

Ireland on the Plains: Clonmel, Sedgwick County, Kansas, 1905-1938

Matthew Barnes

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

History 589

Fall 2017



Figure 1: Photo of present day Clonmel, Kansas, city limits, facing southwest. St. John's Catholic Church can be seen in the background. Photo by author, November 26, 2017.

This study examines the town of Clonmel, in Illinois Township, Sedgwick County, Kansas. It lasted from 1871 to 1938. When the railway left accompanied by the rise of the automobile, Clonmel lost residents, but the bond of St. John's Catholic Church has kept the town alive. This study relies on church history, newspaper articles, and site studies.

Imagine being so hungry that you cannot stay in your homeland any longer. You decide to flee for the United States, the “land of opportunity.” In the 1840s, many Irish families had to do just that. The history of Clonmel starts in Ireland when the Great Potato Famine was in full swing. When these immigrants came to America, they were not warmly welcomed, and so it was common for them to stick together. One group of migrants sought land in the western states, settling first in Iowa and finally on the flat prairies of south-central Kansas near the Ninnescah River, an environment that was vastly different from the terrain and climate of the coastal cliffs of southern Ireland. When they first settled there, it was said that there was only one tree that could be seen, a lone cottonwood tree on the river.¹ The bond of religion forged a community for the settlers, unknown that would thrive for many years.

In the early 1870s, a generation after the potato famine that brought them to the United States, a group of Irish settlers migrated from Nolan Settlement in Johnson County, Iowa to land made available through the Homestead Act of 1862.¹ They settled in the fertile land located in south-central Kansas in Afton Township.² One of the settlers was Edward Wall, a first generation immigrant and veteran of the Sixth Iowa Cavalry, who would play an integral role in founding Clonmel.³ Soon after arrival these Irish-Americans bought five acres of land on which to build a church and cemetery for the community. They referred to this area as St. John’s Mission and sometimes Afton, but for unknown reasons they never built a church on this site. Instead they moved to nearby Illinois Township. They built their first church in 1878 about two

¹ Jack Armour and Janis Pauly, ed., *An Historical Account of the Past 125 Years of St. John’s Catholic Church 1878-2003*, (Wichita, KS: ADR Bookprint, 2003), 8-13.

² “Destroyed by Fire, Cyclone.” *The Catholic Advance*, June 11, 1938.

³ “Edward Wall is Dead.” *The Wichita Beacon*, July 31, 1917; Armour and Pauly, *An Historical Account*, 13.

and a half miles northwest of the current site and named it St. John's Catholic Church. It was a wood frame structure that could reportedly sit sixty people. No town was ever built around this church, but it served as a gathering place for the surrounding community.⁴

This wood frame church was destroyed by fire when a local farmer in the spring of 1899 decided to burn his crops. While the farmer took a lunch break, the fire jumped the creek and burned down the church. An eyewitness claimed that the whole church was gone in less than fifteen minutes. The community was left without a church for six years.⁵ It is unclear where, or if, church services were held during that time. When they decided to rebuild, the congregation wanted to place the church at the same location, but the local bishop did not want new churches built "in the country", preferring that new development be built near railroad tracks.



Figure 2: Edward Wall (fourth from left) with his family in front of his I-House. Photo courtesy of St. John's Catholic Church, date unknown.

In 1904 the Kansas City, Mexico, and Orient Railway had laid tracks several miles south of the original church, cutting off the southeast section of Edward Wall's land. Wall was born in Clonmel, Ireland, and came to America in 1847 at age seven during the height of the potato

⁴ Armour and Pauly, *An Historical Account*, 8.

⁵ Ibid., 12.

famine.⁶ He was devoted to his new nation and to his community. Wall donated his land along the railway to the congregation and soon after construction began on the new church. The church was built from the monetary donations of seven families.⁷ Collectively, they gave \$2,348.50 to build the new church.⁸



Figure 3:

Picture of the first church built at the current Clonmel site. It was completed in a little over a year at the cost of \$2,348.50. Photo courtesy of St. John's Catholic Church, circa 1907.

The settlers established a colony town centered on the new St. John's Catholic Church, and named it Clonmel, after the birthplace of Edward Wall since he had donated the land for the church. It was a familiar name for the Irish-American settlers and a comforting reminder of their homeland. Clonmel became a bustling place in the early decades of the twentieth century. Walter Wall, the son of Edward, built the town's first general store in 1905. The store doubled as the first post office with Walter Wall serving as the first postmaster. Soon after, a barber shop was built next door that, oddly enough, doubled as a pool hall. The church did not

⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁷ "The City Churches." *The Catholic Advance*, June 23, 1906.

⁸ Armour and Pauly, *An Historical Account*, 13.

condemn gambling as a sin, but a pool hall does not seem to promote the family values that one might expect in a small religious town in the early 1900s. Next door to the barber shop was the town's blacksmith. Before the mass availability of automobiles, every town needed a blacksmith to fit and repair horseshoes, along with all other metalworking needs for the community. On the south side of the railroad tracks that divided the town was the Clonmel Train Depot and grain elevator.⁹

In 1912 the population of Clonmel was still just a mere 30 people.¹⁰ Trying to bring new settlers to Clonmel, St. John's Catholic Church opened a parish school in 1918. They built a two-room brick school house next to the church.⁷ The people's love of education was quite naturally aligned with their practice of religion in integrating the parish school and St. John's church.



Figure 4:

This is the first of two general stores built in the town. A larger general store was built later to accommodate the growth of Clonmel and the Post Office was moved into the new store. Photo courtesy of St. John's Catholic Church, circa 1905.

⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰ *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory*, (Topeka, KS: R.L. Polk & Co., 1912), 244.

Tragedy struck again on May 22, 1923, when a cyclone lifted the small church off of its foundation and placed it several feet away, fully intact. Efforts were made to restore the church to its foundation but in the end it had to be demolished. The wood from the building was sold to locals to raise money for a new building. Mass was held in the small school house for the next three years. When enough funds were collected to build a new church, the congregation decided to design a building to house both the church and school. The school would be on the main floor and the mass would be held in the basement. The previous school was turned into a seven-bedroom house as a residence for teachers. In 1926 the combined church and school was completed. In the first year after construction, seventy-one students were enrolled in the parish school.¹¹

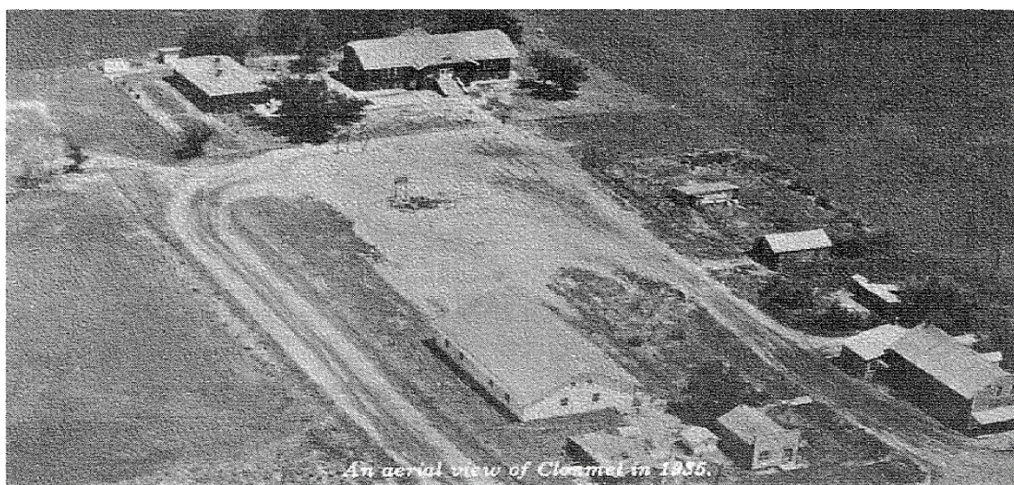


Figure 5: An aerial view of Clonmel depicting the new parish school in the top center, original schoolhouse to the left, and the general store in the bottom right. Photo courtesy of St. John's Catholic Church, 1935.

As the congregation grew, the church needed to expand. Rather than building again, the congregation bought the chapel from the former Strother Army Base near Winfield, Kansas. The Clonmel congregation outbid forty-two other churches to purchase the building for \$1,850. In

¹¹ Armour and Pauly, *An Historical Account*, 24-27.

1946, the wood frame building was moved over forty miles to its current site. It was then set into place and covered with brick. Most of the construction was done by members of the congregation in order to save cost. The actual final cost of the church was only \$15,000.¹² It was paid off by the congregation before the building was dedicated on September 24, 1947.¹³ This is the church that is still in use by the people who live in and near Clonmel today. The role that the church plays in the community is as important now as it was in 1878.

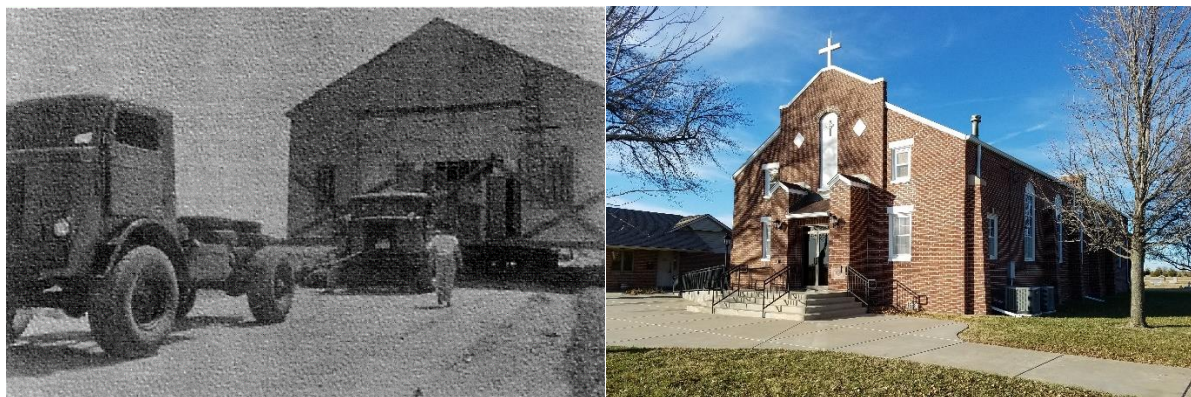


Figure 6:

LEFT: The church in the process of being moved from Winfield, Kansas. Photo courtesy of St. John's Catholic Church, 1946. RIGHT: The church in its current state looking northeast. Photo taken by author, November 26, 2017.

Even when the post office closed in 1938, St. John's church continued to thrive. The railroad was removed and a new highway was built right through town, so Clonmel slowly lost residents. However, the invention of the automobile made it easier for members to live in larger towns and still commute to Clonmel for Mass. Today, Clonmel is an unincorporated community in Sedgwick County but the church still has 225 families as parishioners.

Driving down Kansas Highway 42, it would be easy to miss the once vibrant community that was there. Clonmel, the flat prairieland where immigrants from Ireland came with a strong desire to start a new life and the hopes and dreams of countless opportunities, still boasts the

¹² Ibid., 33.

¹³ "40 Families, Pastor Construct Rectory, Acquire Army Chapel." *The Catholic Advance*, September 19, 1947.

name of its fatherland. Through religion, Clonmel has stood the test of time and brought just a small piece of Ireland to the plains.



Figure 7:

Picture shows St. John's Parish shortly after completion.

Moving from left to right is the clergy house, the sanctuary, the original school, and finally the combination church and school. Photo courtesy of St. John's Catholic Church, circa 1950.

Bibliography

"40 Families, Pastor Construct Rectory, Acquire Army Chapel." *The Catholic Advance*, September 19, 1947.

Armour, Jack, and Janis Pauly, ed. *An Historical Account of the Past 125 Years of St. John's Catholic Church 1878-2003*. Wichita, Kansas: ADR Bookprint, 2003.

"The City Churches." *The Catholic Advance*, June 23, 1906.

"Destroyed by Fire, Cyclone." *The Catholic Advance*, June 11, 1938.

"Edward Wall is Dead." *The Wichita Beacon*, July 31, 1917.

Polk, R. L., ed. *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory, Volume XII*. Topeka, Kansas: R.L. Polk & Co., 1912.