

CHAPTER II

A HISTORY OF PLAINS

Plains is a small western Kansas town of 577 population located in the west central part of Meade County at the junction of U. S. highways 54 and 160.

The topography of the region is predominantly level and truly a plains as the name of the town would suggest. For miles one can see nothing but the large fields of wheat and an occasional tall elevator here and there. Trees are to be found for the most part in town. There are no creeks in the area. About twelve miles south and southwest of Plains is found the Cimarron river, the only running stream for miles. One can easily see why the early pioneers called this region "The Great American Desert."

Several countries have claimed ownership to the area. One of the foremost historians of Meade County had this to say about the change of ownership:

In the early days of discovery, exploration and settlement, three European countries, England, France, and Spain claimed the territory out of which Meade County was finally carved. Basing its claims upon the explorations of the Cabots and others, in 1606 the English Crown granted to the London Company and to the Plymouth Company that vast area of land lying between the 34th and 45th parallels of latitude and extending from ocean to ocean. The English made no attempt to explore the country so far inland, and their claims upon this territory were early abandoned.

The claims of the French were more substantial. In 1673 Marquette explored a considerable portion of the Mississippi Valley; his explorations were continued and extended by LaSalle in 1682; in 1719 Dutians explored a part of the interior, including a portion of the territory of the present state of Kansas; these explorations were continued in 1724 by DuBourgmont, who also entered and explored a part of Kansas. As a result of these various expeditions France claimed the territory which now comprises the Meade County area as a part of Louisiana.

In 1762 France ceded Louisiana to Spain, but by the treaty of 1800 it was re-ceded to France, and by France to the United States in 1803. However, the boundaries were not fully determined at that time, and in 1819 the United States ceded to Spain that part of Louisiana lying west of the 23rd meriden and south of the Arkansas river; so that what is now Meade County became an undisputed possession of Spain.

When Mexico gained her independence from Spain in 1821 this territory passed from Spain to Mexico, and when in 1836 Texas acquired her independence it became a part of Texas. With the annexation of Texas in 1845 it became a part of the United States, but ownership remained in Texas until under the Omnibus Bill of 1850 it was ceded by Texas to the General Government, and became a part of Kansas under the Organic Act of 1854.¹

After the state legislature created Meade County in 1873 many small settlements began to dot the area and the homesteaders began to arrive. Many large wagon trains from the east were filled with people who were anxious to get rich quickly. Glowing reports of cheap, fertile land were spread in eastern Kansas and Missouri.

¹ Frank Sullivan, A History of Meade County (Meade: The Meade County News, 1916), p. 4.

The area around Plains was an almost ideal cattle country. Prior to the advancement of the settler, thousands of buffalo and antelope roamed the prairie and grew exceedingly fat on the rich buffalo grass. The cattlemen came in advance of the farmer and resented the destruction of the grass by the plow. Much friction resulted between the stockmen and the farmer and the stockmen did all they could to discourage farm operations by circulating stories as to the poverty of the soil, the lack of rain, the prevalence of hot winds, and the danger of Indian raids. Much land was homesteaded by paid men, called "stooges," for the purpose of preventing actual settlement. The settler farmers were not so easily discouraged and sought to farm the area despite the resistance of the cattlemen. By 1880 large numbers of settlers had converged on the area. It was not difficult to acquire a title to a piece of land. At this time there were three main ways of acquiring land: homestead under the provisions of the Homestead Act, take a tree claim, or purchase outright all the land by a quit-claim deed. The book, Pioneer Stories of Meade County, has an interesting section on the topic of the Homestead Act:

Under the Homestead Act one could secure title to their land by occupying and cultivating it for five years, and if one served in the Union Army during the Rebellion the time of his enlistment was deducted from the five years; or he could acquire title by six months residence and the payment of two hundred

dollars. This was known as the "Preemption Act" and was taken advantage of by a great many. The pre-emptor would "prove up" his land one day and the following day mortgage it for all he could get, then with his money in his pocket and his family and household goods in his wagon, he would take the back trail to his old home having made his vacation pay.²

To acquire land under a tree claim one had to have ten acres of growing trees on a quarter section of land at the end of a year. Since the country was not adapted to tree raising and since weather conditions were extremely unfavorable, if one planted the trees and kept them cultivated, one was credited with the accomplishment even though at the end of the year the trees had died.

The third method that many used was simply to secure a quit-claim deed by paying \$1.25 an acre for the land. Most generally the land acquired by this method was the best in the area.

The people who were earnestly sincere in "proving up" land soon began to establish towns. West Plains was one of these settlements.

On December 2, 1884, J. M. Friedly and N. J. Friedly, extensive landholders, sold a section of land for \$1.25 an acre and gave a quit-claim deed for the land to the West Plains Townsite Company for the purpose of establishing a

² County Council of Women's Clubs, Pioneer Stories of Meade County (Marceline, Mo.: Walsworth Brothers, 1950), p. 6.

town. Under the incorporation proceedings the following list of men were recorded as directors: Charles W. Mosher, Edward M. Mears, William Leighton, William Randall, and Morris T. Roberts.³

This section was selected by the directors because it was found to have a large supply of water available. People moved in and a few houses were built. The town of West Plains was formally incorporated on April 26, 1888.

Two of the essential items of early settlements were to be located on a stage line and a railroad. Before the railroad reached West Plains, the McKittrick brothers ran a stage line from West Plains to Springfield, Colorado. One could go to Meade and board stages for Cimarron and Dodge City for a charge of ten cents a mile. The Meade to Dodge City stages were pulled by four mules.

The Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad had laid track as far as West Plains by February, 1888. There was a great celebration and a golden spike was driven when the track was finally laid into the town. The railroad eliminated the freighter, provided access to eastern markets, and raised the hopes of settlers to a high level. Other railroads were planned, business activities increased, banks

³ T. B. Novinger, Interviewed at His Home, May 9, 1953. Plains, Kansas.

