

THE EARLY HISTORY OF SEWARD COUNTY

WILLIAM L. BRUSH

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BY

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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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I. INTRODUCTION

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Other men, however, were hungry for profits and learned that power as well as attainment upon the settlement of new territory. They dreamed of more than a home and a farm; they would rather build towns and counties. In the best sense, these men were planners and creators, building for a good community, but in many cases they were exploiters, hoping to control the settlement for their own personal gain. In the worse sense, they were outright thieves who took

¹Minnie Dick Hillborn, "Dr. Samuel Grant Rodgers, Gentleman from Nebo," Kansas Historical Quarterly, 1A, February, 1933, p. 306.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Western Kansas in 1872 was practically empty. Restless and discontented, the Indians were mostly on the reservations in what is now the State of Oklahoma. The few remaining buffalo were rapidly being hunted down and skinned, leaving only the bones for future passersby and bone pickers. The Kansas Pacific Railroad, which was to be the Union Pacific later, was like a thin bridge stretched across the empty prairie. Although little settlement had followed the railroad, still another, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe, was pushing across this same great vacant land. Here, then, was convenient transportation and free land for the restless, westward-pushing, land-hungry Americans. The settler, however, was reluctant, for the land often was dry and his crops might fail.¹

Other men, however, were hungry for profits and learned that power as well was attendant upon the settlement of new territory. They dreamed of more than a home and a farm; they would rather build towns and counties. In the best sense, these men were planners and creators, building for a good community, but in many cases they were exploiters, hoping to control the settlement for their own personal gain. In the worse sense, they were outright thieves who faked

¹Minnie Dubb Millbrock, "Dr. Samuel Grant Rodgers, Gentleman from Ness," Kansas Historical Quarterly, XX, February, 1953, p. 305.

the establishment of towns and counties knowing that it was unlikely that anyone would come so far west to investigate non-existent populations for which they projected such things as courthouses and bridges in order to sell the bonds to the eastern financiers.² During the 1870's and 1880's nearly every town which was organized in western Kansas had such a sponsor and it was often difficult to tell in which category he belonged.

The greatest single problem facing the settler in the grassland region was the adaptation to its physical characteristics.³ The western third of Kansas, the short-grass country, has an annual precipitation of 18.7 inches, which is sufficient for wheat, grain sorghums, broom and other varieties of corn that have been adapted to this climate. In this western section the rainfall is less certain than in the eastern part of the state. What rainfall there is does not always come at the right time. Droughts are more disastrous and frequent than in eastern Kansas and temperature extremes are generally greater. A good crop on the average can be expected once in every four years. While the land is considered generally level, much of it is rough. There are great washouts and a few sand hills. Winds are especially strong in western Kansas. These

²Ibid.

³George L. Anderson, "The Administration of Federal Land Laws in Western Kansas, 1880-1890," Kansas Historical Quarterly, XX, November, 1953, p. 233.

winds have blown away some of the top soil and regular corn has little chance of growth.⁴

For many years after Western Kansas was opened for settlement, the counties remained unorganized and had no population except the cattlemen. The only interest in the land was the grass and water it had for stock. The cattlemen ranged their cattle over the thousands of acres without any restrictions, but soon their time was to come to an end.⁵

A vast tide of immigration in western Kansas started in 1885. It overflowed the short-grass prairies to the Colorado border and beyond.⁶ The following quotation from a letter of the circuit rider, Jeremiah Evert Platt, from Meade County in 1885 describes this immigration.

"It beats all the world. Language can hardly tell it. The Children of Israel going into the 'promised land' don't equal it. A cattle man living in the southwestern part of Comanche county, by the name of Irwin, whose father used to be a Santa Fe freighter from Ft. Leavenworth many years ago, said that he has seen a good many booms to California for gold, to Oregon and to the Black Hills, but he never saw anything equal to this rush to southwestern Kansas. A gentleman living near the north part of the same county told me that when he came there last August, a stake would not do; he must at least plow a furrow around it; by October, he must have a piece of ground broken; by November, if he did not have a house on it, some man would jump it. As early as February, the tide of immigration began to come

⁴Anne M. Goebel, John B. Heffelfinger, Delore Gammon, Kansas Geography, pp. 8-10.

⁵Leola Howard Blanchard, Conquest of Southwest Kansas, p. 55.

⁶Henry F. Mason, "County Seat Controversies in Southwestern Kansas," Kansas Historical Quarterly, II, February, 1933, p. 45.

so that he must not only have a house; but be in it; by March, his family must be there, if he has one; and by April, he must sit in his door with a double-barrel shotgun, and threaten to shoot every man in a covered wagon that did not keep off his claim."⁷

Why did this large immigration take place at this time in this region of recurring droughts? The earlier success in the eastern part of Kansas and the fact that the farming frontier had reached central Kansas by this time is a partial answer. It was believed that every quarter section represented a farm that is a 160 acres of good agricultural land, sufficiently watered to produce crops year after year. This belief was that drought was not to be feared any more than it had been a few years before in eastern Kansas. It was said that the climate had changed, that cultivation of the soil had favored the retention of moisture and so increased evaporation, which promoted further precipitation. The idea of the time was that "the rain follows the plow." The few cattlemen who scoffed at the idea were discredited as having an interest in discouraging immigration in order to keep the range land for their herds.⁸

It was a time of general booming, and free land, as always, was an attraction. Improvements were made all over the state far in advance of existing needs. Generally

⁷Jeremiah Evart Platt, "Circuit-Riding in Southwest Kansas in 1885 and 1886," Kansas Historical Quarterly, XII, November, 1943, p. 382.

⁸Mason, "County Seat Controversies," "Kansas Historical Quarterly, II, February, 1933, p. 46.

conditions were present which required only time to justify the expansion, but it is a question if there were the potentialities in western Kansas to justify the extent of their overexpansion.⁹

This expansion was accelerated by eastern money which was readily available. The money was diverted into public and private improvements carelessly and recklessly. Land values were boosted and "false front" buildings erected. Then came a drought in 1887 and the boom collapsed. Demands made for loans could not be met and banks and business houses failed. Thousands of settlers facing certain foreclosure left the state, particularly in the western counties.¹⁰

In 1889 approximately 50,000 Kansas settlers moved to the newly opened land in Oklahoma, thus leaving the Plains nearly abandoned. Four years later the Panic of 1893, together with another partial crop failure, brought a second period of "hard times." But the region was too well established and was only temporarily affected. Eastern immigrants soon refilled the western counties and another succession of good crops restored confidence.¹¹ New methods of dry farming coupled with the tenacity to stick it out through the poor years made settlement and progress more secure although slower.

⁹Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰Federal Writers' Project of the Works Projects Administration for the State of Kansas, Kansas, A Guide to the Sunflower State, p. 58.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 58-59.

Every citizen had high hopes that his town would turn out to be a metropolis of the prairies, rivaling Wichita or Kansas City. Thus he wanted railroads and other improvements and so was determined to make his town the county seat. Most of the settlers had very little wealth and the easiest way to raise the money was through the sale of bonds. The population was sparse and shifting and each town in the county became a very bitter rival in the struggle. One election after another might be held with conflicting results and mutual charges of fraud.¹²

The newspapers and their editors and journalists played an important part in several of the county seat struggles. Most of the towns rivaling for the position had their own papers which not only promoted their own town but often engaged in verbal battle with the rival newspaper. Those newspapers quite often reflected not only the ideas of the editor and his small staff but also that of the leading local townspeople.¹³ Business men, land speculators, and promoters were among other important influences in the county seat struggles.

¹²Stanley Vestal, Short Grass Country, p. 282.

¹³Ibid., p. 283.

¹⁴Historical Survey, County Archives of Kansas, pp. 3-4.

II. THE COUNTY SEAT WAR

Seward County has nearly all the elements of the country as a whole in its history; the county seat war, the railroads, people coming and leaving, irrigation planning, and other promotion schemes.

The state legislature named Seward County in honor of William H. Seward, Secretary of State during Lincoln's administration.¹ During the following ten years the legislature changed and defined its boundaries three different times, increasing its size greatly. It was first attached to Ford County for judicial purposes and later transferred to Finney County.²

Local government was established in Seward County on June 10, 1885, when the board of county commissioners of Finney County organized Seward County as a municipal township of Finney and designated Sunset City as the temporary seat of local government. This was done to comply with a law of 1883 that required that when an unorganized county was attached for judicial purposes to one already organized the county commissioners of the organized county should appoint temporary township officers until such a time as an election could be held for that purpose. The township was divided into two voting precincts with one precinct at Sunset City

¹Historical Record Survey, Inventory of the County Archives of Kansas, No. 88 (Seward), Works Progress Administration, p. 3. Frank W. Blackmar, ed., Kansas, A Cyclopedia of State History, I, p. 672.

²Historical Survey, County Archives of Kansas, pp. 3-4.

and the other at Fargo Springs. On August the third, the Finney County commissioners canvassed the returns and declared the following results: W. Stoper, trustee; Grant Pauley, clerk; S. S. Rogers, road overseer; B. F. Nichols and A. B. Carr, justices of peace; Allen Moddy and E. P. Carter, constables; and W. Green, treasurer.³

On January 14, 1886, the Finney County Board of Commissioners named J. B. Cullison, Deputy County Superintendent of Public Instruction of Seward County, in accordance with the law of 1884 in order to separately describe and number the school districts of an unorganized county.

During this same year the boundaries of Seward County were returned to their original form and the county was organized on June 17, by the proclamation of Governor John A. Martin. The census which C. L. Calvert had taken showed 2,551 inhabitants, which was more than was required by law to organize a county. Governor Martin designated Springfield as the county seat and appointed men from Fargo Springs as the temporary county officers in order to divide the favors.⁴

Neither of these two early rivals for the county seat of Seward County exists any longer. Fargo Springs was estab-

³Ibid., p. 5.

⁴Ibid., p. 6. Blackmar, Kansas, pp. 672-673.

lished first in the early part of 1885 and Springfield was established late in 1885 by the Springfield Town Company.

In the early days the rivalry between these two towns was so marked that no businessman in one town dared even to solicit business from the other town and so closely were the lines drawn that members of the church would have been ostracized had they dared attend communion service in the rival town.

One night the word came to Fargo Springs that the men of Springfield were coming to clean up the town. A. K. Stoufer and L. A. Etzlod along with some other Fargo Springs men stayed at the foot of a little rise near town all night to guard it against a surprise attack. Little did they dream that Springfield had received a warning that Fargo Springs would attack and accordingly the Springfield men were lying on the other side of the rise carefully guarding their town. Neither side suspected the presence of the other in the all night vigil.⁵

The Fargo Springs men who had been appointed by the governor divided the territory of the county into election districts in such a way as to give their own town an advantage over Springfield. They designated Fargo Springs as the voting

⁵Raymond G. Gaeddert, "First Newspapers in Kansas Counties, Seward County," Kansas Historical Quarterly, X, November, 1941, p. 398.

place, although the bulk of the population was nearer Springfield. On election eve all the voters in the county who were friendly to Springfield assembled and camped out in a body, and early the next morning, August 5, they marched heavily armed into Fargo Springs. In Fargo Springs they discovered that over forty men favoring Fargo Springs had taken possession of the voting place which was called the Owl Building and excluded the Springfield men. The men inside selected two judges and clerks and the voting commenced. The men outside, most of them legal voters, were not allowed to participate in the poll. These voters on the outside drew up a wagon as close to the Owl Building as possible and organized in it a second poll which the temporary county officers refused to canvass. Fargo Springs people referred to this as the "soap-box ballot."⁶

The county commissioners did not want friends of Springfield present when they declared it defeated in the election, so a secret canvass of the vote was made by two members without notice to the third commissioner or anyone else. They had held the canvass, according to the Kansas Supreme Court record--

"On Monday at three o'clock in the morning, by moonlight, and without the official poll-books, ballots, or tally sheets. . . upon the town site of the temporary county seat. . .

⁶Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of the State of Kansas, 1887, XXXVI, p. 236.

[the commissioners]

pretended to make a canvass of votes cast for the county seat, and declared one of the places voted for as the permanent seat of the county. HELD. That the alleged canvass of the returns of the election for the county seat, and the declaration of the result, were not only irregular, but wholly invalid."⁷

The election was contested before the Kansas Supreme Court by the attorney general of the state. In the poll in the Owl Building, 139 ballots were cast, and in the second poll, in the wagon, 265 votes were cast. On August 20, the Supreme Court held that the first poll in the Owl Building was illegal and a majority of the voters had a legal right to organize the second poll.⁸ The Supreme Court ordered the county commissioners to reject the returns from the polls in the Owl Building and to canvass the returns from the wagon. The recanvass gave Springfield 296 votes and Fargo Springs 140. Springfield was declared the county seat.⁹

In this same election the following offices were filled: L. A. Elzold, probate judge; J. E. Thomas, register of deeds; C. J. Traxler, county attorney; Oliver Leisre, county clerk; J. S. Lunsford, clerk of the district court; A. T. Ragland, county treasurer; Mrs. E. F. Brown, superintendent of schools; and M. C. Carpenter, coroner. S. J. Gillis was elected as representative.

⁷Ibid., p. 237.

⁸Ibid., pp. 238-239.

⁹Ibid., pp. 239-246.

County buildings were not constructed for many years, but in a very short time there was a large bonded indebtedness against the county as the officials were extremely extravagant with the county scrip for which the taxpayers received little or no value. The state attorney-general charged fraud of several thousand dollars against the county clerk and two of the county commissioners in 1888. Because county records were burned in 1890, it came to public notice that the county had a bonded indebtedness of \$100,000 with little or nothing to show for it.¹⁰

The railroads played their part in settling the county seat disputes. Springfield promoters thought they could force Rock Island to build through their town, thus more nearly ensuring the county seat struggle to end in their interest. Springfield offered land for the right-of-way and terminals but refused to promote any railroad bonds. Consequently the Rock Island simply moved their surveyors and their crews and by-passed the town entirely.¹¹

Since the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad had by-passed the Fargo Springs-Springfield area in the center of the county in 1888 by building the railroad through the southern part of the county into Oklahoma, a new town called Liberal was founded on the railroad. Four

¹⁰Blackmar, Kansas, p. 673.

¹¹Charles C. Howes, This Place Called Kansas, p. 60.

months after being founded the population reached 800. The people of the southern part of the county began to campaign for Liberal as the county seat.¹²

December 8, 1892, the county seat election was held for the last time for two reasons, the first was the fraud in Springfield, and the second was that the economic and business center had moved south with the railroad. Of the two candidates, Springfield and Liberal, Liberal won the election by 125 votes. Thirty-one citizens from Liberal accompanied by eight Arkalon citizens went to Springfield to witness the canvass. The confident citizens took along five wagons to move the county records. As soon as the commissioners announced the results of the canvass, several teams were procured and in a short time the county seat was on wheels, merrily rolling along towards its new home. Everything had been conducted in a smooth and orderly fashion without interference and the Liberal delegation had no need to be so heavily armed.¹³

The Kansas Legislature of 1893 authorized the county commissioners to refund all outstanding indebtedness existing on May 1, 1891, by issuing bonds to the holders of the indebtedness. In the following October, to retire the

¹²Historical Survey, County Archives of Kansas, p. 6.

¹³Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938.

floating indebtedness, the county commissioners issued refunding bonds for a thirty-year term for \$38,000.¹⁴

The new county seat secured the old Pacific Hotel building located on Washington Avenue, just opposite the Hinde Livery barn, to house the county records. The Kansas Town and Land Company had leased the building rent free hoping, thereby, to draw as much business as possible to that street. This courthouse, which served until the construction of the present one in 1907, was a poorly constructed two-story frame building. In July, 1907, the building was declared unsafe for use as the courthouse and a contract was awarded to L. H. Sutton for a new building at the cost of \$15,500. When the building was ready for occupancy in April, 1908, it was a large two-story red brick building with twelve large, well lighted and ventilated rooms and two broad hallways. The first floor contained the offices while on the second floor were located the court room, the jury room, stenographer's room, the judges chambers, and office space for the county attorney and the sheriff.¹⁵

The new courthouse building had been authorized by a special act of the state legislature in 1907 and was to be financed by a direct tax levy. The law also stated that the building was to be erected at Liberal at a cost of not more than \$15,000. Thus we see more and more control over the county government exercised by the State at this time.¹⁶

¹⁴Historical Survey, County Archives of Kansas, p. 6.

¹⁵Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938.

¹⁶Historical Survey, County Archives of Kansas, p. 7.

III. NEWSPAPERS OF SEWARD COUNTY

The first newspaper of Seward County was The Prairie Owl of Fargo Springs. Its first issue was on August 27, 1885.¹ C. L. Calvert and H. Hays were the editors and A. B. Carr and Company, the publishers.

This newspaper had a very stormy career. It boosted Fargo Springs for the county seat and for the advancement of Seward County in general. Because of losing the county seat struggle and the decline of Fargo Springs, The Prairie Owl moved to Springfield where it started publication on October 6, 1887. It ceased publication in 1888 because of lack of subscribers and advertising to finance it as the town was dying and its citizens were moving to Liberal.²

The first newspaper at Springfield was The Springfield Transcript established in 1886 by L. P. Kemper and ceased publication in 1888. The following are some other early Seward County newspapers all of which were out of business by 1893, most of them lost out in 1888.³ These newspapers were the Seward County Democrat, G. B. Newcome, editor, 1886-1888; Seward County Courant, R. E. Hicks, editor, 1887-

¹Gaeddert, "First Newspapers," Kansas Historical Quarterly, X, November, 1941, pp. 398-399.

²Ibid., The Liberal News, May 2, 1935.

³Kansas State Historical Society, 5th and 6th Biennial Reports, IV, p. 188.

1888; The Springfield Soap-Box, Gibson and Davis, editors, 1887-1888; The Liberal Lyre, Dr. J. Nichols, editor, 1888; and the Southwest Chronicle, 1888.

The Southwest Daily Times is the direct descendant of the only Seward County newspaper which survived from the early days. It has never missed an issue since the first issue came off the Washington hand press at Fargo Springs, April 22, 1886. This paper, which had been founded as The Fargo Spring News, was not Seward County's first paper but it was the only one to survive.

Abe K. Stoufer, editor, was born in Pennsylvania and came out to Fargo Springs which was then a thriving little town on the banks of the Cimarron River. He arrived by stage coach the evening of October 22, 1885, to visit his brother, Bill. At the time he was editor of the Lathrop (Missouri) Monitor. So great was the appeal of the southwestern Kansas county that upon his arrival back home, Abe Stoufer wrote a long article about the goodness of the land and the people. He sent twenty copies of this edition of the paper to Fargo Springs with the result that he was bombarded with letters to start a newspaper in Fargo Springs.

Consequently, in February, 1886, Abe Stoufer returned to southwestern Kansas. When the stage rolled to a stop in front of the Emporia Hotel, Charley Traxler, a local attorney, had a group of business men gathered at his office

just north of the hotel. To these men Mr. Stoufer presented his proposition which was that a stock company should be organized with his taking charge of the paper and buying a \$50.00 share. The company was to pay him \$20.00 a week in wages and pay express on the paper and ready print. As fast as he got the money he was to buy out the other shareholders. In ten minutes the required stock was subscribed.⁴

The next morning saw Abe Stoufer back on the stage headed for Kansas City to buy equipment, which was to include an eight-column Washington hand press, to be shipped at once. The first issue came out on April 22, 1886, with the following editorial:

"...In establishing the News at this place, we do so because we believe in Fargo Springs as the future metropolis of Southwest Kansas, and because we think the rapid growth of both town and county fully justifies the establishment of a first-class journal right here. Such a paper we hope to be able to give you and to this end we ask the co-operation and support of every citizen of grand old Seward County.

"The news is not an organ to run for the aggrandisement of a few individuals, but is put here for the benefit of every man, woman, and child in the county, and will always be found working for the interest of the people among whom it is located, and for the upbuilding of Fargo Springs and the county at large.

"Southwest Kansas is fast gaining favor from the people all over the middle and eastern

⁴Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938.

states, and as the many advantages are advertised abroad, the rush of the home-seekers will become more prevalent.

"Seward County, particularly, is an especially favored spot in this vast area of splendid country, having an unlimited supply of good water, immense stone quarries, and many other natural advantages, making it one of the most desirable spots in the great Southwest. There is no portion of Kansas that speaks louder today than does this part of the state. The highest ambition of the average man is to possess a prosperous and happy home. Come to Seward County, Kansas, and you can have one.

"Many people are now eagerly seeking information as to the best part of Kansas for the various agricultural pursuits. To all such we unhesitatingly say: Come to the well watered and fertile Seward County.

"The weekly publication of the News will give information to all who seek it, and the statements made from week to week will be reliable.

"Respectfully,

THE EDITOR."⁵

Mr. Stoufer guided the News during the first fifteen years of its existence. It was launched before Seward County was organized and the first issue contained Governor John A. Martin's notice of the appointment of a census enumerator. Popular from the start, the News was prosperous. During the fifteen years at the beginning it never missed an issue even though it made two different moves from one town to another. In those days of county seat

⁵Ibid.

wars, it was easy to move a paper from one rival town to the other and be ready to go to work the next morning. According to Mr. Stoufer the people were ready to help in any way they could.⁶

When Springfield was declared the county seat after the Supreme Court ruling regarding the "soap-box ballot" the News moved to Arkalon and became the Arkalon News.

After the county seat was moved to Liberal in December, 1892, Abe K. Stoufer was persuaded to move his Arkalon News to the new county seat and it became the Liberal News. This move was to be the final one. When he moved his paper, it was the only survivor of about twenty papers that had been started in the county.⁷

The News continued its publication even during the years of 1889 and 1893 when the Oklahoma runs were made. Seward County was almost depopulated by the "run of 1893" and in the fall of that year the county could muster only about 200 votes. Mr. Stoufer recalled, "I do not think papers in those lean years had any distinctive policy. . . they simply did the best they could, always striving to be loyal to their town and its people."⁸ When there were

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ray Millman, Sixty-four Years Progress.

⁸Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938.

only 200 people, no incident was too trivial to find its way into the town newspaper.

In 1900 the Liberal News was purchased by Ray Millman. The town and the community were beginning to grow once more and Mr. Millman and the News took the lead in securing needed improvements. Since Mr. Millman was also the postmaster, he had to send the funds to Hutchinson by registered letter as there was no bank in Liberal. Accordingly he began a campaign for a bank and in July of that year the Liberal State Bank was organized. Other campaigns carried on during this time benefited the schools, roads, water systems and sewage disposal.

In 1916 Warren Zimmerman purchased the News from Mr. Millman. Mr. Zimmerman in turn sold out to the Southwest Printing Company in October, 1935, which consolidated with the Southwest Daily Times on October 29, 1935.⁹

Of the many newspapers starting in this period in Seward County only one succeeded. Economic conditions were not favorable to support more of them. Some newspapers were started to further a particular interest such as the county seat struggle and when this interest lost out the paper nearly always ceased publication. The shifting population probably was a cause of the starting and failure of newspapers. Some newspapers may have had an influence

⁹ Millman, Sixty-four Years.

on this shifting of the population by overselling their county such as is shown in Mr. Stouffer's editorial.

During the year 1907, when, as previously stated, there was a great deal of immigration nearly every quarter of the county was overstocked.

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IV. AGRICULTURAL HISTORY

Seward County's economy was almost entirely based on agriculture during the period of this study. Cattlemen were the first white settlers of this region and, while they were few in number, their cattle roamed over vast areas.

During the years of 1885 and 1886, as previously stated, there was a great influx of settlers homesteading nearly every quarter section of the country.

During the first three days in January, 1886, a terrible calamity came to both cattlemen and homesteaders. The wind, bitterly cold as only the prairie wind can be, came up suddenly during the night combined with a driving, cutting sleet which turned to snow. This was the beginning of the "Big Blizzard of 1886" and one of the worst storms on record.¹

Caught completely by surprise the homesteaders were unprepared. For many of them buffalo chips provided the only fuel, and while they made quick, hot fires, they did not last long. Most of the settlers lived in "soddies" or dugouts with only a few one-room houses with basements. More of the settlers lived in shacks, covered with tarpaper, or even in tents which had served very well during the mild

¹Lucile Curt Morrison, The Spirit of the Prairie, pp. 17-18.

winters they had so far experienced, but now these shacks and tents were woefully inadequate against the howling bitter coldness of the wind and snow.

After the storm had passed the ranchers found many of their cattle frozen stiff against barns and walls with their mouths full of ice. John George and other big ranchers lost nearly everything, thus making it easier for the homesteaders to settle on the land. Some 10,000 head of cattle were lost in the "Big Blizzard."²

Settlers who succeeded in breaking the sod that year of the blizzard and planting a crop, even though it might be only a few acres, were well repaid, for the year proved to be one of the most favorable Seward County farmers have ever had. Rains were plentiful and frequent, and with weather conditions nearly perfect, an abundant crop of everything planted was raised.

But in 1887 it was a different story, for the conditions had changed in a single year and it was dry. Settlers left in great numbers, and by 1890, according to Ralph M. Heath, only about five per cent of the early settlers were left.³

Many people moved to Oklahoma during the strip openings in 1889 and 1893, as stated before, and only about 200

²Ibid., p. 22.

³Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938.

voters remained in the entire county in 1893. Much of the land reverted back to the government for future homesteading.⁴

Those who stayed had a hard struggle. Many hauled buffalo bones to Dodge City where they were sold for four dollars a ton. On the return trip they brought needed supplies. A round trip required six days of traveling time, especially when the wagons were loaded both ways.

The people of Seward County learned the hard way that this section of the state was not adaptable to all kinds of farming. They found they could not raise such crops as corn as they had back home in Indiana or Illinois or wherever else they had been. The problem confronting those who stayed was to find crops that could be raised in this drier region of uncertain rainfall and for which there was a market. Leaders in finding the solution to this problem were John and Frank Boles, D. H. Heath, and W. E. Bloom.⁵

Farmers found they could raise sorghum or cane. A sugar mill was promoted by some men from the east. In addition to buying stock in the mill the farmers were asked to sign up to raise so much sorghum or cane. This they did. In 1889, at a cost of \$100,000, the big sugar mill was erected a mile east of Liberal on the north side of

⁴Ibid.

⁵Personal interview with Ray Millman, Liberal, Kansas, August 18, 1953. Morrison, Spirit of Prairie, p. 52.

the railroad. The railroad put in a sidetrack or two and by fall it made quite a showing. The farmers delivered the cane and the mill went into operation. A little very crude sugar was refined and in the evenings a good share of the local population was out to see the enterprise that was to put Liberal on the map. The mill did not open again as the promoters had left town with the funds and since the farmers had purchased stock they lost nearly everything they had put in it. The building was torn down and hauled away and even the side track was taken up.⁶

After the failure of the sugar mill enterprise, the farmers tried a watermelon seed project. D. M. Ferry Company, a big seed company, sent out men to contact farmers who would be willing to plow the sod land and plant seeds to be furnished by the company. This they did and in the fall delivered the watermelons to the big thresher which extracted the seeds. Since hundreds of acres of land had been planted in watermelons, it was an amazing sight after the first fall frost to see acres of land apparently covered with melons almost touching each other. Farmers hauled the melons to the thresher, a rather crude affair, in wagons with side boards. There they were shoveled into the maw of the thresher with big shovels. The machine ground them

⁶Southwest Tribune (Liberal), November 12, 1936.

up with the seeds coming out on one side and the juice and rinds coming out on the other side. Two carloads of seeds were shipped east that fall. While the project was successful from the farmer's viewpoint, the lack of a market closed the operation after the first year.⁷

In the early 1890's a group of farmers, the Boles being the leaders, contacted the officials of Kansas State College about ground silos to store silage. The Kansas State College officials agreed to give a demonstration to the farmers if they would have the necessary equipment ready. Accordingly, at their own expense, the Rock Island Railroad set a special train on a siding containing the necessary equipment. The Kansas State College representatives came on the same train and a lecture was given on how to construct upright and pit silos. Although some farmers were skeptical of the "book men," the demonstration was a success as more than 100 such silos were constructed.⁸ The Boles and a few other farmers who carried out this program over a number of years were able to have feed during the dry years as well as through the winter months.⁹

Cattle raising has always been important in this county, thus feed crops, such as maize and kafir corn were tried

⁷Ibid. Morrison, Spirit of Prairie, p. 54.

⁸Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), October 9, 1952.

⁹Personal interview, Millman.

with some success in the early 1900's. Among other crops that were tried were castor beans and broomcorn. Several farmers including Frank Boles planted several acres of castor beans. The beans grew easily and brought good prices. The beans had to be abandoned, however, as they proved to be poisonous to the cattle. Broomcorn fared better. Many hundreds of acres of broomcorn were planted and harvested. By 1905, Liberal was the broomcorn capital of the world. More broomcorn was grown, marketed, and handled here than in any other place. Broomcorn is still planted in limited quantities, but since 1906 wheat has gradually replaced the broomcorn as the farmer discovered that more money could be made from the wheat crop, and by 1910 the acres formerly planted to broomcorn had largely all been replaced with the winter wheat.¹⁰

Hard winter wheat came to Seward County from the eastern counties and from its neighboring county of Meade. Farmers were having success with this particular variety of wheat, which also proved to be the best variety for the manufacturing of flour. It could also stand the hot, dry weather of western Kansas. By 1910, wheat had surpassed broomcorn as the king in Seward County.¹¹

By 1910 the farmers of Seward County were raising crops valued at \$885,529. Wheat, as the most valuable crop, brought

¹⁰Morrison, Spirit of the Prairie, pp. 54-55.

¹¹Personal interview, Millman. Liberal, Kansas, Publishing Bureau, Liberal, pp. 5-7.

a total of \$258,152; milo maize, \$138,270; broomcorn, \$110,022; corn, nearly \$70,000; kafir corn, \$81,825; hay, \$55,634; and animals sold for slaughter, \$80,701. The 10,537 head of live stock were valued at \$561,618, while the assessed valuation of property was \$6,117,868.¹²

From 1910 on more and more horsedrawn machinery was used in planting and harvesting Seward County farms. About 1914 Henry Plett brought the first combine harvester to the county. Farms gradually grew larger as a result of the increased amount of machinery.¹³

The population in 1890 was 1,503 and by 1900 it had shrunk to 822. In 1910 Seward County was on the up-swing again with a population of 4,091 and by 1920 it was 5,988. This increase was due to improved farming methods, new crops and the knowledge of how to handle the soil of southwestern Kansas to the best advantage.¹⁴ The last homesteading took place about 1908 and 1909. From this time on little if any land ever reverted back to the government.¹⁵

People came and went as an occasional year of seasonal rains and good crops would bring in more new people, then a year or two of drought would send all but the hardiest back where they came from or to other regions. This was

¹²Blackmar, Kansas, p. 673.

¹³Morrison, Spirit of the Prairie, p. 58.

¹⁴Blackmar, Kansas, p. 673.

¹⁵Personal interview with E. S. Irwin, May 8, 1954.

true in most new counties. There were those, of course, who stayed through the good and the bad years and won through to a modest living to become the foundation of a growing community. All this happened before 1900. From 1900 to the 1930's Seward County enjoyed gradual growth with more or less increasing prosperity and with no large groups leaving at any one time.¹⁶

tanks, crude and simple, and a haven of hospitality and rest, was reached and the long ride of the day was over. Because water was scarce on the plains in those early days, it was often sold in spring measure as the well led to by dig by hand and very deep with, perhaps, a limited capacity of water.

One lonely little ranch, however, was an exception to this rule as the water was given freely even though the little one-house could have used the money. Mr. Rogers, the settler, would smiling answer the query of "how much" with a "Oh, that's all right. Water's always free here!" and the traveler quite often returned, "Well, that's liberal." As the years went by, many people were directed to pass this friendly house. People began to call it "the Liberal well" and finally shortened it to just "Liberal." By August, 1933, Mr. Rogers had added a general store and the government

¹⁶Southwest Tribune (Liberal), October 15, 1936.

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V. LIBERAL

From the nearest railroad point at Dodge City in the early days it was a long, lonely trail to the Texas Panhandle and the weary traveler eagerly watched the distant horizon for that welcome speck of the far distant ranch, the oasis of the short grass country. Finally at long last the little sod house with the wire corral and the water tanks, crude and simple, but a haven of hospitality and rest, was reached and the long ride of the day was over. Because water was scarce on the plains in those early days, it was often sold in sparing amounts as the well had to be dug by hand and very deep with, perhaps, a limited capacity of water.

One lonely little ranch, however, was an exception to this rule as the water was given freely even though the little sod house could have used the money. Mr. Rogers, the settler, would smiling answer the query of "how much" with a "Oh, that's all right. Water's always free here!" and the traveler quite often returned, "Well, that's liberal." As the years went by, many people were directed to pass this friendly home. People soon spoke of it as "the Liberal well" and finally shortened it to just "Liberal." By August, 1885, Mr. Rogers had added a general store and the government

soon established a postoffice at the ranch home, and it seemed only natural to call it "Liberal."¹

This story of how Liberal got its name might be a good example of how stories can be built up by clubs and old timers; then again, much of it might be true. The story of the "old" Liberal well is printed in many good sources, but Lee Larrabee claims the well was off the beaten track of the travelers and that there were other wells that gave free water, and, he, therefore, does not believe that particular instance as being the origin of the city's name.²

In August, 1885, from No Man's Land came Mr. Benjamin B. Gant who located southwest of what was to become Liberal and freighted supplies from Dodge City to the Rogers' store. The round trip required four days. On the way to Dodge City his wagons carried buffalo bones and occasionally what little local farm surplus there might be and returned with processed staples, piece goods, farm tools, and occasionally some farmer's order. Within three years, with the coming of the railroad which established a townsite a mile east of the Rogers place, the long haul from Dodge City became unnecessary and even the postoffice was moved to the new townsite which adopted the name of "Liberal."³

¹Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938. The Liberal News, November 20, 1934. The Chamber of Commerce Notebook under L. Morrison, Spirit of the Prairie, p. 38. Personal interview with Paul W. Light, June 3, 1954.

²Personal interview with Lee Larrabee, September 5, 1953.

³Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938. The Liberal News, November 20, 1934.

Marcus A. Low, Division Solicitor for the Rock Island at Trenton, Missouri, and Hilon A. Parker, chief engineer, were chiefly responsible for pushing the Rock Island into Seward County. They first began organizing the project in 1885. A charter was issued March 19, 1886, which first provided for building a railroad southwest toward Liberal. It was issued at the time to the Chicago, Kansas, and Nebraska Railway Company, an affiliate of Rock Island. Surveys began on December 8, 1885, the grading commenced on the following July 1, and by October 1, track laying had begun. The entire mileage from Horton to Liberal was placed for operation on February 26, 1888.⁴

Because of county seat difficulties between Springfield and Fargo Springs, the Rock Island deflected its route southward and created the town of Liberal. Originally the survey called for the road to leave Plains in Meade County and go through the center of Springfield in central Seward County and cross at the more accessible crossing of the Cimmarron River, but somehow the townspeople of Springfield offended the construction crew and the road changed its course and crossed the Cimmarron River at Arkalon. Upon reaching the end-of-the-line, Mr. Low ordered the surveying of a new townsite a mile east of the Rogers place, having

⁴Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), October 9, 1952.

purchased part of four quarter sections of land there for that purpose in the center of the present townsite of Liberal.⁵

The plat of the townsite of Liberal was opened April 13, 1888. During the following twenty-four hours the sale of lots totaled \$180,000.00 of which total some \$60,000.00 was paid in cash. Although there were no houses that day, three small shacks appeared the next day, April 14. By April 21, you could count eighty-three plank constructed houses. The boom was on and within a year the population had grown to 800 and Liberal was incorporated as a third class city. In the next few years Liberal continued to grow as the citizens of Arkalon and Springfield, following the example of those of Fargo Springs, continued to move their homes and businesses to the new county seat.⁶

Upon completion of the terminal facilities and the establishment of the town, the railroad began its freight business. The railroad was to construct two other buildings in 1888; one was a brick roundhouse with one employee to man it and the other building was the big and impressive "depot hotel" to be operated by a man named W. Omer.⁷

⁵Ibid.

⁶Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938. Liberal, Kansas, Printing Bureau, Liberal, pp. 3 and 5.

⁷Personal interview with Mrs. Watson Rogers, granddaughter of T. J. McDermott, August 25, 1953. Biographical Publishing Company, The Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railway System and Representative Employees, p. 160.

Within three months the big boom was over and people left in crowds on every train because the land prices were so inflated and because of the discontinuance of railroad construction as the Rock Island decided not to go any farther west. The fabulous hotel was closed, its furniture carted and moved away.⁸

When the first freight train rolled into the newly established town, it had aboard a large consignment of grocery stock for Ed. T. Guymon. Mr. Guymon at this point, not having a building, erected some tents, and as soon as they were properly pegged and the supplies brought in, he opened his business to the general public. The Star Grocery, as it was called, was shortly housed in a wooden building and Mr. Guymon continued to operate the business until 1901, when he followed the railroad southwest into the Oklahoma Panhandle where the town of Guymon was named after him.⁹

In much the same manner T. J. McDermott also followed the track layers into town and established the first restaurant to help feed the vast crowd of people that converged on Liberal. About a year later he made arrangements with the Rock Island to take over the closed "depot hotel." Ten bedrooms were furnished and opened and this was the beginning of the business which the McDermott's were to run for seventeen years.¹⁰

⁸Southwest Tribune (Liberal), October 15, 1936.

⁹Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938 and October 9, 1952.

¹⁰Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938.
Southwest Tribune (Liberal), October 15, 1936.

During these first few weeks before the bubble burst other businesses were established. Among these businesses was a lumber yard established by L. J. White in partnership with Mr. Flagg. George S. and T. J. Smith moved their drug store from Fargo Springs and Dr. George Smith established his office in Liberal. Charles Summers packed his shoe repair shop along with his stock of shoes and boots at Fargo Springs and came to the new town where he was to establish a dry goods business and the beginnings of a fortune.¹¹

Liberal also became the terminus for the cattle drives of the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandle country, northeastern New Mexico, and the southwestern corner of Kansas. Cattle pens were built and in the fall of each year great herds of cattle were shipped from Liberal until the railroad moved south and west. After that time the shipping of the herds lessened until only the local herds were shipped from Liberal. Liberal's economy fluctuated with the good and bad years of the farmer and of the railroad which had given it birth.¹²

The first postoffice building for the Liberal station was a mile west of Kansas Avenue on Second Street on the site known as "old Liberal." This building was an old adobe shack. The adobe shack postoffice did a meager business and very little mail was received or sent. The first postmaster, Cal Hurd, moved the postoffice from the adobe shack

¹¹Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), October 9, 1952; Morrison, Spirit of the Prairie, p. 41.

¹²Southwest Tribune (Liberal), November 4, 1936.

to a small frame building just a block off Kansas Avenue in 1888 when the present townsite was established. In 1890 Mrs. Menier Vessels became the postmistress, followed in 1894 by Miss Ada Mills. During this period from 1888 to 1896, the postoffice occupied various locations.

In 1896 Abe K. Stoufer was appointed postmaster and immediately moved the postoffice into the office of his newspaper, The Liberal News. In 1900, when he sold his newspaper, he also resigned as postmaster, and his successor, Ray Millman, was also appointed as postmaster and served in the dual capacity until 1903 when he was succeeded as postmaster by J. N. Evans.

In 1907 Mr. Evans moved the postoffice from the News building into the building vacated by the Smith Drug Store. In 1908 under the auspices of A. E. Blake the postoffice finally acquired a building of its own. The need for increased postal facilities led to the building of a brick structure on the corner of Lincoln Avenue and Second Street especially designed to house the postal equipment. Upon Mr. Blake's offer of one year's free rent, the postal authorities promptly accepted the offer and moved the postoffice into its modern plant where it remained until 1914 when the Kansas Avenue businessmen built on the Third and Kansas location and induced the postoffice to move once more.

E. S. Irvin was appointed postmaster in April, 1914, and remained until 1922 when he was succeeded by Abe Stofer

who was appointed for his second term. During this time the postoffice made its last move into its present location at Fourth and Kansas. From the days of the adobe shack it has been enlarged to a postoffice of the first class. The first star routes were the Hugoton route and Shade's Well, followed later by routes to Beaver, Oklahoma, and Ochiltree, Texas.

Rural free delivery from the Liberal postoffice was established in 1908 and four routes were established which were served by carriers with their horses and buggies. Later they were combined into three routes with the coming of the automobile to supply the farm population with daily service.

Postal service was enlarged within the Liberal city limits in 1915 with the beginning of city free delivery with the first carriers being Harold Sutton and Harry Stewart.¹³

The telephone industry in Liberal began in 1897 and consisted of a single line with five telephones. Service was established by George S. and Thomas J. Smith and was operated from their drug store. The three telephones inside the city limits were located at the drug store, the Rock Island Eatery and the G. C. Brown home. The O. K. Ranch and the Smith Ranch on Sharp's Creek were the rural members. The system covered a total of thirty-two miles and was a great convenience, particularly to the ranchers who lived

¹³Southwest Tribune (Liberal), July 16, 1936.

in town. Anticipating future needs the Smith Brothers applied for a telephone franchise from the city council which was granted in 1906. In 1908 a one hundred line switchboard replaced the old ten line board. Upon completion of the new Smith Drug Store at Second and Kansas the telephone exchange was moved to the second story of that building. In 1909 L. W. Stevenson bought out the telephone company, which by now included three toll lines with one to Meade, Kansas, and one each to Beaver, and Hooker, Oklahoma. In 1917 Stevenson built a new telephone building on Third Street and installed the first common battery telephone service in Liberal. ~~This~~ was used until 1926 when it was further modernized.¹⁴

Mr. Benajmin B. Gant told of the first well dug on the Liberal townsite. A Mr. Alphan owned a quarter section which is now a part of Liberal and in about 1885 dug a well near what was later known as Can Creek. The first well was dug by hand three feet square and one evening water was struck at a depth of 118 feet.¹⁵ Paul W. Light tells how his father, George E. Light, dug a second well south of what is now Second Street on their homestead and reached water at a depth of 150 feet.¹⁶ In 1890 the first city-owned wells

¹⁴Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938; Liberal, Kansas, Printing Bureau, Liberal, p. 8.

¹⁵Liberal News, November 21, 1934; Personal interview with Lee Larrabee, June 2, 1954.

¹⁶Personal interview with Paul W. Light, June 3, 1954.

were dug along Kansas Avenue and a small storage tank built. Pipes supplied the business section but homes kept large barrels in front of the house which were filled twice a week for a fee of fifty cents per barrel. As a result of becoming the broomcorn capital of the world and other successful farm ventures, some five hundred buildings were erected in the years of 1907 and 1908 alone. Consequently, in 1909 a successful \$45,000.00 waterworks bond was voted and in 1911 at the Seventh and Grant location a huge tank was erected along with a pipe system for the rest of the city. In 1917 three more wells and another huge standby-pipe was added to the water system.¹⁷

Liberal in 1899 installed its first city lights. They consisted of coal-oil lamps placed on street corners on eight-foot poles and were the pride of the city. Local boosters bragged about being able to read their mail under the street lights, unless, of course, one of three things had happened, such as the lamps having burned dry or the wind having blown them out, or even worse, their having not been lighted.¹⁸ These lights were used until The Liberal Light, Ice, and Power Company was established by Harry Magruder. The company was incorporated January 11, 1908, with the following officers: H. W. Magruder, president and manager;

¹⁷Liberal, Kansas, Printing Bureau, Liberal, pp. 3-4.

¹⁸Morrison, Spirit of the Prairie, p. 60.

Henry Walker, secretary; and E. E. Cook, electrician. A few electric street lights were set up in the business district. The power was furnished by a steam engine and two boilers which produced a maximum capacity of 200 kilowatts. These lights were available only in the business district and the homes continued to use coal-oil or kerosene lamps. It took four times as much power for an incandescent bulb in those days as it does today. By 1909 there were some 3,000 lights ranging from eight to 200 candle power. A 200 horsepower engine supplied the few motors in the business district. The two generators had a capacity of 175 kilowatts along with a Corliss engine of 175 horsepower and a Russell engine of 100 horsepower. In addition to doing electrical repair work, the company also carried a complete line of electrical fixtures, fans, and motors. The residential district was not served by electric lights until the middle 1920's.¹⁹

The ice plant was increased until it had a capacity of twenty tons daily in 1921. The ice plant had two large storage rooms and it manufactured ice in 200 pound cakes. The freight trains passing through Liberal were serviced by the ice plant. Ice was distributed to the local homes and business houses and it was sent to the surrounding towns and communities

¹⁹Personal interview with Mary Flood and Felix L. Cadou, May 28, 1954; Liberal News (Magazine Section), 1909.

²⁰Liberal Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1943; Liberal News (Magazine Section), Liberal, p. 32.

in Kansas and the Oklahoma panhandle. The electric and ice plants were housed in frame buildings.²⁰

The homes and business houses were heated mostly by coal during the period of this study as the first gas company was established in Liberal in 1928 under the name of the Liberal Gas Company. Coal in large quantities was carried and dispensed by the lumber companies.²¹

Paul Woods was brought from Rapid City, South Dakota, to help establish Liberal's first bank to fill one of the great needs of the fast-growing city. The bank which was organized as a result on July 13, 1900, was incorporated as "The Liberal State Bank" with a capital of \$10,000.00. The bank served Seward, Stevens, and Haskell counties in Kansas; Beaver, and Beaver County, Oklahoma; and Ochiltree and Hansford counties in Texas. At this time the closest banks were at Meade, Kansas, on the east and El Paso, Texas, on the west while to the north was the bank at Garden City, Kansas, and south at Higgins, Texas. On April 13, 1903, "The Liberal State Bank" became "The First National Bank of Liberal" with a capital of \$25,000.00. J. E. George, the first president, remained at the head of the institution until 1926.²²

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Personal interview with Ed Andrews and Ruth Reider, May 28, 1954.

²²Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938; Liberal, Kansas, Publishing Bureau, Liberal, p. 82.

On March 30, 1907, the Citizens State Bank was organized with a capital of \$25,000.00. The first officers were: Charles Summers, president, a leading dry goods merchant who had moved his business from Fargo Springs several years earlier; E. T. Guymon, vice president; George E. Ellison, cashier; Lee Larrabee, assistant cashier. The small frame building that housed the bank opened for business on April 10, 1907, with the first day's deposits totaling \$31,168.10. By 1926 its total assets were over \$700,000.00. Bert DuBois was elected assistant cashier in January, 1908, and later succeeded Mr. Ellison as cashier. In 1912 Mr. Frank Summers followed in his footsteps.²³

While many people left Seward County during the Oklahoma strip openings, Liberal was to gain from this migration in the long run as her trade area was increased to include the Oklahoma Panhandle. People who came from the east to file on the government land made Liberal their temporary headquarters. As it became the trade center, Liberal also became the center of social life and the educational center for the area, as will be discussed in the following pages.²⁴

J. E. George came to Liberal from his Beaver County, Oklahoma, ranch in 1900 and bought an interest in a grocery

²³Liberal, Kansas, Publishing Bureau, Liberal, p. 81.

²⁴Ibid., p. 4; Southwest Tribune (Liberal), April 11, 1935.

store and a little later expanded it into a wholesale and retail business of considerable size. Customers used four-horse teams to haul groceries after making their purchases. The business had a personnel of six to eight salesmen who did the selling, delivering, and keeping of the accounts. The store handled canned goods, flour, feed, potatoes, and crockery for both wholesale and retail business. It was housed in a two-story brick building. When H. J. Smith left the concern, it was incorporated with a capital stock of \$25,000.00, which was fully paid. The business continued to grow through the period of this study.²⁵

When Mr. E. T. Guymon followed the railroad southwest to the Oklahoma panhandle in 1901, he sold a twenty-five per cent interest in his grocery business to Lee Larrabee, who became the manager of the store. Under his management it continued to prosper until 1907 when Mr. Larrabee organized the Star Lumber Company.²⁶

The Enterprise Mercantile Company was organized in June, 1906, by Frank G. Boles and John N. Evans with D. L. Longnecker as manager. It started as a small grocery store but in 1909 was housed at Second and Lincoln in a building twenty-five by one-hundred thirty feet. The stock included potatoes, syrups, and canned goods in carload lots. In

²⁵Liberal News (Magazine Section), 1909.

²⁶Personal interview with Lee Larrabee, June 2, 1954.

season they also had produce and garden and field seeds. In September, 1908, Frank Boles sold his interest in the business and in October bought the Liberal Cash Store from its founder, M. W. Travis. His announced policy in regard to his new store was to buy and sell on a cash basis and pass along the savings amounting to as much as ten to thirty per cent to his customers. He published a catalog showing the advantages of this system for savings by doing away with bookkeeping, collecting, and the loss of bad accounts. He announced that the quick sales and small profits would insure the customers of new, clean stock in seasonable and up-to-date styles. His stock included piece goods, ladies ready-to-wear, white goods, notions, hosiery, novelties, combs, handkerchiefs, men's wear, work clothes, shoes, valises, telescopes, blankets, and oilcloths.²⁷

By 1907 Charles Summers had enlarged and expanded the little business he had moved from Fargo Springs until it was one of Liberal's leading dry goods department stores. The store was housed in a building 50 x 130 feet and had branches in Guymon, Oklahoma, and Dalhart, Texas. The manager of the Liberal store was Ralph Summers.²⁸

Bolin, Hall and Company was established in Liberal in 1900 by J. R. Bolin. The building contained offices, ware-

²⁷Liberal News (Magazine Section), 1909.

²⁸Ibid.

rooms for manufactured lumber, lime, cement, plaster and other building materials. Yards enclosed roomy double decked sheds that were 200 feet in length. Stock also included brick, stone, posts, and fencing. In 1909 the company expanded and equipped a grain elevator with a capacity of 15,000 bushels. The railroad laid a side track to accommodate cars for the grain and coal. The company had branches in both Kansas and Oklahoma.²⁹

Lee Larrabee organized the Star Lumber Company in 1906 with the help of E. T. Guymon, Sr., Ezra Shorb and Link Smith. Later Mr. Larrabee bought their interest. In 1913 the company began expanding to other towns establishing the first yard in Elkhart. Later they opened branches in Hugoton and Kismet in Kansas; Keyes and Boise City in Oklahoma; and Clayton and Santa Fe in New Mexico.³⁰

In 1907 J. E. George, C. E. Woods and Paul W. Light organized a lumber company under the name of the J. E. George Lumber Company. A little later Mr. Light purchased the other members' interest and the company name changed to the Paul W. Light Lumber Company, which still operates. The original company platted an addition to the city of Liberal, reserving one block for their use. The company carried a complete line of building supplies and had coal sheds in

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Personal interview with Lee Larrabee, June 2, 1954.

the yard to handle its business in Colorado coal. A side-track was laid to the yard to facilitate loading and unloading. For a while the Company expanded and included a Ford agency as a part of their business.³¹

In 1907 B. E. Blake came to Liberal from his stock farm which he had established in 1897 near the Oklahoma line and established a hardware business on October 7, under the name of Blake and Son. The officers were: B. E. Blake, president; A. E. Blake, vice president; A. Moore, secretary; and James McMullen, general manager, and they incorporated with a capital of \$25,000.00. The building proper was 140 feet by 165 feet with several additional storage houses and yard space for machinery, vehicles, and windmills. Inside the building was 25,000 square feet with shelf and heavy hardware of all kinds, furniture, queensware, tools, seeds, buggies, wagons, machinery, pumps, tanks, and a manufacturing tin shop. There were also enclosed offices for the accountants and consulting rooms as well as a retiring room for the ladies who came shopping from the surrounding area. Blake and Son expanded to include the Blake Oil Company which distributed all kinds of lubricating and illuminating oil. This was done with tank wagons. The undertaking department was stocked with coffins, caskets, and related funeral supplies.

³¹Liberal News (Magazine Section), 1909; Personal interview with Paul W. Light, June 3, 1954.

The company kept a hearse and the personnel were qualified to act as funeral directors. The company claimed, overall, to have the most complete stock in Kansas.³²

The Eureka Steam Laundry was established in 1907 by C. H. Leete. In the original twenty by thirty-six feet building one small gasoline engine powered the machinery. The laundry also had a hand-powered shirt and collar ironer and two washers. The laundry washed, dried, and finished clothes and maintained a delivery service. By 1909 it had a steam heated drying room and a steam heated mangle for the flat work. The laundry has been run by the Leete family through the years.³³

The Security Elevator Company was organized in 1907 and is the oldest grain company in Liberal. It was organized by Charles Summers, Lee Larrabee, Frank and Ralph Summers when most people still doubted that this was the hard wheat section of the United States. By 1922, Hutchinson had become the headquarters of the Security Elevator Company and there were nineteen elevators in the organization with Frank Summers as the general manager.³⁴

The Light Milling and Grain Company was organized in 1915 by C. M. Light and started with one elevator with a

³²Liberal News (Magazine Section), 1909.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Liberal, Kansas, Publishing Bureau, Liberal, p. 75.

capacity of 15,000 bushels. In 1921 an office building was added and the elevator facilities increased to 60,000 bushels. Lights added branches in Tyrone, Hooker, Guymon and Beaver, Oklahoma, as well as Tucumcari, New Mexico. The feed plant had a capacity of 50 tons daily while the flour mill had a daily capacity of 500 barrels.³⁵

Charles Taylor and Company had its beginnings in 1908 when Charles Taylor purchased a small drug store from Dr. Fannon at Third and Kansas. Upon the completion of the Miller Block he enlarged his stock and added a small line of musical instruments and sheet music. The music department continued to grow and he added pianos, phonographs, and radios.³⁶

As we have seen in the past few pages, Liberal started with an early boom which was over in a few months to be followed by hard times when cash was practically non-existent. Many people became discouraged and left, some of them going back home while others tried their luck in the Oklahoma panhandle. Those who stayed, however, achieved comfortable homes and many of them became moderately wealthy.

The years of 1906 through 1908 seemed to set a seal of approval on the expanding economy of Liberal when many business enterprises were successfully established. Many

³⁵Personal interview with W. E. Bush, June 2, 1954.

³⁶Liberal, Kansas, Publishing Bureau, Liberal, p. 57.

of the businessmen were the sons of the homesteaders who had had the tenacity to "stick it out." Another reason, perhaps, for the growing business boom was the fact that there was little land left to be homesteaded. This combined with the general good times prior to and during World War I gave these businesses a good margin for security. This business growth in Liberal was accelerated by the farming development of the Oklahoma panhandle from 1900 to 1910. Many of the businesses starting in Liberal expanded and added branches in the surrounding area.

Rev. J. H. Clark, Long Missionary, organized the church and Homer Miller and Clarence Coomer were duly elected and installed as elders with O. Coomer elected as clerk of the session.

Not only were the Presbyterians the first to be organized but they also erected the first church building. That first year, services were held in temporary quarters but on November 10, 1909, they dedicated a new frame church building. This little white church was used continuously for worship and religious services until it was torn down in 1926. The Presbyterians in these early years also invited other denominations to conduct their services in this building. The original building had been located east of town as they thought the town would grow in that direction but the growth went west and in 1908 it was moved

VI. CULTURAL HISTORY

The early homesteaders of Seward County brought their religion with them as evidenced by the early organization of their churches.

The first church to be organized in Liberal was the First Presbyterian Church on July 8, 1888, at the request of seven persons who presented certificates showing themselves to have been members in good standing in their previous church. As recorded in the minutes of the session Rev. S. G. Clark, Home Missionary, organized the church and Norman Mills and Cicero Coomer were duly elected and installed as elders with C. Coomer elected as Clerk of the Session.

Not only were the Presbyterians the first to be organized but they also erected the first church building. That first year, services were held in temporary quarters but on November 10, 1889, they dedicated a new frame church building. This little white church was used continuously for worship and religious services until it was torn down in 1926. The Presbyterians in these early years also invited other denominations to conduct their services in this building. The original building had been located east of Kansas Avenue as they thought the town would grow in that direction but time proved them wrong and in 1898 it was moved

west of Kansas Avenue to its present site at Fourth and Lincoln. Had W. Lane moved the building without damaging it, although the high steeple was removed and replaced with a shorter steeple and belfry.

Between 1890 and 1907 the Methodists accepted the offer of the use of the building and alternated Sunday services with the Presbyterians with one denomination conducting Sunday school in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Similar arrangements were made with the Baptists and the Episcopalians at other times.¹ These arrangements were made during these hard times because of the lack of finances.

In 1885 in a sod farmhouse, a Sunday School was organized which in later years was to become the Methodist Church of Liberal. A portable organ owned by the G. E. Light family in whose home the Sunday School was organized, furnished the music. In 1887 the Sunday School was moved to the country school house and a revival meeting held which resulted in the organization of a church.

In 1888 the first regular pastor came to serve the group and a Tabernacle was built in Liberal, but hard times and crop failures forced the sale of the building and the congregation accepted the Presbyterians offer to use their building.

¹Harry Armstrong, historian, Pamphlet "Historical Sketch of the First Presbyterian Church of Liberal, Kansas," 1938.

In 1897, under the leadership of Rev. J. L. Rutan, an unused school house was purchased and moved into town to serve as the parsonage. A new building was constructed and the congregation once more moved into a building of their own in 1908. In 1911 two temporary buildings were added to house the growing Sunday School while W. T. Ward was minister. In 1920 plans were again formulated for a new building and were successfully concluded in the dedication of this building on January 8, 1922.²

On August 15, 1907, fourteen members gathered with Rev. L. H. Harper to organize the First Baptist Church of Liberal. The church building was dedicated on July 10, 1910. The Sunday school was organized in March, 1908, with G. W. Anderson as superintendent.³

A small group of people who had belonged to the Christian Church in their former home towns accepted the hospitality of the Presbyterians in the early 1890's but they were restless and felt the need of a building of their own. Accordingly, in the spring of 1894, they met at the schoolhouse and decided to call an evangelist. On May 15, 1894, the Reverend J. A. King came and held a meeting in the Presbyterian Church, and a few weeks later a second meeting was held under the leadership of Rev. Aaron States. Following

²Pamphlet, "Fiftieth Anniversary of the First Methodist Church," Liberal, Kansas, 1938.

³Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), July 12, 1949.

the service some twenty persons were received into the church with the immersion taking place in the Cimarron River.

The First Christian Church was organized on August 26, 1894, the first elders being T. A. Scates and G. C. Hayes. The deacons were T. J. McDermott and E. O. DeVoss with Miss Myra McDermott as clerk. The first meeting was held in the Rock Island Eatery. Regular worship began in 1895 with Rev. J. H. Knapp in the Presbyterian Church.

The building fund was begun in 1896 and a site was purchased at Fourth and Kansas in 1897. In the early part of 1898 the little white church was dedicated. The Sunday School was well organized by that time with A. E. DeVoss as superintendent. During the hard years of 1900 and 1905 W. H. Feather, Sunday School Superintendent, was the leader in keeping the church organized and open.

By 1907 the feeling was growing that a new and larger building was needed so once again a building fund was established. In the spring of 1910 conditions became so crowded that the old City Hall was rented for the church services. In 1911 the lots at the corner of Third and Sherman Streets were purchased and ground breaking ceremonies were held on June 27. Rev. O. L. Cook officiated at the cornerstone ceremonies on September 5, 1911, and the building was completed in the spring of 1912 with the dedication on June 23,

1913. Thus one more Liberal church congregation was adequately housed.⁴

When Seward County was first settled in 1885 and 1886, nearly every quarter section was filed on and thirty-three crude sod school houses were built. Then, when the county was almost depopulated through the years 1887 to 1893, most of these schools disappeared. As the land was resettled, country school districts were organized but never had as many schools as before, probably because of the increase in the size of the farms resulted in fewer farm families.⁵

By the close of World War I there were thirty school districts in operation. During the years that followed the number of schools slowly decreased through the consolidation program, better transportation, and the further increase in the size of the farms.⁶

The first school near the location of Liberal was a very crude affair constructed of sod and was located a mile south of Second Street. It was a one-room school opened in 1886. Mattie Hollingsworth, niece of the first County Superintendent, was the teacher and there were five students. Mr. Squire was the teacher the second year in this same building. In the fall of 1888, a two story building was

⁴Personal interview with Mrs. F. O. Rindom, August 17, 1953; Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), May 10, 1947.

⁵Personal interview with Olive Eddington, August 18, 1953.

⁶Ibid., June 3, 1954.

moved to Second and Kansas and school was held in the two first floor rooms of this St. John building while people lived on the second floor. Mr. and Mrs. C. E. Locke taught both in the St. John building and, the next year, in the Vaughn building at the southeast corner of Lincoln Street.

In 1890 work began on the first real school building in Liberal which was called the Lincoln School. A contractor named "Dad" Morris built a two story brick school at a cost of \$12,000. The bricks used in the building were made just west of the town. The building consisted of six rooms, three classrooms on each floor with cloak rooms, two large halls, and two broad stairways. The teachers were still Mr. and Mrs. Locke and they had ten beginning students that year.

In 1892 there were three teachers on the staff with approximately one hundred students. In 1894 the students were divided into three groups with Miss Ada Hood teaching the primary, Mr. Rhoades teaching the immediate students, while those taking high school subjects were under Professor Stickel. The first graduate of the old Lincoln School was Evermont Hays in a class of one.⁷

The school continued a slow and steady growth throughout the years and in 1908, F. O. Rindom was hired as Superintendent of Schools and under his guidance a fully accredited

⁷Liberal News, October 28, 1931.

four-year high school was started. At this time there were eight teachers on the faculty and four more were to be hired to teach in the new high school. In the general election in November, 1908, the voters expressed their desire to have the provisions of the Barnes High School law applied to Seward County. Under this law the high school would be a county high school, the building provided by District 2 (Liberal) and to be maintained by the county. To fulfill its part of the requirement, District No. 2 in 1909 built a building at the cost of \$20,000. The Board of District No. 2 was in control of the building and its aim was to provide one of the best high schools in western Kansas.

In the high school's first annual catalogue were listed the accommodations, admission requirements and the courses of study to be offered. The townspeople supported the high school not only financially but aided in securing accommodations for the out-of-town students and securing part-time jobs for some of them. Many of the girls worked in the homes of Liberal. To be admitted to the high school without an examination, an applicant needed a common school diploma or a card showing completion of eighth grade work of an accredited city school. All other prospective students must take an examination which would be given at the high school building without charge. There was no tuition fee for any pupil.

Liberal News, May 31, 1913.

The courses of study offered at first included a college preparatory course approved by the University of Kansas whereby graduate students would be admitted to the University without examination and a second course designed to meet the needs of those who intended to finish their education at the high school. In 1910 a normal course was introduced. The school year was divided into two terms with reports of student progress sent to the parents four times yearly. The catalogue also stated that "unexceptional deportment" was required in order not to waste their opportunity.

In 1910 there was a graduating class of three; in 1911 twelve graduated; in 1912 there were eighteen graduates; and in 1913 the graduating class had increased to twenty-six.⁸

During this period of advancement for the high school, the grade school under Principal Ernest Fulton between 1906 and 1915 continued to grow until the schools were "bursting their seams." The faculty included twelve teachers and the enrollment in 1914 and 1915 for grades one to eight was a total of 560 pupils.⁹

This increased enrollment in both the grade school and the high school pointed the way for the need to expand the

⁸Personal interview with Mrs. F. O. Rindom, August 17, 1953; Liberal News (Magazine Section), 1909; First Annual Catalogue, Liberal High School, September, 1910.

⁹Liberal News, May 31, 1915.

facilities of the schools and in 1916 additions were made to the high school to bring the total cost of the facilities up to \$40,000.00. A second grade school was constructed in 1916 at a cost of \$16,000.00. This school was named in honor of United States President Garfield. It was a two-story building constructed of red brick containing eight classrooms with necessary cloakrooms, halls and stairways. Garfield was followed by another grade school, McKinley also named for a president, in 1921 at a cost of \$40,000.00. McKinley was a two-story buff-colored brick building of eight classrooms, one of which was an oversized room with a stage to be used as a small auditorium. Thus Liberal's students during this period had adequate facilities with their high school and the three grade schools.¹⁰

The Woman's Club of Liberal was organized by Mrs. Alma Edmonds in 1902. The purpose of the club was to pursue cultural studies and to find better and richer ways of living. It became affiliated with the national organization in 1904. One of their outstanding projects was that of promoting the library. It started as a club project with only a few volumes and grew until eventually the library was donated to the city.¹¹

¹⁰Liberal News (Magazine Section), 1909; Personal interview with N. B. Mahuron, June 2, 1954.

¹¹Morrison, Spirit of the Prairie, p. 60.

The Liberal Woman's Club opened the library in their building on West Second Street in 1915. The members, themselves, acting as librarians when funds were too low to permit hiring a librarian. They hired the first librarian, Miss Maurine Long, at \$5.00 a month by donations made on tag days. In 1917 because of the many war drives the club decided against a drive asking for money for the library so Mrs. W. O. Woods, Mrs. M. H. Flood and Mrs. Bert Long went to the city council for aid. They were granted \$500 from the general fund to carry on their work, but still expenses grew until it was impossible to keep up with them. Because of the increased expense the club decided in May, 1920, to circulate a petition to be signed by twenty-five per cent of the taxpayers to provide a fund to support the library as a city library. The question was voted on in the spring of 1921 but the businessmen assured the club that a levy would never be provided.

In July, 1921, Mrs. Long went to W. E. Wilson, city councilman, and requested the council to appoint a library board and provide a levy. Consequently the first board was appointed with Frank G. Boles, president; Mrs. Bert Long, vice president; Miss Kate Wright, secretary; and J. N. Evans, treasurer. In that fall the library was moved into a rented building on Kansas Avenue owned by Walter Krohne. The books

were moved as a community project with the ladies of the club doing a large portion of the work. Thus the city library was a reality in spite of the predictions of the businessmen.¹²

Liberal's first hospital was run by Dr. R. L. Jones in a dwelling house next door to his home. Miss Ward (Mrs. F. O. Rindom) was the first trained nurse in Seward County.¹³

Under the patronage of the Methodist Church in 1919 a three-story structure of copper chief brick with bedford stone trimming was constructed. Epworth Hospital had fifty-four rooms, a large glass enclosed operating room on the third floor, a clinic room on the second floor with an X-ray department. Downstairs were located the diet kitchen, dining room, storage room, and the laundry. Epworth Hospital not only served the city of Liberal but the surrounding community as well.¹⁴

Although the men dominated the early business activity, the women worked right beside the men in establishing the cultural life of the community, even on occasion being a step ahead of the men as evidenced by the beginnings of the library.

¹²Southwest Daily Times (Liberal), April 17, 1938.

¹³Personal interview with Mrs. F. O. Rindom, August 17, 1953.

¹⁴Liberal, Kansas, Printing Bureau, Liberal, July, 1926.

Schools and churches were not only organized at the request of the people of the county but were maintained and improved to meet the constant change of the times through their continued interest and financial help.

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