

# Barnes in Full Bloom



Figure 1: Street view of Barnes, Kansas. Circa 1900s. These street scenes are a common image of early Kansas towns. Source: <http://www.barnesks.net>

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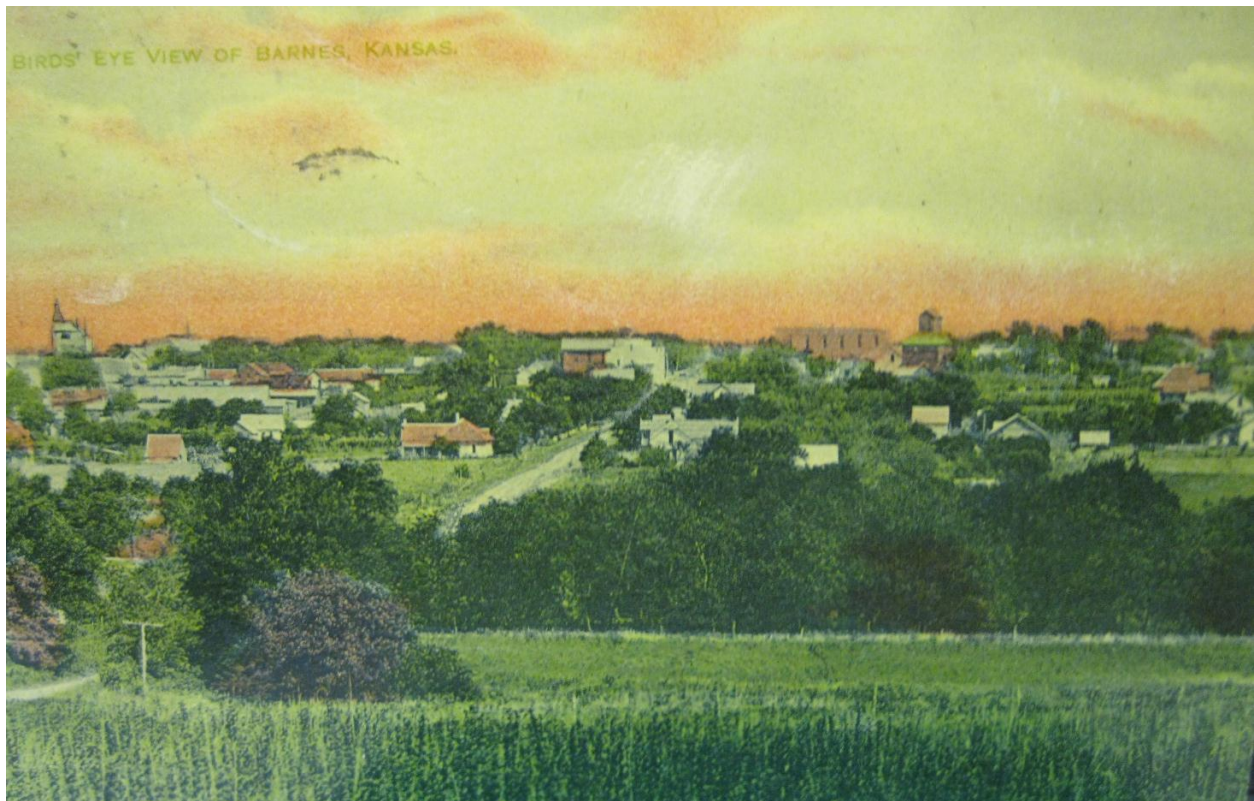
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## **Barnes In Full Boom**

**By Carrie Tanner**

Barnes is a small town tucked in the Flint Hills of Kansas. It resides in Washington County and is just north of the head of Coon Creek. Today, this charming community boasts a population of about 150 people. However, just a few decades ago, it was a bustling town of 500 (Nease 1976). During its boom, Barnes offered a variety of businesses that attracted people from across the region. Barnes' entrepreneurial tact as well as its entertainment options made it the exciting meeting place that it was known for.



*Figure 2: Postcard of Barnes, Kansas in 1911. During its boom, Barnes had postcards for visitors to send to their loved ones. SOURCE: Washington County Historical Museum*

## Early History

The Central Branch of the Union Pacific Railroad was extended to the Barnes area in 1876, before Barnes was really established (Early History of Barnes). Barnes was on the main line of the Central Branch, unlike the town of Washington which was on a spur (Ken Stettinisch 2012). Being on the main line offered greater access to materials and transportation, which was a key factor in the formation of Barnes.

Henry Ober was the first person to begin building in Barnes. Ober wrote a letter to a man named Anthony inquiring about land to begin building near the railway. His intention was to build a store, a boarding house, and a stable for teams and cattle corals (Ober 1877). Ober did indeed build his store in 1876, which through the years became a grocery store, post office, church room, dance hall, and a dwelling place (Early History of Barnes).

The town itself was named after A.S. Barnes from the A.S. Barnes Publishing Company in New York City, New York (Ramona Stettinisch 2012). At one point, the townspeople requested a plaque from Mr. A.S. Barnes commemorating their town. Instead, Mr. Barnes gifted a silver chalice to the first boy born in Barnes and a white bible to the first girl born. Mr. Barnes also donated a book *1000 Voices* to the town (Early History of Barnes). However, the location and content of the book is not known (Ramona Stettinisch, 2012).

Once Barnes was established, the post office from Elm Grove, about a mile and half north of Barnes' current location, moved to downtown Barnes. The post office moved in 1877 to be closer to the railroad (Nease 1976). The name was then changed and it has remained in the town to this day (Early History of Barnes).

## **A Gathering Place**

During the 1880s straight through to the 1940s, Barnes was booming. It was a bustling town. In 1884 when the boom began, a writer for the Palmer Weekly Globe speculated why Barnes was growing so quickly. As he writes, “Many people wonder why Barnes has taken such a wonderful start and what is the cause. There is no new railroad, no gold mine or mineral springs discovered, but simply a plain quarter section of Kansas sod fast being covered with houses.” He goes on to say, “In addition to her splendid agricultural advantages, Barnes is represented by genuine business men, who encourage every enterprise beneficial to the town.” (Palmer Weekly Globe 1884) This writer was very keen in noting that it was Barnes' businesses that made it so successful, even back in the 1880s. It is true that Barnes is surrounded by prime cropland, but it was indeed the wide variety of businesses that has made Barnes a long lived community. These businesses as well as churches and entertainment options made Barnes a gathering place for people from surrounding areas.

Ken Stettinisch, when reminiscing about his childhood growing up in Barnes, stated that this town had one of the largest business districts in the area. These attractions were always bringing people from the surrounding areas into town to stock up on supplies or to socialize with others. “Every Wednesday and Saturday night, this town was just full of people. The farmers came to town to visit” (Ken Stettinisch 2012). The abundant businesses and specialty stores that Barnes was home to dazzled many travelers as well as residents. Many townspeople as well as newspapers of the time are proud to boast that the town was home to three grocery stores, three blacksmiths, five filling stations, three car dealerships, and three telephone companies, among a host of other businesses. As Norma Megenity, a town resident for 60 years remembers when she first moved to town, “Barnes was very entrepreneurial ... I would ask my mother-in-law what was in this old building and that old building, and she would tell me. I was just amazed that there was a shoe store and a jewelry store and things like that” (Norma

Megenity 2012). Barnes' business district was a big destination for people in the surrounding areas and it is a characteristic of town that still brings pride to its residents.

The railroad was crucial to the identity of the Barnes community, as pictured in Figure 2. One account of Barnes claimed that “it was one of the most prosperous towns on the Central Branch of the Missouri Pacific Railroad” (Early History of Barnes). Being on the main line of the Central Branch, it was easy to get supplies and catch passenger trains in town. Mr. Stettmisch remembers going to meet the train in the mornings as a child. “There was always so much going on ... In the spring of each year, crates of chickens might be unloaded, hardware of all types, goods, and there'd always be, like in the mornings, 25-30 meeting the train to pick up supplies” (Ken Stettmisch 2012). The railroad made it possible to get a multitude of goods and led Barnes to be the vibrant business town that it was.



*Figure 3: Barnes train station circa 1900. The train station in Barnes was a major factor in developing the community and becoming a significant business center in the region.*

*SOURCE: Washington County Historical Museum*

Churches played a significant role in the community of Barnes as well. Marilyn Nease explains in her *History of Barnes, Kansas* that “the establishment of churches followed closely, or occasionally preceded the building of their homes.” Nease goes on to say that “the church was quite a center of early community life. The church not only provided spiritual sustenance but was the entertainment center of the community” (Nease 1976). Barnes has had several churches over the years, but the ones that have been active the longest have been the Methodist church and the Christian church. The Methodist church was started in 1884 and the Christian church was started not long after (Ramona Stettinisch 2012). However, there is a Lutheran church seven miles south of Barnes that some residents attend that has been active for over 60 years (Norma Megenity 2012). Churches are a place for worship, but they were also a place for socialization and learning. Mrs. Megenity retells of her involvement in the Lutheran church when she first moved to Barnes. “When our children were small, we had couples club and bible classes. There were always potlucks or something going on. Church activities are always a big thing in many communities I think” (Norma Megenity 2012). Churches attracted people for many reasons and helped to build a stronger community in Barnes.

There was not a shortage of things to do in Barnes, either. People could go to the pool hall or hang around Mike's Cafe that acted both as a restaurant and a poker house. There was always the Fox movie theater, too. The theater was built by John Wright and holds many pleasant memories for those who grew up going to shows (Early History of Barnes). Mr. Stettinisch remembers going when he was a small child. “All the time I was growing up, we had the Fox Theater. And old Charlie Ray, a retired farmer, he had a popcorn machine, [he sold] popcorn for five cents a bag. It cost twelve cents to get in the movie” (Ken Stettinisch 2012). Even at the movie theater, there was a distinct sense of community and entrepreneurial tact. Unfortunately, the Fox burned down years later and was replaced by outdoor screenings of films (Ramona Stettinisch 2012). These outdoor films took place in a lot just north of the telephone office on summer evenings. These screenings were free to the public (Norma Megenity 2012).

Like many small towns at the time, Barnes had its own baseball team. Many surrounding towns had teams as well that would play Barnes. They would compete in men's fast pitch, slow pitch, boys' teams, and girls' teams. It was a favorite pastime of residents, many would come out to watch the games. Mrs. Megenity remembers taking her granddaughter to the baseball field to watch the games, "Every night when I'd get home from work, or a lot of times anyway, I'd get on a bicycle and take [my granddaughter] and we'd go to the baseball game and we'd get us a sandwich. You know, there was always something going on in town" (Norma Megenity 2012). The town baseball team offered yet another occasion for family and friends to come together and enjoy an evening together.



*Figure 4: Dearborn Opera House in 1908. This building used to hold plays and musical acts. The building is still there, complete with its original stage. SOURCE: Washington County Historical Museum*

The Dearborn Opera House was also a center for entertainment, as seen in Figure 3. Ramona Stettinisch, a dedicated town historian, tells of numerous shows that would be put on here. "All kinds of companies would come through and put on plays and singing things. They had wedding dances and all

kinds of stuff up there” (Ramona Stettinisch 2012). It that is said that the Dearborn family decided to build the Opera House to rival the one in Waterville, a neighboring town (Caroline Tanner 2012). With the variety of shows and entertainment that was offered, it did just that. The Opera House is still standing and it has its original stage, as seen in Figure 4. The building remains a living piece of Barnes' history.



*Figure 4: Dearborn Opera House Stage in 2012. This is the original stage that hosted numerous plays, musical acts, and school dances. It is still structurally sound and plans are underway to renovate it. SOURCE: Caroline Tanner’s personal collection*

People would travel from miles around to go the Barnes Carnival. The carnival was entertaining for the entire family. It had rides, merry-go-rounds, a Ferris wheel, duck ponds for the kids, sideshows, and even games of bingo, among other events that you can see in Figure 5 ( Norma Megenity 2012). The



carnival was typically in August, after most of the farmers had finished harvest and could take a break from work. Many people took advantage of this exciting social occasion. According to Mr. Stettmisch, “The city park was just full of everything. People came from miles around. In fact, that's where [Mrs. Stettmisch]'s dad met her mom, at the Barnes Carnival. He came from east of here on the Little Blue River and she come from down south of Waterville” (Ken Stettmisch 2012). The carnival was a gathering place for people from the whole area, allowing people from other towns to socialize and enjoy the last days of summer. Norma Menegity remembers her mother retelling when Norma's grandfather would take the family to the carnival. “She always used to say that the Barnes Carnival was always the biggest carnival. Their dad would say 'We'll go to the Barnes' Carnival' and they'd come with the wagon. They'd stay all night. A lot of people would stay all night in the park, and that was the highlight of their summer...because it was the biggest one around” (Norma Megenity 2012). The Barnes' Carnival was an annual social event that was anticipated by many across the region. It was a celebration of the season and a time for friends and family to gather enjoy the last days of summer.



*Figure 5: Barnes Carnival taken in Barnes City Park in 1908. The Barnes Carnival was a annual social gathering that people from the region looked forward to for months. The whole town would be full of people for days while people enjoyed the entertainment by day and slept in the park by night. SOURCE: Washington County Historical Museum*

### **Slow decline**

Unfortunately, Barnes began a slow decline of population during the 1930s. Some believe that this decline started with widespread mobility offered by the automobile. “As in so many small communities in Kansas, the automobile in large numbers signaled the beginning of population decline” (Nease 1976). Although the freedom of mobility that automobiles offered might have been a factor in Barnes’ decline, several other factors including the Great Depression, drought that plagued the cropland in 1934 and 1935, and floods in 1936, had a significant effect on the population. Regardless of the

specifics, many people started leaving the town (Ramona Stettmisch 2012). As Mrs. Stettmisch explains, most of the people who still live in town are living on land that was owned by their family for generations. “Now there are some people whose parents or grandparents or great-grandparents homesteaded here and they kept their land and they're generally the only ones that have their land” (Ramona Stettmisch 2012). Though some townspeople chose to stay on their family's land, many people left, either going to school or looking for work and opportunities elsewhere.

The railroad slowly shifted from a passenger train to a cargo train and then finally no train at all. The depot was shut down in 1973 (Nease 1976). For a long time, they were running grain cars on the rail, but Mr. Stettmisch says that the rail itself was torn out about eight years ago (Ken Stettmisch 2012). Now there is just an empty space where a main icon of the city once was.

The school in Barnes was also shut down. Some say that a rash decision was made when the foundation of the building started settling and officials closed the entire school (Ken Stettmisch 2012). Others say that the school was shut down to comply with the School Unification Acts of Kansas in which small town schools were consolidated in rural areas (Nease 1976; Megenity 2012). Now, all of the local children and teens go to a school outside of Barnes. With the loss of the school, Barnes lost part of its identity. However, the old gym continues to be used for community events. It hosts community plays, local organizations hold benefit meals there, and the Barnes high school reunions continue to be held in the halls of so many memories (Ken Stettmisch 2012).

### **Still surviving**

Though Barnes' population is a fraction of once it was, boasting a population of 150, it continues to press on. The town has a resilient attitude that allows it to continue to build and enhance its community.



*Figure 6: The Hometown Cafe in 2012. This is a historic building that was once Mike's Cafe. It was bought by the Barnes Community Development Corporation and is currently run as the Hometown Cafe. SOURCE: Caroline Tanner's personal collection*

The Barnes Community Development Corporation is committed to seeing Barnes' traditions and community continue. They own the gym and the Hometown Cafe, as pictured in Figure 6. They are trying to preserve parts of Barnes' history and give them continued use. The local Lions Club also does city beautifying projects, planting flowers in large tubs in the summer (Ken Stettmisch 2012).

Even today, Barnes is still a gathering place. One of its main events is the lighted horse parade the weekend after Thanksgiving. Mr. Stettmisch says that over 1000 people show up and watch the spectacle. Afterward, there is a soup supper that allows people to visit and catch up with each other

(Ken Stettmisch 2012). It is these kinds of events that allow the tight-knit community to continue on and give Barnes a sense of prosperity.

It is the resiliency of Barnes that has given it success for the past 130 years. This attitude gave the town strength to build and expand, outlast depressions, droughts, floods, snowstorms, and near misses of tornadoes. It is this attitude now that gives the community pride in their history and spirit to continue into the future.

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