

Langley, Ellsworth County, Kansas: The Town that Died in a Train Wreck: 1887-1952



Figure 1. Photograph displaying the remaining site of the Kansas Pacific Railroad that traveled through Langley, Kansas, from 1887 to 1952. The removal of the railroad caused a swift decline in community and population persistence and ensured that Langley's economy would never recover. Photograph taken by Kathrine Watkins.

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The town of Langley is located in Langley Township, Ellsworth County, Kansas. For many American families and Civil War veterans, Langley was the mark of a new beginning and a fresh start. The town's economy was centered on the booming business of the railroads, and when the trains came through and wrecked in May 1952, Langley's community and economy would never be the same. This case study includes photographs, maps, drawings, and interviews from Langley natives: Charlotte Koehn and Rosalie Williams.

Note that the railroad line labeled as affiliated with the "Kansas Pacific Railroad" in the work may be mislabeled, and may be the "Missouri Pacific Railroad" instead. Both the Union Pacific Railroad, once the Kansas Pacific Railroad for the line in question, and the Missouri Pacific Railroad operated lines within Ellsworth County, KS during the temporal period covered in the work. However, a Union Pacific line, once operated by Kansas Pacific, is approximately 14 mi. north of Langley, KS and runs East to West from Salina, KS to Ellsworth, KS. An abandoned Missouri Pacific Railroad line ran East to South West from Salina, KS to Geneseo, KS, and is likely the line which ran through Langley, KS.

An Introduction to Langley

April 15 - 1969

City Council,
Langley, Kansas.

Dear Sirs -

As Abilene, Kansas has been so much in the news lately it has prompted me to write this letter.

Eighty or eighty five years ago my father and several men invested their money in what they thought was "get rich" investment, thinking the railroad was going through at the spot where the town of Langley is. After getting there they found out the railroad was coming through at some distance away and all they got out of it was to have a town named after them.

I have been thinking about it, and have wondered if the town has ever grown. I know it is on the map.

Thank you.
(Mrs) Jane Langley Board

At the time my father lived in either Henderson or Osawatomie, Mo.

Figure 2. A photograph of a letter written by Jane Langley-Board, April 15, 1969, inquiring about the township and remains of Langley c. 1969. Photograph taken by Kathrine Watkins on March 16, 2013.

What was originally supposed to be a “get rich investment”¹ as in Figure 2 above quickly turned out to be symbol of hope and a fresh start for many Americans as they settled in Langley, Kansas. With the railroad industry booming, the Kansas Pacific Railroad decided to build tracks through Kansas in 1862. The Kansas (Union) Pacific Railroad claimed twenty miles, and

¹ Letter written by Jane Langley-Board on April 15, 1969. Letter provided by Charlotte Koehn on March 16, 2013.

Langley, although unnamed at the time, was included within the twenty miles. Across the United States, savvy business men and investors discovered the lucrative opportunity to invest in the railroad business. For many investors, this meant founding a town's community and economy around the tracks of the train. Two business partners in particular with the surnames Langley and McCracken decided to split up areas and invest in a new railroad town for themselves. From this, Langley, Kansas, and McCracken, Kansas, were both settled respectively. Langley officially founded his town in 1887. With the end of the American Civil War in 1865 and the Homestead Act of 1862, Civil War veterans and poor independent farmers in Kansas caught wind of the budding township and flocked to Langley with the hopes of starting over and making it big. Although Langley was never incorporated, it gave its name to an enduring township as well. From 1887 to 1952, Langley struggled and managed to maintain population persistence and businesses within the town, all credit due to the Kansas (Union) Pacific Railroad. Visiting Langley, Kansas, today, you are able to see the foundations of businesses and homes that once were and experience a sense of melancholy eeriness that continues to lurk around the railroad tracks that once prominently ran through the town.

Langley Today

The township of Langley, Kansas, and the remains of the town are located in the southeastern region of Ellsworth County. Wiley Creek runs about five miles southwest of the original town site. Approximately 8.9 miles away from Langley lies Kanopolis State Park near Marquette, Kansas. Geneseo, Kansas, is also about 14 miles from the town. According to the *Kansas Historical Society* website, as of 2010 the United States Census Bureau reported that the entire

township of Langley was home to just 74 people.² I conducted an oral interview with Langley native Charlotte Koehn at her home in Lindsborg, Kansas. During the interview, Charlotte was able to draw the village of Langley as she remembered it growing up. As seen below in Figure 3, a memory map of Langley, Mrs. Koehn clearly conveys how Langley's businesses and economies were centered on the Kansas Pacific (Union Pacific) Railroad. The drawing features a church, school, service station, stockyard, lumberyard, hotel, grocery store, elevator, and "old Highway 4" as it might have appeared in the late 1940s.³

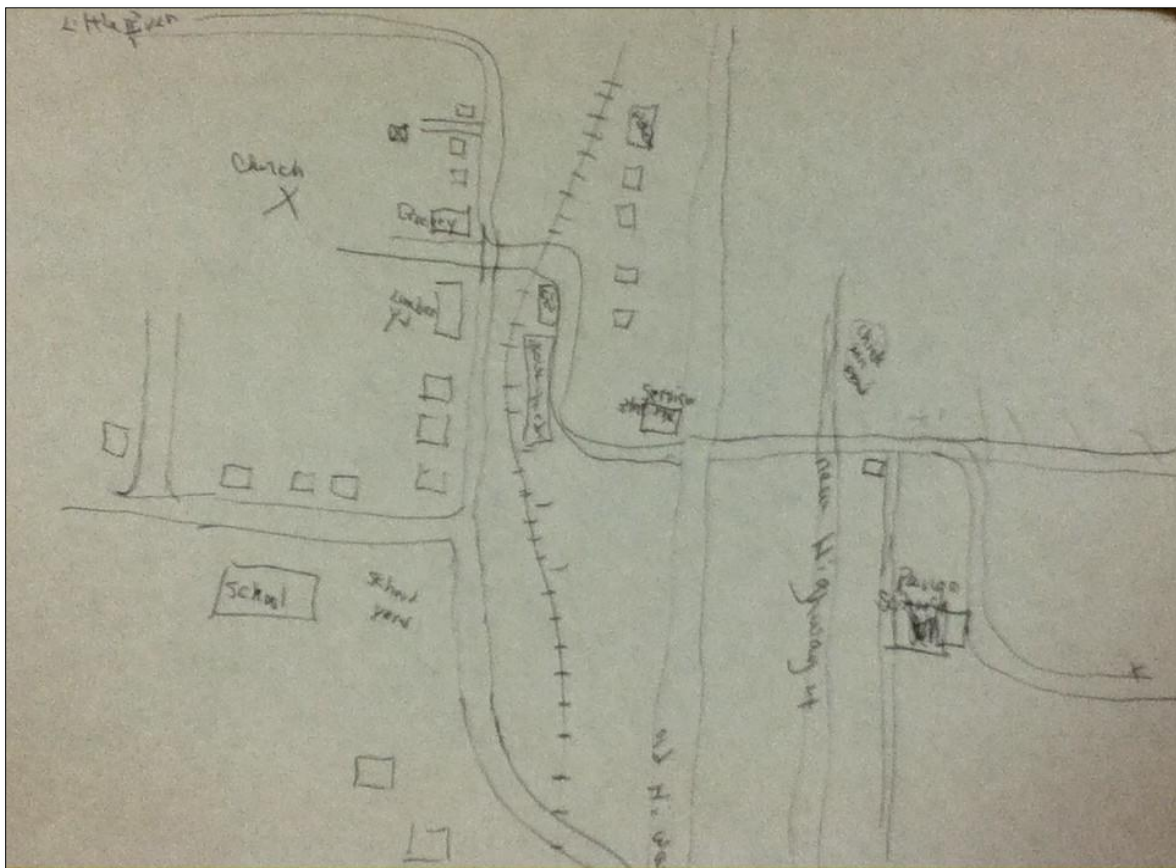


Figure 3. A photograph of Charlotte Koehn's drawing of Langley, Kansas, in the late 1940s. The drawing depicts a town that was centered solely on the prosperity of the Kansas Pacific Railroad. Photograph taken by Kathrine Watkins on March 16, 2013.

² Kansas Historical Society website. http://www.kshs.org/geog/geog_counties/view/county:EW. (accessed May 1, 2013).

³ Personal Interview with Charlotte Koehn. Oral Interview conducted on March 16, 2013 in Lindsborg, Kansas.

Following the oral interview, Mrs. Koehn was able to take me on a tour of Langley. She pointed out the foundations of old buildings that still existed in the town today and how these were reflected in her drawing of Langley. As we traveled down old Highway 4, we passed the hill that once was home to Langley Methodist Church, also known as “the little white church on the hill.”⁴ The following photographs (Figures 4, 5, 6, 7,8) show a train spike that was recovered from the site of the old tracks, as well as the remaining sites of the service station, grocery store, school, and hotel.



Figure 4. A photograph of a train spike that was recovered from the original site of the Kansas Pacific Railroad tracks in Langley, Kansas. Photograph taken by Kathrine Watkins on March 16, 2013.

⁴ Information obtained from personal interview with Rosalie Williams in Langley, Kansas, on March 16, 2013.



Figure 5. A photograph of what used to be Langley's only service station. Now it is inhabited by a local Langley family. Photograph taken by Kathrine Watkins on March 16, 2013.



Figure 6. A photograph of the remains of Langley, Kansas's grocery store. The site now serves as a sort of dumping ground for old appliances. Photograph taken by Kathrine Watkins on March 16, 2013.



Figure 7. A photograph of the hotel that still holds a slightly solid foundation in Langley, Kansas. This is where travelers and visitors would have stayed. Photograph taken by Kathrine Watkins on March 16, 2013.



Figure 8. A photograph of the remains of the school house in Langley, Kansas. The only thing left that indicates the site of the school is this set of stairs that would have led into the school building. Photograph taken by Kathrine Watkins on March 16, 2013.

After the enactment of the Homestead Act of 1862, Mrs. Koehn recalls how her family first moved out to Langley, Kansas: “Dad and Mom were originally from northern Kansas and Dad was unable to successfully farm out there, so because of the Homestead Act they moved here to Langley.”⁵ With the Homestead Act established, many poor farmers saw Langley, Kansas, as an opportunity to come try out the new lucrative farming land. For young Civil War veterans, this

⁵ Personal Interview with Charlotte Koehn on March 16, 2013, at her home in Lindsborg, Kansas.

was their opportunity to not move back to their family farms, but to start anew with potentially lucrative business ventures.

Beginnings and Establishments of Langley

The Kansas Pacific Railroad was obviously an active part of Langley. At the site of Langley there was a switch track that allowed trains coming through to switch over so other trains could pass. When passengers got off the train in Langley, there was a depot to greet them. During the early 1890s, two businesses were established. “Phil Fredrick owned the post office and Ed Buffington owned the stockyard...the stockyard was used to ship out large numbers of cattle from surrounding areas of Langley.”⁶ During the interview, it was also mentioned that Phil Fredrick owned another store that sold farm implements. By the end of the 1890s, Langley had a small, but steady population and the Kansas Pacific Railroad kept outside passengers passing through the town, some deciding to stay. Mrs. Koehn cites other businesses that popped up during the beginnings of Langley: a creamery, a barber shop owned by a man named Sharkey⁷, the service station which was shown in Figure 5, an elevator owned by Rodney Millwhite and run by Vade Hendershot and Leslie Loder⁸, and finally a blacksmith shop. The blacksmith shop became an unsuccessful business endeavor, due to the vast majority of farmers who purchased automobiles in the early 1910s. Even though the automobile allowed Langley families to travel to other towns like Marquette and Geneseo, with the Kansas Pacific Railroad bringing in so much profit and providing jobs for the town of Langley, there was little need to relocate.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Personal Interview with Rosalie Williams on March 16, 2013 at her home in Langley , Kansas.

⁸ Ibid.

Rosalie Williams is an eighty-seven year old native of Langley, Kansas, who taught at the Langley school house for fifteen years. She taught Charlotte Koehn when she attended the Langley School. Due to a visual source Mrs. Williams provided, the accurate history of Langley Methodist Church has been preserved. Figures 8 and 9 show the front and back of a postcard that provides a brief history of the church.

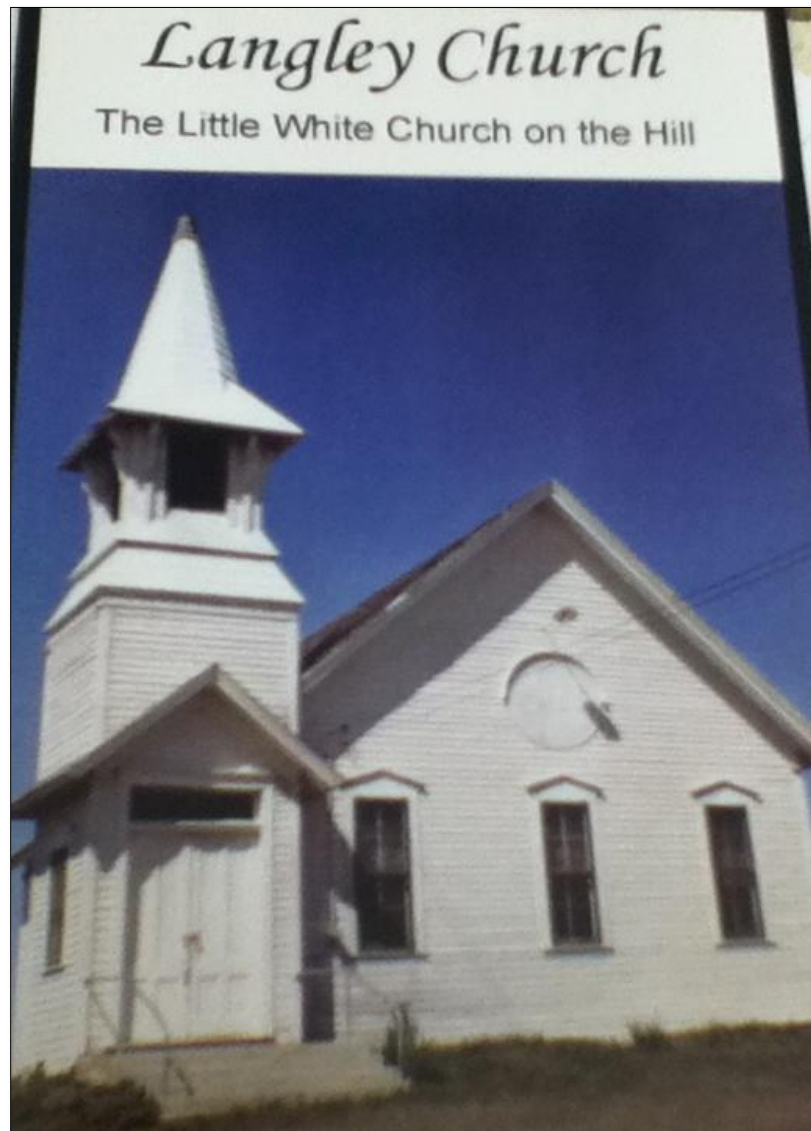


Figure 8. A photograph of the front of a Langley Methodist Church postcard. Picture taken by Kathrine Watkins on March 16, 2013.

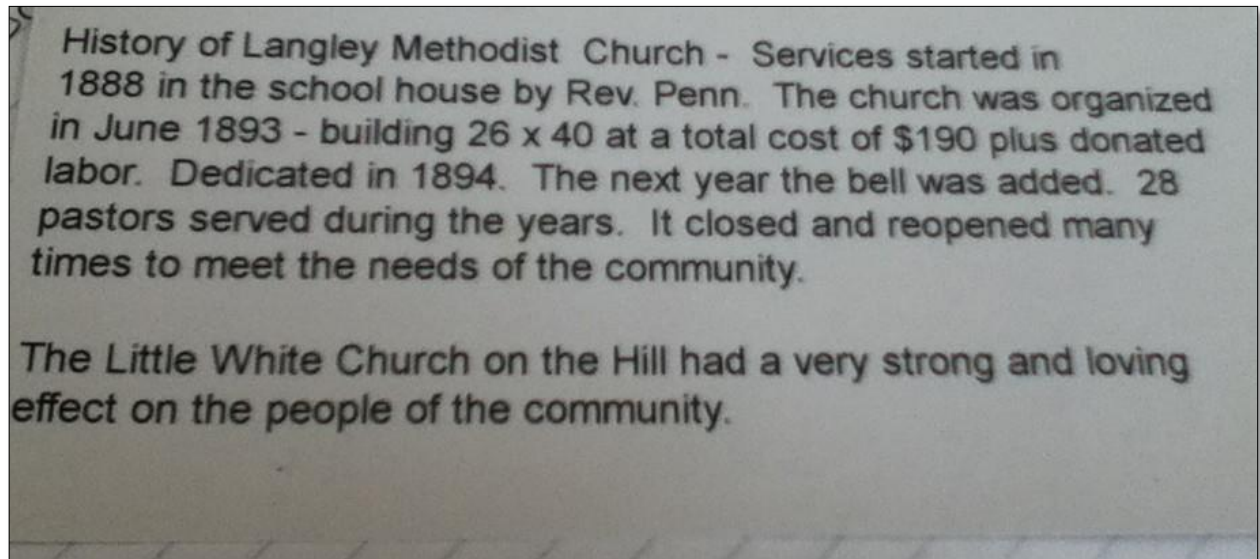


Figure 9. A photograph of the back of a Langley Methodist Church postcard that provides an insight into the history of the church. Photograph taken by Kathrine Watkins on March 16, 2013.

Langley Methodist Church had thirty pastors until the train wreck of 1952, which forced the members of Langley Methodist to join the church in Marquette, Kansas, by May, 1964. The postcard proves that although Langley was a small community, the town held religious and conservative values that could only be attributed to common ancestry. Many of the families who resided in Langley, Kansas, can be traced to having living relatives in the neighboring towns of Marquette and Lindsborg, Kansas.

Train Wreck and the Decline

By the 1950s, Langley still had roughly 300 people in the community, and this was mainly due to the two section crews that worked out of Langley. The trains transported mail for Langley. In

the summer of May 1952, a train wrecked coming in from Pennsylvania. It was normally scheduled to run through Langley, but due to a broken axle on the second car, it jumped track. Fortunately, there were no passengers aboard; the cars were actually transporting lumber that was supposed to be dropped off and delivered at George Ultch Lumber Company.⁹ After this catastrophic accident, the decline in businesses and population persistence in Langley was significant.



Figure 10. A photograph of the train wreck in Langley, 1952, clearly shows that the cars were transporting lumber. Photograph provided by Charlotte Koehn.

⁹ Personal Interview with Charlotte Koehn on March 16, 2013 at her home in Lindsborg, Kansas.



Figure 11. A photograph showing the devastation of the Langley, Kansas, train wreck in 1952. Photograph provided by Charlotte Koehn.

Following the train wreck, the Union Pacific did not replace the track. Langley's depot was closed, the elevator was closed and torn down, and the current owner of the hotel at the time had died, so the hotel closed as well. All that remained following the wreck were the school, church, and grocery store. However by 1956, the grocery store also closed down due to old Highway 4 being re-routed. The economy in Langley plummeted. There were no longer secure jobs and no longer were passengers coming through Langley on the Union Pacific Railroad. The town's community and economy had literally and metaphorically died in the train wreck.

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