot as mayor.⁶ After only a year headlines in Hutchinson read, “Sylvia sanguine of her future greatness and chances of becoming a great shipping point. Her railroads and water power something to be proud of.”⁷

The origins of those that settling in or what would be Sylvia range from those settling from the eastern US from somewhat established roots and those starting fresh after immigration from Europe. These countries include Germany, England, Scotland, Wales, Denmark, and Sweden. Upon arrival a Declaration of Intention was made.

Declaration of Intention.

Be it Remembered, That on the 11 day of Oct A. D. 1887,
 personally appeared before me, H. P. Adams Clerk of the District Court,
 in and for the County of Beard in the 9th Judicial
 District of the State of Kansas, Charles Josephson an alien, a native
 of Sweden, and aged 23 years, who being duly
 sworn upon his oath declares that it is bona fide his intention to become a citizen of the United
 States of America, and to renounce and abjure forever all allegiance and fidelity to every foreign
 power, prince, potentate, state and sovereignty, whatever, and particularly to the
King of Sweden
 whereof he is at present a subject.

Witness my hand the day and year first above written.

Charles Josephson
H. P. Adams Clerk.

⁵ The Hutchinson News, June 23/21, 1886

⁶ *Pride in the Past...Faith in the Future: Sylvia, Kansas 1887-1987* by Donna Graber and Mary Ellen Roberts, Page 7; “Sylvia: A Brief History of its Early Days” by Mrs. Hazel S. Brownlee, 1968

⁷ The Hutchinson News, March 31, 1887

A Declaration of Intention to become a citizen. Charles Josephson from Sweden signed and dated on October 11, 1892. This certificate is typical of what immigrants signed.⁸

Upon its establishment, Sylvia grew quite fast. It would eventually approach 600 people by the end of the century.⁹ The presence of a railroad line running through the middle of town created a fertile opportunity for expansion.

“When Sylvia was less than two months old, a newspaper reported that it already had two



elevators, three lumber yards, a bank a livery stable, a hotel, and a newspaper. The *Weekly Telephone* published Sept. 7, 1886, stated that Sylvia had a population of 200 and more were still coming.”¹⁰

“Sylvia’s Main Street was hustling in 1889 with horses, wagons and pedestrians. Note the dirt street, porches on the store fronts and the boardwalks. A furniture store is the first on left. Sylvia was officially only three years old then.”¹¹

From the start and up through its peak, two major factors played a part in the town’s success.

These are agriculture and the critical role of the railroad. The primary crops that were grown

⁸ *Pride in the Past...Faith in the Future: Sylvia, Kansas 1887-1987* by Donna Graber and Mary Ellen Roberts, Page 12

⁹ 1900 US Federal Census

¹⁰ *Pride in the Past...Faith in the Future: Sylvia, Kansas 1887-1987* by Donna Graber and Mary Ellen Roberts, Page 7

¹¹ See footnote 8

were corn and wheat. The Sylvania Milling & Grain Co. was built in 1884-85 and began operating in 1895.¹² This is where agriculture and the railroad met. Like many rural Kansas towns this was a critical aspect of Sylvania's existence. W.A. Marsh Co., R.A. Henri, and N.B. Hull were the first owners of the mill. The Bank of Sylvania acquired the mill in 1900. Following this, Sarah and J.G. Lycums owned and operated the site for two years. Once again in 1902 the mill changed hands. Ed and George Yust, sons of Fred Yust, bought the business and operated it until 1904 when Ed's flour allergy forced them to sell to James Roberts.

“Ed Yust taking wheat sample from wagon being weighted at Sylvania Roller Mill, 1903.”¹³

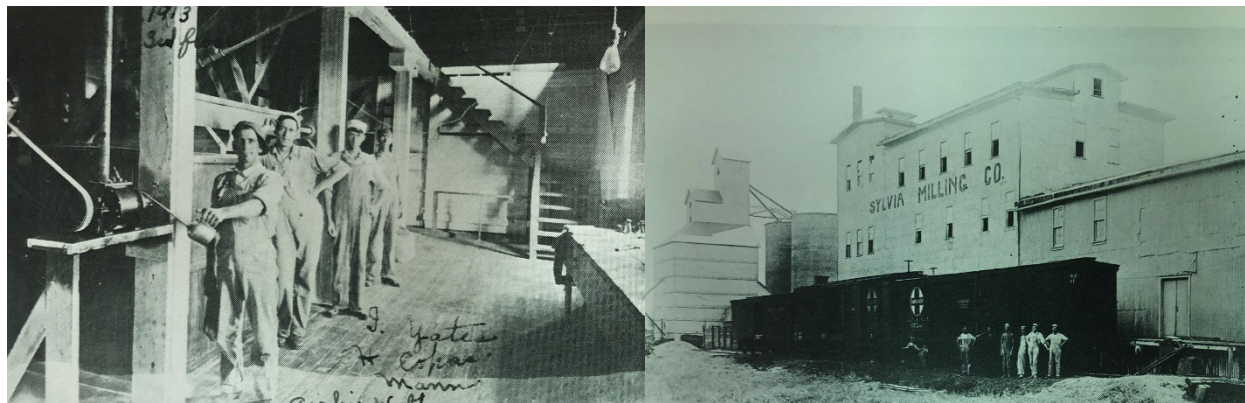


Keeping to the standard set by his predecessors, Roberts sold the site in 1906 to J.A. Whitehurst. Whitehurst became the one to solidify the mill and after some assistance it grew size and

¹² *Pride in the Past...Faith in the Future: Sylvania, Kansas 1887-1987* by Donna Graber and Mary Ellen Roberts, Page 23

¹³ *Pride in the Past...Faith in the Future: Sylvania, Kansas 1887-1987* by Donna Graber and Mary Ellen Roberts, Page 22

production. From 1916 to 1927 it would change hands five times before it was torn down. Most of the scrap iron would lie still until the scrap drives of World War II.¹⁴



Sylvia Milling Company in 1913 and 1914.¹⁵

With the turn of the century Sylvia exploded with new citizens. It went from two hundred in 1886 to over six hundred in 1900.¹⁶ Sylvia started to gain all the amenities a sprawling town on the rise. In the first decade of the 20th Century Sylvia saw a new bank, multiple churches, train depot, and water tower. The post office expanded its routes to cover the expanding city limits and farm land.¹⁷ Sylvia's population would peak in this decade. Following decades saw population decline at a steady rate that continues even to this day.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Pride in the Past...Faith in the Future: Sylvia, Kansas 1887-1987* by Donna Graber and Mary Ellen Roberts, Page 23

¹⁵ *Pride in the Past...Faith in the Future: Sylvia, Kansas 1887-1987* by Donna Graber and Mary Ellen Roberts, Page 23

¹⁶ *Pride in the Past...Faith in the Future: Sylvia, Kansas 1887-1987* by Donna Graber and Mary Ellen Roberts, Page 7; 1900 US Federal Census

¹⁷ *Pride in the Past...Faith in the Future: Sylvia, Kansas 1887-1987* by Donna Graber and Mary Ellen Roberts

¹⁸ US Federal Census

Bibliography

- Brown, Eunice, and Lorene Lavielle. 1929. "History of Sylvia." *The Sun*, May 30.
- Brownlee, Hazel S. 1968. "Sylvia: A Brief History of its Early Days."
- Graber, Donna, and Mary Ellen Roberts. 1987. *Pride in the Past...Faith in the Future: Sylvia, Kansas 1887-1987*. Shawnee Mission, KS: KES-Print, Inc.
- Kansas Historical Society. 2010. *Railroads in Kansas*. January. Accessed November 25, 2018. <https://www.kshs.org>.
- The Hutchinson News. 1886. June 21.
- . 1886. June 23.
- . 1887. March 31.
- United States Census Bureau. 1900-1920. *1900-1920 US Federal Census*. Suitland, MD.
- United States Census Bureau. 2017. *Population Estimates*. Suitland, MD.
- Yust, William Fredrick. 1937. *Fred Yust: Kansas Pioneer A Biographical Sketch*. Winter Park, Florida: The College Press.