

# Alton (Bull City), Osborne County, Kansas 1870 to Present

Chapman Center for  
Rural Studies

Fall 2012

## Elk Kills Bull: A Bad Omen for Alton

Elks are known for their captivating grace and majestic qualities. However, most gamblers would not pick an elk over a bull in a fight. Yet, in the case of "General" Hiram C. Bull (he was actually only a Major), the founder of Alton, the elk certainly had the upper hand.

In 1870, "General" Bull and Lyman T. Earl arrived in Osborne County in northwestern Kansas, at the present day Alton town site. They decided it was a good location for a settlement. Earl and Bull flipped a coin to choose the town's name, and Bull City won out over Earlsville. The plat was filed on September 12, 1870, and the construction of the town began. By May of 1871, Bull had built a multifunctional two-room log cabin that served as his home, a general store, and the post office. By the end of 1872, Bull City had several more log structures, a hotel, and a sawmill. That winter, classes were held inside the Austin Hotel, and the next year a school was built.

All was well in Bull City until

the morning of October 12, 1879, when tragedy struck. With the intent of preserving the natural Kansan setting, Bull had built a small enclosure for tamed wildlife native to Kansas. Among his collection were buffalo, antelope, elk, and more. One of his hired hands, Robert Bricknell, noticed that the elk was exhibiting unusually hostile signs, and went to report them to Bull. Armed with clubs, Bull and Bricknell went to subdue the animal with the help of George Nicholas and William Sherman. The elk proceeded to gore all of them in turn, Bull receiving 44 wounds, Bricknell 32, and Nicholas with 66. Sherman was spared thanks to a book in his pocket that shielded his internal organs. In 1885, a few years after this unfortunate event, a petition was created to change the name of the town because some of the settlers feared that the constant reminder of this gory story was warding off newcomers. On October 1, Alton was incorporated, christened after Alton, Illinois, the birthplace of some



Figure 1. A photo of General Bull's grave marker in Sumner Cemetery in Alton. The marker notes that he was "killed by Pet Elk." <http://ochf.wordpress.com/2012/05/13/hiram-c-bull-1996-inductee-5-2/>.

of the settlers.

It would seem that the name change wasn't enough to attract a crowd; however, the town does still persist today. At its height, Alton was home to 435 people in 1940. Today the population has dropped to 103.

## Sources:

For more information about Alton visit: Alton, Kansas, <http://www.skyways.org/towns/Alton/history.html>. The Osborne County Hall of Fame, <http://ochf.wordpress.com/2012/05/13/hiram-c-bull-1996-inductee-5-2/>. Population of Cities in Kansas, <http://www.ipsr.ku.edu/ksdata/ksah/population/2pop33.pdf>.