

A Town Grown By Farmers:
Menoken, Shawnee County, Kansas, 1876-1936

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Chapman Center for Rural Studies, Fall, 2015



This study explores what the town of Menoken, Menoken Township, Shawnee County, Kansas was like, and what happened to it. Menoken was eventually overtaken by bigger sister towns Topeka and Silver Lake. Methods include interviews, maps of the county, photographs of town site as it is today, and newspaper articles about the town.

Introduction:

Being located right next to the Kansas River just miles away from the sprouting city of Topeka, having a farmer's paradise of soil to grow crops, and having one of the most travelled railway routes in the country going right through your town would make you think that your town was going to last forever. This is most likely what the people of Menoken thought about their town; however, many different factors would prove this to not be the case. Menoken was founded in the years 1876-1877, just about five miles northwest of Topeka, and it was mainly a farming town and railroad depot. Almost the entire population of Menoken was made up of farmers who produced corn, wheat, and livestock. Menoken arguably would not have even existed without all of the farmers who lived around it. Like many other towns at this time, agriculture was the backbone of this community. Because of its close proximity to the Kansas River and many other small creeks including Soldier Creek, Menoken became a prime place for farming due to the flooding and irrigation of the area.

The town was so centered around farming that at one point the town was named Farmersville. The new name of the town also has a connection to farming too: the word "Menoken" is actually a Native American Sioux word meaning "fine growing place." It most likely received this name because the Menoken town site is very close to the location of the Kansa Indian village, Fool Chief's Village. So there was some Native American influence in the very early history of the town, and that is how it obtained its name.¹ Although the town of Menoken was never vastly populated nor viable for very long, it still holds importance in the history of that surrounding

¹ Melvin D. Bruntzel, *Quick Reference to Kansas*, Vol. II. (Belleville: Print Schop, 2010). See entries for "Fool Chief's Village" and "Menoken."

area to this day. The town of Menoken molded the culture that still exists in the northwestern part of Topeka.

People of Menoken:

The people of Menoken were diverse at that time. There wasn't just one group of people living there. In the years before Menoken was established, a census was taken of the Kansas counties and townships. In 1865 the township of Menoken consisted of 25 to 45 percent of people who came from Missouri.² That is the highest percentage of anywhere in the state. This large portion of southern settlers in Menoken explains why they are so rooted in farming, especially in corn, hogs, and livestock. This small-scale, diversified farming was brought by the southern settlers from Missouri. An article published in May of 1879 by *The Weekly Commonwealth* included a story about a young African American boy in the area being accused of stealing money from a woman. In the article the authors refer to the boy as "colored," and while this derogatory word was more commonly used during that time, this still exhibits the possible presence of racial tension between the southern settlers and other people who would be living in the area during this time. It also shows how there in fact was a mix of people living in Menoken.³

Early History:

Menoken is reported to have been established in the years 1876-1877; however, it was most likely 1877, because that is when the first post master was named. This was John S.

²James R. Shortridge, *Peopling The Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas* (University Press of Kansas, 1995). See census maps for eastern Kansas, 1865.

³"Steals a Trifle of Money," *The Weekly Commonwealth*, May, 1879.

Banker, and he was the post master in Menoken from April 17, 1877 to January 15, 1910.⁴ In the same year it was established, Menoken began to become a factor in the growing and distribution of corn in Kansas. An article in the *Kansas Farmer* published in December of 1877 reported that Menoken was moving so much corn out of their farms that they didn't even have enough carts to transport it all.⁵ This caused the buyers and other distributors to come to Menoken themselves to pick up the corn they wanted to purchase. This commercial buying and trading gave Menoken life and a reason to be seen as a growing town at this time. The production of corn not only helped keep Menoken a well-visited place, but it also stimulated development. In October of 1881, *The Daily Commonwealth* published an article on the new roads in Menoken; three roads were opened that year. These three roads were Graft Road, Spangler Road, and Priddy Road.

However, Menoken wasn't the only town that had roads built that year. Soldier, Rossville, and Auburn all had roads going in as well.⁶ The reason this is significant is because this was before cars were invented. Yet the area around and in Menoken was so well travelled by oxen and wagon, horses and buggies, that they needed to build three new roads. The people traveling these roads were the farmers, grain buyers, and distributors making regular trips to buy and sell corn, wheat, grain, hogs, and cattle in their wagons. Local residents and businesses also needed roads linking Menoken to Topeka and other points. This is an obvious sign of how well business was for these Menoken farmers. Most of the newspaper articles about Menoken in the years before 1900 mentions business deals or shipments of produce and livestock. This was the identity Menoken had built, and it was working. Being connected to early railroads was also important.

⁴ See "Kansas Post Offices, 1828-1961" Kansas State Historical Society, kshs.org; see also Bruntzel, "Menoken," in *Quick Reference to Kansas*.

⁵ *The Kansas Farmer, Supplement*, Dec. 19, 1877.

⁶ See "County Commissioners," *The Daily Commonwealth*, Oct. 12, 1881.

The Kansas Pacific was built through the area by 1878; later this changed to the Union Pacific Railroad and was also another major advantage for the farmers of Menoken in shipping their products out to buyers, whether it be corn, wheat, grain, or cattle.⁷ In the figure below you can see how Menoken is located on the railroad system. All these transportation factors together show what a cornerstone Menoken was in the farming business at this time and why it was able to last as long as it did.

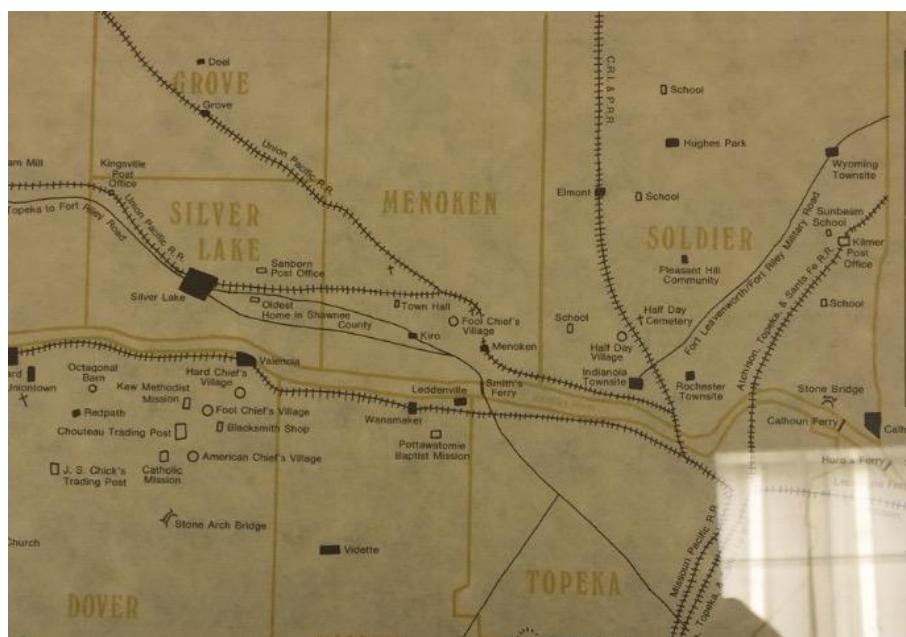


Figure 1. This historic map shows the layout of the railroads that were in Kansas at the time. Menoken sits right on top of the Union Pacific Railroad that comes in from two different directions. SOURCE: Dan Fitzgerald, Shawnee County Historical Society.

Later History:

While it would be impossible to talk to anyone who was alive when Menoken was first being established, I was able to interview some residents who had lived near Menoken during its later years. I got in contact with Betty and Lee Conaway and interviewed them about what they

⁷Homer Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988). See Map #30.

remembered about the Township and village of Menoken. They told me that while Menoken was still visible in the year 1936, not much was still there. A schoolhouse on Menoken Rd. which Betty Conaway attended at that time had at the most thirty students.⁸ There was also a railway depot, a grain elevator, a cemetery and one store called the "Menoken Store" run by three brothers: Harry, Jim, and Joe Donahue. The Conaways said that at that time, there were not even any residences left in Menoken. This was when Menoken was on its last leg after some factors had caused it to dwindle over the years. In 1917, a tornado that Lee Conaway stated was known as "The Great Tornado of 1917" roared south from Silver Lake down to the Menoken area. In the process it killed five men, and left fifty families homeless after completely destroying their homes and farms.⁹ I believe this to be a major factor in the decline and eventual disappearance of Menoken. The only thing left physically to be seen from the early days of Menoken is the cemetery, shown below in Figure 2, and the schoolhouse which has since been turned into a residence and is inhabited to this day.



Figure 2. This photograph shows the office building of the cemetery that currently resides in Menoken Township on Menoken Rd. SOURCE: Photo taken by Nicholas Gonzalez 2015

⁸ L. Conaway, B. Conaway, Personal Communication, Dec 16, 2015.

⁹ L. Conaway, B. Conaway, Personal Communication, Dec 16, 2015.

Another important factor in Menoken's decline was competition with the larger neighboring towns and cities like Silver Lake and Topeka, especially after the arrivals of automobiles. The last time Menoken appears in the *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory* is the year 1900, when it had a population of 14. It is not listed in the 1912 edition.¹⁰ This caused people to migrate to shop and live in larger cities, leaving Menoken empty. Although Menoken is now almost forgotten, there are still traces of it everywhere in northwestern Topeka. Whether it be road and township names, school and cemetery, or just the culture that was left behind by the settlers of that area, Menoken will never be completely gone. It is important for us to know about these vanished places in order to understand why things are the way they are today.



Figure 3. This photo shows the old schoolhouse that was in Menoken on Menoken Rd. It is now a residence and people live in it to this day. SOURCE: Phot taken by Nicholas Gonzalez 2015

¹⁰ *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directories*, 1900 and 1912.

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