

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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

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<sup>3</sup> T. B. Novinger, Interviewed at His Home, May 9, 1953. Plains, Kansas.

were established to care for the expanded business, and a spirit of progress was in evidence. In 1890 the following business places had been established in West Plains: Kids Livery Barn, Leighton Hotel, Starror's Ready to Wear, Badly and Russell Grocery, C. W. Mosher Grocery, M. T. Williams Grocery, William T. Edwards Drugs, Turner and Plymale Hardware, Myers Barber Shop, Commercial State Bank, Champion Hotel, Champion Livery Barn, Perry Marker Grocery, Cash Water's Cafe, and the law offices of Graves and Loffborough.<sup>4</sup>

The first bank to start business in West Plains was called the Bank of West Plains and was incorporated January 11, 1888, with a capital stock of \$50,000. The directors of the bank were B. B. Brown, W. C. Gould, H. B. Stone, and R. F. Crawford. The bank continued to do business until the general conditions of the country indicated to the directors that a continuation would mean failure. Some months after the bank was started the bank closed. The directors paid the depositors and creditors in full and quit business.

The decade, 1890-1900, was indeed a period of "black years" for the West Plains area. Most of the land was owned by mortgage companies and the government. A large majority

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<sup>4</sup> Mrs. T. B. Novinger, "West Plains, The Settlement," Meade Globe-News, July 15, 1950.

of the people who had come five or six years before had abandoned their claims and had gone back to their former homes. Few of the non-resident land owners felt the land was worth paying taxes on so the land went to the county. West Plains was practically depopulated, having less than a dozen people at one time. Many of the settlements in Meade County were entirely depopulated and became "ghost" towns. This was indeed a great depression.

About the year 1900, a few adventurous persons, called "speculators," commenced to buy land at depression prices. Other speculators followed and gradually land prices rose to a dollar an acre. Then came the real estate agent who advertised the country and assisted the investor in disposing of the property. A demand was thus created and prices began to rise and generally kept rising. By 1905 West Plains had gained back its former importance. Many new business places had been established and new buildings built. The Collingwood brothers started the Plains State Bank in the present post office building in 1907. The directors of the bank were J. A. Collingwood, D. A. Collingwood, Joe G. Collingwood, S. G. Demoret, and H. H. Collingwood. H. H. Collingwood served as the cashier of the bank. The original capital stock was \$35,000.<sup>5</sup> Other establishments

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<sup>5</sup> William P. Elliott, Interviewed at His Office, May 16, 1953. Plains, Kansas.

started at this time were The Plains Journal, a weekly newspaper, and Parsons Store. The paper was originated by Maurice McDonald and had a wide circulation in a short time. Parsons Store was the main grocery and dry goods store at this particular time. Some of the people who patronized it lived as far as forty miles distant.

Between 1910 and 1930 the town and the surrounding area made a tremendous growth. Frank Blackmar has the following comments about Meade County in 1910:

The leading crop is wheat, which in 1910 brought an income to the farmers of \$618,938; Kafir corn the same year was worth \$170,340; alfalfa and other tame grasses \$28,097; and barley, \$75,644. Corn, oats, buckwheat, millet, milo, maize, sorghum, Irish potatoes and wild grasses are other important crops. The raising of livestock is important. The animals sold for slaughter in 1910 brought \$264,644, and the total value of farm products for that year was \$1,642,089.

The assessed valuation of property in 1910 was \$9,192,283, and the population was 5,055, showing an average wealth per capita above the average for the state. The population in 1900 was 1,581, the gain in the last ten years being over 200 per cent. In common with other western counties Meade experienced a depression from the latter '80s and the '90s from which it has now fully recovered.<sup>6</sup>

The population of West Plains in 1910 was 350 as compared with less than a dozen a few years previous. Because of the increasing population and the general demand for

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<sup>6</sup> Frank W. Blackmar, Kansas (Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912), p. 251.



better educational facilities, the taxpayers voted to build a new school building to house the "scholars." A Dodge City contractor was awarded the contract and set to work on a two story brick building in the northwest part of town. The first four grades had their rooms on the ground floor and the upper four grades had their rooms on the second floor. Close on the heels of this building came the construction of the municipal light and water plant in 1915.<sup>7</sup> The light plant was given up some time later as the city officers decided that electric service could be acquired from an outside source much cheaper. In accordance with this thinking the Western Light and Telephone Company at Liberal was given a franchise for the service. This same company has charge of supplying electricity to the town today.

By 1916 West Plains had a population of 477 and was considered a thriving little town. The Plains State Bank had a capital stock of \$150,000 by this time and was looked upon as one of the "strongest" banks in the region.

From the standpoint of population West Plains made the largest gains during the ten-year period of 1920-1930. The population in 1920 was 361 as compared with a population of 883 in 1930.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sullivan, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Blackmar, op. cit., p. 480.

Nothing of spectacular importance occurred to the town other than a steady period of growth during the ten-year period previously mentioned. In 1930 the bank had outgrown the building in which it was housed so the directors decided to build a two story buff brick structure on the west side of Grand Avenue. The bottom story was occupied by the bank and the Masonic Lodge bought an undivided one-half interest in the building and occupied the top story as a meeting place.<sup>9</sup>

West Plains was a trade center of western Meade County, eastern Seward County, and southern Gray County by this time because of the businesses that had been established by this time were of the best that could be found.

The depression years from 1930 to 1936 were dark ones for the nation and the entire world, but for Western Kansas it was extremely dark because of the severe dust storms that engulfed the area. Mrs. Gray of Meade, Kansas, gives a rather graphic account of a typical storm which hit the area on April 14, 1935:

My husband glanced out of the living room window a few seconds before the storm hit our house. "It's a cyclone!" he yelled excitedly. I rushed to the window. By that time the dust cloud was advancing over the block to the north and west of us. It was as though the sky was divided into two opposite

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<sup>9</sup> Elliott, op. cit.

worlds. On the south there was blue sky, golden sunlight and tranquility; on the north, there was a menacing curtain of beiling black dust that appeared to reach a thousand or more feet into the air. It had the appearance of a mammoth waterfall in reverse... color as well as form. The apex of the cloud was plumed and curling, seething and tumbling over itself from north to south and whipping trash, papers, sticks, and cardboard cartons before it. Even the birds were helpless in the turbulent onslaught and dipped and dived without benefit of wings as the wind propelled them. As the wall of dust and sand struck our house the sun was instantly blotted out completely. Gravel particles clattered against the windows and pounded down on the roof. The floor shook with the impact of the wind, and the rafters creaked threateningly. We stood in our living room in pitch blackness. We were stunned. Never had we been in such all-enveloping blackness before, such impenetrable gloom. Finally, we groped our way to the wall switch and turned on the light.

Several times during the next fifteen or twenty minutes we would turn off the electricity to see if the windows were admitting any daylight. Not a flicker of light came in; in fact, we could not even tell where the windows were in the wall. When we flipped the switch again, we could see only a dark brown mass of soil pressed tightly against the outside of the glass; it was like a curtain hanging there with no visible motion. We pressed our faces against the panes in search of the catalpa tree that grew about ten feet from the house. Not even a faint outline of it was discernible. There was no immediate let up, but after the first onslaught the wind became less frightening. The wind was not gusty; it was straight and steady and strong.

When the moments ticked away with no apparent lessening of the storm, I dragged the rocking chair into the middle of the floor and sat down in it. I thought it was the end of the world. "This is it," I said to myself, not daring to say the words aloud even to my husband. I was not afraid. To be truthful, I was filled with a quiet satisfying peace because from where I sat I could see that the tape was holding out almost every piece of dust and in those days of the Dust Bowl that was a condition under which almost any housewife could have died happily!

Sometime before normal sunset time, the sun reappeared briefly but its light was of a violet-greenish hue. The sun itself merely was a pale ball in the sky and looked more like a misty full moon than the sun. It sank sadly out of sight into a fog of unrelied gray and brown. The wind gradually subsided but for hours afterward and even into the following day, fine particles of wheat-land soil sifted down from the sky like powdery gray snow.<sup>10</sup>

The account of Mrs. Gray's is typical of the experiences that many people had all through the area during this time. The "dust bowl" not only included southwestern Kansas, but comprised southeastern Colorado, southwestern Nebraska, northeastern New Mexico, southern Texas, and northern and northwestern Oklahoma as well. No land in this section escaped the damage wrought by the blinding dirt and gravel. Sullivan describes it thus:

At times, the storm having spent its fury, one could look out over the fields and find that small machinery were so completely covered with dust as to be invisible; even threshing machines, engines, and combines were so completely covered with the fine dust as to look like nothing but a pile of dirt. The condition existed for days and weeks. Lights of an approaching automobile could be dimly discerned at a short distance, but not the body of the car. But all this passed away. The rains and sunshine came again, the dust settled, fields again were fruitful and hope and fruition displaced despondency and gloom; the "never say die" spirit of the people prevailed and everyone resumed the even tenor of his way which led to contentment and prosperity. Perhaps these trials and vicissitudes were a blessing in

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<sup>10</sup> Mrs. Pauline Gray, "The Black Sunday of April 14, 1935," Meade Globe-News, September 26, 1948.

disguise; certain it is that the weak and vacillating, the namby-pamby, the "pansies," the weaklings who could not take it were driven out, and there remained the sturdy pioneer whose fortitude had been proven by adversity.<sup>11</sup>

By 1938 the dust storms had subsided in the area and the Plains area was due for another era of prosperity. Large elevators were built to take care of the increasing yields of wheat. The cooperative unions built a number of elevators in the Plains area. One of these elevators is shown in the pictorial section in the back of this thesis.

Since 1940 many new improvements have taken place in Plains. The writer shall mention only a few of them. Probably the most outstanding improvement was the building of a medical clinic. The contractor was a firm from Dodge City and the contract price was \$25,000. This entire amount was furnished by Mrs. Frank Collingwood as a memorial to her husband. It was also through her kindness and generosity that the City Hall was built. The townspeople furnished both buildings. About eleven thousand dollars were spent furnishing the clinic. Under one thousand dollars were spent furnishing the City Hall.

The city officials have put in a new sewage disposal system, refinished the pavement on Grand Avenue, and put

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<sup>11</sup> Frank Sullivan, "Early Settlement," Pioneer Stories of Meade County (Marceline, Missouri: Walsworth Brothers, 1950), p. 9.

many new culverts on several streets. New private businesses that have been started in the last decade are the B & G Diner Cafe, the Plains Cleaners, Chambers Standard Service, Slivers Shamrock Service Station, and Wells Department Store.

One of the newest buildings in town is the new Plains Methodist Church which was built on the north side of town on Grand Avenue at the contract price of \$158,000. The contractor was the Sunderland Construction Company of Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Several new residences have been built in the past few years. These include the homes of Francis Angell, Bill Cotrell, Dave Langhofer, C. C. Krause, Claude Holmes, Ben Smith, August Bortz, and Keith Rosson.

Business establishments that have not been mentioned thus far but have had an active part in the development of Plains are as follows: Collingwood Elevator, Round-Up Cafe, Holmes Motor-Machine-Milling, Cobb-Richardson Motor Company, Ramsey Implement, Elliott Insurance, Woodies Electric, Haddon Equipment, Dunns Store, Ideals Grocery, Home Lumber and Supply, Fromme Insurance, Gano Grain Company, Breeding Drug, and Co-op Elevator.

Mention might be made of the fact that the Plains State Bank has been ranked among the top ten banks of the state in regard to vault construction and safety. As this

is written a new ten unit motel is being built on U. S.  
highway 54.

In looking over the history of Plains one can easily see the amazing development that has taken place over the past sixty years. The "never say die" spirit of the pioneers has made the town what it is today. We are indebted to them for things we have. May we continue in the same spirit throughout the next sixty years.