

# **Toronto, Woodson County, Kansas. 1869 to 1970:**

## **Isolation in Rural Kansas**

**Zac Zarich**

**Chapman Center for Rural Studies**

**History 589, Fall 2017**

This study examines the town of Toronto, in Toronto Township, Woodson County, Kansas. The town was founded in 1869, and because of its location, it was at a disadvantage in terms of growth when compared to towns surrounding it. The town's population never exceeded 829 residents. I used maps, papers, articles, census data, and fieldwork to write this paper.

## Humble Beginnings

The year is 1869 and the American Civil War has been over for four years; many people are moving across the United States to find opportunity in the post-war America. Eastern Kansas is the destination for many, because of its abundant water and its generally forgiving terrain. This is where the town of Toronto was founded; named after the city of Toronto, Canada.<sup>1</sup> It is believed that Toronto, Canada got its name from the word “*tkaronto*” from the language of the Iroquois tribe of the northern United States and Canada. Translated it means “where there are trees standing in water.”<sup>2</sup> So it is fitting that the city of Toronto, Kansas was located on the Verdigris River. Trees and hills also dominate this region of Kansas, and dense woods are found all around Toronto presently. The town of Toronto was isolated in the woods and the best access to the town at its founding, was the Verdigris. Toronto was not a destination town in the area because of its isolation and population growth became a challenge as the years went on.

Toronto was founded by the Toronto Town Company, led by Enoch Reeves. The school existed in the region even before the town. Soon after the town was established, the school was moved to the center of the town.<sup>3</sup> A number of businesses opened in quick succession during Toronto’s early years. Residents had to rely on the town establishments for all their needs. The first building to be built in newly-founded Toronto was described as “small in size”

---

<sup>1</sup> *Biennial Report of the Board of Directors of the Kansas State Historical Society, Volume 23*, (Ithaca, NY: The Kansas State Historical Society, 1923), 316.

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Methot, “Toronto’ Is An Iroquois Word,” August 2012. <http://dragonflycanada.ca/toronto-is-an-iroquois-word/>.

<sup>3</sup> US Army Corp of Engineers, “History of Toronto Lake.” [www.swt.usace.army.mil/Locations/Tulsa-District-Lakes/Kansas/Toronto-Lake/History/](http://www.swt.usace.army.mil/Locations/Tulsa-District-Lakes/Kansas/Toronto-Lake/History/).

and served as a home and store owned by William P. Dennis.<sup>4</sup> In 1882 this structure was moved and connected to the meat market in front of it, owned by G.W. Johnson. Another store, owned by S.R. Kellogg, was built. Then in 1870 a hotel was built by S.P. Miller; it closed in 1882. The following year, another hotel opened. The Toronto Post Office opened on July 1, 1870 and S.R. Kellogg served as postmaster. In 1871 a doctor by the name of Mann started practicing in the town. His practice was supplied with medicine by one of the general stores in town. The dependence of businesses on local supply chains rather than a network of towns, shows how isolated Toronto was. A Methodist church was built sometime between 1875 and 1876; this church still exists. It was joined by a Baptist church in 1877.

### **The Promise of the Railroad**

Toronto remained relatively the same size until fall 1879 when the St. Louis, Fort Scott & Wichita Railway completed a branch that connected Toronto to the railways. A new road through the town also connected the residents to nearby towns. Though it still remained relatively isolated, there were signs of change. In the next three years, some 75 new buildings were erected. A new school house was among these buildings; it was two stories and could seat the 150 students now enrolled. Another hotel was added and it was described as “large and finely designed” and a “credit to their city” by an article in the *Greenwood County Republican*. The author of this article wrote it on a visit to Toronto to watch the town’s two

---

<sup>4</sup> William G. Cutler. “Historical and Biographical Sketches of Woodson County, Kansas,” in *History of the State of Kansas*, (Chicago, IL: A. T. Andreas, 1883), <http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/woodson/woodson-co-p1.html>.

baseball teams play.<sup>5</sup> Despite growth, it was still easier to field two teams than travel the distance to play teams from other towns.

When the railroad came, citizens of Toronto saw opportunity for growth. Real estate broker, J.B. Stockton, took out an ad in the *Fort Scott Daily Monitor* encouraging investment in the growing town of Toronto.<sup>6</sup> Toronto was very dependent on the railroad in the late 1800s. When the Model T automobile revolutionized the everyday lives of many Americans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Toronto continued to benefit more from the railroad. Roads through the town were basic and travel by car was still a challenge.

---

<sup>5</sup> *The Greenwood County Republican*, Eureka, KS, June 1888.

<sup>6</sup> *Fort Scott Daily Monitor*, Fort Scott, KS, April 30, 1882.

By 1910 the population of Toronto had risen to 627 people, much higher than the population of 88 in 1880. The railroad had everything to do with that. But Toronto still lacked a distinguishing feature, attraction, or necessities that less isolated towns didn't already offer. In 1914 Toronto High School opened, providing a draw to people to move to Toronto.



Toronto high school, as it appears today. Notice the date "1914" on the top of the building. It's small size is an indication of the small number of students enrolled. Photo courtesy of Jimmy Emerson, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/auvet/8646958736/sizes/m/>.

The school closed in the 1970s and was consolidated with other districts, but for years, the high school contributed to the growth of Toronto. Better education meant that residents would have better opportunities.

### **Oil Boom and Bust**

Soon after in 1918, oil was found along the Verdigris River.<sup>7</sup> This discovery brought jobs and people moved to the area to fill them. Since Toronto was located on the river itself, the town was an ideal place to live for people working for the oil company. By the 1920 census, Toronto had a population of 829. Despite the new opportunities in Toronto, its isolation

<sup>7</sup> *The Independence Evening Star*, Independence, KS, Feb 6, 1918.

continued to be a hindrance to advancement, and the population began to decline after this peak in 1920. In the late 1920s, the oil was depleted from the rivers and the workers moved on to the next place they could find work. Although the Toronto High School attracted families, the distance of colleges from the town meant that graduates had to move away to further their education. Emporia State University, the closest college to Toronto, was over 50 miles away. When students did move away to attend college, the distance created great anxiety for families especially in times of crisis. For example, a 1918 newspaper article tells of a family who travelled many miles to Lawrence in order to visit their son at the University of Kansas, who contracted influenza while attending vocational school.<sup>8</sup> College graduates were unlikely to return to their hometown because of a lack of work for them.

By 1930, the population of Toronto had shrunk to 706 people, a 15 percent decrease in 10 years. The Great Depression began in 1929 and by 1931 many banks had closed and millions were out of work.<sup>9</sup> The depression wreaked havoc throughout the United States, and Kansas was no different. During the "Dust Bowl," Western Kansas suffered from drought and many farmers were forced to move into town and find different work. That could explain why by 1940 Toronto's population had increased slightly to 737 people. That same year the United States Draft enrolled men ages 21 to 36 years old in the Selective Service.<sup>10</sup> From 1940-1946, 1,010 men were drafted from Woodson County, Kansas, including the town of Toronto.<sup>11</sup>

World War II had great effect on small towns in America. Thousands of recruits who left their

---

<sup>8</sup> *The Daily Gazette*, Lawrence, KS, Oct. 28, 1918.

<sup>9</sup> "The Great Depression," *History.com*. <http://www.history.com/topics/great-depression>.

<sup>10</sup> "United States Imposes the Draft," *History.com*. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/united-states-imposes-the-draft>.

<sup>11</sup> "World War II Selective Service Records, 1940-1946," *Kansas State Historical Society*.

[https://www.kshs.org/kmi/kmi\\_wwiiselectives/search/surname:/fname:/branch:/county:WO/serviceNumber:/year:/submit:SEARCH](https://www.kshs.org/kmi/kmi_wwiiselectives/search/surname:/fname:/branch:/county:WO/serviceNumber:/year:/submit:SEARCH).

rural homes, never returned. Many died heroically in battle and some who survived the war chose not to return to their hometown. The grave of a notable World War II soldier, John C. Woods, rests in Toronto's cemetery. Woods gained notoriety for his role as executioner in the Nuremberg Executions on October 16, 1946. Woods carried out the execution of 10 former leaders of the Third Reich.<sup>12</sup> Woods, a Kansas native, was buried in Toronto after his death in 1950.

Toronto saw its greatest drop in population since its founding in the 1950 census, 18.6 percent. It was then home to 600 people. The 1950s were a quiet time for Toronto until 1954 when the Army Corps of Engineers began to dam the Verdigris River to make a new lake located adjacent to Toronto, Toronto Lake. Toronto Lake was one in series of lakes created for flood control along the Verdigris River Basin. Other lakes included Elk City Lake, Neodesha Lake, Hulah Lake, and Oologah Lake. By 1960, Toronto Lake was officially open for flood control.<sup>13</sup> Then in 1964, Cross Timbers State Park was established around Toronto Lake.<sup>14</sup> With the opening of these two landmarks Toronto saw an influx of visitors. The park and lake are still heavily visited today. I grew up going to these places to fish a few times a year with my father and grandfather, and spent much time in Toronto.

### **Conclusion: Toronto's Legacy**

It seemed when the railroad came to town that Toronto had a high ceiling for growth. However that ceiling fell out once the railroad was replaced by the automobile as the primary

---

<sup>12</sup> "John C. Woods," *Wikipedia.org*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_C.\\_Woods](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_C._Woods).

<sup>13</sup> US Army Corp of Engineers, "History of Toronto Lake."

<sup>14</sup> "Cross Timbers State Park," *Homestead on the Range*. <https://homesteadontherange.com/2015/05/20/cross-timbers-state-park/>.

means of transportation. Once that happened Toronto couldn't compete with surrounding cities. By 1970 its population, just 431 people, was the lowest in decades and businesses couldn't survive with the lack of people. The population of Toronto showed no signs of bouncing back. Although it had competed for decades with Yates Center, the county seat, for residents, Toronto was always disadvantaged because of its geographic isolation.



## Bibliography

*Biennial Report of the Board of Directors of the Kansas State Historical Society, Volume 23.*  
Ithaca, NY: The Kansas State Historical Society, 1923.

"Cross Timbers State Park." *Homestead on the Range*. July 03, 2017. Accessed December 13, 2017. <https://homesteadontherange.com/2015/05/20/cross-timbers-state-park/>.

Cutler, William G. "Historical and Biographical Sketches of Woodson County, Kansas" in *History of the State of Kansas*. Chicago, IL: A. T. Andreas, 1883. Accessed December 13, 2017. <http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/woodson/woodson-co-p1.html>.

*The Daily Gazette*. Lawrence, KS, Oct. 28, 1918.

*Fort Scott Daily Monitor*. Fort Scott, KS, April 30, 1882.

"The Great Depression." *History.com*. 2009. Accessed December 13, 2017. <http://www.history.com/topics/great-depression>.

*The Greenwood County Republican*. Eureka, KS, June 1888.

*The Independence Evening Star*. Independence, KS, Feb. 6, 1918.

"John C. Woods." *Wikipedia.org*. November 27, 2017. Accessed December 13, 2017. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_C.\\_Woods](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_C._Woods).

Methot, Suzanne. "'Toronto' Is An Iroquois Word." Accessed December 13, 2017. <http://dragonflycanada.ca/toronto-is-an-iroquois-word>.

"Toronto, Kansas." *Wikipedia.org*. December 05, 2017. Accessed December 13, 2017. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toronto,\\_Kansas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toronto,_Kansas).

US Army Corp of Engineers. "History of Toronto Lake." Accessed December 13, 2017. [www.swt.usace.army.mil/Locations/Tulsa-District-Lakes/Kansas/Toronto-Lake/History/](http://www.swt.usace.army.mil/Locations/Tulsa-District-Lakes/Kansas/Toronto-Lake/History/).

"United States Imposes the Draft." *History.com*. 2009. Accessed December 13, 2017. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/united-states-imposes-the-draft>.

"United States Imposes the Draft." *History.com*. Accessed December 13, 2017. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/united-states-imposes-the-draft>.

"World War II Selective Service Records, 1940-1946." *Kansas State Historical Society*. Accessed December 13, 2017. [https://www.kshs.org/kmi/kmi\\_wwiiselectives/search/surname:/fname:/branch:/county:WO/servicenumber:/year:/submit:SEARCH](https://www.kshs.org/kmi/kmi_wwiiselectives/search/surname:/fname:/branch:/county:WO/servicenumber:/year:/submit:SEARCH).