History of Rooks County

In 1867, the Kansas Legislature defined the boundaries of Rooks County with twenty-three (23) townships. The county was named for a private, John C. Rooks, of the 11th Kansas Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, who died from a wound suffered during the savage December 7, 1862, Battle of Prairie Grove, Arkansas. Rooks County is the only county in Kansas named for a private.

historic_stocktonThe first settlers in Rooks County were ten persons engaged in the stock business named Joseph, James, Thomas, John and Francis NcNulty (originally from Massachusetts), Tunis Bulis, John Wells, John Powell, Seal Northup and Capt. J Owens. They arrived in January, 1871, and all took the first claims made in the County, in what afterwards became Stockton Township. They came from Washington County, Kansas and with the exception of James McNulty and Capt. Owens, all became permanent residents.

Soon after these settlers followed John Shorthill who resided on a claim in Lowell Township. Mrs. Robert E. Martin, who came with her husband and family in the fall of 1871, was the first woman who settled in Rooks County. She also resided in Lowell Township. Following these early settlers soon came Thomas Boylan, Henry Purdy, S.C. Smith, M.M. Stewart, G. W. Patterson, Henry Hill, George Steele, John Russell, Lyman Randall, John Lawson, W.H. Barnes, George W. Beebe, the Dibbles, Parks and others.

The first house erected in Stockton Township, and Rooks County, was erected in February, 1871, by the McNulty Brothers, two and one half miles south of town on the south side of the South Solomon. The first marriage occurred in Lowell Township, January 1, 1873. William E. Newton was married to Mary M. Young, by B.M. Cooper, a Justice of the Peace.

The first child born in the county was Myrtle Maud, daughter of Thomas McNulty, born Christmas night, 1871, on Elm Creek, three miles east and south of Stockton. The first death in the county was Erastas Foster, two miles from Stockton, in the spring of 1878. He was buried in the Stockton graveyard.

Stockton

The Stockton Town Company was chartered in August of 1872 and incorporated in 1880 to develop a new community in the valley of the South Solomon River in Rooks County, Kansas as a market center for farmers and ranchers. Early settlers, mostly cowboys, named the town Stockton hoping that it would be a livestock center with the coming of the railroad.

A good many people wanted to call the town McNultyville, (after Joseph McNulty who homesteaded 160 acres just above the creeks mouth) but Joe thought the name might be considered a little too suggestive of a fresh importation from Limerick or Cork (Ireland). As stock raising was the only industry at first, the names of Stockville and Stocktown were urged, but Stockton was finally settled upon.

NcNulty built a log home on his property, which adjoined the townsite on the west and was later added to the town when the McNulty Addition was annexed, This building was later enlarged and used as a hotel. It was destroyed in 1924, but a replica of the "Log Hotel" was built in 1961 across Main Street south from the original location.

Stockton, and nearby Rooks Centre, were both candidates for the county seat after Rooks County was officially organized on November 26, 1872. A contest won by Stockton in an election on December 31, 1872 cemented the town's future as the site of local county government. The hope that the town would become a livestock center never materialized. However, the coming of the railroad would prove to be essential in maintaining Stockton as a viable community.

The increased population of the area following 1877 stimulated the first Stockton boom, and the town grew from a population of about 100, with 20 buildings, to a population of about 600 with over 100 buildings by early 1878. Many of the buildings were constructed of native limestone with no particular ethnic influence. The first church, St. Thomas Catholic, was constructed of native limestone in 1878. A small replica was built at the Catholic Cemetery northwest of Stockton with the stones from the original church.

A County Agricultural Fair Association was organized in June 1879, and the first Rooks County Fair was held October 8, 9, and 10 of that year. This later became an annual affair and is an important institution in the history of Rooks County and Stockton. By the 1980's, the annual Rooks County Free Fair was the largest county fair in the state. The fairgrounds and buildings erected there as a W.P.A. project at a later date (1930's) constitute an important part of the heritage of the community.

History of Rooks County

The Congregational Academy, which later served as the public high school in Stockton, is an example of the importance that education played in the city's history. At one time, it was hoped that the academy would become a college, but the school fell on hard times and graduated it's last class in 1896.

In 1881, a two-story structure was constructed to house the county offices. The building served the county until the present courthouse was completed in 1923. Today, the courthouse stands as one of the outstanding examples of courthouse design in Kansas.

Stockton remains essentially as it began, a typical county seat town on the Great Plains existing to provide goods and services for the agricultural community. The buildings of the town reflect the heritage of the community as many of the homes and businesses constructed of native limestone or locally manufactured brick are still in use including the wide, brick Main Street.

Plainville

The area surrounding what is now Plainville was first called the Paradise Flats. The name was derived from the fact it is a large and level plain situated at the head of the Paradise Creek, where buffalo, deer and antelope were once so plentiful it was given the name, "Hunters Paradise."

historic_plainvilleThe north half of the original townsite of Plainville was first settled upon by Mr. Washington Irving Griffin, July 1, 1876. Mr. Griffin, from Pennsylvania, and his wife, Lydia R. Griffin, settled near what is now the east corner of Washington and Mill Streets. Mrs. Griffin was the first lady resident of the town and, for some time, was the only woman on the prairie between the Solomon and the Saline Rivers.

In May 1878, the Plainville post office was established with Mr. Griffin as postmaster. He soon started a store, which was then the only trading point between Stockton and Hays City, a distance of 45 miles. The name "Plainville" was arrived at when Mr. Griffin went to the homestead of Lambert P. Darland to fix up the papers to start the new town. Mr. Darland suggested the name Plainville, and without questioning, Mr. Griffin, on whose farm the town was to be started, agreed, and Plainville it was.

Charley Weeks started a store farther to the south in a "soddy." Mrs. Weeks served meals in the back of the store, and Plainville's sod hotel became well known.

The G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic) Monument stands in downtown Plainville next to the new library, which was built on the site of the previous library. The G.A.R. Hall, built by the "GAR boys", was a one-story frame hall located in what is now the 100 block of west Mill Street. It served as the first city library beginning on May 24, 1902.

A fire in October of 1909 destroyed as many as sixteen business buildings and the opera hall in downtown Plainville. The fire destroyed buildings on both sides of Mill Street and one of the few structures left standing were the stone walls of what is now the True Value Hardware store. Damage estimates of the time showed over $45,000 in damage of which only $19,600 was covered by insurance.

The first Plainville school system was formed May 14, 1880. The first school building was erected the following summer. In 1888, a two-story frame building was erected on the grounds where Plainville High School is located. The PHS football program began in 1904. The old junior high gymnasium was constructed as a Works Progress Administration project. The current high school was completed in 1952 at the site of the original two-story structure.

Several former Plainville teachers went on to become very important figures. C. E. Rarick, who served as principal, became president in 1933 of Fort Hays State College, the forerunner of Fort Hays State University. Rarick Hall, on the FHSU campus, is named for the former president. Also, Jack Hartman, a football coach at PHS, would go on to become legendary at Kansas State University as a basketball coach and was inducted into the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame.

History of Rooks County

Palco

Cresson was the first village in Northampton Township. It was located one and one-half miles northwest of the present Palco. During the year of 1877, several men from Pennsylvania arrived via Union Pacific Railroad who were dubbed "The Pennsylvania Colony." They named the village after a town in Cambria County, Pennsylvania near Esbenburg, the county seat where they came from.

The first thing on the agenda was to build homes and other essential buildings on their homesteads. The following year, after the homes were built, these first settlers sent for their families, women and children.

The post office was officially established here in February,1879, with Wm. McLaughlin as the postmaster. The first school was organized in 1879, District No. 68, and was located on the Wm. P. Jones homestead. In 1883, the first church in Cresson was the 7th Day Adventist Church. By 1885, there were three more churches: Christian, Presbyterian, and Free Methodist.

Rumors spread throughout Cresson in regards to the new railroad that was being built by the Union Pacific Railroad Co. Rumors were that the railroad was going to bypass Cresson, so the people decided to relocate where they thought the line would be constructed in the near future. They called their new town "New Cresson". By 1886, some of the businessmen pulled out of Cresson and moved to New Cresson. Just when the new community was steadily growing, something happened that they hadn't expected. The railroad tracks veered off to the northwest, bypassing them by a mile or more. As it turned out, the railroad went near the previous town of Cresson. Had people disregarded the rumors, there would possibly still be a Cresson.

With this latest development, it meant another move for the enterprising businessmen taking their belongings, families and even buildings to the railroad site in the fall of 1888. The new village was named "Palco." It was decided to use the first letters of the last names of the two railroad officials, Mr. Palmer and Mr. Cole. Thus "Pal" and "Co" resulting in Palco.

The current library, built in 1928, was previously the First National Bank. This bank was one of the few banks in Rooks County that did not close its doors following the Stock Market Crash of 1929.

The Palco Township Hall, still used for many community activities, was completed in 1917.

Damar

On October 8, 1884, President Grover Cleveland signed the document which entitled Francis St. Peter to one hundred and sixty acres of land on the western edge of Rooks County for the consideration of $4.00. By 1880, most of the government land had been "taken up." Francis St. Peter had hauled ammunition during the Civil War and, like so many other veterans, was lured to seek the free land made available by the Homestead Act.

Almost immediately, other Canadian French Catholic people followed. They came by way of Illinois, then Concordia, Aurora and St. Joseph and on further to the west looking for cheap land and a new home. The community became so solidly French in character that it was referred to as the "Acadia of the West." It has retained much of its original tradition to this day.

The first church services were held in the home of Ezra St. Peter, in 1887. Mr. St. Peter then donated three acres for a cemetery and two acres for a church to the east of his home. The new community was first known as St. Petersville. However, the first post office located about two miles to the northeast was named Ainsworth. When the Union Pacific Railroad passed nearby, the first small frame church was moved to the site of the present church. The post office moved also, to the railroad station. It was at this time that the new town became known as Damar.

History of Rooks County

Today, the St. Joseph Catholic Church is recognized as one of the most beautiful churches in the area. Due to hard times, the building was completed in stages. The limestone was quarried at Waldo and shipped to the site. The towers were completed in 1913 and the first mass celebrated in 1917.

The Damar Knights of Columbus Hall, located on Main Street, was completed in 1922 and serves many functions in the community.

A war memorial next to the post office in town, commemorates those citizens that served and dedicated their life to the freedom of the United States.

Zurich

In 1877 or 1878, a group of French Canadian settlers came to western Kansas and homesteaded in Logan Township of Rooks County. It was soon identified as "The French Settlement."

In 1880, President Rutherford Hayes granted this settlement its own post office. Mrs. Armenda Webb was appointed the first postmaster. Mrs. Webb was asked to submit a name for the community before the Proclamation would become official. Since she and her husband, John Webb, were born in Zurich, Switzerland, they submitted this namesake as the name for the settlement. The first post office was in the home of the Webb's located at the west edge of Zurich.

The Union Pacific Railroad came to Zurich in 1887 and, with four trains daily, became one of the most prosperous trading points in Rooks County. Zurich was formerly known as "The Gateway to the Northwest Wheat Belt of Kansas."

The town of Zurich once had three grocery stores, two grain elevators, a bank, telephone office, a medical doctor, drug store, implement dealer, two car dealerships, lumber yard, hardware store, hatchery, three gas stations, creamery, barber shop, real-estate office, blacksmith, auctioneer service, and a cafe. Fire destroyed several of the businesses and they were never rebuilt.

In 1882, a new Catholic Church was built in Zurich with Fr. M. B. Pujoz as pastor. At one time, a Catholic Convent was built in the northeast part of Zurich where classes were held by the nuns. This school was dissolved before 1892.

St. Ann's Roman Catholic Church was completed in 1950 on the site of the original church built in 1886. The parish hall that was adjacent to the church was originally intended to be the supporting foundation and basement of the new church. However, the basement, which came to be known as the "Catacombs", was found to be too weak to support the super-structure of the new church. Plans were then put in place to build the new church on its present site. Unfortunately, St. Ann's Parish was essentially dissolved in 2007 and the church went into a state of disrepair and despite considerable effort on the part of parish members was ordered to be demolished by the Diocese of Salina in 2009.

The Zurich School was built in 1930 and has had several additions added to the original structure. School unification brought an end to the use of the school building for Zurich students who are now bused to nearby schools. The building continues to be used for meetings and various family activities.

The Zurich Township Hall was built in 1914 and is one of the oldest structures in town. No longer used as it once was, the building stands as a testament to the hard-working people who once made Zurich a bustling community along the Union Pacific Railroad.

Woodston

History of Rooks County

Woodston was founded in Lowell Township, eastern Rooks County, in October of 1885 because of a single creating force – the railroad. The railroad, so vital to the economic well-being of every frontier region, was slow in coming. There were already several older towns nearby to serve the needs of the settlers.

The man most responsible for the construction of the railroad and the founding of Woodston was the Stockton businessman after whom the new town was named, Charles C. Woods. He came to Stockton from Marion, Iowa, in 1879, and established the first bank. Woods understood the importance of railroads, and when he could not persuade the Missouri Pacific to extend the Central Branch from Bull City (Alton) to Stockton, he contacted an Iowa contractor and organized the Rooks County Railroad Company to do the job.

The Rooks County Record reported in 1885, "The proposed railroad from Bull City to Stockton contemplates the establishing of a station and shipping point in Lowell Township, and a nice lively little village could soon be built there. " The railroad did eventually come, and the townsite was officially founded July 4, 1885. Because of his efforts in securing the location of the townsite, Robert L. Stephens was acknowledged as the town's founder. But the town was later named Woodston in honor of Mr. Woods.

Woodston, after one year, boasted a population of almost 200 people and almost 40 business establishments. Businesses included five general stores, four carpenters, three insurance agents and land offices, two blacksmith shops, two hotels, two lumber yards, two livery stables, two meat markets, two drug stores, two boot and shoe repair shops, and one each of at least 12 other businesses.

The Rooks County State Bank was organized in April, 1909 and opened for business on June 14. A decision was made to erect a new building in the fall of 1909. Robert Brittain, a local contractor, designed the bank and contracted for the construction. The building was erected during 1910 and opened for business on November 10 at the location where the bank operated until the year 2000 when it was closed.

Woodston received its first post office in February of 1886 in the general store of James S. Wilson, Woodston's first postmaster. The post office moved several times, once because of fire, before being located in March, 1934 in a new building that is still in use today.

When Woodston was established in 1885, there were rural schools in operation in every direction from the new town. The residents of Woodston wanted their own attendance center, and a subscription school was organized during the first winter. The residents went on to construct new grade schools in 1886 and 1907. Construction began on a new high school in August, 1921 at the east end of Main Street. The building was completed in May, 1921. A new auditorium and grade school were built onto the south of the high school building in 1958-1959. Classes continued in the high school until 1968 and in the grade school until 1974.

Among the most important institutions of rural America, including country towns, were churches. The first church organized in Woodston was the Free Methodist. Two churches in Woodston still stand today as monuments of the past. The Methodist Episcopal Church held their first services in their new building on September 17, 1911 and today is the only active congregation in Woodston.

The Ash Rock Congregational Church or "Stone Church," located north and east of Woodston, held it's first services on March 4, 1883. The native limestone building was renovated in 1976 and today is one of the truly historic sites in Rooks County.

Codell

Paradise Township was settled between the years of 1868 to 1878. During that time, the town of Motor, the first town to be established in Paradise Township, came into being. It was one mile east of what is now Codell, and was located on all four corners of what ins now 25 Road and 18 Highway. The name "Motor" meant "a moving force." Instead of it moving things forcefully, it was destined to be moved to a new location, and it's name changed to Codell.

History of Rooks County

In 1887 and 1888, the Union Pacific Railroad ran a branch line from Salina to Oakley. The survey ran just south of Motor, and because of the failure of the railroad to agree on a price for the townsite, the railroad refused to build a depot near the town, but built one three-fourths of a mile west. It bought land for a townsite and named it Codell. The name "Codell" means "a retired glen." The frame buildings were moved from Motor to Codell.

The Codell School District No. 11, was organized in 1879 at Motor in a sod building with hand-sawed logs for benches. In 1894, a two-story building was built in Codell, but was destroyed by a tornado in 1918. A new brick building was erected in 1920, which served as both grade school and high school for 20 years,. In 1938 to 1940, a new high school was built as a W.P.A. project. Because of school unification and lack of students, the high school closed in 1965. The grade school closed in 1978.

During the early settlement, the Church appeared on the scene along with the school. The Methodist and Baptist denominations were first, each using the same building, alternating services, which were held in the school building. In 1908, both congregations made new edifices. The Baptist Church was built on the present location, and the Methodist Church was built in the northeast part of Codell. The town also had many businesses that do not exist today such as a bank, hotel, restaurant, and hardware store.

The little village of Codell went through an experience, the effects of which rated sufficiently to make Ripley's Believe It or Not. It had a tornado three times in successive years-1916, 1917, and 1918 on the 20th day of May. The first year the twister passed at the east edge of town in the late afternoon. The second year it passed very close to the west edge of town in mid-afternoon. The third year, it came after dark wiping out a large part of town.

The 1918 tornado was a hard blow to the town, the effects of which it has never fully recovered. In spite of that and other deterrent influences, Codell remains a peaceful, friendly little village.