

Germantown, Kansas: the Community That Refused a Railway



Figure 1. Photograph of the sign for Germantown Cemetery. Photograph by author.

Halee Thompson
History 533: Lost Kansas Communities
Chapman Center for Rural Studies
Kansas State University
Fall 2012

The lost town of Germantown was founded by hard working settlers who, with the last of their money, bought claims on this sight. They fought valiantly to break the western Kansas landscape and began to prosper. By standing up and refusing to have a railroad they kept their quiet town, but not for long. With a town popping up four miles south next to the railway, Germantown soon faded until the only thing left was the cemetery we see today.

Along a dusty road in Smith County, Kansas, past wheat fields, an unassuming sign sits crookedly among the prairie grass. The bold black letters point towards the last remnants of a small town called Germantown. The town is gone, but its cemetery remains, marking the place of a town that refused a railroad.



Figure 2. Photograph of the only sign showing the way to Germantown Cemetery.

Photograph by author. It is located about two miles away from Germantown Cemetery on Mohawk Road.

Early Life

In June 1871, Fredrick Wagner and his pregnant wife Augusta arrived in Smith County. They, and Augusta's parents Michial and Louise Emme, had left Wisconsin and headed as far west as the train went. The family liked the landscape of eastern Kansas, and the forested northern floodplain¹. Real-estate men selling

¹ Sofolosky, Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (2nd ed.) 5.

land convinced the two couples to buy land in Smith County in a place called Middle Cedar Creek.²

The Wagners and Emmes were not the only people conned by the flowery language used by land speculators to describe the harsh bluestem-grama prairie³ sold to the families. Fred Hohner, Charlie and Louie Clemon, Herman Hilbrink, and their wives also bought land.⁴ They were surprised and disappointed by the sparse land, but they had used all their money to relocate to Kansas and had no means to return east, they were forced to make their situation work. They began to create a new life by building a log and dugout house to live in. The settlers then built a sod stable for the horses. Horses were vital for hauling their belongings to the claims. Other families that settled in the area also built dugouts. With the establishment of the new community under war Mr. Wagner decided a post office was necessary, and the Germantown post office was commissioned on December 15, 1871; Fredrick Wagner served as the first post master. On this same day the Wagners gave birth to the first child Anna, she became the first child born in Swan Township of Smith County. Anna recorded many events of the town's early settlement; some she lived, while others were handed down as oral history. One such event was a November blizzard that occurred the month before she was born. Anna's memoirs describe some of the terrible hardships these early settlers endured.

"After the wind had gone down and the sky cleared my father mounted a large iron gray horse and rode out to look over the countryside and take note of the extent of the storm. He was surprised when he found a team of mules and a wagon. Upon investigation he found two men frozen to death and one man still alive but buried in

² Anna Wagner, memoir.

³ Sofolosky and Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (2nd ed.) 5.

⁴ Juanita Reneberg, Germantown Cemetery pamphlet.

the snow. He had crouched down on the ground and the wind had whirled the snow around him piling it high over his head . . . They carried the man into the sod barn but his boots were frozen to his feet and could not be removed and he was unconscious. It took two days to make the trip to Gaylord and return with the Doctor. The boots still could not be removed from the man's feet, so using my father's carpenter saw and a hunting knife the limbs were cut off with the boots on. As soon as the man was able to talk, he told us his name was Frank Brauer. He was from Wisconsin and had been on a buffalo trip.⁵

Another story Anna recounts in her memoir is occasion when the family's little cabin was surrounded by hundreds of Native Americans from the Omaha tribe.⁶ Frederick had left the house to go hunting, but returned when he saw the Native Americans. Outside the cabin, he and a Native American approached each other with guns drawn. The Native American was an Omaha chief who spoke English; he told Frederick that they were passing through on their way home from a buffalo hunt in Colorado. The travelers set up camp that night near the cabin and Anna remembers some of the visitors peeking through the windows. The next day a Native American woman brought a little girl into the cabin and presented her to Augusta, neither of them speaking a common language it took a little while for the Native American woman to be understood. Eventually Augusta found the woman wanted trade the little girl for Anna's younger sister.⁷

In 1873 the Wagners and Emmes were finally able to build new homes, this shows that the people of the area were having some success with the inhospitable land. The closest town was quite a distance from the little town, so the Wagners found the need to open a general store, in order to make it easier for the people of

⁵ Anna Wagner, memoir.

⁶ No dates were given for this event.

⁷ Anna Wagner, memoir. Stories such as this were common on the Kansas frontier. Many communities feared Indians would kidnap their little girls or another variant of this story has the Indians trying to barter for one of their daughters. It is possible that these tales were one of the earliest "urban legends" told in Kansas.

Germantown to buy needed supplies; they ran a small store out of their new home. They would have only been able to stock the bare necessities. The mail route was bringing with it more homesteaders; the town's commerce was beginning to thrive. The town had a blacksmith, lodging house, sawmill, school, and a German Lutheran Church, all things that demonstrate a town's viability. Eventually Mr. Kalbfleisch opened a proper general store; it was much larger and provided more goods than the little store located in the Wagner home. The Wagners closed their store but continued running the post office.

Refusing the Railroad

The thriving Germantown looked like a prime place to receive a railroad. The ground was surveyed and plans were drawn up. When the town was finally asked to vote on the railroad, it didn't pass. The railway company was forced to move four miles south, where the town of Kensington would eventually spring up.⁸ Many of the town's founding settlers were fearful of the perceived lawlessness that was often associated railway communities, they likely had no idea how their decision would affect the town's future.

This decision heralded the end for Germantown. The town tried to hold on, but Kensington sprang up next to the new railroad in 1887. This is one of the exceptions to the twin town phenomenon of towns being founded near each other within only a couple of years with a landmark in between them. Even with

⁸ Emme, "Germantown."

Kensington established about 13 years later, the twin town phenomenon could still be seen.

The pull of the railroad was too much. In 1892 the post office was moved to Kensington.⁹ With hopes that the town would pull through and thrive again, the church was turned into a school in 1906, and a new school was built at another location.¹⁰

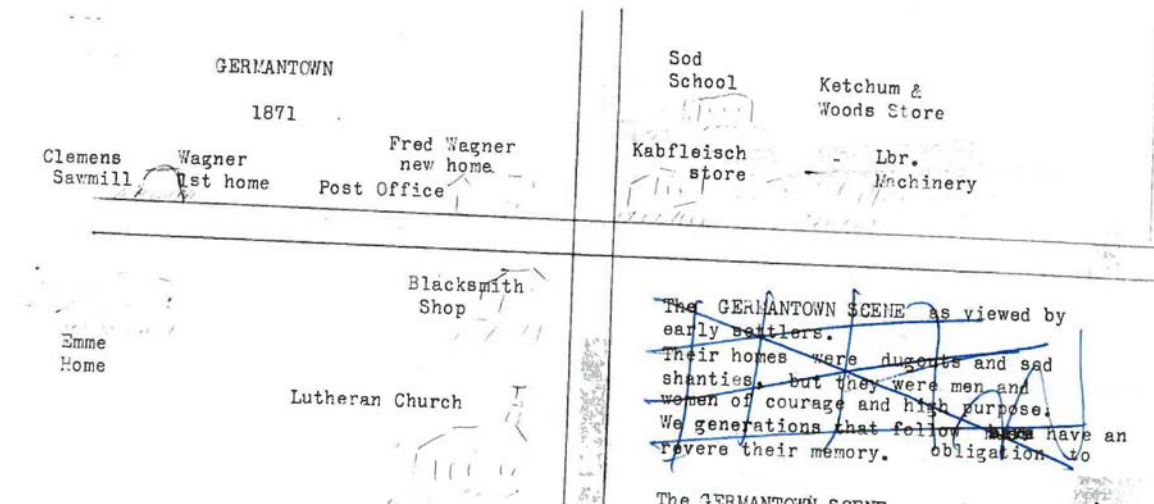


Figure 3. Drawn map of Germantown. SOURCE: Anna Wagner, Germantown Historical Pamphlet.



Figure 4. Photograph of Germantown town site today. Photograph by author.

⁹ Juanita Reneberg, Germantown Cemetery pamphlet.

¹⁰ *Kensington Mirror*.

Germantown Cemetery

The Germantown Cemetery, established in 1880, is located $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile east of the former town site. The first graves were brought from family sites. The lots were \$2.50 for a plot.¹¹ The Wagner family is buried here.



Figure 5. Photograph of Fredrick and Augusta Wagner's gravestone. Photograph by author.



Figure 6. Photograph of Anna Wagner's Gravestone. Photograph by author.

¹¹ Juanita Reneberg, German Cemetery pamphlet.

Located in the cemetery are graves of two Spanish-American War veterans, Civil War veterans, WWI, WWII, Korea and Vietnam veterans.



Figure 7. Photograph of a Civil War commemoration. Photograph by author.

The cemetery is maintained by the Germantown Cemetery Association, a non-profit organization. At the front entrance of the cemetery an information hut is located. Inside it shows the layout of the cemetery and has a full listing of names and where the lot is located. The hut is stocked with an information packet about Germantown, keeping the history alive and available for any of the visitors.

Bibliography

Emme. "Germantown." *Kensington Mirror*, n.d.

Kensington Mirror, August 16, 1906.

Reneberg, Juanita. *Germantown Cemetery*. Kensington, Kansas: Germantown Cemetery Association, n.d.

Socolofsky, Homer E., and Huber Self. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*, 2nd ed. Norman Oklahoma: Publishing Division of the University, 1988.

Wagner, Anna. "Germantown." Personal Memoir. 1950.

Wagner, Anna. Illustration. Copied from historical society document. 1950.