

## Emmons, Kansas 1878-1946



**Figure 1:** Exterior of Emmons schoolhouse. Which is now located in Washington, KS. Source: Photo taken by the author.

Edward L.W. Green wrote this report, which would not have been possible without the generous help and time of co-researchers including: The Washington County Historical Society, Helen Rosenkranz Pannbacker, Norman Stewart, Arlene Dague, Lloyd Holbrook, and the late Bill Peters

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Figure 2. Inside the historic Emmons school house in downtown Washington, KS. Source: Photo taken by author.

While stepping into the relocated schoolhouse of Emmons, district number 2, in downtown Washington, Kansas the past is summoned back to life. It's as if you can anticipate the bell ringing and a rush of children running in behind you to take their seats. The old school house is fully furnished with period decorations. The walls have maps of the United States and a picture of George Washington from whom the county and seat inherited their names. Books line the walls. The desks hint at many years used, but still capable of performing their duties. This historical building harkens back to a time when life seemed, well...simpler to this part of North East Kansas bordering Nebraska. The building almost transports the visitor through a Norman Rockwell style painting. Lending the imagination to an era characterized

by drug stores, a movie theatre and nickel ice creams for a Saturday afternoon treat. Yet this schoolhouse has a history predating the modern era of *The Saturday Evening Post*, starting its current run in 1897.

The community of Emmons was located a few miles out of Washington, KS to the North East. The community was named after E.N. Emmons. Mr. Emmons was born in Pennsylvania. *The Washington Republican* reported April 16, 1897, "GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) Post No. 5 was organized July 18, 1878. Charter Member: E.N. Emmons, Sixth Wisconsin Infantry." Mr. Emmons also served in 1875 as Washington City Clerk, in 1880 as a Washington City councilman and was among the first officers of the Knights of Honor, Keystone Lodge No. 1473.

It is clear that E.N. Emmons was thought of highly. On March 12, 1897, *The Washington Republican* reported:

If this paper was to select a postmaster for this office, we could not help but favor E.N. Emmons. Tuesday of this week we lost a dollar's worth of postage stamps in the post office. He found them and gave them up without being asked for them.

As noted, the name Emmons has a long and storied past within the development of early Washington County. He was born, Erastus Norval Emmons on November 14, 1844 in Titusville, Crawford Co. Pennsylvania and died March 16, 1919 in Los Angeles, California. Emmons married Sarah Catherine Tinney August 21, 1869. She was born in 1850 in West Virginia. She died June 2, 1940 also in Los Angeles, California. Her parents, James Kenesaw Polk Tinney and Zultulba (Givens) Tinney are buried in the Emmons Cemetary (RootsWeb data, compiled by Lloyd Holbrook).

From downtown Washington the journey to Emmons took "just less than an hour's ride," according to life-long resident and co-researcher Mr. Norm Stewart,

remembering the trek by horseback. The schoolhouse was located about three quarters of a mile west and on the north side of the road from where the town of Emmons stood. The history of this described, “tight-little community,” begins around 1878 when school district number 2 was actually the first organized one-room school district in the county (Washington County Tourist Brochure). Although folks were in the area by the late 1860s as recollected by Mrs. Pannbacker. According to the *Washington Historical Society*, “Washington County once had more one-room schoolhouses than any county in Kansas.” Here in lies the heart and beginnings of our journey into the late town of Emmons.

The expanding country of the young United States was suffering through fresh memories of the U.S. Civil War, the Homestead Act of 1862 recently ratified, “which offered 160 acres of public land to settlers who would live and labor on it” (Roark et al., 2000, p. 400). The Pacific Railroad Act, passed later that year, would also seed the minds of industry westward. While the rest of America was reading Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner’s *The Gilded Age* (1874) and recounting Custer’s infamous loss at Little Big Horn (1876)—the folks in Washington County, Kansas were stubbornly planting a new life and building the community of Emmons.



Figure 3. The Emmons School dated 1882, which is written on the photo from the Washington County Historical Society's collection.

In December of 1884 the *Washington Register* describes a stop on the Burlington (B&M) railroad, "The town is handsomely laid out in a rich and beautiful section of country, and is destined to become a good trading point." For the next several decades, this description proved true. Driving through this community now, at the time of this writing, still illustrates a rich and beautiful rural Kansan landscape. It was reported in that same December issue of 1884, the "Gregg Brothers, grain buyers, have built commodious corn cribs already." By 1885 Emmons had its own Post Office. According to Mr. Stewart, who claimed, "well, it was little before my time, but there was a small building with a postal slot there. I think it was where they gathered folk's letters."

The Emmons Post Office would operate, according to Mitch Zabokrtsky, from January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1885 until December 31, 1895 and from July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1896 to closing for good July 31, 1918. George W. Roberts was, reportedly, the first postmaster. On October 18, 1895 the *Washington Republican* reported, "Mrs. J.M. Shank, the accommodating deputy postmistress at Emmons, left last Saturday with her children for Johnson County to join her husband, who has been there for several months working at carpenter work." The paper continues, "The post office at Emmons which has been under charge of Mrs. J.F. Shank, daughter of H.G. Bobbitt, postmaster, will now be at the home of Mr. Bobbitt" (compiled by Lloyd Holbrook).

Discovering the history of settlers during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century uncovers hardships. Although many settlers in the Washington County area were German, according to Mrs. Deague, what follows is an excerpt during this era of pioneers heading to a small settlement in Kansas. After the Civil War many immigrants headed west to stake out a new life. In Michael Johnson's *Reading America's Past vol. 2: From 1865*, Ida Lindgren, a Swedish immigrant writes:

Don't you think, Mamma, that I could bear a little bit of *success*? I think myself that I could well manage a little, but the Lord sees best what we need and therefore He daily strikes and humiliates us, now in one way, now in another. But still He has not crushed our stubborn hearts. As burdened as I feel, my heart is still not weighed down, it still rises up from time to time. (25 August 1874, p. 29)

It was these 'stubborn hearts' that forged a life and settled this part of the world during this time period. These people were pioneers of a young, expanding country.

Emmons School House has been described as the center of the community. The school was the longest lasting building in the community and remained in use until 1961. According to co-researcher and long-time resident Mrs. Helen

Rosenkranz Pannbacker, whose children attended the school, “It was one of the last ones [one-room schools] to close.” The school served the community in a number of ways. The school was used to vote and as the meeting hall for the long-running Emmons Community Club. The school may have been used as a church during the early years, according to Mrs. Pannbacker. *The Washington Republican*, in fact, reported in October 4, 1895, “Quarterly meeting services and communion services will be held by the Presiding elder at the Emmons schoolhouse next Sunday at 3 p.m.” (Lloyd Holbrook). Aside from church, the school also functioned as a community fund-raising site. On June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1895, *The Washington Republican* again reported, “Ice cream at Emmons. There will be an ice cream social at the Emmons School Tuesday evening for the benefit of the pastor June 25” (Lloyd Holbrook). Community buildings served as social hubs and places where folks could gather and discuss public matters. Mrs. Pannbacker writes, “After 1942 it was used as a Community Club in about the 1950s.” She continued, “It was used as the Busy Bee 4H club meeting place for many years.”





Figure 4. This is a picture of the Emmons schoolhouse, circa 1890s, after the community added a steeple and an entrance.

Every community had certain needs for the daily process of living. Emmons was no exception and quickly added a general store, post office, mill, grain elevator, icehouse, and a blacksmith. An agricultural community is the same as any other supplying needs and some entertainment for folks. For many years life in Emmons changed but remained quaint and agriculturally oriented. Life was centered on work. Mr. Norman Stewart recalls:

My dad talked about, when he moved into this country in about 1929 or so, that there was a thirty acre field on the south side of the railroad there, he worked with about a 14" plow on that thirty acre field with what they called a walking plow, an a team of horses. But, I can't imagine starting around a thirty acre field with a hand plow, folks wouldn't even plow a garden now days with one. We have a walking plow in our yard just for decoration.



It is hard to imagine the kind of indomitability that carved the fields and lively-hoods of yesterday.

The General Store was an early and central feature of the town of Emmons. According to the late Bill Peters the store had different owners. He recalled around 1900 that Mr. Stehlik, Bill Gish, George Cook and Mr. Woolman owned the store at one time. The Washington Register reported that in July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1924 George and Adolph Kuck became the owners of Emmons Store from Adolph Rigger, formerly of Linn. Norman Stewart recalls the general store:

The store was little like our “short stops” now; it had a little bit of everything in it. I mean it had candy bars, ice cream and few groceries. I remember the folks always had access to the store.



Figure 5. This is a photograph of the foundation of the General Store in Emmons. Source: photo taken by the author.

Emmons also had a blacksmith shop, which (previously recorded) Bill Peters recalled was run by Sherman Reedy around 1900. Blacksmiths were common in such communities for fixing and fabricating tools and a wide-range of necessary services. Farming communities epitomize the French term ‘bricolage’, which means, improvising by drawing on diverse materials lying about and using them in creative ways to accomplish a pragmatic task. In short, making do with what one has could be the underpinning philosophy of pioneering. Blacksmiths and other trades providing for a community often do just that; fixing a plow, shoeing a horse and forging the proverbial nails that hold a community together.

A grain elevator and the Burlington Railroad formed a central aspect of commerce in Emmons. The station where the elevator of Emmons was located is north east of Washington. The elevator is remembered and described by Norman Stewart:

It [the elevator] was on the Burlington railroad there, it was designed for horses to thrash, and you know a thrashing machine. They’d haul their wagons under it, it was narrow and get their grains from it. We just lived three or four blocks from it, that’s how close we were, probably the closest neighbors around. I was just a kid then. Yeah, they dumped grain there. There was a [railway] switch there, they’d drop cars off there and load some grain. It didn’t go very far, the Burlington railroad. I think it started over here in Concordia, Kansas, south of Bellville—came down through Emmons and Hanover then on up to Wetmore. Truthfully I was so young that I didn’t pay much attention, but the train came through about everyday. One day, there were four of us kids out there near the tracks and we had this big old St. Bernard dog that fell in front of the train and got hit. That engineer got out of the train and felt so bad for us kids. I’ve never forgotten that.

This is the kind of compassion that framed the heart of community and contributed to a sense of belonging. Among the persistent hardships of daily survival, virtuous acts can be read, seen and felt throughout the history of Emmons.





Figure 6. This is a railroad map of Washington County circa 1890. Source: Wichita State University, Special Collections.

Back before the widespread expansion of electricity, communities often had shared icehouses. These were often dug into an embankment and designed around the idea of insulating a large block of ice. Norman Stewart describes the icehouse in Emmons:

They had a little icehouse there. I guess it's just disappeared in the last few years; it was near the corner of our little farm spot there. We sold the farmhouse off in later years. There is just the boy and I to work the farm, but we had a little concrete icehouse, the mill creek would run through the farm there. They would go down and use a handsaw to cut the ice and with a horse throw a rope or something and pull the ice up the bank. Then we would take and cut it up in sections and put it in the icehouse. There was also a mill there. They would pack it with sawdust. I believe we would put that water in our tea in the summer time, but I wouldn't swear to that (laughing).

Today having ice is taken for granted and is seldom considered a luxury. Before the booming fifties, however, having and maintaining ice called for a process. Although details such as icehouses may not be the focus of many historical landmarks, these public buildings played an important role for small communities. Like most processes, acquiring and maintaining ice, before refrigeration, required a collective effort. Collective labor contributes to a shared sense of community, true then as now.

During the late nineteen-twenties, much was happening around the world. Life in Emmons continued day-by-day and row-by-row. Mr. Norman Stewart recalls this year affectionately:

Back then there were no hospitals around, I was born in 1929. Folks moved here and started farming in '28. My mother says, "They had a snow storm, the sixth of January" and the roads were all blocked, of course they didn't have [snow] blades or Caterpillars, they used a "scoop shovel". Two or three neighbors came in, she mentioned them a few time, Delbert Allen and few others scooped a path so the doctor could get his car in. That's where I was delivered down there [Emmons]. We didn't have anything but corncobs and a little wood for heat, so I told my friends that I was born in a snow bank (laughing). The doctor was Dr. Smith; he built the big house down there on the south side. There probably weren't over 8 or 10 houses and that area.

It's amazing how things have changed. I suppose they will continue to change. Back in the thirties I ran a team of horses, then tractors come around, of course it depends where you were, probably in the mid-forties, I guess. But farming has gone from small acreage farmers to huge, I mean big farming. More like corporations than family farms.

This was a time when families were getting into farming and for many, the trade, was expanding. Norman Stewart remembers a unique occurrence that his father experienced:

My daddy bought this land, about 80 acres, it had to be—he moved down here in '29 so this would be been in the forties. They wanted thirty dollars an acre for it, dad bid it for twenty-nine and they took it. Dad bought this for

twenty-nine dollars an acre. 80 acres here, it didn't look like that quite, it had ditches and had eroded. He came up here and I remember him out there he tried to work the ditches out. The first year, the wheat paid for the ground. I can't remember now how much it brought, but that's kind of unusual that the yield bring enough to pay for the land.

May 25<sup>th</sup> 1946 was a historical day for Emmons, Kansas. While the state has a history of many defining moments linked to inclement weather, Emmons was drastically affected by one such tornado. Two longtime residents and neighbors that experienced that fateful day, which would forever place the town in the history books, recount the event here. Helen Rosenkranz Pannbacker remembers:

Actually I was out there, in the tornado. We lived by a creek and some hills. This might be interesting to you, my father-in-law came and I had a little girl, she was a year old at that time. He said, "we'd better go to the basement because it's not looking good out there" and I hadn't even looked. I was newly married and a new mother. We hadn't much more than got to the basement, he said, "Come back up here and look at this". We had a great big hill and that tornado was just bouncing up and down like a top, it looked like a top. I looked at the top of the hill and realized that's where my husband was fixing fence. My husband was up there and he said, "we saw it come around we ducked down in the bottom of the car, then it went on up and over to Emmons. He didn't do the proper thing and had said, "heck we could have outrun it". Then he said, "It looked like it was coming back", so he ducked back down. It went down the Westside of the creek and did not harm our buildings. It destroyed Emmons. The General Store was torn down which had not been used since about 1940. Then there was an elevator, which it blew down. Someone from town [Washington], Mark Taggart, had just bought that elevator. Of course that ended that, it ended the town.

Norman Stewart recalls the tornado of 46' from his experience:

Yeah, we were out there, about this time of day (just after noon), maybe a little later, kind of a stormy, humid day, we was up at the house. Mrs. Pannbacker lived just over that big hill over there. You could see that tornado come down that hill; they don't move all that fast, but like a big whirlwind out there, dust was blowing. Dad looked out and said, "that's a tornado coming". So, we all went out and ran into the cave over there, I don't know if its still there or not, but went to the cave, got the lady across the road. Mrs. Geisler, she was old then and she didn't want to come across because she wanted to pick up her treasures. They finally got her over there

and by then, boy, the wind was about to blow her away. I think dad sent mom after her. Pretty crazy.

This event marks the end of the town, but not the community of Emmons. What remains are stories, artifacts, family histories and memories of those that stubbornly labored and lived on this land. What bound the people to this land then is what binds people to this land today—work. The area today is still beautifully maintained and comprised largely of producing farms.

It has been noted that Kansas has over five thousand 'lost towns' for various reasons. Many communities, like Emmons, were never rebuilt. There are a number of reasons for this phenomenon. A tornado contested *The Washington Republican's* claim of a destined trading post; but not, however, the hearts of those that lived and thrived in Emmons.

The Emmons cemetery exists where it always has and is still, at the time of this writing, being used. The history of this area can be recounted in each date etched into the limestone markers of people, families and neighbors past. Each tombstone harbors a story that is in some way linked to the old general store. Each story reflects on a time when the school bell rang and children reluctantly flooded in to learn their daily lesson. And every lesson was taken and taught to another who would grow up and fondly recount days gone by. Looking out over the cemetery in Emmons, again, one is transported through time, not to a singular moment, but across generations. Early pioneers, like Ida Lindgren writing family in faraway places, were determined to plow through tribulation and plant new hope for the future.





Figure 7. Emmons Cemetery photographed in the spring of 2012. Source: photo taken by the author.

In 1982 residents of Emmons organized a one hundred year celebration. Several people gathered at the school and recounted the years, stories and residents of Emmons since being found as the first school district in the county. Mrs. Pannbacker writes, “[the] Stewarts, Longs and E.J. and I had fun making that celebration come about”. She continues, “A few years ago the Emmons School was moved to Washington by the Washington County Historical Society. So it is still being used and is [now] located on the south east corner of the square, close to the Museum.” The school can still be visited by appointment through the Washington County Historical Society.

A new community now calls Emmons home. The train engines have long been silenced. The grain elevator perished in the tornado of '46. The general store and the icehouse have been farmed past. Yet the land is still dutifully manicured and represents well over a century of work, family and a country that was growing into the modern-era of today. Just as the land of Emmons tempered Midwesterners historical beginnings, the people teach us that persistence and perseverance are the real legacy of all similar communities.

The story of Emmons conjures more than a small town turned rural community. It tells the story of a frontier settled by hard working people bound to turn the earth and farm out a living with stubborn hearts. This legacy can still be seen and experienced through the preservation, fellowship and community spirit in the residents of Washington County today.

## Figures:

Figure 1. Emmons School, 2012, facing the town square in Washington, KS. Source: Picture by Edward Green.

Figure 2. This is a photo taken from the front doorway of Emmons School, 2012, from the doorway peering inside. Source: Picture by Edward Green

Figure 3. The Old Emmons School, 1882 on the north side of the road, facing south. Source: The Washington County Historical Society.

Figure 4. The Old Emmons School, date unknown, after the community added the bell tower and front entrance way. Source: The Washington County Historical Society.

Figure 5. This is a photo of the old foundation (Spring, 2012) of the General Store of Emmons, KS being destroyed May 26, 1946. Source: Picture by Edward Green

Figure 6. This is a Kansas Railroad map circa 1890. This is part of a digitized collection from Wichita State University: Department of Special Collections. Retrieved from:  
<http://specialcollections.wichita.edu/collections/maps/detailsframes.asp?var=1890-0001>

Figure 7. This is a photo taken of the Emmons cemetery (Spring, 2012). Source: Picture by Edward Green

## References:

Johnson, Michael P. (2009). *Reading The American Past Selected Historical Documents Volume II: From 1865*. Bedford/St. Martin's: Boston/New York.

Roark, James L., Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, Susan M. Hartmann. (2000). *The American Promise: A History of the United States*. Bedford/St. Martin's: Boston, Mass.

## Interviews

1. Helen Rosenkranz Pannbacker, interview by Edward Green, digital recording, 4 February 2012, Washington County Historical Society.

2. Norman Stewart, interview by Edward Green, digital recording, 4 February 2012, Washington County Historical Society.

3. Norman Stewart, interview by Edward Green, digital recording, 6 April 2012, Washington County, Kansas.