

Sweet Boom Town, Bitter End

Sugar Works: Shawnee County

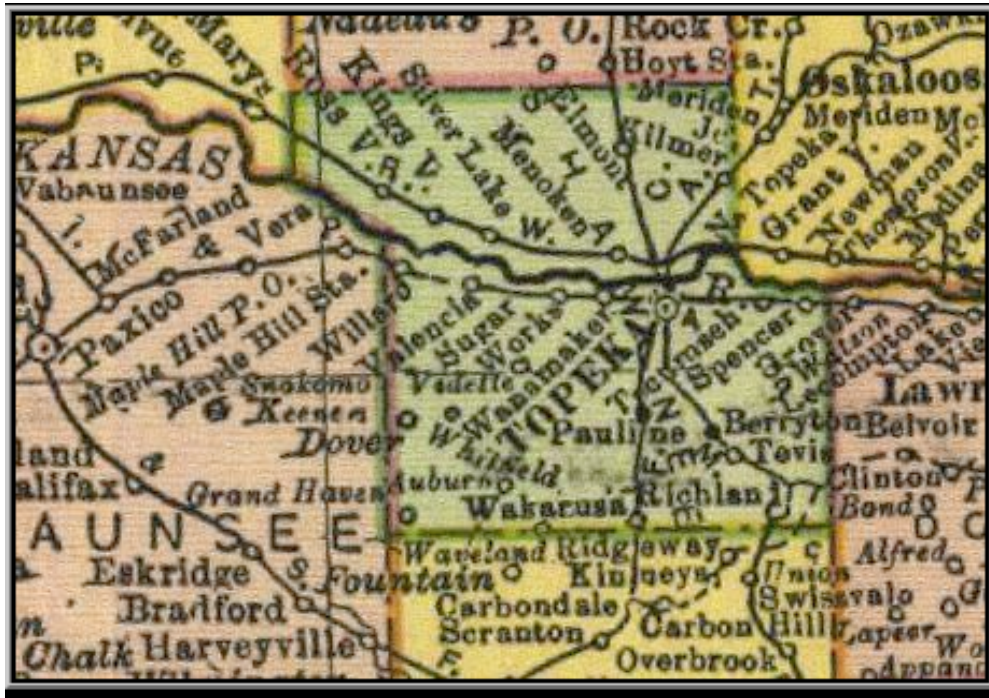


Figure 1: Sugar Works appears on only one 1895 map. The city seems to be truly lost even during its own time period. Source: Wichita State University-Special Collections

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In the late nineteenth century there was a passion for growth and development among Americans. Their dream was to own land and strike gold. In the case of many early Kansans, the gold would come from a sweet treat, sugar, processed from sugar beets grown in the rich Kansas soils. Their economic dreams concentrated in an area outside of Topeka, Kansas, called Sugar Works. This ghost town came and went quickly but its story of hope and dreams for wealth will live on.

Sugar Works has no records, not even in the census. A federal census was conducted in 1890, but Kansas records were destroyed in a 1921 fire in Washington D.C. A state census was conducted in 1895 but Sugar Works is not included. Very curiously, a map made by McNally and Company included Sugar Works in their 1895 map of Tecumseh Township, Shawnee County. According to McNally and Co., Sugar Works is recorded as being a straight shot west of Topeka down the Rock Island Railroad (currently I-70).

The sugar industry seemed logical to the early settlers in the Topeka area. Sugar was expensive and had to be brought in by rail west of the Mississippi River. There also seemed to be an opportunity for money with the rich Kansas soils, believed perfect for growing sugar beets. Both the state and federal government thought the cause so worthy they allotted money for experimentation and development. Kansas passed a bounty on sugar for five years. This was to make the Kansas sugar business profitable. Large sugar companies bought stock in the business and so the boom began.

By the end of the 1880s, at least three major sugar companies made home along the Rock Island line that ran through Topeka, one being the Topeka Sugar Company. The

Topeka Sugar Company was closely related to the town name of Sugar Works. This happy go lucky business began with the help of the National Sugar Manufacturing Company of Boston and nearby residents who believed this was the future of Topeka. In 1888, a beautiful limestone mill, constructed in a time of hardship, appeared on the prairies west of Topeka with the goal of increasing business in Kansas. The building contained eight furnaces and a warehouse capable of holding nearly 200,000 gallons worth of sweet Kansas syrup. This was one of the most complete and impressive sugar mills in the United States.

The mill encouraged Kansans all around the area to grow sugar beets. The mission seemed so worthy, a bridge across the Kansas River was built to accommodate farmers and their beets. The company's luck began turning sour when the bridge was destroyed by high water in April of 1889. The troubles only became worse when the three ferries to travel back and forth across the Kansas River were destroyed by floodwater several months later. Just shortly after the loss of the ferries came the loss of the main building, destroyed by fire on August 6, 1889.

One year later, the building was rebuilt and the factory became operational again. However, the year 1890 was not a good year for the sugar crop and the new machinery was not right for the job. Kansas was experiencing a drought decade, and the sugar industry suffered because of the extremely poor economy in Kansas and all over the country. When the Depression of 1893 set in, the company failed because there was a great loss. It seems there was never a profit.

These were not easy years. Kansas was struggling through a depression. Over the course of three years, Kansas lost eleven percent of its population. Large cities were losing people at a more rapid rate. The once bright light of the Kansas sugar industry seemed dim.

As the census shows, this small district was not even considered a town, although the mill likely employed many local people. The area suffered more hardship than most will see it their lifetime. This is another example of how Kansas and its inhabitants fought for the idea of the American Dream, with sometimes success and sometimes failure.

End Notes

- ¹ Kansas State Historical Society. "Kansas 1890 Federal Census." Accessed August 30, 2011 <http://www.kshs.org/p/kansas-1890-federal-census/10949>
- ² Kansas State Historical Society. "Kansas 1895 State Census." Accessed August 30, 2011. <http://www.kshs.org/p/kansas-1895-state-census/10951>
- ³ Wichita State University Libraries. "A Collection of Digitized Kansas Maps." McNally Co. (1885). Accessed on August 30, 2011. <http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/collections/maps/detailsframes.asp?offset=20&var=1895-0005>
- ⁴ Stone, George. "Sweets and Sours." *The Bulletin of the Shawnee County Historical Society Volume 33*. (1959). 44-45
- ⁵ Bird, Roy and Wallace, Douglass. "Witness of the Times- A History of Shawnee County." (1979). *Shawnee County Historical Society*.
- ⁶ Stone, George. "Sweets and Sours." *The Bulletin of the Shawnee County Historical Society Volume 33*. (1959). 46
- ⁷ Stone, George. "Sweets and Sours." *The Bulletin of the Shawnee County Historical Society Volume 33*. (1959). 46

8 Miner, Craig. *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000*. Lawrence, Kansas. The University of Kansas Publication. 2002. 149-150

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