

The Merchants of Palmer: 1879-2012

Washington County, Kansas

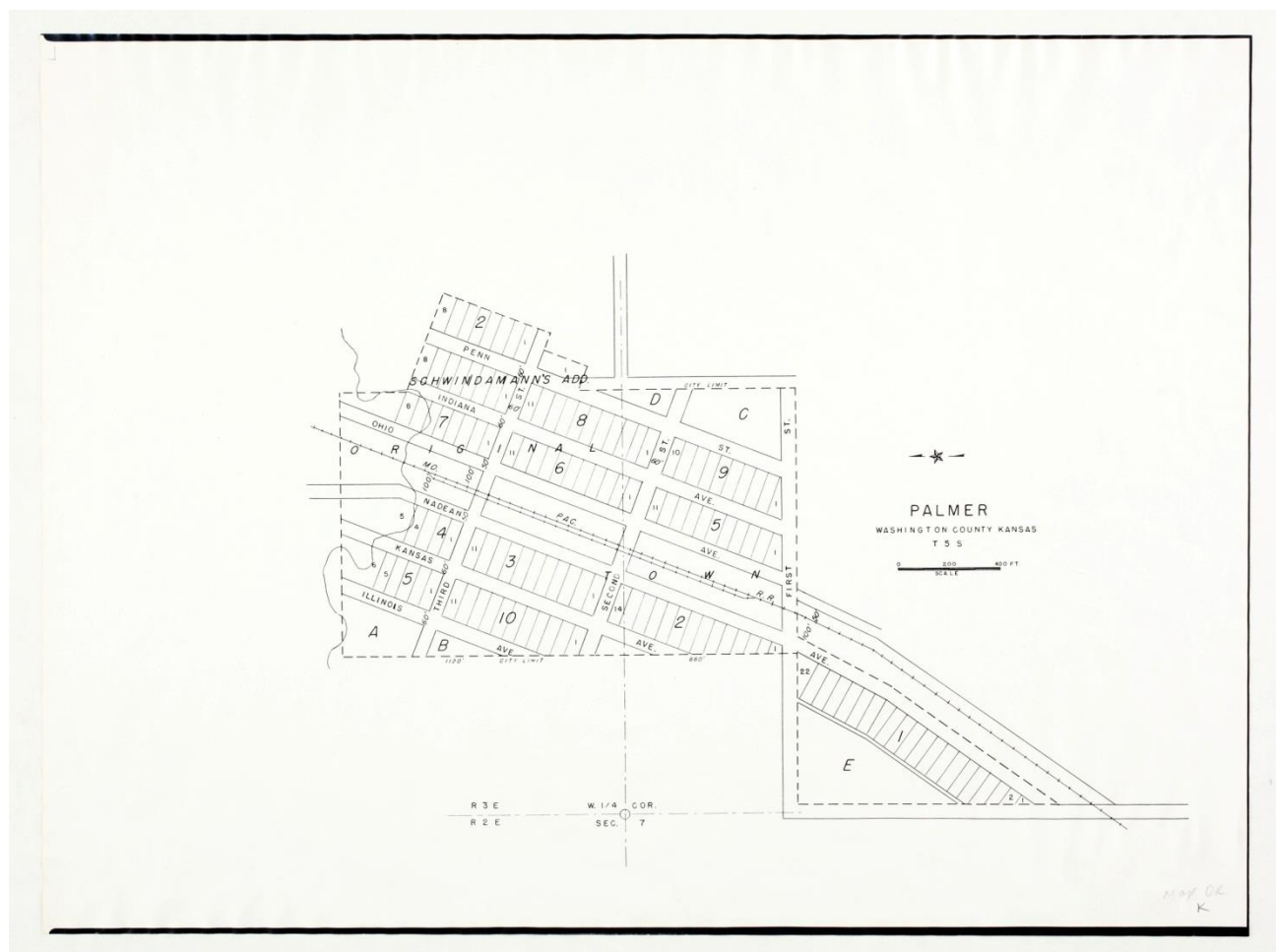


Figure 1: Platt map of Palmer. Circa 1947. Can be found at KansasMemory.org

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History 533: Lost Kansas Communities

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

Kansas University

Fall 2012

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This study is of the city of Palmer, located in Washington County, Kansas, and how the entrepreneurial spirit allowed it to flourish. This industry allowed the town to thrive though all manner of trials and disasters. This study shall include maps, pictures, interviews, and publishing.

The Beginning

The year is 1879. A lone depot sits next to a railroad track, built by the Central Branch Union Pacific Railroad, which runs along Peach Creek. In the background, a mound crests, nestling the site in its shadow. This site is what E. A. Thomas, the founder of Palmer, saw when he arrived for the first time. Soon, he was followed by numerous other businessmen from the town of Peach Creek, which had been passed over by the railroad. In just three years, the town had a booming businesses and trade.¹ Palmer continued from that day in 1879 to this present year of 2012. Business drove this town. Business was its life's blood. Palmer was started by businessmen and would thrive because of them. The town drew entrepreneurs with its access to the railroad.

Through its history, Palmer remained small with the population mostly hovering around 100-200. It is pleasantly situated in the northwest portion of Sherman Township, thirteen miles south and five miles west of Washington, the county seat. Washington County lies in the northeast part of Kansas. Incorporated in 1857, the county was only 22 years old when Palmer was established. Receiving, on average, 28-30 inches of rain a year, Washington has 2 types of grasses, Bluestem-Grama Prairie and Bluestem Prairie.²³ Palmer lies within the Bluestem-Grama grasses, making the local fauna a mixture of short and tall grasses. The town site is located next to Peach/Peats/Pete's Creek. The name of the creek is open to interpretation, being listed under Google Maps as Peats Creek yet referred to as Peach Creek by others. But the creek bed and the small rise shading Palmer are covered in timber. Trees are rare to find in such abundance in the

¹ William G. Cutler's History of the State of Kansas. April 1990.

<http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/washington/washington-co-p3.html#PALMER> (accessed December 5, 2012).

² Socolofsky, Homer E., and Huber Self. Historical Atlas of Kansas. University of Oklahoma, 1992. Pg 4

³ Socolofsky, Homer E., and Huber Self. Historical Atlas of Kansas. University of Oklahoma, 1992. Pg. 5

rolling plains of Kansas. This, combined with Palmer's short distance off Madison Road makes it seem to be almost a little secret of Kansas, which only a keen explorer would find.



Figure 2. Main Street view of Palmer, Ks. Taken February 16th, 2013. Photographers Bruce and Carol Peters

Palmer did have its share of difficulties to face. Fire was a constant threat, and many times buildings and business were lost to a blaze. In addition, Palmer lived through the Great Depression and numerous other financial trials. Why people didn't pull up stakes and move on can be attributed to their business spirit. They had a home and work here and they will continue to see it through tough times. But sadly, probably one of Palmer's most important struggles is

more recent. According to Marily Bargman, widely considered the official town historian, the problem facing Palmer now is the removal of the railroad, a blow to Palmer's prospects. Due to flooding in the early 1990's, Kyle Railroad, once the Union Pacific, was closed; it was followed in 2002 with the removal of the tracks.⁴⁵ No longer would a train come through Palmer. How Palmer will face this new challenge is difficult to tell in these times but as ever, the people ever have an air of optimism.

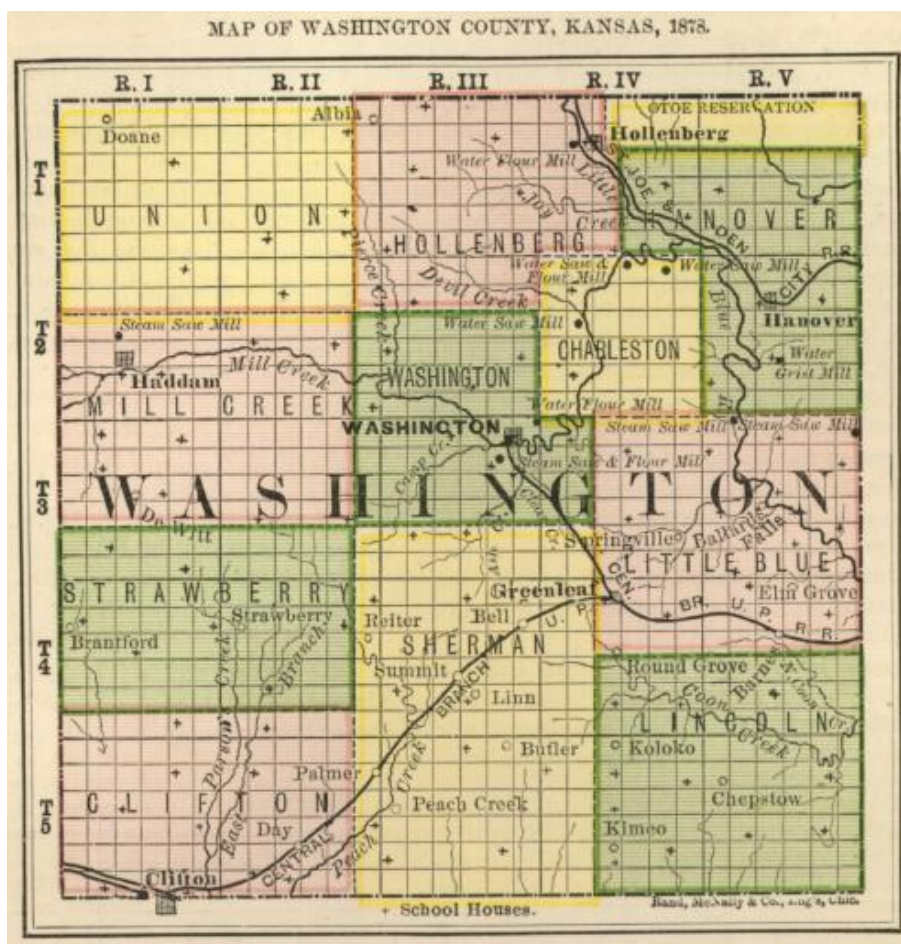


Figure 3. Map of Washington County circa 1878. Note: One year before the founding of Palmer, see the location of Peach Creek village. Found on Blue Skyways copy of First Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture to the Legislature of the State of Kansas, for the Years 1877-8

⁴ Bargman, Marily, interview by Grant Peters. (December 1, 2012), interviewed at home.

Peach Creek

Peach Creek village was established in 1870.⁶ The town was named after the creek it lies by. Why Peach Creek was called Peach Creek might be attributed to Peach orchards that were in the county. In 1878, there were 86,916 fruit-bearing peach trees and 28,772 non-fruit-bearing trees in Washington County.⁷ However, no mention of peach orchards or peach related products has been found about Peach Creek Village. But while peaches might not have been grown in Peach Creek, another town up or downriver might have named the creek for it. This might account for the multiple names that the creek has. The idea for the town itself came about through a discussion between an E. Wilson and Charles D. Potter who had come from Vermont searching for a place to locate. Mr. Potter settled on the stagecoach road between Waterville and Concordia. After the Post Office was moved from Mount Clifton, he took over as Postmaster. By 1872 the town consisted of two general stores, a blacksmith shop, a hotel, a doctor's office, a grain house, and several homes. A school was even organized, Peach Creek School District Number 90. The town seemed to be on a track to success. However, while the "iron race horse" can be beneficial to a town, see Palmer, it can also doom it. When the Central Branch Union Pacific Railroad started to lay track through the area, they refused to deviate a few miles to put the railroad through the town. While not having a railroad wasn't the killer for the town, the leaving of the business men was. Business men like E.A. Thomas couldn't compete without access to a railroad, and so many picked up stakes and moved to the depot that C.B.U.P.R. had built. The town remained scattered about, the people slowly ebbing away.

⁶ Palmer Centennial. Palmer: Ellsworth Printing Company, 1978. Pg. 18

⁷ "First Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture to the Legislature of the State of Kansas, for the Years 1877-8." Kansas State Board of Agriculture. Topeka: Rand, McNally & Co, 1878.

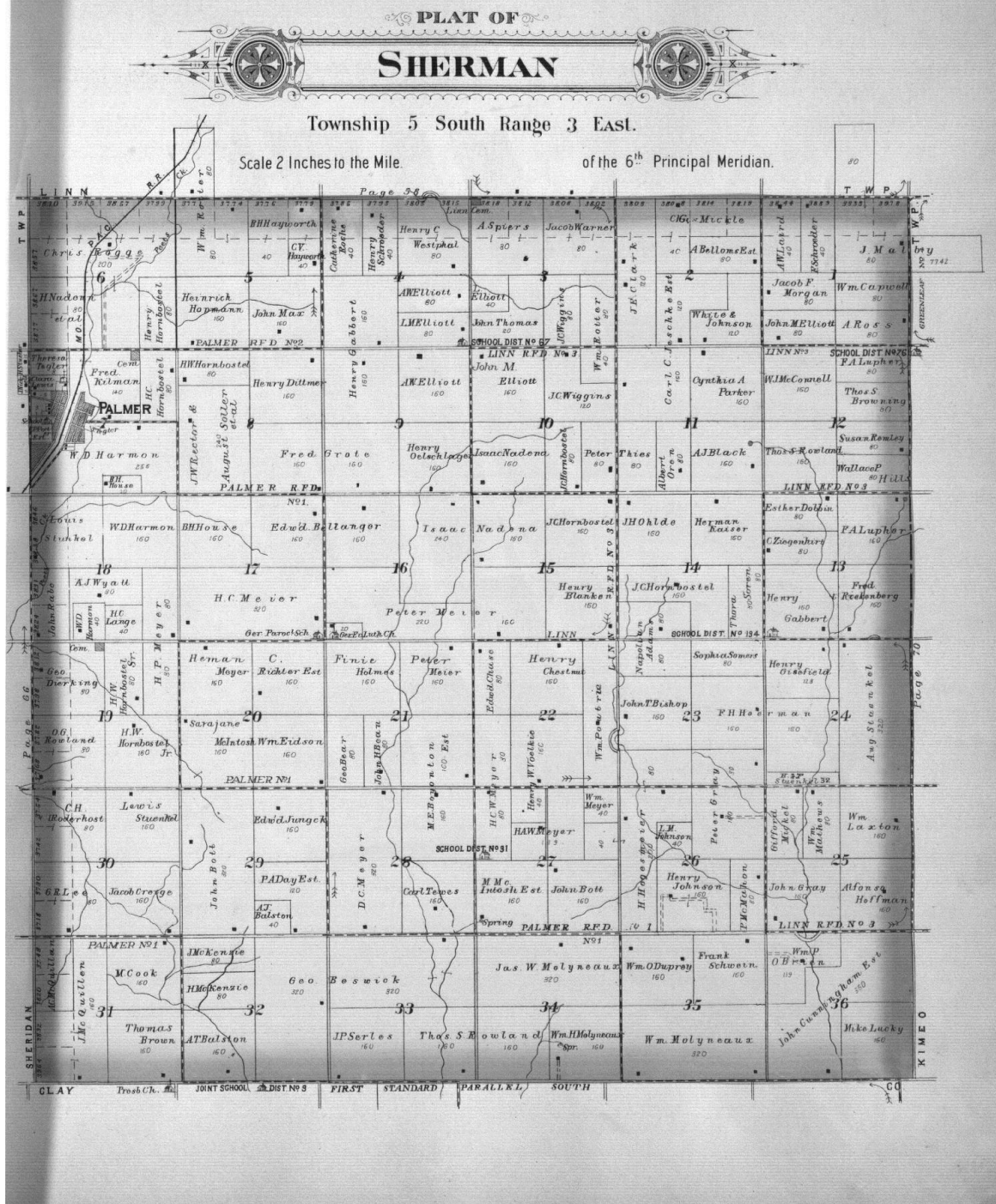


Figure 4. Atlas Map of Sherman Township, Washington County, circa 1906. Note: Top Left corner, location of Palmer and railroad. Courtesy of Kansas Memory.org

Zelinsky's Law

Wilbur Zelinsky was an American cultural geographer who studied populations and immigration. He labeled the imprint that is left by the charter group as the "doctrine of first effective settlement":

Whenever an empty territory undergoes settlement or an earlier population is dislodged by invaders, the specific characteristics of the first group able to affect a viable, self-perpetuating society are of crucial significance for the later social and cultural geography of the area, no matter how tiny the initial band of settlers may have been.⁸

This doctrine would be known as Zelinsky's law of First Effective Settlement. The law refers the impact the first settlers to a land have, how they stamp their culture and values into it. This relates to Palmer in that the first settlers to arrive to the town were the merchants and businessmen from Peach Creek village.⁹ These men knew that with the railroad passing over Peach Creek, business would falter and screech to a halt. So they followed E.A. Thomas to Palmer to seek a better fortune. The first business that was "landed" here was run by George F. Kober on May 16, 1878¹⁰. Following him were other merchants such as Francis W. Nadeau who built a store that sold, among other things, stationary and confectionary. In a direct example of Zelinsky's law, the main street of Palmer was named Nadeau(n) after this man. A druggist and apothecary soon followed, then a lumberyard (which is still in business to this very day).¹¹ By 1882, when the town was platted and incorporated, it boasted five general stores, one lumber yard and hardware store, one drug store, one furniture store, two butcher shops, one photograph gallery, two hotels, one harness shop, three blacksmith shops, one wagon shop, one grain buyer,

⁸ Hapter 6 Migration and Ethnic Geography. n.d. <http://faculty.mc3.edu/wbrew/CGEONOTES/CHAPTER6.htm> (accessed December 5, 2012).

⁹ Palmer. "The Washington County Register." September 16, 1938.

¹⁰ Palmer Centennial. Pg. 24 Palmer: Ellsworth Printing Company, 1978.

¹¹ Ibid.

one livery stable, one millinery store, three physicians, one dentist, one carpenter, and a large elevator.¹²

In 1879, the Central Branch Union Pacific Railroad & Company, or the C.B.U.P.R., which owned the railroad passing through Palmer, published a pamphlet targeting recent emigrants interested in purchasing agricultural land situated in central and eastern Kansas. Among the numerous towns listed in the pamphlet was Palmer. In the publication, a description was given of Palmer.¹³ These are some excerpts:

*“From the preceding statements it will be seen that Palmer is destined to be a place of importance, and now offers great inducements by way of material advantages and otherwise, for the investment of capital.”*¹⁴

“If you want a good location for business go to Palmer...”

Along with the description ran ads that ranged from general good stores, hardware, furniture, and drug stores. Palmer was a center for business and wanted to be known as such. Whether you lived in town or were just passing through on the railroad, Palmer could provide you with the goods and services you would need.

Fast forward to the turn of the century and business in Palmer was still booming. New shops and operations were being started. Old storeowners were selling their businesses and new owners were eager to fill their positions. In 1910, one Ralph Groom had started an automobile business and sold Allen 41's for \$850 and Rio Roadsters for \$1,000.¹⁵ And still in the same town, an E.H. Hornbostel serviced those cars in an automobile garage.¹⁶ Others ran meat

¹² William G. Cutler's History of the State of Kansas. April 1990.
<http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/washington/washington-co-p3.html#PALMER> (accessed December 5, 2012).

¹³ Emigrants Guide or Handbook of the Central Branch Union Pacific Railroad & Company." Kansas Memory. 1879.
http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/display.php?item_id=1016&f=D00001009 (accessed December 5, 2012).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hubbard, Ruth McIntosh. "Businesses in Palmer." n.d.

¹⁶ Ibid

markets, drugstores, or were harness makers. Even an undertaking business was started. Palmer was the town where a small town person could find anything and everything available to him. Businessmen started the town, and according to Zelinsky's Law, had made their stamp.

Entrepreneurial Spirit

A lot has been said on how many stores were in Palmer and how much variety of goods was available. But this also suggests the entrepreneurial spirit that the people of Palmer had. If they saw an opportunity to make a living and provide a service, they took it. For instance there existed in Palmer the "**Palmer Rural Telephone Company.**" The Palmer Rural Telephone Company was organized on April 20, 1905 and lasted until March 21, 1972 when the Blue Valley Telephone Company of Home, Kansas bought them out.¹⁷ In addition, Palmer to this day claims the only barber in Washington County, Mr. Dennis Peters.¹⁸ But the most creative and innovative use of available resources has to be the unique harvest that occurs every winter. The harvest would occur when the water in the creek would freeze over. This was before the time of refrigeration and air conditioning. A local butcher by the name of Henry Dammon¹⁹ would organize teams of men to go out onto the ice. A group of horses would drag a plow like instrument through the ice, cutting a furrow that the men would follow behind. Six to eight men would line up, sawing into the ice with blades three to five feet long.²⁰ Men down the stream with long poles with hooks would snag the blocks that were cut loose. Each block was 18 inches across, three feet long and often nine to ten inches thick.²¹ Loaded up onto a cart, the blocks were then transferred to the ice house to be stacked. In the summer, delivery of ice was made by the

¹⁷ Palmer Centennial. Palmer: Ellsworth Printing Company, 1978.

¹⁸ Bargman, Marily, interview by Grant Peters. (December 1, 2012).

¹⁹ Hubbard, Ruth McIntosh. "A Unique Harvest." November 1989.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

very same butcher. A cart with a bell would come to individual houses to make the delivery, bringing cold relief to the citizens of Palmer. This practice, however, was ended when refrigeration was made easily available to Americans. But the ingenuity of such an idea was not limited in Palmer. Many such other capitalists existed in this town.

Challenges

The town of Palmer seems to have lived a charmed life, but challenges did exist as it did in all small towns in Kansas. The first and most critical threat was the danger of fire. Early on, Palmer was built from wood, so if a blaze started, it could quickly spread to nearby buildings. There were numerous accounts of large and damaging fires in Palmer. One happened on a Wednesday night, February 4, 1914²². The General Merchandise Store, the Bank of Palmer, the Telephone Exchange and the Palmer Index Office were totally destroyed by the blaze. While attempts to fight the fire were made, it was all in vain. Luckily however, most of the buildings and equipment inside were insured, making replacements easy to order and not costly. Another incident happened six years later on August 20th, 1920²³. An entire business block consisting of eight store buildings and town storehouses were completely destroyed together with all their contents. The fire started in the Fairmont Cream station when an oil stove exploded and quickly spread to the entire block. The damage from this blaze was set at around \$75,000-\$80,000, and loss was only partially covered with \$40,000 insurance. This was the most devastating fire to have happened in Palmer yet.²⁴ But after the devastation, the town was rebuilt with brick and stone, improving the look and mitigating the danger of another blaze.

²² Palmer Centennial. Palmer: Ellsworth Printing Company, 1978.

²³ Ibid. See 'The Palmer Index, August 20, 1920 Albert Higgins, Editor'

²⁴ Bargman, Marily, interview by Grant Peters. (December 1, 2012).

Fire was not the only danger in Kansas. Tornadoes have been a common occurrence in Palmer saw its fair share. On May 17th, 1896,²⁵ one of the ten worst tornadoes to strike Kansas hit near Palmer. It passed by without causing too much damage, but this close call is a reminder of the danger that many towns in Kansas face. Another case of concern might have been crime but no major cases were ever reported. There was one case of a bank robbery occurred in Palmer, the only robbery in the history of the bank's 91 years of business. In 1895, burglars blew open the safe one night and carried away twenty-five hundred dollars. The next morning the door of the safe was found in the middle of the railroad tracks a half a block east of the bank. Tracks of about four horses were trailed south of town before they were lost.²⁶ This story adds a little bit of drama to the town's memory.

Conclusion

Palmer, Kansas is a small town with a pioneering attitude that has recently celebrated its 125th anniversary. It was started by men who saw an opportunity to succeed. When the railroad passed by Peach Creek, the merchants of the town packed their bags and moved to this new city of Palmer, not knowing what to expect. They then made the most of this new opening, starting new businesses and providing new and different services. They embraced the change that came with time. Automobile salesmen and garages were quick to appear with the arrival of the car. Palmer had its own telephone company that all houses were wired to. And when disaster struck, the citizens of Palmer picked up the pieces and moved on. There was no mass exodus of the city after any of the major fires. Homes and stores were rebuilt in brick and stone to be newer and better. But there has come a new challenge with the change of time. As of 2010 census, Palmer

²⁵ F5/EF5 Tornadoes That Have Struck Kansas. n.d. <http://www.crh.noaa.gov/ict/?n=toptenkstors> (accessed December 5, 2012).

²⁶ Palmer Centennial. Palmer: Ellsworth Printing Company, 1978

has a population of 111 with the average age of a male being 56 and female, 55.²⁷ In addition to a maturing population, the town has also lost the railroad link, the reason it was created. In the early 1990s, the bridges crossing the creek in the Clifton area were washed out in a flood, causing the closing of Kyle's Railroad, formerly known as the Union Pacific. Then in 2002, the tracks were removed completely.²⁸ The ten years following the loss of the railroad have gone smoothly for Palmer, but time is not on its side. It is hard to say whether the pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit of this town will find another way to find success. Perhaps in another ten years, Palmer will have faded too far to be reclaimed. But in those same ten years, another businessman can find something that will pump life into the town. Ten years, give or take, can mean a big difference.



Figure 5. Apples being unloaded at the north elevator. Photograph courtesy of Washington County Historical and Genealogy Society. Circa 1910.

²⁷ City-Data. n.d. <http://www.city-data.com/city/Palmer-Kansas.html> (accessed December 5, 2012).

²⁸ Train Story." Washington County Historical and Genealogy Society, n.d.



Figure 6. Lumber business in Palmer, Ks. Photo taken in February 16, 2013. Photographers Bruce and Carol Peters

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