

Braving the Storm

Suicide in Clay County, 1893-1905



A couple's homestead, Clay County, KS 1892
SOURCE: Clay County Museum and Historical Society, Clay County, KS

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Today, we live in “uncertain” times, with financial instability and collapse looming like a heavy storm cloud. Many of us have become used to that “cloud”, but what if it were to actually rain? The people of Clay County in the 1890s knew what this was like all too well. With economic depression right on their doorsteps, many of them were driven to the point of madness that ended at the barrel of a gun. The “Panic of 1893”, as it would come to be called, was truly an example of the wrong things happening at exactly the wrong time. What started with a few companies failing snowballed into a depression that tightened the noose on an already falling community. For many of the most affected residents of Clay County, there was no end in sight, except for the relief that death offered, often accelerated by their own doing. Suicide ripped through the county like an epidemic from the late 1890s into the 1900s, largely due to the stress brought on by the Panic of 1893.

In 1863, the Kansas Pacific Railroad opened up for transport,¹ breathing life into the area and giving rise to Clay County, which was established in 1866.² To a community such as this, a railroad was everything. The Kansas Pacific provided a means for farmers to get their produce and livestock out to markets, as well as bringing in customers for local business. Train depots, like the one pictured in Figure 1 on the next page, were a town’s major link to financial success.

¹ “Kansas Pacific Railroad”, accessed May 1, 2010, <http://www.kansasheritage.org/research/rr/kp.html>.

² “Clay County”, accessed May 2, 2010, <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/counties/CY/>.



Figure 1: The depot agent, Mr. Dever, and his wife stand outside the train depot in Broughton, Clay County, KS. C. 1900.

SOURCE: Clay County Museum and Historical Society.

A major vein of industry like the railroad would come to be crucial to Clay County. This new dependence would also be the undoing of some of its residents. If a railroad went down, or new tracks were built elsewhere, the towns were the ones that lost. With such a heavy reliance on the tracks, the depression following the Panic of 1893 could be nothing but catastrophic.

The Kansas Pacific Railroad merged with the larger Union Pacific, creating a huge company that controlled much of the transit between Kansas and the East. In 1893, “the Reading Railroad, a major eastern line, went into receivership. That collapse was soon magnified by the failures of hundreds of banks and businesses dependent upon the Reading and other railroads.”³ After this, many investors, including European investors, pulled their money out of the market, resulting in a depression. Public trust was also weakened by the “Billion Dollar Congress” under President Harrison. His administration successfully drained the national reserves to under \$100 million, which only served to expand upon the fears of investors. President Cleveland did almost nothing to reverse these conditions, leaving millions unemployed in the wake of the failing businesses and banks. He, like most politicians of the time, believed that everything would sort itself out.⁴ It was not until the railroad companies, some of the largest businesses in the nation, went under that they realized that there was a massive problem.

By May of 1893, 74 railroads had gone under, with only a few able to save themselves by declaring bankruptcy. These included the Northern Pacific, Santa-Fe, and the Union Pacific, which owned the Kansas Pacific.⁵ As a result, Clay County was left crippled and cut off from many of the markets it depended on. With the train seldom coming through, if ever, business dwindled and farmers could not sell their produce and livestock. Many of the poorer farmers could not sustain their farms, and since so many of

³ “Panic of 1893,” Online Highways LLC, accessed May 1, 2010, <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h792.html>.

⁴ “Panic of 1893,” Online Highways LLC.

⁵ “Panic of 1893,” History Central, accessed May 1, 2010, <http://www.historycentral.com/Industrialage/Panic1893.html>.

the banks failed, they could not get loans to ride out the depression.⁶ Many of these farms were foreclosed and abandoned, just like the one pictured in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2: “An abandoned homestead on the way to Salina” C. 1890s
SOURCE: Clay County Museum and Historical Society, Clay County, KS

To a farmer who depended on the railroad to get product to market, a failed railroad was a nightmare. When a farmer could not sell the majority of his harvest or his livestock, he was in danger of losing everything. James Thornton, a farmer in Clay County, was just one of those individuals that fell on particularly hard times. According to the plat books of 1881, Mr. Thornton owned land in Clay County in Township 7 South, Range 3 East in section 36.⁷ For many people just like James Thornton, the depression was too much to cope with. With pressure mounting, little or no money coming in, and several mouths to feed, suicide may have seemed like the only way out. On March 30th, 1897, James Thornton took his own life.⁸

⁶ “Panic of 1893”, History Central.

⁷ Clay County Museum and Historical Society, *Historical Plat Book of Clay County, Kansas* (Chicago: The Bird and Mickel Map Co., 1881).

⁸ Rose Family Funeral Home, *Rose Family Funeral Home Records* (Clay County Museum and Historical Society: Clay County, KS), 10.

Sadly, this is just one of many recorded suicides in the area following the Panic of 1893. Between coroner's reports, funeral home records, and newspaper articles, one can draw clear connections between the Panic of 1893 and the increased suicide rates in the county. The coroner's reports, assembled from the records of several different coroners, describe "temporary insanity" as a common cause of the suicide.⁹ This is most likely a panic attack of some kind, which would leave a person prone to rash actions, such as suicide.

"Temporary insanity" did not grab only farmers. Dr. H.H. Deal, a dentist in Clay Center, committed suicide on December 8th, 1897 in his office. The newspaper account in "The Times" made note that he seemed happy and confident even on the night of his death. The journalist even went so far as to suggest that he might have been "possessed" at the time of the shooting.¹⁰ One can only speculate on cases such as this, and guess that some sense of overwhelming panic took control and ultimately caused him to end his own life.

Even today we wonder, "what drives a person to suicide?" Can things be so bad as to leave one's own family with nothing? Whatever the reason, legitimate or not, the decision to commit suicide always leaves loved ones behind to pick up the pieces. T.A. Coatsworth, a farmer of Broughton, Kansas, did just that. Mr. Coatsworth only owned a small piece of land in Township 10 South, Range 2 East, Section 14¹¹, and when the depression hit, it is not likely that he fared well. He must have found some way to get on

⁹ Clay County, *Coroner's Reports* (Clay County Museum and Historical Society), 40.

¹⁰"Strange Suicide," *The Times*, December 9, 1897.

¹¹Clay County Museum and Historical Society, *Historical Plat Book of Clay County, Kansas*.

in the years following the depression that started in 1893, however. He was able to hang on to the land he owned, but hung himself on May 2nd, 1902 in another fit of “temporary insanity.”¹² His three daughters, below, were left to take on the responsibilities of the farm.



Figure 3: The Coatsworth sisters: May, Clare, and Louisa Coatsworth sometime after their father’s suicide. *SOURCE*: Clay County Museum and Historical Society.

None of these women ever married, likely due to the fact that the farm was so demanding, and settling their father’s debts probably took some doing. This is just another sad story of loved ones left hanging out to dry in the wake of a suicide. Incidents like this were relatively common in the area at the time, with 19 cases reported between

¹² Clay County, *Coroner’s Reports*, 68.

funeral home records and coroner reports; both are records that are incomplete, likely excluding several other cases.

Aside from religious implications, which there surely were for these people, suicide has not changed. Its victims usually take their parting thoughts with them to the grave, which lends to the act's puzzling nature. Whether these people knew it or not, many of them would leave a bigger impact in their death than they would have had they lived. In leaving this world, they left others behind to ask the ever-present question, "Why?" It is a question that mostly goes unanswered, and perhaps it is better that way. What is known is that in Clay County, a depression swept in, whipping up businesses, farms, and families in its destructive path. It is a sad commentary that so many lives were ended because of the Panic of 1893. These were by no means weak individuals, just people whose spirits could not brave the storm.

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