

Western Frontier of Orion, Gove County, Kansas

Written by Brad Zerr

History 533: Lost Kansas Communities

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Instructor: Dr. Morgan

Photograph Courtesy of Kansas, Inc.,
accessed May 1st, 2010,

Rolling Waves of Grass

Kansas is known for its vast prairies where grass moves with the wind like waves in the ocean. Eastern Kansas is known as the Flint Hills with lush trees and creeks, but the farther west you go, the land becomes flush while the trees and creeks become sparse. Buffalo and many other types of animals wander around the prairies in search of food, or just a relaxing day in the sunshine. There are a few rivers that travel through western Kansas, such as the Smokey Hill River, the Saline River, and the Arkansas River. Creeks break away from the rivers like the root systems of plants, scattering all over western Kansas. Today, most of the creeks are completely dry and leave an empty trench all throughout the prairies. One would ask: would this land of peace and openness be the place to raise a family? To start a career? To get away from fearful past experiences? Many settlers did just that, and came from the eastern coast, foreign countries, or other surrounding states like Missouri, Oklahoma, or Nebraska. However, not everything was sweet and dandy in the Old West. Weather has a huge impact on the western prairies. Rainfall is rarely seen out in the west, but don't let the 20 percent chances of precipitation fool you.

Western Kansas is in the middle of what meteorologists call Tornado Alley. Severe weather is a major threat to not only Kansas, but to all of the surrounding states. Severe thunderstorms can occur any place at any time. Warm air moves north from the Gulf of Mexico and cools as it mixes in with the cold air from the Colorado Rockies, stirring up tornadoes during the spring and summer periods. Although weather plays a major role in the loss of these settlements, other factors contributed to the destruction of most small Kansas communities. The loss of most small

Kansas communities is a result of location—lack of water sources, proximity to railroads and highways, or relocation enforced by the United States government.

Early History of Gove County

Gove County is in the northwest corner of Kansas, though some people might describe its location as more west central Kansas. It is easy to find Gove County on a Kansas map: starting from the northwest corner, count three counties to the east (going right) and then three counties south (going down) as seen on the map to the right.

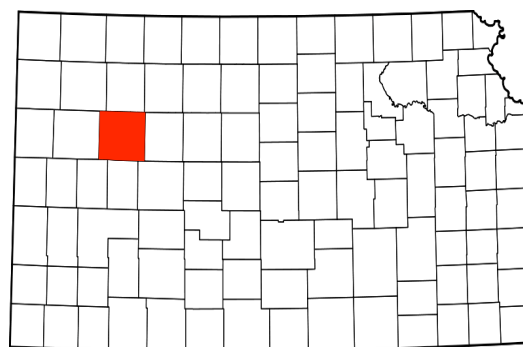


Figure 1: Kansas Map with Gove County Highlighted. SOURCE: Kansas Historical Society, "Gove County, Kansas," accessed May 1 2010

Founded in 1886, the county was named in

honor of Captain Grenville L. Gove, Eleventh Kansas Calvary, who died in 1864.¹ Gove County

started out with five towns: Quinter, Buffalo Park, Gainfield, Grinnell, and Gove (county seat). Within ten years, six more communities arose. These communities include Tiffany, Alanthus, Jerome, Catalpa, Coin, and Orion as seen on the left. These six communities were formed by area farmers living around the town, who

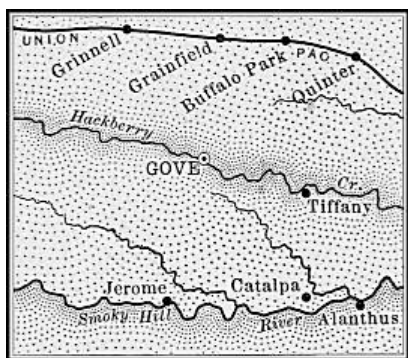


Figure 2: Map and text from

¹ History of Kansas, Noble Prentis. (Winfield: F.P. Greer.

2010, <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/counties/GO/>.

voted to install a post office and/or general store. In 1890s America, railroads were the best source of transportation and hauling freight. Most Kansas towns wanted to locate the railroad lines near their homes, but back then the railroad took a long time to build, and also cost a hefty sum of money. Many small communities died out due to empty rumors of the railroad coming though. Fortunately, a few communities survived without a dependence on the railroad.

As the years go by, the small towns slowly begin to lose their population. The railroad is still in use, but the invention of the automobile stirred up on the East Coast and began its journey westward. It didn't take long before the farmers started using these automobiles to work the fields and to travel to and from different communities for food, supplies, and recreation. Shortly thereafter, different kinds of automobiles were invented—for example, the tractor. This implement made farming in Kansas fast and efficient. After all, Kansas is also known as the bread basket of the world because of the Kansas farmers' ability to mass produce wheat, which can survive the cold, mild winters and hot, dry summers.

Life in Orion

The crossroads of county roads S and 22 in western Gove County became home to Orion, a small community. Before Orion was a town, the first building near Orion was a sod one-room



Figure 3: Orion Schoolhouse pictured with students. SOURCE: Gove County Historical

schoolhouse that was located one mile south of Orion. Students that studied there had to bring their own stools, slates, and books. The land was bare and flat, the parents dug furrows for the children to follow to and from school if by chance there happened to be a dust storm. When you learn about the history of most small towns, you notice that buildings such as

schools and churches were moved around the rural areas. The photo on the left is District 22 which was formed in Orion on March 28, 1887, where the first framed school house was built on the northeast corner of the crossroads.²

Orion received its name from a student who suggested that the community should be named in honor of her teacher Mr. Justin Orion McBurney. McBurney taught in Orion and Grainfield, which was ten miles north of Orion. He was well liked in the entire county, especially since he was a teacher. History books don't tell the actual date of when Orion was named, but they believed it was named in 1898.

In most small towns, the main buildings are usually a schoolhouse, a church, and a general store. The first church was the Methodist Church, and was thriving until May 18, 1918. On this date, a tornado swept through and wiped out the church and the minister's home. A general store was built on the northwest corner of the crossroads and was a two-story building. The store was owned by John Rundberg and J. A. Danielson. The bottom story of the store was a general and hardware store, while the top story was a dance hall and

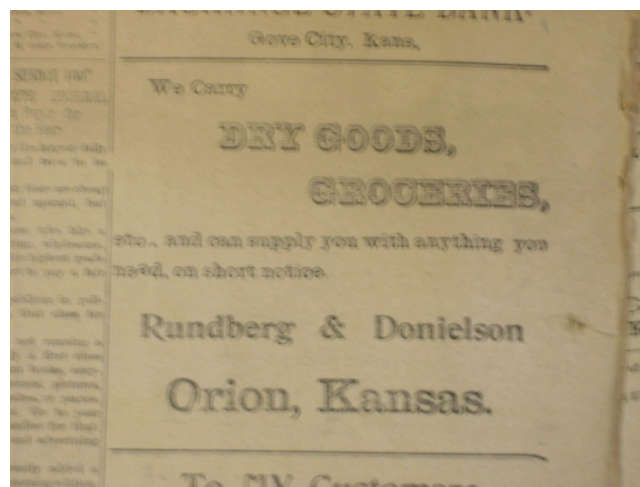


Figure 4: Advertisement for Orion Store. SOURCE: Rundberg and Danielson, "Dry Goods, Groceries Advertisement," *The Gove County Republican Gazette* (Gove

²J.H. Abell, Albert Tuttle, and Mary Tuttle, "Orion," in *History and Heritage of Gove County*, first edition, edited by Mary Tuttle and Albert Tuttle (Quinter, KS: Gove County: Bicentennial Commission & The Gove County Historical Association, 1976), 85-86.

also served as a meeting place for Lutherans, who held services at least twice a month. The photo above shows an ad in the paper. Unfortunately, the May 18, 1918 tornado that destroyed the Methodist Church and part of the parsonage also damaged the top story of the store.

A post office that was originally named Geil was built on May 1, 1901 and was located two miles west and one and a half miles north from Orion. This post office was run by a postmaster named Joel Beougher. One year later on June 11, 1902, the town's people petitioned for the post office to be relocated in the town of Orion. The post office was moved into the store and fell under the new postmaster John Rundberg.³



Figure 5: Orion crowd enjoying festivities.

Orion wasn't a simple, boring little community. The town was known for its dances that used to be held in the second story of the store. Book clubs, auctions, and baseball games were another way for the community to get together and have fun as seen in Figure 5. There were also barbershops and

blacksmith shops in Orion. When the weather was pleasant on a Saturday afternoon at about 2 p.m., Rundberg would appear with two new baseballs, toss them to the crowd, and tell them to get to it.

³ Ibid.

Many rumors were told of a railroad that was supposed to work its way into Orion. Many residents knew that this would make Orion a better supplied and maintained community, and this might influence other settlers to move into Orion. Unfortunately, the railroad never made it through. Orion was located in the Gaeland Township that was established in 1903. Even though there was a store, post office, church, school, and residents, Orion was never platted. The cemetery was named the Gaeland Cemetery and was located behind the Methodist church. The cemetery is still there today and is very well kept.

After the news that the railroad was not coming through, along with and the dance hall being damaged and removed due to the May 18, 1918 tornado, hopes of survival started to fade for the town of Orion. Post offices that served the rural areas south and west of Orion were closed. So Orion formed a rural route with box delivery for these rural farmers. The post office survived until the start of World War II, when the Aerial Gunnery Range was established circa 1939, and took over the southwest part of Gove County. Orion wasn't within the range, but it was close enough that most residents moved out, away from the range. Due to the lack of people to run the post route, the post office in Orion was discontinued on August 31, 1943, and the stores closed shortly after.

Death from Above

As war in Europe was stirring up in 1939, America was just coming out of tough times. We had just survived the Great Depression in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the Dust Bowl in the 1930s.⁴ America didn't want any part in the war across seas, but the American government wasn't going to just turn its head. Troops were being trained and prepared in case the war came

⁴ "The Dust Bowl," accessed April 28, 2010, http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/water_02.html.

to the United States. The U.S. government issued Aerial Gunnery Ranges throughout the United States, and Gove County, Kansas was one of many ranges. The range was 340 square miles and affected 100 families. Rumors were spreading around Gove County about when the range was going to be in effect, and on February 11, 1943, the *Gove County Republican Gazette* wrote an article about these rumors:

“If you’re awakened early some morning by the sound of bombs busting in air, do not jump out of bed and run to the storm cave thinking the Japanese or the Germans have swooped down for an attack—it’ll probably be our own American boys going through maneuvers on a bombing base in the southwest part of Gove County. Mind you, we have no official information that there will be a bomber base in Gove County, but indications point strongly in that direction.”⁵

Later that year, the government let the citizens know the range was going to be a gunnery range. Flying bullets were the only scare for the citizens—no bombs would be deployed.⁶ The land was only going to be leased for one year by the War Act and with the privilege renewal for war if necessary. After that, it would be returned to the original owners. July 31, 1943 was the “Order of Immediate Possession for Gunnery Range” date.⁷ Some of the main communities that were affected were Orion, Coin, Jerome, and rural areas of southwest Gove County as shown in Figure 6.

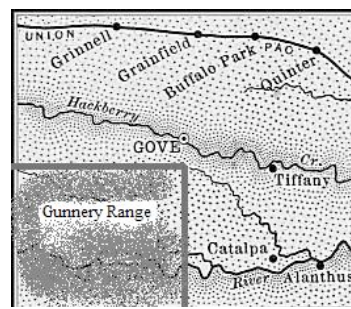


Figure 6: Map and Shaded area of Gunnery Range from History of Kansas
SOURCE: Winfield: E.P.

⁵ “Editor’s Voice,” *The Gove County Republican Gazette* (Gove City), February 11, 1943.

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⁶ Mary Tuttle and Albert Tuttle, "Gunnery Range," in *History and Heritage of Gove County*, first edition, edited by Mary Tuttle and Albert Tuttle (Quinter, KS: Gove County Bicentennial Commission & The Gove County Historical Association, 1976), 254 - 256.

⁷ "When did World War 2 start?" accessed May 2, 2010, http://wiki.answers.com/Q/When_did_World_War_2_start.

Orion after a Century

Today, Orion is still there, and as you drive into Orion from the East, you will pass the Gaeland Cemetery. It has been well cared for, and still has the original archway over the entrance of the cemetery. The schoolhouse and church are no longer in Orion, but the parsonage is still there, though the south wall is breaking apart. On the northwest corner of the crossroads, the store still stands, but is gradually sloping down. The top story is gone, but the porch and awning are still intact. Several trees have grown around the buildings and several residents still live there. Most of Gove County's citizens have heard of or remember the wonderful times they or their parents spent in Orion. Though the town died physically, the memories of the town will live forever in the minds of those fortunate enough to call Orion home.



Figure 7: Orion around 1898.
SOURCE: Gove County Historical



Figure 8 Orion in 2010. Taken by author.

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