

The Great County Seat War: Coronado vs. Leoti

Wichita County, Kansas 1885-1887

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I am writing this paper to show people some of the history of Wichita County, Kansas. I am also writing about how “wild” the West really was when people were migrating out to the newly formed state of Kansas. This paper includes newspaper accounts from the week after the county seat fight and has photographs of structures in each town; I also show how Leoti and Coronado look today. This paper is the story of how Coronado started and ended in the blink of an eye.

The Great County Seat War

Of all the famous towns that were shot, literally shot, out of the uprising of the western towns, most will think of Dodge City and Tombstone. However, unless you are familiar with the area of Wichita County you would not know that the county seat war between two small towns was one of the bloodiest of the American West. Driving from Scott City, Kansas, to Leoti, Kansas, on Highway 96, you will pass the feed lots that lie on both of the sides of the highway, what seems like an endless line of seeded and tilled fields, and the small elevator towns that have grown up along the Kansas and Oklahoma Rail Road. About three miles before you enter Leoti, coming from the east, you will drive by what looks like an elevator, a house surrounded by a windrow of trees, and a tall white shed squeezed between two eighty acre fields. Looking at it today you would think that this is just a regular farmstead, common around this area. However, at one point this spot, the mid 1880s settlement of Coronado, was considered to be the county seat of Wichita County. There were businesses, a church, hundreds of residents, the railroad, and saloons. This would have been considered an all American western town. Yet what was once a booming town competing with the neighboring town of Leoti made a turn for the worse when they both clashed over which would be the county seat of Wichita County; and at just over thirty years of existence, Coronado became a ghost town. Buildings were moved to Leoti, and Coronado appeared to vanish into dust with the constant winds that sweep across the plains. Today, Coronado may look like a small farm yard; however, there is more than meets the eye.

The story of Coronado begins when John Knapp and W.D. Brainerd wanted to establish a town that would rival Leoti, which everyone in the county assumed would be the county seat. Coronado in no time was becoming quite a little competing village, with several stores and saloons opening up one after another. Knapp and Brainerd's reasoning behind the name they

chose for the town is presumably because of the Spanish explorer Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, who explored much of western Kansas and is also credited with giving the state of Kansas its name. Coronado encountered Wichita Indians and pronounced their name as the “Escansaques.”¹

Within three months of establishing Coronado, residents had constructed the Hotel Vendome.² By March of 1887, Coronado had a total of one hundred stores that had come and gone. Compared to its neighbor, Leoti, Coronado was said to be smaller but more advanced in architecture design, offering finer and larger homes to its residents. Jeremiah Platt once said that “this town has given me some of the claim fever,” meaning that during the late nineteenth century, western Kansas was unpopulated, leading to speculation of land in 1886-1887.³ Two years before Knapp and Brainerd made their way out into western Kansas; this area had nothing, with the exception of Native Americans. Once land was being claimed, and with the recent rainfall of the previous years, people began racing out to what appeared to be a high quality agricultural area. Eleven years after Wichita County was established, there were fifteen hundred souls in it, according to the 1895 Kansas State Census, from the Kansas State Historical Society, and 175 people were counted within Coronado/Coronado Township.⁴ By the summer of 1886 Coronado was at a steady growing pace with the neighbor town of Leoti. Before too long, they both began to resemble each other and join the stereotypical twin towns that were growing rapidly all over Kansas. As stated before, Wichita County didn’t exist until 1886, and as both towns began to attract more people, one of them had to be the county seat.

¹ Dr. M.J. Morgan, class lecture notes, Kansas State University, February, 2013.

² Fitzgerald, Daniel. Ghost Towns of Kansas. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988.

³ Kansas State Historical Society. “Wichita County, Kansas.” Kshs.org <http://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/wichita-county-kansas/15356> (accessed April 28, 2013).

⁴ Kansas State Census Bureau. “1895 Kansas State Census.”

http://www.kshs.org/genealogy/genealogy_censuses/search/surname:/fname:/city:Coronado/county:/submit:SEARCH. (Accessed May 4, 2013).



**Figure 1: A sketch of The Hotel Vendome, Date Unknown. Source: Wichita County History Book
Caption: The Hotel Vendome was the first building erected in Coronado, Kansas in 1886.**

So intense was the rivalry that one local person wrote, ⁵“The people of the two towns love each other as his satanic majesty is said to love holy water.” By the spring of 1886, Coronado began to appear as a threat to Leoti for who would win the county seat. In under a year, Coronado had grown from a desolate area to a town with two hotels, two banks, hardware stores, a post office, and a bakery. Both towns had been started in 1885, but due to the fact that Leoti had been established first in the entire soon-to-be-county, as well as being geographically centered in the county, people who were from around the area felt that Leoti should be the county seat. Coronado and Leoti were twin towns; Leoti had just barely beaten Coronado to the first land claim for a town.

⁵ Unknown Author. “Settling a County Seat.” *Wichita Standard*, January 6, 1887.

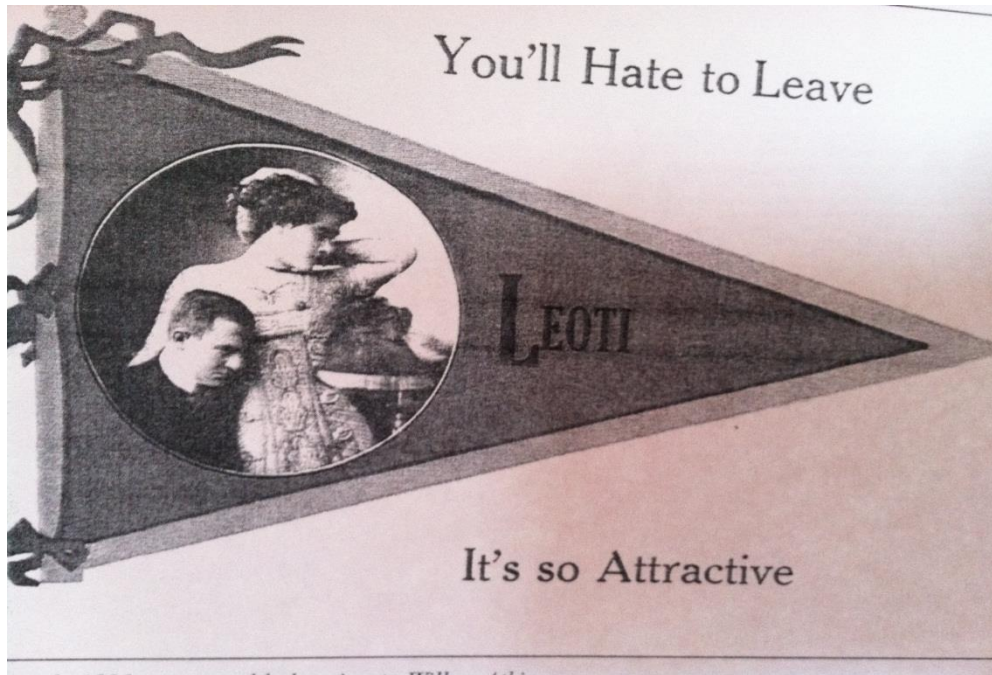
Competition between these towns was fierce, not just among the peers in the streets, but it had grown into the newspapers.⁶ Editors of the newspapers would constantly accuse each other of lying, blasphemy, and even murder! Before Leoti was established initially by the government in June of 1886, settlers had begun a fundraiser to help send a delegate from Leoti to the governor in Topeka to establish Leoti as the Wichita County seat. After Governor John Martin believed the petition from Leoti to be “too irreconcilable,” he appointed his own commissioner in December 1886 to go to Wichita County and account for the all of the households and citizens who were eligible to vote. Samuel Gerow was assigned to do this job that was to produce angry, trigger-happy men who would warn the residents of Coronado to not vote for their current town as being the county seat. These threats against non- Leotian voters went as far as teams guarding the county lines and “hidden” guards at the voting booth, but these men were clearly present as they stood in nearby windows of hotels and balconies.

Two weeks after Gerow had arrived, he believed it was clear that Leoti was the better suited county seat, and Leoti was unofficially announced in this position on December 24, 1886. There would be an election on February 8, 1886, that would decide the final county seat between Leoti and Coronado.⁷ However, during the election, there was an estimated 400 residents from Coronado who did not vote. Some of the residents in the two towns were furious with the immaturity of the non-voters, and demands for a re-election were almost immediate after the results were announced. In the eyes of other residents, Leoti was already named the county seat and the election was just a “pity vote” for Coronado to make the town feel worthy of being recognized as a county seat contender. Two years ago these towns didn’t exist on the map, and

⁶ Fitzgerald, Daniel. *Ghost Towns of Kansas*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988.

⁷ Fitzgerald, Daniel. *Ghost Towns of Kansas*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988.

now they were both holding knives at the other's neck. The tension was at its peak on February 27, 1887.



**Figure 2: A post card of Leoti, Kansas in the early 1920s. Source: History of Wichita County Kansas
Caption: This post card belonged to Wilbur Atkinson.**

Before this story is told, know that there are several accounts of how the initial gun fight started on this winter day, and this is a compilation of what I have researched and believe to be the truth. On a cold Sunday afternoon in February, what would be a peaceful quiet day of the week, turned into a flash of bullets and gun smoke with casualties and a stream of blood running through the middle of town.⁸ Some would say Charles Coulter was invited over to Coronado from a note given to him that morning; others say that a William Rains was looking for trouble by asking for a beer in one of the local saloons, only to find out there was no beer in Coronado on Sundays. His retaliation was to round up his posse, which included Coulter, and come back

⁸ History of Wichita County Kansas. Volume II. Wichita County Historical Society: Leoti, 2003.

that afternoon and stir up trouble by making residents “dance to the bullets” that were fired directly at their feet.

My thoughts about what occurred on this day, judging by the hostility towards the Coronado residents by some of the Leoti residents during the voting for the county seat, are that Leoti people were looking to erase Coronado off of the map. Mr. Coulter and Mr. Rains may have gotten their wish, but it cost them their lives in the outcome. I believe Coulter, Rains, Frank Jenness, Albert Boorey, George Watkins, A. Johnson, and Emmet Demming had come over to Coronado to socialize with some of the residents on what was at the time a peaceful afternoon in February. But they came cautiously with their free hand constantly close to their revolvers on their hip. As they were leaving town, still on their toes, they were just waiting for someone to comment about the constant rivalry and how their town cheated. The same ol’ arguments started, enough of an excuse to let them fire off a couple of rounds at someone to show an example of why Leoti had stronger residents compared to Coronado. Leoti people continued to see Coronado residents as pushovers, as they had not stood up for their own town in the election; instead they wished for a recount in the votes. Not one hundred feet from the edge of town, Frank Lilly stepped out of the bank. (The president of the bank, Knapp, was witnessing this account from inside the door). He states that Frank Lilly “mouthed off” to the men from Leoti. Not necessarily looking to kill someone, but just to release some anger that had been building up over the last two months, Lilly began to bait William Rains. William Rains made a move for his gun. And the town of Coronado was waiting for Rains to make this mistake. It is unknown how many people were firing their weapons from Main Street, but according to the Wichita County History Book, sixty to seventy-four guns were fired upon the Leoti posse.⁹ Coulter and Rains were presumed dead instantly, as 24 bullets between them were found in their bodies before

⁹ History of Wichita County Kansas. Volume II. Wichita County Historical Society: Leoti, 2003.

burial. George Watkins was fatally wounded and would die later at the scene. Denning and Johnson were shot in the leg and were left to suffer in the street.¹⁰ Johnson was also shot in the head. When doctors were performing surgery, they were unable to locate the bullet, but after making a rapid recovery over the course of a few weeks, the bullet fell out from the roof of his mouth. Boorey and Jenness managed to get back to Leoti; however, Jenness was shot five times after falling out of the buggy while it was still within the Coronado town limits. Frank Lilly, the instigator in this massacre, was shot instantly by Mr. Coulter on the steps of the bank.

Granted, there was going to be bad turmoil between the two towns of the rapidly growing Wichita County, but what really began this bloody event in history was when Leoti, before the first election, had sent for Coulter and his friends to help guard the voting booths. This could be the reason why those four hundred residents of Coronado refused to vote in the second election.¹¹ Samuel Gerow himself said, "Leoti is the clear favorite in this election, as they have the majority of the votes." I believe that some residents in Coronado knew this and that they had a good chance of losing the county seat, but what really bothered them was the threatening image Coulter and his friends had made by hovering over the booths and making sure there were plenty of votes for Leoti. These residents of Coronado had to wonder if their lives were really worth one vote in the county seat election, even if they knew they were going to lose. The massacre may have been set up, but many believe it is as if the bully of the area -- Leoti --finally got what he deserved.

¹⁰ Lindquist, Teresa. "The End of Coronado." Skyways.lib.ks.us
<http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/shawnee/library/KSHSvol12/coronado.txt> (accessed May 5, 2013).

¹¹ History of Wichita County Kansas. Volume II. Wichita County Historical Society: Leoti, 2003.



Figure 3: A photograph of the lawmen of Dodge City, KS after the county seat fight in 1887. Date of picture is unknown. Source: History of Wichita County, Kansas.

Caption: Left to Right: Luke Short, Ed Masterson, J.C. Ford, unknown, unknown, Doc Holliday, Bat Masterson, Bill Tilgham, Red Loomis, Wyatt Earp, Virgil Earp, and James Earp.



**Figure 4: A photograph of a gun dating back to the Coronado era, May 8, 2013. Source: Jeff Ridder
Caption: Jeff and his son were hunting and his son had stumbled upon this gun on the ground.**

Leoti was awarded with the county seat on March 10, 1887 by Governor Martin after this historic county seat battle. Being the county seat meant more opportunity for business, and more business meant more potential profit for residents.¹² The feud between these towns was said to last for another year and half; others say it was over when another small town that was between these two, Farmer City, died out after famous law men Bill Tilghman shot down Ed Prather. Prather was starting up what looked like another bloody battle in a desolate town that had no chance of surviving. Coronado had begun to fade away within two years of the incident. Businessmen were offering only Coronado residents free lots within the city limits of Leoti, and even by today's standards, how could someone turn down such a rare deal? By 1889, compared

¹² History of Wichita County Kansas. Volume II. Wichita County Historical Society: Leoti, 2003.

to its neighbor, Leoti was not as carefully architecturally engineered as Coronado, and because of its recent win as county seat, town planners were offering to buy buildings from Coronado and have them moved into Leoti. Just over thirty years after the gun fight, Coronado was similar to what it appears as today with a farm house and an elevator.¹³ Today Coronado is currently owned by the E.S.E. Alcohol Corporation located in Leoti. Once a fierce competitor with its neighbor towns, a stereotypical western shoot up town, and a place of new opportunity, Coronado should be remembered not for the gun fight, but as a sign of how much effort it took to make a living in early western Kansas.



Figure 5: A photograph of Coronado, Kansas today, March 29, 2013. Photo by author.

¹³ Berning, Dwayne. Interview with Steve Harkness, Leoti, Kansas, May 10, 2013.

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