

**A Rural Resort:  
Farming and Recreation in  
Scott County, Kansas  
Beaver Beach, 1886-1933**

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The landscape of western Kansas has been variously called bleak, barren, dull, desolate, and, of course, flat. Such descriptions usually come from outsiders, who feel they must travel the No-Man's Land between Denver and Kansas City at their own peril. Few of them know (and fewer still probably care), that their perception of the lands along Interstate 70, while understandable, is not the only valid assessment of the area as a whole. Less than an hour's drive south of I-70, for example, a creek-bed meanders through lush pasture, the “desolation” of which is interrupted by cottonwoods along the banks. The ground north of the creek rises slowly into gentle bluffs, while south of it the elevation change is more definite: hills, short but steep and peppered with jutting rocks, protrude up suddenly to disabuse the viewer of the ever-flat Interstate myth.

To native eyes, the aforementioned landscape is a thing of cherished worth and beauty. It can also appear timeless. Walking along the creek, looking at the trees, boulders, and the distant, silent hills, it is easy to believe that this place has always been as it is now – that its seeming emptiness has preserved it from changing along with the rest of the world.

In truth, though, neither this native notion nor those of the condescending passersby are true. Nothing in the physical world is impervious to change, and the lands along this stream (which lies in Beaver Township, northwest Scott County), are no exception. This place is neither barren nor lifeless, but steeped in history. Within the one-and-a-quarter century of its recorded existence, this tranquil cow pasture has been a developed farm dotted with buildings. Even more strangely to modern eyes, it was also once the site of an amusement park.

### **Farming and Foreclosure: 1886-1921**

The creek mentioned above originates in eastern Colorado and flows southeast into

Kansas; in Scott County it abruptly turns north, and flows into the Smoky Hill River in southern Logan County. Though elsewhere called Ladder Creek, local people call this stream the Beaver.<sup>1</sup> The lands along Beaver Creek were inhabited by American Indian peoples long before the founding of Jamestown, Santa Fe, or Plymouth. White farmers, when they first began plowing up the adjacent short-grass prairies, found dozens of stone arrowheads and scraping tools, representing many generations of habitation.<sup>2</sup> The written history of the area, however, only begins in the 1880s, when Scott County was formed and opened for settlement.

One of the first settlers on Beaver Creek was Alva Morse Hopper, a young man from Indiana, who took out a 160 acre claim in 1886. His first night on the prairie he was obliged to stay under his wagon with his gun beside him, too terrified to sleep.<sup>3</sup> He had good reason to fear: cougars and gray wolves still inhabited wild parts of Kansas in 1886, and coyotes were both more numerous and less shy than today. Several other early Scott County settlers were reportedly stalked and attacked by some of them around this same time.<sup>4</sup> Around 1893, Hopper and his wife moved into a sod house built and then abandoned by their neighbors; A.M. lived there until early in the twentieth century, when the need to accommodate his growing family obliged him to build a larger wood-framed house. His first wife had died in 1898, leaving him to raise three children;

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<sup>1</sup> Homer Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), Map #6.

<sup>2</sup> Chuck Kirk, (father of the author and current owner of the area), field notes, August 9, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Eythel Hopper Hollingsworth, "The Alva Morse Hopper Family," in *History of Early Scott County* (Scott City, KS: Scott County Historical Society, 1977), 145.

<sup>4</sup> J.W. Lough, "Yes, I Came West," in *History of Early Scott County*, 170.

he later re-married, and had seven more.<sup>5</sup>

Though he started out with only the standard 160 acres attainable under the Homestead Act, Hopper doubled that amount by planting cottonwood trees along the creek, in accordance with the requirements for a "tree claim," as laid out by the Timber Culture Act of 1873.<sup>6</sup> He also gradually purchased claims abandoned by others. By World War I, Hopper had acquired 720 acres, and in addition to his home had built a barn, granary, chicken coop, milk house, and smoke house. He raised horses, cattle, hogs, chickens, and turkeys. He dug a well and built a windmill, allowing him to maintain a large garden and giving his wife the luxury of a kitchen sink: a luxury which at this time was slowly becoming more common in rural areas.<sup>7</sup> Hopper also attempted to dam up Beaver Creek, hoping to use its water for irrigating his crops. This worked out well in years of normal rainfall, but in wet years the creek flooded, destroying his work and forcing him to start all over again.<sup>8</sup>

These expansions and improvements coincide with the greatest period of agricultural affluence in the history of the United States. Imbalances of supply and demand through the first two decades of the twentieth century, exacerbated by the need to feed America's allies during the World War I, created abnormally high prices for farm products. The farming markets declined sharply in 1920, presaging the national economic downturn which would follow at the end of the

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<sup>5</sup> Hollingsworth, 145; Clio Hopper Johnson Sherry, "The Jessie Johnson and Alva Johnson Families," in *History of Early Scott County*, 157; Patricia L. Rudolph, (granddaughter of A.M. Hopper, grand-niece of Colonel Johnson, local historian and lifelong Scott County resident), field notes, October 9, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> David Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 145.

<sup>7</sup> Hollingsworth, 145; Danbom, 165-66.

<sup>8</sup> Hollingsworth, 146-47.

decade.<sup>9</sup> But even during prosperous times, successful farmers like A.M. Hopper were not immune to financial difficulties. Years earlier, Hopper had been obliged to take out two mortgages on his property, both to the Eastern Kansas Land & Loan Company. Though he was able to pay off the first mortgage, he could not pay the second, and in 1917, at the height of the farming boom, he faced foreclosure. He only kept his land because his son-in-law, Alva Johnson, paid off the mortgage. When Hopper died in 1921, Johnson bought the land from his widow, intending to put it to a very different use.<sup>10</sup>

### **Beaver Beach Amusement Park: 1921-1931**

Alva Johnson was born in Iowa, around the same time that his coincidental namesake, Alva Hopper, established himself on Beaver Creek: land which the younger Alva would someday own. In 1902, aged about sixteen, Johnson moved to Scott County with his parents, settling a 160 acre claim on Beaver Creek, a mile and a half west of the Hoppers.<sup>11</sup> Alva Johnson's parents were both dead by 1907, and he took over their homestead, living with his unmarried older sister, Emma.<sup>12</sup> The Hoppers and the Johnsons soon became fast friends: both families originally hailed from mid-western states, and shared the same appreciation for farming and hard work. They often helped one another and their few common neighbors, and attended

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<sup>9</sup> Danbom, 161-64, 185, 187.

<sup>10</sup> Kirk Family Papers, "Abstract of Title to Southwest Quarter of Section 16, Township 17, Range 33," documents 5-11.

<sup>11</sup> Sherry, 157.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; U.S. Bureau of the Census. "1910 US Federal Census: Beaver Township, Scott County, Kansas." Found online at [http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=View&r=an&dbid=7884&iid=31111\\_4328345-00542&fn=Alva+H&ln=Johnson&st=r&ssrc=&pid=8130865](http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=View&r=an&dbid=7884&iid=31111_4328345-00542&fn=Alva+H&ln=Johnson&st=r&ssrc=&pid=8130865) [Accessed November 20, 2010].

the same social events, such as square dances: Alva Johnson (an auctioneer by trade) was usually the caller for these dances, while Alva Hopper played the guitar. The bond between families was further strengthened in 1915, when Alva Johnson married Clio Hopper, A.M. Hopper's daughter.<sup>13</sup>

Though not a military man, Alva Johnson was known to everyone as “Colonel” – an honorific he picked up as a result of being an auctioneer. He had graduated from the Missouri School of Auctioneers, and was moreover a natural salesman and showman, locally famous for his outgoing demeanor. Indeed, while the census data calls him a farmer, he had many other interests. He conducted auctions throughout western Kansas, raised cattle, horses and mules on his family property, and traveled throughout the region operating a hotdog stand at rodeos.<sup>14</sup> He was also interested in providing his neighbors with a place to get away from the toils and boredom of rural life. To this end, early in 1922, he took up his deceased father-in-law's long-running battle to control Beaver Creek. By spring, the Colonel had built a large cement dam across the water just above one of its many curves, forming a small lake.<sup>15</sup> Around this lake, he set up recreational facilities, including a restaurant, boathouse, dance pavilion, and a small power plant to provide electricity.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the flat expanse of land on the north bank was left open to serve multiple purposes: it could be used as a camp ground, baseball field, rodeo arena, or whatever else might be required.

In order to promote his amusement park, Colonel Johnson held a contest to name the

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<sup>13</sup> Sherry, 157.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.; Hollingsworth, “My Memories of Colonel Johnson,” in *History of Early Scott County*, 158.

<sup>15</sup> Patricia Rudolph, “Beaver Beach – A Fun Place to Go,” in *History of Early Scott County*, 391-392.

<sup>16</sup> Rudolph, 391-392.

place, which came down to two finalists: Beaver Amusement Park and Beaver Beach Park.

Unable or unwilling to decide between the two, the Colonel combined them. The two winners split the offered cash prize of five dollars, and Beaver Beach Amusement Park opened Memorial Day Weekend, 1922, with a barbeque and baseball – which in the event was quickly rained out.

Despite this initial setback, local people apparently liked the Colonel's place and the ideas behind it, because they kept coming back. For the next decade, on weekends and holidays during the summer months, Beaver Beach was a frequent destination for the work-weary. The biggest events took place around the Fourth of July and Labor Day, when the Colonel annually held a three-day rodeo, a photograph of which can be seen in Figure 3 at the back of this document. During the rest of the time, Saturday night dances, baseball games, cook-offs, camp-outs and other attractions, such as a small zoo featuring live badgers, raccoons, and coyotes, were popular with people of all ages.<sup>17</sup>

The Colonel himself was also an attraction. According to his widow, he “had a keen sense of humor, [and] a lively interest in people.” His sister-in-law also remembered his sense of humor and “fantastic charisma.”<sup>18</sup> Put another way, the Colonel possessed that rare ability to always be the center of attention, and he put his popularity to good use on behalf of his neighbors. Unlike most resorts operating today, Beaver Beach was free; the only fee visitors incurred came if they ate at the Johnson family’s restaurant or hotdog stand.<sup>19</sup>

The lake was popular, too. Visitors could swim in it, fish along the banks, or take boats

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Sherry, 157; Hollingsworth, *Colonel Johnson*, 157.

<sup>19</sup> Hollingsworth, 157; Patricia L. Rudolph (granddaughter of A.M. Hopper, grand-niece of Colonel Johnson, local historian and lifelong Scott County resident), telephone interview with the author, December 4, 2010.

out on the water, as can also be seen in Figure 3. Amid the arduous and unending cycle of agricultural labor, the poor market for farm products, and the countless other concerns weighing on the minds of rural Kansans in the 1920s, the lake at Beaver Beach offered solace and fun.

### **After the Colonel: 1931-Present**

Like all good things, Beaver Beach inevitably came to an end. Unfortunately, its end came just when the local people needed it most: in the depths of the Great Depression and on the eve of the Dust Bowl. Interestingly, it was not the Depression that brought on its demise; while other parts of America had been very prosperous in the 1920s, western Kansas had not. There, the Depression made a bad situation worse, but it did not kill Beaver Beach Amusement Park. What did that was, firstly, the death of its founder. Colonel Johnson died of a heart attack in 1931, and without his dynamic presence much of the fun of Beaver Beach vanished. But while it was not the same as before, people continued to visit his lake for the next two years.<sup>20</sup>

But in August 1933, fed by heavy rainfall around its sources, Beaver Creek went on a rampage. As late as 2010, old-timers in Scott County remember the awful “flood of '33,” when all the efforts of A.M. Hopper and Colonel Johnson to bring the Beaver under control were undone. A wall of water descended on the amusement park, destroying the dam and everything else in its path.<sup>21</sup> It was never rebuilt; people seeking rest and relaxation began frequenting the new Scott County State Park several miles further north, which also boasted a lake. Soon after the flood, the Colonel's widow sold the property and moved to nearby Scott City. In 1962, the site came into the possession of the current owners, the Kirk family of Scott City.

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<sup>20</sup> Rudolph, 392.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia L. Rudolph, field notes, October 9, 2010.



In 2010, almost nothing remains of the prosperous farm that Alva Hopper built up through thirty years of hard labor. His fields and garden have reverted to short-grass prairie, while his home and many outbuildings are long gone. Only the cottonwoods he planted along the banks of the Beaver can still be seen today, and they are now mostly dead.<sup>22</sup> The creek is dry, having been drained through extensive irrigation in the 1950s and '60s. Only during extremely wet seasons can a modern witness imagine how it once was.

Today there are only two testaments to the former existence of Beaver Beach. One is a weathered, solitary concrete wall, built into the creek bank long ago: this is all that remains of the Colonel's dam. The other testament is less tangible. It exists in the oral histories that have preserved the tradition of eccentric Colonel Johnson and his amusement park, which for a brief span of years brought great happiness to many people.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

## List of Figures



Figure 1: A.M. Hopper and family, c. 1913. His eldest daughter, Clio (standing in the center of the photo), married Alva Johnson in 1915. Both Clio and her half-sister, Eythel (the child in white, front row second from left), left written accounts of their family that were used by the author of this paper. SOURCE: *History of Early Scott County*, page 145.



Figure 2: Colonel Alva Johnson with his wife, Clio, and daughter, Gladys, c. 1930. Col. Johnson bought the land of his father-in-law, A.M. Hopper, after it was foreclosed on. He developed part of it into Beaver Beach Amusement Park. SOURCE: *History of Early Scott County*, page 157.

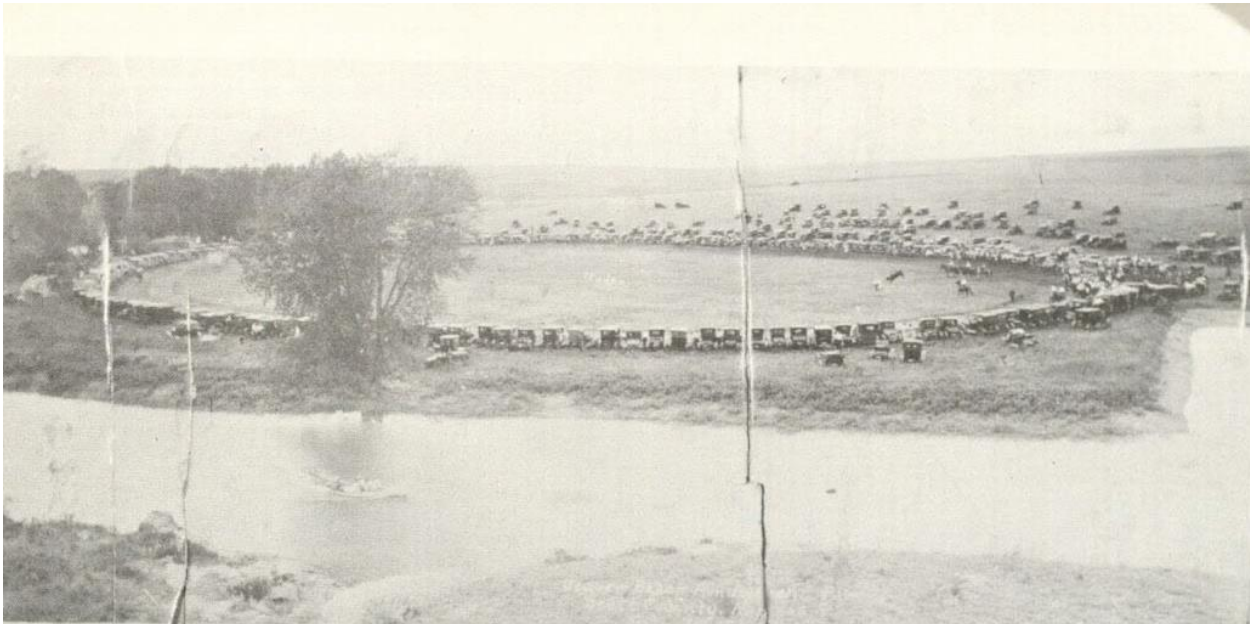


Figure 3: Beaver Beach Amusement Park, seen from the south at the zenith of its popularity, c. 1925. Note also the numerous trees and buildings in the left background, while in the foreground Beaver Creek has enough water for boating – Col. Johnson's dam and lake are to the right, outside the range of the photo. SOURCE: *History of Early Scott County*, page 391.



**Figure 4: The site of Beaver Beach Amusement Park, taken from approximately the same vantage as Figure 3, November 28, 2010. Beaver Creek has been drained through intense irrigation, and many of the trees along its banks are dead or dying. Apart from this and the lack of manmade structures, the land seems little changed. SOURCE: Patrick Kirk.**

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