

Port Byron: A Stop on the Great Western Cattle Trail

Port Byron, Sheridan County, Kansas, 1879



Figure 1. A photograph of a sign placed by the original town site of Port Byron, Sheridan County, Kansas, 2015. SOURCE: Photographed by author, approximately one mile east of Hoxie, Sheridan County, Kansas looking south, March 21, 2015.

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This study overviews the lost town of Port Byron, Kansas, from its one booming year along the Great Western Trail to its disappearance after the Union Pacific Railway came through and shut down the town. Much information has been provided by archaeologist and local historian, Don Rowilson.

On one of those notorious Kansas days when the sky looks like it stretches on forever and the sun could not possibly shine any brighter, I looked upon the tall prairie grass and tried to imagine the community of Port Byron that had once flourished for one short lived year in 1879. Although it didn't last long and not much information is known about Port Byron, it will live on through the generations of Sheridan County residents as a town with a wild reputation. Port Byron, or Camp Scripture as it was sometimes called, was located one mile east of the center of Sheridan County, on the High Plains, in northwest Kansas. Although the location of Port Byron is now a rolling wheat field, at the time, it was nestled into a hill along the south side of Sand Creek with no trees to be seen for miles.¹ Port Byron only lasted for one single year in 1879, yet it had a post office from September 4, 1879, to December 9, 1879, run by Samuel Scripture, from which we can assume came Port Byron's other name, Camp Scripture.² The existence of Port Byron can be attributed to several factors but mostly, to the Great Western Trail.

The Great Western Trail was started in 1874 for the movement of cattle to markets in the east and north. It started in Bandera, Texas and ran north over vast grasslands to several different cow towns in Kansas and Nebraska. Between 10 and 12 million cattle were driven on the Great Western Trail.³ Entrepreneur Frank Richards, and his partner Billy Hudson, saw an opportunity for a much needed stop for the cowboys and trail drovers along the Great Western Trail, so they founded the town of Port Byron. They saw it as the perfect opportunity to start a

¹ Interview, Don Rowilson, Hoxie, Kansas, March 20, 2015.

² *Sheridan County, Kansas: A History of Faith and Labor*, 1895, p. 173. Copy from author's private collection.

³ George Laughead, "The Great Western Cattle Trail," *Kansas History*, May 10, 2011, <http://www.kansashistory.us/westerntail.html>.

“cowboy resort” with a saloon and other amenities. Along with seeing an opportunity for a booming town, these men had alternative motives. Oral tradition says that Frank was seriously injured in a previous fight with a man known as Fisher only a few miles south of Sand Creek. After Richards recovered, he began to visit all of the towns and camps in northwest Kansas in hopes that Fisher would show up so he could take revenge. Failing to find Fisher, Richards thought that establishing a town on the Great Western Trail would either bring Fisher to him or he would be able to obtain information about Fisher’s whereabouts. Supposedly, Fisher never showed up, so the conflict was not resolved in the little town of Port Byron.⁴

The Great Western Trail played a fundamental role in Port Byron. The trail traveled right by the tiny community, as shown in Figure 2. The drives usually began in May or early June, and cattle would arrive to the Port Byron area in July. The herds traveling north would cut through the eastern portion of Sheridan County because there was no one path that the cattle traveled; as they moved over the prairies, they spread out sometimes as much as a mile.⁵ Business owners in Port Byron would ride south on the trail until they found a cattle herd. They would hand out cigars to cowboys to encourage them to stop at Port Byron. Men with a herd of up to 3,000 head of cattle would then sometimes stop in Port Byron and bed the cattle within miles of the saloon.⁶ This was also a good place for cattle because the next crossing and water were not available for another ten miles.⁷ Word spread up and down the Great Western Trail about the wild town of Port Byron, so cowboys couldn’t help but check it out for themselves.

⁴ Interview, Don Rowilson, Hoxie, Kansas, March 20, 2015.

⁵ *The Hoxie Sentinel*, March 5, 2015.

⁶ Interview, Don Rowilson, Hoxie, Kansas, March 20, 2015.

⁷ *The Greatest Texas Cattle Trail*, 2004. Copy from Don Rowilson’s private collection.

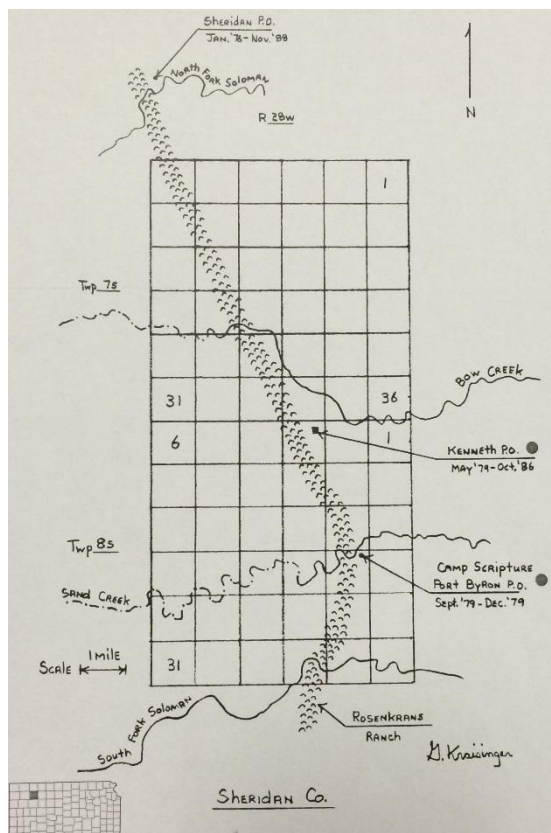


Figure 2. A sketch of a map of the Great Western Trail, printed in 2004. SOURCE: *The Great Texas Cattle Trail* by Gary and Margaret Kraisinger. Notice Port Byron located on the southeast side of the trail with the date of incorporation.

Although it is not completely confirmed what was in the town of Port Byron or where establishments were located, some information is known. There were three saloons⁸, a post office, a general store, a livery barn, and a brothel. It can also be assumed that there were homes that the prostitutes and business owners lived in. Also, there was most likely a hotel for people traveling through. Port Byron had a wild reputation mainly because of the saloons and brothel.⁹ People who visited Port Byron in its prime said, “The refreshments that these places sold were not good for man or beast, that a man had to have a cast iron stomach and iron

⁸ *The Greatest Texas Cattle Trail*, 2004. Copy from Don Rowlison’s private collection.

⁹ Interview, Don Rowlison, Hoxie, KS, March 20, 2015.

constitution to even smell the stuff.”¹⁰ Also, local history states that the frame of one of the saloons was moved approximately two miles northward to the then Sheridan County seat of Kenneth, an incorporated city which co-existed with Port Byron. When the county seat changed location and name to Hoxie in 1886, the former saloon building was again moved approximately three and one-half miles to the southwest, to Hoxie’s Main Street where the original frame of that structure now serves as the core of the current Farm Bureau office.¹¹ The post office in Port Byron was the only government agency ever located in Port Byron. It is not known if it was a free standing building or located inside of a business or home in Port Byron.¹² The town was only incorporated from September 4, 1879 to December 9, 1879. During that time, Samuel F. Scripture served as the post master. When the post office was closed in December, mail services were moved to Kenneth.¹³

Port Byron never had a formal government; the sheriff would have been based out of Kenneth, the county seat at the time that Port Byron was in existence. It can be inferred that business owners or the founders would have most likely been in charge of Port Byron. Kenneth was also known for being where the “proper” people lived, whereas Port Byron was inhabited by cowboys and people wanting a good time. Kenneth was also where the churches and school were located. Most likely there were not children in Port Byron, so they would not have needed the school. As far as church goes, it is often said, “There are no Sundays west of the Missouri River for cowboys.”¹⁴

¹⁰ *The Greatest Texas Cattle Trail*, 2004. Copy from Don Rowlison’s private collection.

¹¹ Interview, Don Rowlison, Hoxie, KS, March 20, 2015.

¹² Interview, Don Rowlison, Hoxie, KS, March 20, 2015.

¹³ *Sheridan County, Kansas: A History of Faith and Labor*, 1895, p. 173. Copy from author’s private collection.

¹⁴ Interview, Don Rowlison, Hoxie, Kansas, March 20, 2015.

With so much of Port Byron being centered around the Great Western Trail, when the cattle drives and carrying trade era ended, so did the town. As immigrant settlers began to permanently homestead Sheridan County, and the Union Pacific Railway came through right by Port Byron, as shown in Figure 3 below, the Great Western Trail ceased to exist as a route for vast herds of cattle. The longhorn breed of cattle could no longer easily walk that far of a distance, and rail shipment became common; in addition, barbed wire fences went up all across the plains. Also, the efficiency of the railroad was unprecedented compared to The Great Western Trail.¹⁵ Prohibition might have also played a role in the demise of Port Byron. With the organization of the town also came prohibition laws (in Kansas, 1880) and enforcement officers, so the saloon business didn't have an opportunity to prosper.¹⁶

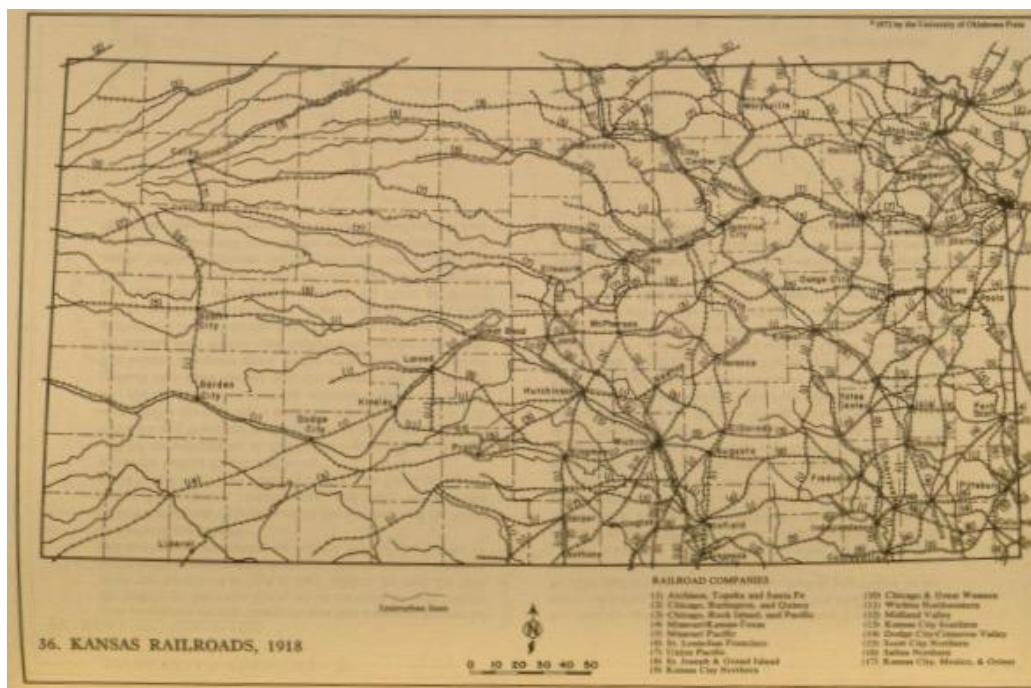


Figure 3. A map of the Kansas Railroads in 1918, printed 1972. SOURCE: *Historical Atlas of Kansas* by Socologsky and Self. Notice the Union Pacific Railroad that runs through the middle of Sheridan County where Port Byron, Sheridan County, Kansas, used to be located.

¹⁵ Interview, Don Rowilson, Hoxie, Kansas,, March 20, 2015.

¹⁶ *The Greatest Texas Cattle Trail*, 2004. Copy from Don Rowilson's private collection.

Even after all of these years, the story of Port Byron still lives on as a mysterious, wild town on the plains of northwest Kansas. So much still remains unknown about this cattle drive community, however. Only glass, tableware, and cookery have been found on the town site.¹⁷ The actual town location is now a wheat field, as shown in Figure 4 below. Although the town lasted such a little time, and so little is known, the fascinating stories of cowboys, saloons, brothels, and fights assure us that the town was more exciting than we could ever imagine. The family who homesteaded the land after the railroad came through always feared that a drunken cowboy would make a return visit to Old Port Byron.¹⁸



Figure 4. A photograph of the town site of Port Byron, Sheridan County, Kansas, April 5, 2015. SOURCE: Photographed by author approximately one mile east of Hoxie, Kansas looking south. Notice the wheat field in the distance with a higher elevation than the creek bottom where the water used to run through near Port Byron.

¹⁷ Interview, Don Rowilson, Hoxie, KS, March 20, 2015

¹⁸ *Sheridan County, Kansas: A History of Faith and Labor*, 1895, p. 196. Copy from author's private collection.

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