

The Rise and Decline of Wakarusa: Shawnee County

History of Kansas

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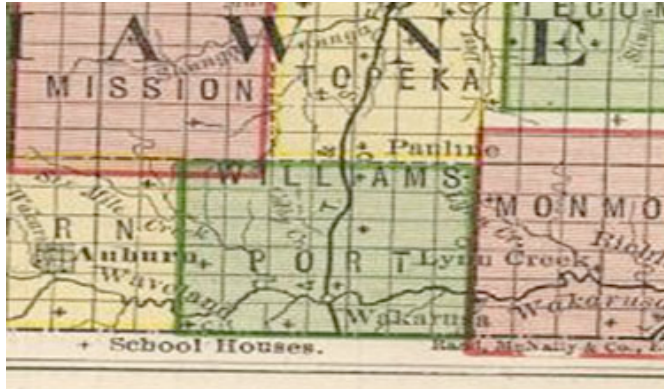
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The history of Wakarusa, a town in Shawnee County, Kansas, located about eleven miles south of Topeka, dates back to the 1850s (fig. 1). Its name originates from



the Wakarusa River valley, land that was originally inhabited by the Pottawatomie Indians. The name "Wakarusa" was supposedly derived from an American Indian folk tale about a chief who crossed the river by

horse and exclaimed to his followers, "Wa-ka-ru-sa," meaning "hip-deep" or "river of big weeds."¹ The land became a part of the Williamsport Township, which separated from the Auburn Township on April 20, 1860.² The first American who settled in the area was Reverend Robert Simerwell, a noted missionary who translated the New Testament into the Pottawatomie language.³ He built the first cabin in the township, as well as a blacksmith shop, on August 13th 1854.⁴ In February 1855, the first child in the township

¹ Dick King, "Q&A: Builder Addresses Demand," *The Topeka Capital-Journal*, March 17, 2002, http://cjonline.com/stories/031702/com_qna.shtml.

² James L. King, *History of Shawnee County* (Richmond and Arnold: Chicago, 1905), <http://files.usgawarchives.net/ks/shawnee/history/1905/historyo/chapteri5nms.txt>.

³ Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *First Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture to the Legislature of the State of Kansas, for the Years 1877-8* (Rand, McNally & Co., Printers and Engravers: Chicago, 1878), <http://www.skyways.org/genweb/shawnee/library/1878/shaw1878.htm>.

⁴ William G. Cutler, "Shawnee County, Part 2," *History of the State of Kansas* (A.T. Andrea: Chicago, 1883), http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/shawnee/shawnee-co-p2.html#TERRITORIAL_SETTLERS.

was born to Mr. and Mrs. Darius W. Herald.⁵ Residents continued to move to the area, and in 1856 (by some accounts 1857), the first school was built on the township.^{6 7}

In 1868, two individuals named Mill and Smith, of Topeka, became interested in platting a town in the area, where they expected the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad to run through.⁸ The town was originally named Kingston, in honor of Zenas King, of Topeka, who was one of the original promoters for the town.⁹ However, the post office was created under the name of Wakarusa and residents preferred to name the town after the river.¹⁰

W.H. Mills would go on to build the Wakarusa Hotel and a general store at the new railroad station in the early 1870s to accommodate future travelers.¹¹ As the population continued to grow, the Sherman Stone Crushing Company located a machine in Wakarusa that crushed stone into ballast for the railroad. The company employed more than 50 men and became the biggest business in town.¹²

The Santa Fe Railroad helped establish present-day Wakarusa as a major watering stop, and with the help of the Sherman Stone Company, Wakarusa was beginning to

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *First Biennial Report*.

⁸ Dick King, "Q&A."

⁹ James L. King, *History of Shawnee County*.

¹⁰ William G. Cutler, "Shawnee County, Part 50," *History of the State of Kansas* (A.T. Andrea: Chicago, 1883), http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/shawnee/shawnee-co-p50.html#WAKARUSA_VILLAGE.

¹¹ Julie A. Wortman, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form, Wakarusa Hotel," *Kansas State Historical Society*, February 21, 1979, accessed March 27, 2012, http://www.kshs.org/resource/national_register/nominationsNRDB/Shawnee_WakarusaHotelNR.pdf.

¹² Cutler, "Shawnee County, Part 50."

flourish.¹³ It even claimed to have the best school in the county and was heralded as the finest school in Kansas by people who lived there.¹⁴ By 1883, the population grew to include more than one hundred people, many of whom were farmers who grew corn and raised cattle or pigs.¹⁵

From 1920 to 1985, there was a long, gradual decline in business, most likely due in part to the droughts of the 1890s and 1930s. The harsh Kansas seasons proved to be too harsh for some, and many saw the state as more of a halfway point to the west than a destination. The Santa Fe Railroad on its own could not sustain enough growth to attract new business, and the economy of Wakarusa began to fade.

The town itself still exists, although it is a



¹³ Dick King, "Q&A."

¹⁴ Cutler, "Shawnee County, Part 50."

¹⁵ Ibid.

shadow of its former self. The church remains and is still in use. The railroad tracks also remain and are now a part of the BNSF Railway. Although the station is no longer in use, the post office is still in business. However, the Wakarusa Hotel, built by W.H. Mills, is long out of business. In 1979, the hotel was added to list of National Register of Historic Places (fig. 2).¹⁶

Wakarusa's history, although short lived, was full of promise and ambition, and perhaps the town could have continued to develop if not for the severe droughts that afflicted the state. In the end, the gamble Mills and Smith made did not pay off, as the railroad in itself was not big enough to support a town economically, and the population failed to grow enough to become viable in any industry or agriculture. Wakarusa, although not dead, is certainly dormant, and its time has passed.

¹⁶ Kansas State Historical Society, "National and State Registers of Historic Places," accessed March 27, 2012, http://www.kshs.org/natreg/natreg_listings/search/page:8/county:SN.

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Wakarusa Hotel. Ca. pre-1883. Photographer unknown. National Register of Historic Places. Accessed March 27, 2012. <http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NRHP/Photos/79000955.pdf>.