

Kansas State University

Early Chapman, Dickinson County, Kansas, 1890-1930: The Lumber Yard that Developed a  
Town

Hist 533 Lost Kansas Communities

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This study of early Chapman and the Sanborn Lumber Yard in Dickinson County, Kansas, includes a map of the county, an interview, and photographs of the Sanborn Lumber Yard.

Shouts ring out across the yard as the clatter of building material is thrown on the shelves. Wagons make their way back and forth from the lumber yard, and the clip clopping of hooves echo throughout the town. This lumber yard offers the highest quality of cement and plaster; and roofing and millwork are made available to the town of Chapman, a small but bustling town. More remarkable is that Malte P. Sanborn, the owner of this proud establishment, was once a young man with only \$7.50 to his name, an immigrant hoping to make a life for himself in America.<sup>1</sup> Sanborn came from humble beginnings, growing up in Onnestad, a small town in Sweden where he honed his craft of carpentry. He had a strong interest in capitalism, and a desire to find opportunity for advancement. He decided America was where he could fulfill his dream, and ultimately he settled in Chapman, Dickinson County, Kansas, where this dream came to fruition: he made his mark on the community. In 1892 the Sanborn Lumber Company was founded, quickly becoming a profound influence on the town.<sup>2</sup>

Malte P. Sanborn arrived at Chapman in 1880, at the mere age of 23, unable to speak one word of English. Since he could not speak the language, he was not able to find work in his chosen profession of carpentry. He first had to work as a farm hand, earning \$13 per month.<sup>3</sup> Within six months he became fluent in English, procuring a job as a building contractor. Once Mr. Sanborn got his foot in the door as a contractor, he gained a reputation for being a fair business man. In 1898, he started his retail lumber industry, and in 1908 he purchased the plant and equipment from the Dickinson County Electric Light & Power Company, therefore owning the lighting franchise for the town of Chapman. He made several generous contributions to the town of Chapman, such as serving as a member of the city council for fifteen years.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Sanborn, John. *Malte P. Sanborn Family of Chapman, Kansas*. Blurb Inc. 2013.

<sup>2-4</sup>Ibid.

Mr. Sanborn had an interest in many of the towns businesses and wanted to see them succeed. His main goal was to see Chapman progress and become an even better place to live.

Malte P. Sanborn's first carpentry and contracting shop was located on what is now Sheeran and 4<sup>th</sup> street, the lower side of town, since Chapman was a two level city. A two level city is split into an upper level and lower level, with the upper level being the nicer area of town. Church buildings and more expensive housing are located on this level, whereas, the lower level is located closer to the river, and is more industrial and affordable, the working side of town. The reason the lumber yard was located on the lower side of town, was because it was actually closer to the Union Pacific Railroad and Chapman Creek, which was good for transportation, and shipments.<sup>5</sup> Sanborn purchased the Chapman Lumber Yard from P.L. Jennings, and changed the name of the lumber company in 1905 to the M.P. Sanborn Lumber Company.<sup>6</sup> The first power source for this shop was a black horse (as seen in figure 1). The horse was basically on a treadmill, which was an endless Webb that carried the shafts. This powered all of the equipment in the shop.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Socolofsky, Homer and Self, Huber. *Historical Atlas of Kansas. Map #30*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1972.

<sup>6-7</sup> Sanborn, John. *Malte P. Sanborn Family of Chapman, Kansas*. Blurb Inc. 2013.



Figure 1: First Carpenter and Contracting shop (opened in 1892) built and owned by Malte Persson Sanborn. SOURCE: *Malte P. Sanborn Family of Chapman, Kansas*.

Starting the Chapman Lumber Yard was only the beginning for Malte P. Sanborn; on the night of May 1, 1907 it was the first time the city had ever been lit up with electric lights. As Mr. Sanborn had said, “For a business to prosper, the community must prosper. A community must keep pace with the advancements of the times. So Chapman must have electric lights.”<sup>8</sup> The spring of 1906 was when the construction of the dam was started on Chapman Creek (Figure 2). The dam was what powered the electricity, as the turbines were powered by paddle wheels so as to create an electric current.<sup>9</sup> Although financially the power project was not successful, it showed just how much Mr. Sanborn believed that the progress of the community was more important than his own personal gain. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of October, 1915 he sold the Chapman Light and Power Plant to the town of Chapman. When Malte P. Sanborn died in 1918, his wife Anna Marie Sanborn, who had given her husband \$800 from her savings to buy the lumber yard, took over the business.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8-10</sup> Sanborn, John. *Malte P. Sanborn Family of Chapman, Kansas*. Blurb Inc. 2013.

The business was renamed A.M. Sanborn Lumber Yard, and Mrs. Sanborn had the firm incorporated. She kept most of it in stock until right before her death in 1934. She gave 40% to her daughter Elizabeth, and 30% to each of her sons, Austin and Ted.<sup>11</sup>

The Sanborn Lumber Company eventually expanded into seven lumber yards. The success of the lumber yards was all thanks to great family management. The Sanborn Lumber Yards were known for being neat, clean, and efficiently run.<sup>12</sup> Another reason that the lumber yards lasted as long as they did, was because of innovative business ideas. Austin Sanborn, the son of Malte, bought land in Junction City and used only his lumber for the building of the houses.



Figure 2: Chapman Light and Power Plant around 1907, Chapman, Dickinson County, Kansas. SOURCE: *Malte P. Sanborn Family of Chapman, Kansas*.

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<sup>11-12</sup> Sanborn, John. *Malte P. Sanborn Family of Chapman, Kansas*. Blurb Inc. 2013.

Although the Sanborn Lumber Company was a successful business, a time had come when it, and other mom and pop stores like it were going to be run out of business.<sup>13</sup> In my interview with John Sanborn, he said, “The smaller lumber stores were going under, because of the big box stores, like Home Depot, and Lowes.”<sup>14</sup> Eventually the Army Corp of Engineers offered money to buy the Sanborn Lumber Company, and since Austin Sanborn was not in good health, and the business wasn’t doing as well, he took the offer. Much like Broughton, Kansas, the Sanborn Lumber Company would become a memory. The town of Broughton was bought by the Corp of Engineers as well during the construction of Milford Reservoir and is now a lost town of Kansas.<sup>15</sup>

The Sanborn Lumber Company showcases the persistence that people had to have to get a business started and help develop a community. Malte P. Sanborn came to Chapman with a dream of making something of himself and building a successful community. He got involved with every aspect of the community, and worked for the community, not only himself. The community of Chapman today is still successful, but not like it was in the 1900s. Some of the factors that probably contributed to this would be the invention of the automobile, larger box stores, and the tornado that hit Chapman on June 2008. The invention of the automobile made it easier for people to go elsewhere for shopping. The large stores had more appeal to customers, because they could get everything they needed in one trip.

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<sup>13-14</sup> Interview with John Sanborn, May 1, 2013, Manhattan, Kansas.

<sup>15</sup> Morgan, M. J. *Broughton Kansas: Portrait of a Lost Town 1869-1966*. Chapman Center for Rural Studies at Kansas State University, 2010.

The tornado that hit Chapman on June 12, 2008, also devastated several parts of the little town, including its schools. Thankfully, Chapman has recovered from this natural disaster and still exists today.



Figure 3: The M. P. Sanborn Lumber Company, 1914. SOURCE: *Malte P. Sanborn Company of Chapman, Kansas*.



Figure 4: The Sanborn Lumber Company, 2013 (knocked down shortly after this picture was taken).

## Bibliography

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