

Terra Cotta, Ellsworth County, Kansas 1878-1914 Could've been a Contender

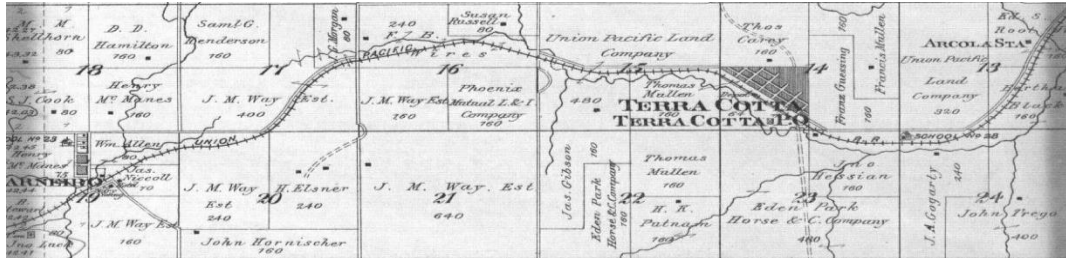


Figure 1: A section of the 1901 Plat Map of Ellsworth County. By the time this was made the hopes and dreams of Terra Cotta KS had already died. Found at Kansasmemory.org.

Timing can be good or bad. Good timing is thought to be the result of doing everything correctly at the right time. Bad timing is the unfortunate result of several events cumulating into one massive failure taking everything with it. Anybody or anything can fall victim to bad timing, and the life and death of Terra Cotta, Kansas was no different.

It didn't start out overnight; it was never even considered a boom town. No, Terra Cotta, once platted, was the result of a slow and steady ten year growth and probably should have been a booming Kansas town in the 21st century. But a series of events led to the town's undoing.

In 1878, Terra Cotta became an official placeholder on the Kansas map through the hard work of Thomas Mullen and S.M. Simpson. The town site was perfect. The town, named for the surrounding red clay, stood next to the Union Pacific railroad, was also near water and had a good many trees breaking up the Kansas plain. The reddish/brown clay, hence the name Terra Cotta, became the town's first industry and was shipped out along with sand for use with pottery and molding. The town grew to include a post office, blacksmith shop, grocery store, elevator, lumber yard and even a hotel. The good times continued in Terra Cotta in 1885 with the building of the stockyards to accommodate the cattle ranchers; the little town enjoyed the title of largest shipper of cattle between 1886 and 1912, even beating out Kansas City and Denver!

But Terra Cotta was not able to survive the dark times that would soon envelope the entire nation. The string of bad luck began with the burning of the hotel due to a prairie fire in 1887. This was followed by the nationwide 1888 recession, and whether due to the recession or for other reasons, the elevator and blacksmith shops were moved to other towns. Key Terra Cotta business men decreased their business operations or left altogether, and settlers sold their land to ranchers. By the 1890s, most business and homes were gone, but the post office hung on until 1914. For some unknown reason, in 1900 a depot was built in Terra Cotta even though no one remained in the town. The Terra Cotta depot had quite the life, serving as a night club, honky tonk, and finally apartments; it was eventually donated to the Ellsworth County Historical Society. Today state road 141 crosses over the land where Terra Cotta once stood, but there are no visual aids to remind us of the hopes and dreams that briefly grew out of the red Kansas dirt.



Figure 2: Better late than never; the Terra Cotta depot, now part of the Ellsworth County Historical Society. Photo by author.