

# The Town That Somehow Stuck: Edson, Sherman County, Kansas, 1888-1979

Maura Hansen

Chapman Center for Rural Studies  
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**Figure 1:** Photograph of Edson town marker. Notice railcars parked in the background on the tracks of the Rock Island Line behind the “old” Edson elevator. Photograph by author, Nov. 26, 2016. Taken facing northeast down Highway 24.

The following is a brief history of Edson, Washington Township, Sherman County, Kansas. Edson is a community that has managed to maintain its small population for over 100 years, and has relied heavily on the railroad along the way. This study uses personal interviews, on site photography, Sherman County history books, and a number of other local resources.

Situated among the vast plains and infinite farmland of northwestern Kansas, just less than 30 miles east of the Colorado border, sits Edson, a tiny railway town that you just might miss if driving down Highway 24 too quickly. Small as it may be, with a population always under 30 residents, Edson has survived for over a century without much logical reasoning. Businesses have come and long been gone, and the school has been closed for nearly 40 years. Grain elevators, the Rock Island Line (now a branch of the Union Pacific railroad), and the Post Office are the only remaining things that seem to keep the town functioning. However, I believe Edson still exists today simply because “They Came to Stay,” as stated in the subtitle of the four volume Sherman County history series. Not surprisingly, some of their children and grandchildren have chosen to return for many of the same reasons those before them stayed: the pride and comfort in small-town Edson.

The Rock Island had made its way to Sherman county by July 4, 1888,<sup>1</sup> and on August 10 of that same year, Edson was formed after Albert and Laura Harris had platted the town and filed for official record of Edson.<sup>2</sup> They named the town simply, as Albert was the son of Ed Harris.<sup>3,4</sup> As with other towns along the Rock Island Line, such as Kanorado and Ruleton, Edson began as a station town.<sup>5</sup> Countless settlers throughout the United States and especially in Kansas headed west in search of land. Many migrants came from North Midland states such as Iowa and

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<sup>1</sup> *Sherman County & Family History*. (Goodland, Kansas: Sherman County Historical Society, 1980), vol. I, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Melvin Bruntzel, *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing, Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths*. (Belleville, Kansas: The Print Schop, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> *Sherman County & Family History*, p. 151.

Illinois.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Edson, these settlers specifically followed the Rock Island Line, in high hopes that fertile lands and railroad transport of goods could bring newfound prosperity.

### **The Prosperous Years**

The first few decades for Edson were fruitful. Homesteaders were fueling the growth of the town, as the nearly half of all settlers in Washington Township came to claim their “free title to a quarter section of land.”<sup>7</sup> “Notice to Purchase School Land” was made in August of 1894,<sup>8</sup> and construction began on the original Edson School soon thereafter. A number of general stores, stations, and garages were opened up in town (see Figure 2 below), and the Post Office was run inside one of the stores. These businesses were multifunctional because normally the owner (and his/her family) lived in attached living quarters. One store manager released a brief account titled “Increasing Our Stock to Meet Demands” in 1904, stating that “the people in east Sherman County are prospering” and “now we have the Biggest Stock ever Handled in the East Part of This County.”<sup>9</sup> Another similar account in 1905 says, “We have cleaned up, painted up and filled up the Edson Store with an additional stock of one thousand five hundred dollars.”<sup>10</sup> These statements show that Edson was a thriving little town during the final years of the 1800s and the early 1900s, enough so that they were in need of more supplies and resources to meet the demands of the townspeople and others from the surrounding area.

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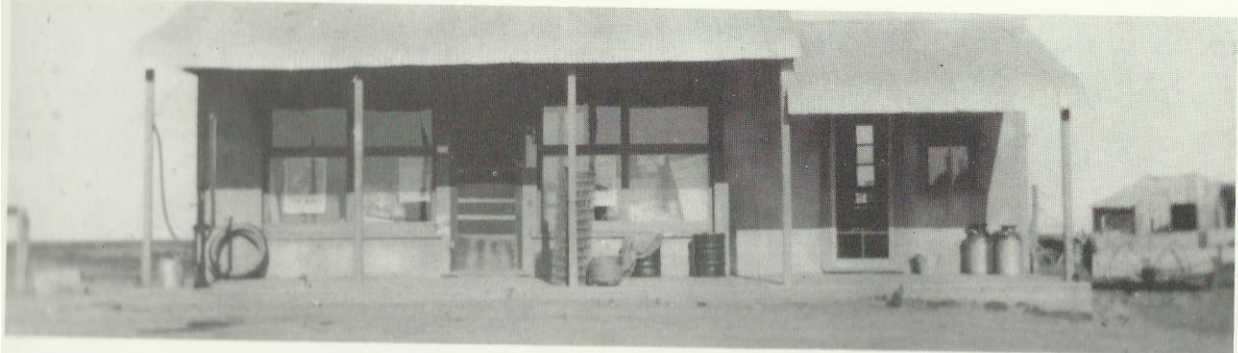
<sup>6</sup> James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 174.

<sup>7</sup> *Sherman County & Family History*, vol. I, p. 114-118.

<sup>8</sup> “Notice to Purchase School Land,” *The Goodland Republic*, August 24, 1894, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> “Increasing Our Stock to Meet Demands,” *The Goodland Republic*, October 28, 1904, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> “Take Notice!” *The Goodland Republic*, December 1, 1905, p. 1.



**Figure 2:** Historic photograph of W.H. Chambers Store in Edson, taken c. 1900. Notice the wagon to the far right, and what looks to be living quarters connected to the right side of the store. SOURCE: *Sherman County & Family History*, 1980, p. 175.

This prosperity in Edson continued into and past the Great Depression and the infamous Dirty Thirties of the Plains. The Edson School was renovated and added onto in the early 1920s, but the school was still unable to keep up with the number of students. In April of 1931, Edson Consolidated School District gave notice of petition to build a new school building for \$50,000.<sup>11</sup> The new building opened to students in December 1931 (see Figure 3 below),<sup>12</sup> with the chosen name of “The Edson Rockets” after the familiar Rock Island Rocket train (see Figure 4 below).



**Figure 3:** Photograph of Edson Consolidated School building as it appeared in the fall of 2013. SOURCE: Private collection of Tina Hansen, author’s mother. Taken facing north.

<sup>11</sup> Eleanor Wilson Elliot, *Edson Kansas: Home of the Edson Rockets*. (Goodland, Kansas: Sherman County Historical Society, 2016), p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> “History of Edson Consolidated High,” *Goodland Daily News*, August 7, 1986.



**Figure 4:** Photograph of Edson Rockets logo, painted on north side of bus barn. Photograph by author, November 26, 2016.

As former school secretary Janis Elfers recalls, “we all used to come from [the new school] to go have lunch over at the old school,” which was just across the lot, and some rooms of the old school remained in use for a number of years.<sup>13</sup> “During the 30s, many a time pupils had to be kept at school due to severe dust storms, and there was a near epidemic of whooping cough... [but] the 30s did manage to see some good times, like when the school would close for one whole day so everyone could go to the County Fair.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout the Depression, we see that Edson Consolidated School managed to thrive because “in the late 40s and early 50s a home economics classroom and cafeteria were added to the school house as well as the construction of a farm shop,” and even up until 1964 when “a nice up-to-date gymnasium was built.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Disasters Strike**

Although Edson continued to grow and prosper, a few disastrous events put a bump in the road along the way. For example, a fire in November of 1931 completely destroyed the Edson Store building, including “the records of the store, and the government post office supplies in the building.” “The origin of the fire is not known” and when a call was made to the Goodland fire department, they did not go to Edson because a city ruling didn’t allow the department to leave

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<sup>13</sup> Janis Elfers, personal interview, 26 Nov. 2016.

<sup>14</sup> “History of Edson Consolidated High.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

town “as it would take all the fire fighting equipment and leave no local protection.”<sup>16</sup> Janis Elfers remembers a time as a young woman, while working at one of the stations that also housed a small café, that “a car drove straight through the front corner of the building” successfully shutting down that business for a while.<sup>17</sup> Another fire on July 11, 1966 “destroyed an undetermined amount of property... at the Vinton L. Albers Salvage Yard at Edson... including two buildings on the property.”<sup>18</sup> Luckily the townspeople of Edson worked together to always help rebuild for their neighbors.

### **Industry in Edson**

Farming and grain production played a huge part in the lives of Edson citizens and those in all towns across northwest Kansas. Grain elevators were built in Edson right as the Rock Island arrived, as well as what seems like every few miles down the Rock Island Line. Homesteaders made a living doing construction of the railroad, which gave them an opportunity to work for wages. “The money earned could then be used to buy equipment needed for farm improvements.”<sup>19</sup> The Rock Island Line also made the transportation of grain to better markets in Kansas possible and much more accessible for Edson farmers. The railway and elevators are still used regularly at Edson today, just not quite as frequently as before (see Figure 5 below).

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<sup>16</sup> “Edson Store Burns,” *The Collyer Advance* (Collyer, Kansas), November 5, 1931, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Janis Elfers, personal interview.

<sup>18</sup> Eleanor Wilson Elliot, *Edson Kansas*, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Sherman County & Family History*. Vol. I, p. 151.



**Figure 5:** Photograph of a line of railcars down the Rock Island (now Union Pacific) being the “old” Edson elevator. Photograph by author, November 26, 2016. Taken facing east.

However, the industrial factor that really sets Edson’s history apart is the discovery of diatomaceous marl deposits south of town in 1953 and the resulting construction of a Lorite plant. The plant was built along the Rock Island, right next to the elevator, allowing easy transfer of the product to trains to be distributed all over the country.

EDSON—A white deposit with an almost unpronounceable name is putting this Northwest Kansas town on the map. The substance is called diatomaceous marl, the raw material for a new industrial product being produced at Edson. The finished produce, Lorite, is processed at a modern plant employing 15 to 20 men. Diatomaceous marl is a white deposit found near the surface of the earth, it was deposited there thousands of years ago when a great inland lake covered this part of Kansas.<sup>20</sup>

Lorite was an extremely valuable and versatile product in this time period. Since the product is sterile, it was used in face powder, toothpaste, and fruit juices. “It is also buoyant, being used to hold paints in mixture” and “because it will absorb heat it is used as an insulation. The product is

<sup>20</sup> “Deposits of Marl Put Edson on Map,” *The Salina Journal* (Salina, Kansas), December 13, 1953, p. 34.

also sold for use in fertilizers and explosives.”<sup>21</sup> The plant remained open for around 20 years with all townspeople remembering something different about it. Both Janis Elfers<sup>22</sup> and my grandfather Melvin Musil<sup>23</sup> recounted the memory of the awful, loud squeaking noise that the plant made all day and all night for years. My mother Tina (Musil) Hansen remembers her, my aunt and uncles, and all their friends collecting the chunks of “chalk” that fell out of the trucks along the road to the plant and using them for their sidewalk chalk.<sup>24</sup> Everyone in Edson knows someone who worked at the plant for many years and many proudly recall that “nearly every state in the union and many foreign nations have received shipments of Lorite from the Edson plant.”<sup>25</sup>

However, a product so incredibly versatile turned out to be poisoning countless people, as it was discovered to contain lead. By the end of the 70s, lead was banned for commercial use, the Edson deposit had nearly run out of marl, and there was no use for the plant to remain open.

### **They Stayed**

Edson is located in a Kansas area without aboveground water sources, lacking a vital resource that surprisingly was not much of a threat or concern for homesteaders. The first way settlers were able to survive without a nearby water source was to collect rainwater. Lifelong Edson resident Dan Butts remembers his childhood home and all of his neighbors’ homes using underground cisterns to collect and store rainwater.<sup>26</sup> However, rainwater was unreliable and became nearly unheard of when the drought of the 1930s arrived. Some had already done so, but at this point people were forced to dig wells into the Ogallala aquifer. “The Ogallala aquifer in

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Janis Elfers, personal interview.

<sup>23</sup> Melvin Musil, personal interview, November 26, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Tina Hansen, personal interview, November 26, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> “Deposits of Marl.”

<sup>26</sup> Dan Butts. Personal interview. November 26, 2016.



western Kansas is a saturated, water-bearing rock formation more than a hundred feet deep... Except in times of severe drought, these aquifers are dependable sources of water and serve as an important resource for irrigation, industry, and municipal water supplies.”<sup>27</sup> Edson being positioned above the Ogallala aquifer provided a way for its townspeople to stay in their homes and on their land through the unpredictable precipitation of western Kansas.

By 1973, competition with the Sherman county seat being located in ever-growing Goodland, 10 miles west of Edson, had forced the Edson High School to close. “The students were then bussed into Goodland,”<sup>28</sup> although some, like my mother and her siblings, chose to attend Brewster High School, just 10 miles to the east. The grade school and junior high remained open for six more years until the entire school was shut down in 1979.<sup>29</sup> My grandfather Melvin Musil and his brother Marlin Musil purchased the school property including the school building, bus barn, teachers housing, and football field at auction in 1979. In the following years, they used the bus barn to store farm equipment, and the school and teachers’ houses were home to Marlin and his wife Yvonne, as well as my uncle Melvin Jr., his wife and daughters in the 90s. However, for about the past 20 years, the school and house have gone to ruin and stood empty. All the while, my grandfather Melvin has been using the football field as his miniature farm and personal garden, growing the best potatoes and sweet corn in western Kansas. A year ago, Melvin sold the entire property to Mike Cochran of Cochran Farm Supply in Edson, under the agreement that he can still use the football field as long as he likes. This past summer the Edson Consolidated School building and the teachers’ house was finally demolished.

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<sup>27</sup> Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas, 2nd ed.* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> “History of Edson Consolidated High.”

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Families could have relocated at any time throughout the 1930s to now, yet the people of Edson have stayed for generations. Through the countless business closings of the 1930s to 1970s, the closing of Edson Consolidated School and the Lorite plant in the late 1970s, most chose to stay put in their Edson homes and some of their children have since left and returned home. The Post Office remains open to this day (see Figure 6 below), indicating Edson's vitality and never-ending identity. Proof that Edson pride runs in the veins of its residents.



**Figure 6:** Photograph of Edson Post Office, still in use. This building has been home to a number of postmasters in the past, but is only an office today. Photograph by author, November 26, 2016. Taken facing east.

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