

**Dammed if You Do, Dammed if You Don't:
A Case Study of Webster
Belmont Township
Rooks County, Kansas
1885-1954**

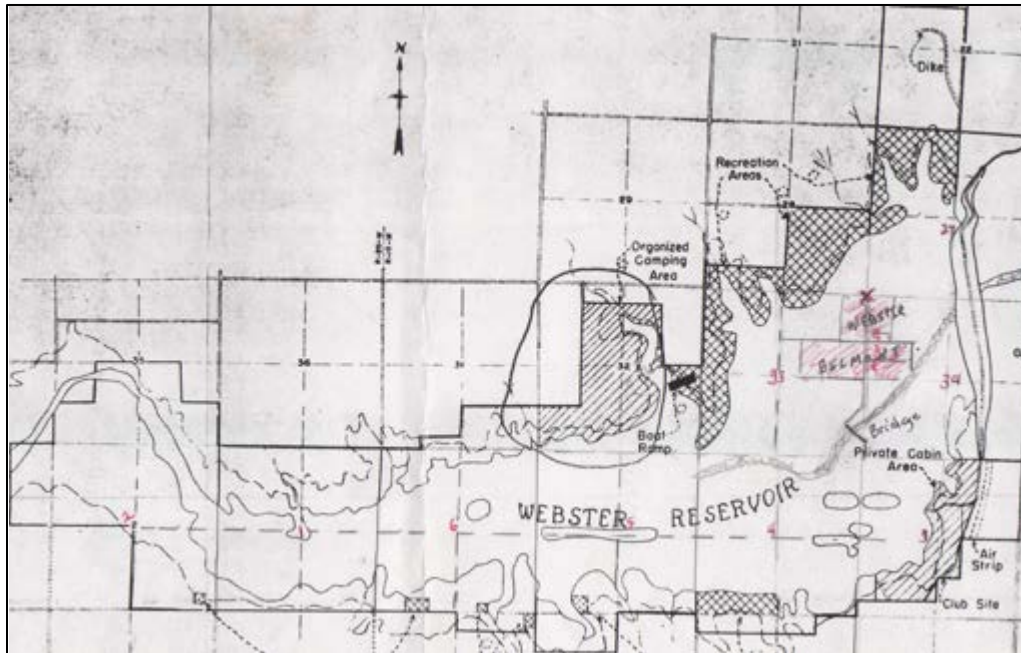


Figure 1: A map of Webster Reservoir. A copy from the Bureau of Reclamation from the Department of the Interior, Courtesy of Mrs. Jean Lindsey's personal collection. Additional points drawn in by Mrs. Lindsey for reference.

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Webster was a failed railroad town that, despite its unity and perseverance, was sacrificed to the creation of Webster Reservoir. This case study includes photographs, maps, and interviews from Mrs. Jean Lindsey, local historian, and Mrs. Patty Chesney.

What was to be the “Next Chicago”¹ in western Kansas is now a beautiful lake where many families spend their summers out on the boat taking in the sun, fishing, or camping on the shore. What younger generations do not realize is that on the east side of the lake next to the dam, below the blue-green water, was once a little town called Webster. Though it’s no longer there, a few former residents of Webster now reside in Stockton, the town to the east, and have many stories to share. They’ve all been documented one way or another, and are shared frequently with those who have a moment to sit and chat. Just by skimming through Webster’s history, you can come to understand the small things that made the town exactly what it was; it was a place that valued community interaction and togetherness, despite its challenges. It was the people who kept it together through the early failed and successful, attempts at growth, and the people who put it to rest when the town finally met its demise at the creation of Webster Dam.

Old Webster, as the surrounding public knows it now, was located in the Belmont Township, covering sections 33 and 34, which is on the western edge of Rooks County, Kansas. In 1876, a small trading post was set up on the south side of the south fork of the Solomon River for buffalo hunters and early settlers in the county.² The natural resources such as underground water and fertile soil in the area made it possible for farmers to settle and break the land and raise cattle. In response, a small settlement began to rise. Due to significant flooding, though, it was moved across the river where this village,

¹ Henry F. Desair, "Webster and Belmont-Rooks County's Twin Cities," *The Plainville Times*, March 1994.

² Jean Lindsey, "Webster," *Solomon Valley Anthology* 6 (Summer 2009): pg. 2.

which came to be known as Belmont, was surveyed on August 20, 1878.³ The town survey was filed at the county courthouse in Stockton, the county seat, on March 24, 1881. It was placed next to an adjacent village, which was surveyed on June 23, 1885 as Webster, Kansas, and the plat was filed two days later on June 25. The two areas shared two streets, Main Street and Broadway Street, and were eventually surveyed together as a town on November 10, 1885, and named Webster, after leading statesman Daniel Webster. An application for a post office made this name change permanent, as another town in Kansas already held the name Belmont, giving Webster its official stake.⁴ Neither of these towns was ever incorporated, even as one single town. According to Jean Lindsey, a local historian and 1953 graduate of Webster High School, early dwellers still referred to them as separate towns, because frankly, that was where they acquired their start.

Shortly after Webster came to life in 1885, a railroad was making its way from Alton, Kansas in Osborne County up the Solomon River towards Rooks County. This news caused a great boom in the town. The following year in 1886, Webster's newspaper, *Enterprise*, reported that the town was home to one bank, two hotels, four grocery stores, three livery barns, two blacksmith shops, three real estate and loan offices, a furniture and harness shop, a hardware store, lumberyard, telephone system, newspaper, barbershop, drugstore, two physicians, and two churches.⁵ Webster was flourishing with its local farmers and 300 residents. Unfortunately, the dream of a railroad coming through the town was cut short with the railroad ending in Stockton. The idea was

³ Desair, March 1994

⁴ Jean Lindsey, interview by author, November 3, 2012.

⁵ Von Rothenberger, "Chapter Two," in *Weaving the Common Threads of the Solomon Valley Fabric* (Woodston, Kan.: Kansas Humanities Council, 2002), 23.

revived in 1907, though, with the surveying of a north-south railway that would make its way through Plainville, the town to the south, and come close enough for Webster to utilize. Again, that too, also was put to a quick end with the Panic of 1907, or the Banker's Panic.⁶ This was a time of recession, and the New York Stock Exchange fell almost 50%, causing people to rush to their banks to withdraw their savings. Of course, there was no central bank at the time, so liquidity was not to be pushed to the banks going bankrupt.⁷ In return, the funding, as well as security, for a railway to go through to Webster was not to be. The town continued to carry on through the loss of several businesses due to the failed line. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, a post office, a bank, three grocery stores, and two churches were among what was left. An elevator had been built, but was of little use due to the lack of a railway to support it.⁸ The town had lost business, but not its people. In fact, it had another glimmer of hope in the making amid the building, and end of the railroad.

Through the trying times of the railroad passage, a school was in session for children who resided in the area. This school, Webster School, District #23, came together on March 20, 1879. It was first held in a log cabin and held class for 21 pupils on a dirt floor, using wooden planks on wooden blocks for seating. It was only a basic grade school. During the summer of 1882, a teacher held classes for three months at a salary of twelve dollars per month. Locals allowed her to board with their families during this time.⁹ Though this was the first school session, the first actual school to be built was

⁶ "Panic of 1907," Wikipedia, November 22, 2012, Panic of 1907, accessed November 27, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panic_of_1907.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rothenberger, pg. 23

⁹ Ibid.

a one room, limestone building in the fall of 1882. It was merely a village school, until 1911. In that year, an experimental consolidation took place between other schools in Belmont and Rush Townships in Rooks County. It was only the second school in Kansas to make such a change. This consolidation included 27 sections throughout the two townships.¹⁰ A two-story, more modern-framed structure was built on the west end of the town to accommodate the children, and was dedicated in 1914, with horse-drawn busses carrying the children to their destination as shown in Figure 2.¹¹ A vocational shop and gymnasium were later added, and the first class graduated in 1918. It was a significant event for the small town for a few different ways. They finally had another reason other than work for people to come live in their town, and it became the only school in Rooks County that met the requirements of the United States Department of Agriculture in the 1920s. It became fully accredited with courses in Agriculture, Vocational, Home Economics, Music, and Normal Training, which is the prepping of students to become teachers.¹² Out of all the Rooks County schools, it was certainly one to be proud of.



Figure 2: A photo of the Webster School, Dedicated in 1914 with Horse drawn busses. Courtesy of the Plainville Times, February 27, 1975 and the Personal collection of Mrs. Jean Lindsey

¹⁰ L.J Dryden, "History of Belmont Township" (1961), 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Most small towns have always lived in the simplest of ways due to their locations and therefore, a lack of access to luxury items. In the early 20th century, the small communities that unfortunately had very little anyway, lost what businesses they had, that could have provided them with entertainment as well as appeal. When cars began to be a regular sight in the town, Highway 24, which runs east and west, was built from Stockton along the river and continued through Webster along Broadway Street. In the 1920s, though, the highway was moved two miles north, leaving Webster off of the highway, and therefore isolated from passersby.¹³ Webster, though, had multiple ways to entertain what few visitors they had, as well bring together their small community. The residents kept active in many organizations and activities that not only benefited them socially, but spiritually as well. It also allowed them to keep alive their past achievements and provide insight for future generations. A few groups in particular such as the 4-H club, the Rooks County Poultry Club, and the Neighbors Circle were local, and served the children as well as the men and women of Webster.¹⁴ The Neighbors Circle was a group composed of all women, basically for the purpose of carrying on their role as women. They met at the home of Mrs. Roy Hance, who was elected President, on Thursday, February 16, 1933 for the establishment.¹⁵ Their official attire was housedresses, and different ladies in the group hosted the meeting every third Thursday of the month. Their yearly dues of twenty cents were collected for public use, such as for providing support for the sick and entertainment for the less fortunate. A few of the other organizations were nationally recognized, such as the Grand Army of the Republic. An organization created by, and for,

¹³ Rothenberger, pg. 92, Ref. Lindsey, *Webster*

¹⁴ Rothenberger, pg. 83

¹⁵ Outline from Personal Collection of Mrs. Jean Lindsey

Civil War Union Army veterans in 1866, the G.A.R. founded soldier homes, and was active in relief work and pension legislation.¹⁶ The closest post was located in Stockton, allowing the war veterans from Rooks County to gather for meetings. Webster was also home to the Pioneer Settlers Reunion, which was held in the public park after the farmers had harvested their crops. It consisted of picnic dinners, homemade lemonade, a band to play music, and a few political speeches.¹⁷ They held many different games ranging from boys and girls baseball, to checkers and even had a horse race at the racetrack located a mile and a half east of the town. This reunion was held annually from 1910 until the early 1920s. Small events such as swimming in the Solomon River, ice-skating, literary debates and church revival meetings kept the towns people busy at other times, and allowed for socialization. Baptisms were also common all year round in Webster, as it was a “God-fearing community,” being home to five churches since 1886. The people gathered together to support those devoting their lives to Christ¹⁸



Figure 3: A photograph of a baptism in Norman's Pond, Webster, Kansas, Jan. 21, 1913. Baptisms were held no matter the season. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of Mrs. Jean Lindsey.

¹⁶ Glenn B. Knight, "SUVCW--Grand Army of the Republic," SUVCW--Grand Army of the Republic, accessed December 03, 2012, <http://suvchw.org/gar.htm>.

¹⁷ Rothenberger, pg. 83

¹⁸ Ibid.

Religion was a very important part in the lives of Webster's residents. The town catered to a number of denominations from the late 1870s until 1954. A Catholic priest included Webster in his circuit, and Seventh Day Adventists held services in a schoolhouse or other buildings, but churches were never fully established very early in the town's life.¹⁹ Webster was also put on the Methodist Episcopal Church's circuit with adjacent towns, but services were still held in random locations due to the lack of a sanctuary. In 1886, the first plans for a church were constructed, and was shared between Methodists and Baptists for several years. The Baptists' last services were held in 1923.²⁰ The Methodists on the other hand, acquired their own church in 1910. After raising the money to erect a building, a visitor to the town, Miss Alice Mott, offered \$250 if the church was named after her. The Philander Mott Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church was dedicated on June 11, 1911, and thrived for 33 years. On December 17, 1944, it was destroyed by fire, and to this day it is unknown as to whether it was an accident, or arson. The Methodists, though, purchased the District #99 schoolhouse in 1947 and moved it to the town where volunteers remodeled it. It was dedicated on May 21, 1950.²¹ During the time between the fire and the dedication, services were held in the high school auditorium. The people of Webster rebounded after every loss of every traveling minister, and every loss of a church. Their religion taught them how to treat their neighbors as they treat themselves, how to cooperate to conduct a town that had no mayor, and how to lend a helping hand when needed. Their activities and, most likely, daily lives, were centered on Christian values, and the want and need to keep their hometown happy and thriving.

¹⁹ Rothenberger, pg. 23

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Webster's location in Rooks County was not exactly the perfect place to settle, despite the healthy condition of the soil and the amount of underground water. It was located on a flood plain, which caused damage to houses when the river would flood with the coming of spring rains. Though the people of Webster did their best, the floodwaters would surely wreck their humble abodes. Around 1932, a Mrs. Lavinia Fry instigated what would become the death of "Old" Webster, and the birth of "New" Webster. Mrs. Fry had sent 22 letters and 228 column inches concerning her idea from the *Rooks County Record*, the Newspaper located in Stockton, to Kansas State officials. Mrs. Fry had suggested that a dam be built over the South Solomon River for flood control, and other forms of conservation.²² A meeting was held in Webster in 1938, and a committee came together to begin the circulation of a petition to promote the building of a dam. This petition gathered 1186 signatures, and was sent to the Army Corps of Engineers.²³ These signatures were gathered from people living along the South Solomon River from Woodston, the town east of Stockton, Stockton, and Webster. The building of a dam would benefit these towns, as it would catch flood runoff, and allow water to be used for irrigation in the rural farming county. It would also provide recreational benefits for Rooks County, as it had never had such opportunities. It wasn't until 1940 that the Kansas Reclamation Association was created to support dam projects, and was accepted by the Water Resource Division.²⁴ The Webster Unit was approved under the Flood Control Act of 1944, which was a part of the Missouri Basin Plan. In 1951, a very destructive flood that reached all the way to the Missouri River washed out the steel

²² Rothenberger, pg. 5

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

bridges belonging to Alton, in Osborne County to the east, and Webster. The demand for a dam was greater than ever at that point. The flood is what led to the surveying of Webster, and eventually, the approval for the building of the foundations of Webster Dam, which were completed December 2, 1953.²⁵ One million dollars was appropriated to the construction of the foundation. Kansas's politicians and citizens pushed Congress to allow for completion, and by the end of December in 1953, they had their contract for completion, and six million dollars in funding. Work began in March of 1954, and was completed July 26, 1956.²⁶ The overall cost of the dam, including the irrigation system that had yet to be constructed in 1956, was estimated to be around \$17,000,000.²⁷ The dam dedication took place on October 5, 1956 in Stockton, and again on the sixth at the Webster Dam site roughly seven miles west and two miles south of Stockton. A parade was held during the day, and a dance commenced in the evening at the city auditorium in Stockton, and a free barbeque was held at the dam site for those who wished to spend the afternoon by the newly filled lake. Mrs. Fry had the pleasure of celebrating the completion of a structure she felt so strongly about.²⁸

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lavinia Fry, Carl Brown, and Bureau of Reclamation, comps., *Webster Dam Dedication* (Stockton: Rooks County Record, 1956), pg. 9.

²⁸ Ibid.



Figure 4 A photograph of beginning construction on Webster Dam, 1954. Photo Courtesy of the Hays Daily News and the Personal Collection of Mrs. Jean Lindsey.

Though the building of the dam had many benefits for Rooks County, the people of Webster had no choice but to remove themselves from their homes and relocate to one of the surrounding towns. At the end of Webster, 66 adults and 59 children were residing in the old town.²⁹ After multiple town meetings, it was decided that a “New” Webster would be created two miles Southeast of the Old Webster town site. Many of the frame houses were moved to surrounding towns, especially Stockton, but the stone buildings had to be torn down in preparation. Two hundred graves in the cemetery were moved to the Stockton Cemetery in an area now denoted as the Webster Addition, and 29 were moved to other parts of Kansas.³⁰ In an attempt to make their town known, a \$200,000 school was built to accommodate the families who chose to stay with their town.³¹ The new school held both a high school and grade school for the only three homes in New

²⁹ Rothenberger, pg. 55

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ "Little Webster Has \$200,000 School," *Hays Daily News* (Hays), May 23, 1954.

Webster, with roughly 13 people being accounted for, not including country dwellers.³² The school was built in hopes that it would give people some incentive to live in the town. The school would not be so successful, though. Many people had moved to Woodston and Stockton before the plans for the new school had been finalized, due to the evacuation date being so sudden. The last class graduated in 1963, and the grade school was transferred to Stockton in the fall of 1969.³³ Webster was not only home to a new, expensive school, but also to the Richardson's Store, run by Mrs. Albert Richardson. It was the only general store in the town, as Fry's Store did not make the move from Old Webster. Patty Chesney, a former student at the New Webster School, and my mother, explained how their bus driver would occasionally stop at "Arkie's", as was the endearing nickname given to Mr. Richardson, to let them buy a soda or a piece of penny candy before taking them to their country homes.³⁴ Besides being a typical convenience store, offering handmade sandwiches, soda and other sweet treats, it was also a bait shop, carrying bait and tackle for those who went fishing out on the new lake. Mrs. Jean Lindsey joked, "They would dig out the bait worms, then make you a sandwich." The little store changed hands after Mr. Richardson, and eventually closed in 1997 due to smoke damage from a fire.³⁵

³² Ibid.

³³ Lindsey, pg. 2

³⁴ Patty Chesney, Personal Interview by Author, December 11, 2012.

³⁵ Lindsey, pg. 2



Figure 5 A photograph of Mr. Albert Richardson, right, helping customer Marion Brown, resident of Webster, 1954. Photo Courtesy of the Hays Daily News and the Personal Collection of Mrs. Jean Lindsey.

In Webster's meager beginnings, the people of Webster and Belmont each claimed their own section, as it was where their story in the area began. They did, though, come together and learn to appreciate and love their town of Webster. Once they had to make the move to New Webster, their attitudes changed greatly about their situation. Their population had dropped to thirteen people, leaving four families to sustain the town. The older generation that was a part of Webster's original settlement was "plenty mad" about losing their precious home.³⁶ One resident in particular, Mrs. Hattie Anderson who was 79 at the time of her newspaper interview, remained bitter despite the attempts at growth in the area.³⁷ She had been a resident of Webster since 1924, and had lived on a farm near the area previously in 1879. The paper quoted her saying, "They

³⁶ "Battle With Bureau Leaves Little Webster Badly Battered," *Hays Daily News* (Hays), 1956.

³⁷ Ibid.

took our homes away.”³⁸ The interviewer felt her anger, and knew she said every word with a bitter tongue.

The loss of Old Webster and the rise of New Webster has been documented by many prominent newspapers across Kansas, such as the *Topeka Daily Capitol*, *The Salina Journal*, and the *Hays Daily News*. For the people of New Webster, that meant that they had not yet been forgotten. By reading Mr. Albert Richardson’s account in *The Topeka Daily Capitol*, you can tell he understood the trouble New Webster was in. As stated by the Topeka paper in response to Mr. Richardson, “There seems to be little but the stubborn spirit of the present thirteen citizens working to keep the name of Webster from being erased from Kanas maps.” The little town had diminished within 15 years of being settled. The people who are still living who experienced Webster, Old or New, still remember the little things that made the town so special and persistent. If it had not been for the 13 people who began New Webster, the dignity of Old Webster would have been left below the blue-green waters. They understood how people just like them had persevered to keep their town going after the loss of what was to have made their town the “Next Chicago.”³⁹ Webster is the definition of community pride.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Henry F. Desair, "Webster and Belmont-Rooks County's Twin Cities," *The Plainville Times*, March 1994.



Attachment 1: An aerial photo of Old Webster,1953. Photo courtesy of the Personal Collection of Mrs. Jean Lindsey.

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