

Publicity Stunt: The Importance of Seymour Rogers and Free Water in the Creation and Survival of Liberal, Kansas, 1885-1888



Nathan Dowell

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A study connecting the story of where the name of Liberal, Kansas came from to the factors that impacted town survival in Seward County during the late 1880's and early 1890's. Seymour Rogers, the figure who is credited with inspiring the name of "Liberal," is explored within the context of a county vying for trade, railroads, the county seat, business, and, perhaps most importantly, attention. This study uses land deeds related to Rogers' time in Seward County, past and present newspapers from Liberal, personal accounts of settlers in early Seward County, Kansas Historical Markers located in Seward County, and various historical reference works on Seward County, southwestern Kansas, and the state.

The year may vary, the name occasionally, but not often, varies, and the expression varies, but whether he is described as “mighty Liberal,” or just as “that Liberal fella,” the basic legend is the same: Liberal, Kansas claims to be named after the generosity of one man—Seymour Rogers. The commonly accepted version of the story is that Rogers, a settler in Seward County during the 1880’s, offered free water to travelers at a time when water was both limited and expensive.¹ Rogers’ generosity not only directed more travelers by his property, but led to the town that was created nearby to be named Liberal in his honor.

Liberal is also my hometown. As a resident of Liberal, I have long been aware of Seymour’s story, and of the character trait that would become the name of our town. However, it is only recently that I have become interested in the other side of Liberal’s early history: the struggle to survive. Seward County, between 1880 and 1890, became home to at least four different towns: Fargo Springs, Springfield, Arkalon, and Liberal.² Of these towns, only Liberal currently exists. In fact, the other three were extinct or in decline before the twentieth century began. Liberal, certainly, experienced periods of decline, but there were key reasons that the town survived: Liberal had a railroad, the county seat, and a strong trade territory.³

What, then, is the reconciliation between the story of the town named after the generosity of a kindly settler and the story of the town that only survived due to holding a series of advantages over other towns? The only possible solution, of course, is that they are the same story. In attempting to describe the connection between the “mighty liberal” actions of Seymour Rogers and the challenges experienced by the town named in honor of him, I believe that

¹ Earl Watt, “Seymour Rogers’ Grave Found in Missouri,” *Leader and Times*, December 1, 2014, accessed March 1, 2017, <http://www.leaderandtimes.com>.

² Pauline Toland, *Seward County, Kansas* (Liberal: Seward County Historical Society, 1979), 99.

³ Mrs. Clay G. Stevenson, “Early Days in Liberal,” in *Seward County, Kansas*, 77.

Rogers' free water functioned as a publicity stunt. By using this term, I refer not to Rogers' intent, but instead to the result of his actions. The survival of Liberal was not hinged solely on the railroad, the county seat, or even on a constant influx of settlers, but instead on each of these factors working in tandem, and the acquirement of these achievements depended on Liberal gaining attention—attention that all began when word spread of a man in Seward County who gave out free water. The complex web of factors that would enable Liberal to survive far exceeded the work of one man, and largely had little to do with Rogers himself, but the events that Rogers set in motion would prove to be the foundation of the growth of Liberal, Kansas.

Free Water and Early Seward County

For Seymour Rogers, the time that he spent in Seward County represents a very short period of his life. Having arrived in Seward County before the summer of 1886, when documents show him to have participated in land transactions, Rogers was in his early sixties when he became the owner of the property from the story of Liberal's naming. Before travelling to Liberal, Seymour S. Rogers had been a soldier in the Civil War, a trustee of Tecumseh, Nebraska, and a father of seven.⁴ For unknown reasons, Seymour separated from his wife Amanda and his family prior to 1886, and moved to Seward County. There, he lived in a sod house with a eighty-eight foot hand-dug well.

In travelling to southwestern Kansas during this period, Rogers was certainly not alone. The 1880's represented a near-unprecedented movement toward western Kansas. Garden City was home to the land offices for many of the surrounding counties: on April 25, 1881, a record-

⁴ Watt, "Seymour Rogers' Grave."

setting 375 land entries were filed at these offices.⁵ Five years later, Garden City reported on March 3, 1866, that their offices were “packed with new settlers,” predominately, like Seymour Rogers, from Nebraska.⁶ One potential reason for this boom is that Kansas, in 1885, 1886, and 1887, experienced very wet weather when compared to the surrounding regions of the Dakotas and Southwestern United States.⁷ The environment proved promising to settlers during this period, spurring increased settlement in Western Kansas.

This increase in travel through Southwestern Kansas both explains the movement toward Kansas that Rogers joined and provides the context around his liberal acts. 1885 and 1886, the years that Rogers is believed to have made his reputation for giving out free water, were years of high traffic toward western Kansas. In these circumstances, charging travelers for water was a way for settlers to both protect their own supply and earn money for the use of their resource. Thus, Seymour Rogers marked himself as unusual in his refusal to charge visitors, and, though this was not intended to attract the attention, the increased frequency of travel to Rogers’ property demonstrates that it did. As more travelers stopped at Rogers’ well, awareness of Rogers spread.

Meanwhile, other critical events were occurring in Western Kansas: with the new settlers also came a new reality for the settlers that were already there: the cowboys. Leola Howard’s *The Conquest of Southwest Kansas* establishes that there was “no good feeling between the cowboys and the newcomers” in the 1880’s.⁸ As the decade continued, the cowboy lifestyle

⁵ Craig Miner, *West of Wichita* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 206.

⁶ Jennie Small Owen and Kirke Mechem, *The Annals of Kansas 1886-1925*, Volume 1 (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1954).

⁷ Miner, *West of Wichita*. 129.

⁸ Leola Howard, *The Conquest of Southwest Kansas: A History and Thrilling Stories of Frontier Life In the State of Kansas* (Wichita: Wichita Eagle Press, 1931), 76.

became increasingly replaced by ranching, as those who owned cattle purchased their own grazing land. This cultural development, while largely separate from the events of Roger's story, would later prove to be a critical economic focus of Western Kansas, and of Liberal.

However, just as the generosity of Rogers would lend itself to the eventual development of Liberal, interest in western Kansas soon extended to the creation of communities. Towns were quickly established, and then quickly inhabited and developed. The prevailing belief was that any town could be made great, if the right opportunity was seized upon. Ralph M. Heath, a settler who moved to Seward County in 1886, shows this mindset in a reflection on Fargo Springs as "a town destined, as we thought in those days, to be the metropolis of Western Kansas."⁹

As these dreams developed, so too did the political landscape of western Kansas. With the route around Seymour Roger's property becoming increasingly well known, a Pony Express post office was established on June 14, 1886.¹⁰ This post office, quickly named, "Liberal" in reference to Seymour Rogers, was one of 180 post offices established in Kansas that year.¹¹ Similarly, between 1885 and 1888, 25 counties were organized in Western Kansas, an expansion only rivaled in Kansas by the period between 1870 and 1874.¹² In many ways, the Liberal Post Office was only one of many acts of settlement in Southwestern Kansas at that time. However, the unique beginning that was the story of Seymour Rogers aided the site in gaining attention, and laid the groundwork for what would become the town of Liberal.

⁹ Ralph M. Heath, "Seward County and Southwest Kansas in 1886 Described by Early Settler," in *Seward County, Kansas*, 66.

¹⁰ Toland, *Seward County, Kansas*, 146.

¹¹ Owen and Mechem, *The Annals of Kansas*.

¹² Miner, *West of Wichita*, 204.

The Growth of Liberal

Seymour Rogers is known to have run a small store during his years in Seward County, and this store often worked in conjunction with the Liberal post office. The first postmistress of this office was the thirty-six-year-old Addie. J. Mason, who is known to have carried out land transactions with Seymour Rogers in 1877, though, admittedly, the full purpose of these transactions is not currently understood.¹³ By March 12, 1888, Seymour Rogers and Addie Mason were husband and wife, as reflected in the Land Deeds detailing the selling of their property.¹⁴ However, while the establishment of the Liberal Post Office may be the most notable and direct instance of the attention gathered by Seymour Roger's generosity in giving out free water, three events that would occur in the two years following the establishment of the post office would do much to shape the town of Liberal, Kansas.

The first factor was the Chicago, Kansas, and Nebraska Railroad, which became a division of the Rock Island Railroad on May 15, 1886.¹⁵ Railway bonds were extremely popular as a method of developing a county, especially for newer counties. A state officer, quoted in the 1886-1925 *Annals of Kansas History*, remarked that, "the tendency of some of the newer counties to rush headlong into debt is alarming."¹⁶ Nevertheless, in 1886, nine-tenths of Kansan counties had voted in favor of railway bonds, and by 1888, only eight counties had no railroads.¹⁷ The perceived benefit from railroads for counties was, in many instances, too much to refuse.

¹³ Deed of Sale from S. Rogers to A.J. Mason, March 19, 1887. Liberal, Kansas; Deed of Sale from A.J. Mason to S. Rogers, May 7, 1887. Liberal, Kansas.

¹⁴ Deed of Sale from S. and A.J. Rogers to J.F. Doty, March 12, 1888. Liberal, Kansas.

¹⁵ Owen and Mechem, *The Annals of Kansas*.

¹⁶ Owen and Mechem, *The Annals of Kansas*.

¹⁷ Owen and Mechem, *The Annals of Kansas*.

Seward County was no exception. Within Seward County, Springfield had been established along the pathway that the Rock Island Railroad was supposed to take, while Fargo Springs was located along the Cimarron River, which the railroad would have to cross. However, over the course of 1888, the railroad eventually bypassed both cities, first crossing the river at another point and establishing the town of Arkalon. Later, when a dispute arose between Springfield and the Rock Island, the railroad was taken through another part of the county, 1 mile from Seymour Rogers and the Liberal Post Office.¹⁸

The second of the three factors did not directly impact Liberal, at first: the question of which town should be the Seward County Seat. Between 1886 and 1888, this contest was between Springfield and Fargo Springs. On August 5, 1886, Fargo Springs was voted the County Seat, only until the Supreme Court, on March 6, 1887, ruled that Springfield was the rightful County Seat; a final vote in 1888 firmly established Springfield as the county seat.¹⁹

Fargo Springs, having neither the railroad nor the County Seat, was the first Seward County city to suffer decline. As the population of the town fell, many residents moved to the two locations with railroads: Arkalon and Liberal.²⁰ Liberal's prominence, growing from a ranch property to a Post Office to a town, was again useful for the town when the Rock Island moved away from Arkalon, further strengthening the population of Liberal. As the 1880s ended, Liberal was ready to challenge Springfield for the County Seat.

Finally, the establishment of a trade territory, the third factor, was less pronounced than the other two, but was still essential in fueling the awareness that sustained Liberal in later years.

¹⁸ "Fargo Springs and Springfield." Kansas Historical Marker, erected by Kansas Historical Society and State Highway Commission, Seward County, Kansas.

¹⁹ Toland, *Seward County, Kansas*, 83.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Liberal was already surrounded by ranchers, and the Rock Island Railroad only strengthened the bond between Liberal and the cattle industry. As a Liberal settler of the time wrote, “the coming of the railroad meant a great deal to these men,” and Liberal’s trade territory eventually “extended South and West 75 to 90 miles”²¹

The last evidence of Seymour Rogers in Seward County ties directly into the establishment of the town of Liberal, and the three factors discussed above. Land records show that Mr. and Mrs. Rogers sold their land to J.F. Doty, an agent for the Kansas Land Agency.²² When the Rock Island Railroad then passed through this area, it created the town of Liberal, named after the post office. On April 13, 1888, the town site of Liberal was officially open, and the site grew rapidly, as can be seen in Figure 1. Beginning with tents, then buildings, Liberal sprung up around the railroad.



Figure 1. A photograph depicting the town site of Liberal, Kansas, a few days after the town was created by the Rock Island Railroad. SOURCE: *Seward County, Kansas*. 125.

²¹ Stevenson, “Early Days in Liberal”.

²² Deed of Sale from S. and A.J. Rogers to J.F. Doty, March 12, 1888. Liberal, Kansas.

Within two weeks, 100 buildings were present in Liberal. By 1892, as evidenced by an article in the Liberal news, Liberal was home to numerous businesses, a hotel, several churches, the railway depot, a \$12,000 school building, and, after defeating Springfield, the County Seat.²³ As Fargo Springs, Springfield, and even Arkalon entered decline, the awareness that Liberal had been able to gain fueled the town's rise to political, economic, and spatial prominence.

The Tribulations of Seward County

Liberal's period of expansion, however, like those of the other Seward towns, was not to last. There are many potential causes for the collapse, but, in general, population fell as the county failed to retain many of the settlers from the 1886-1887 period. Among these settlers that left the county was Seymour Rogers. After selling his property in 1888, the 64-year old Rogers travelled to France with his wife, seemingly severing his connection with the town that was named about him²⁴. His early generosity had gained enough attention for the town to be formed, but Rogers himself does not seem to have been very involved in the government or long-term maintenance of Liberal.

He left behind a region that struggled to deliver on the benefits of living there. The problem was partly environmental: Craig Miner, in his book *West of Wichita*, labels 1888 a significant year of decline, bringing with it less rain, more wind and snow, failing crops, and a loss of some of the cattlemen who made up much of the region.²⁵ Many of the weather patterns that had made western Kansas so appealing to settlers during 1886 seem to have vanished within

²³ Toland, *Seward County, Kansas*, 129.

²⁴ Watt, "Seymour Rogers' Grave."

²⁵ Miner, *West of Wichita*, 212.

a few years, and the western half of the state, rather than being molded by communities into a copy of the east, was increasingly proving itself to be a harsh environment.

However, environment was not the only key factor in this decline: another was the mindset that had been in place during the boom. Miner notes that many of the towns created in western Kansas during the 1860s were “overexpanded and overcommitted,” being designed for “a rapidly growing population” that, in most cases, never materialized.²⁶

While Liberal was still experiencing a relative boom in 1888, and would continue to experience this boom through 1892 as Liberal became the county seat, these general patterns that developed across the western half of the state would also be seen in Seward County. Increasingly, the failure of a town to gain a railroad connection proved to be a potentially fatal blow to that town’s survival. Fargo Springs experienced this truth first, fading in 1888, followed by Springfield, which, after losing the 1892 election, was declared officially vacant by 1897. The Kansas Historical Marker for these two towns states that, “two towns withered and died—unhappy proof of the vital need for rail connections in the vast and then undeveloped Western frontier.”²⁷

This became an issue for Liberal when the Rock Island Railroad, a key factor in Liberal’s popularity, never extended past seven miles beyond Liberal.²⁸ Liberal, like many western towns, had been developed for prosperity that never occurred, and, when the environment worsened, the decline began. By 1900, the town that had sprung up within days of the construction of the Rock Island Railroad had a population of only 400. However, Liberal still had some advantages that

²⁶ Miner, *West of Wichita*, 215.

²⁷ “Fargo Springs and Springfield.”

²⁸ Stevenson, “Early Days in Liberal.”

the now extinct towns of Fargo Springs and Springfield had not: Mrs. Clay G. Stevenson, a resident of Liberal in the early 1900s, later claimed that two things helped the town survive: the railroad and the ranchers that still surrounded Liberal.²⁹ The same influences that had helped found the town became the threads that a struggling Liberal held on to at a critical time.

In a way, Liberal's trials following 1892 act as a denouement to Seymour Rogers' involvement in the history of the town. Liberal may have been founded on Rogers' generosity, but it survived due to the persistence of the 400 "hardy souls" described in Mrs. Stevenson's account.³⁰ However, just as the story of Rogers' generosity had attracted first travelers, then the post office, and later the railroad, Liberal in the early twentieth century would survive based on the connections that had been established during the boom years. Seymour Rogers would die in Joplin, Missouri, at the age of eighty-nine.³¹ By contrast, the town of Liberal would survive, having gathered enough attention to form the essential connections that would carry the town through difficult times.

Conclusion

Seymour S. Rogers is known in Liberal for his generosity in giving free water to travelers. However, I have shown that the greatest impact that Rogers seems to have had was the attention that he, and by extension, Liberal, gained in Seward County. This attention quickly spread to influence, and, in turn, vital connections between Liberal and the economic and political systems of Southwestern Kansas. Through the early phases of the spread of Seymour

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Watt, "Seymour Rogers' Grave".

Rogers' popularity, the years of conflict over the railroad and the county seat, and the decline era in Seward County, these connections proved pivotal in the survival of Liberal, Kansas. Rogers was only in Seward County for a few years, but the foundation that he laid for the creation and survival of Liberal, Kansas functioned, in many, as a publicity stunt that would enable the town to remain relevant by securing beneficial connections as the years went on. Publicity and attention helped Liberal survive, but this publicity would never have begun without the stunt that was one man being "mighty liberal" with his water.

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