

Murdock: Booming Town to Farming Community

Kingman County, Kansas

Austin Smith



Figure 1. Photograph of Main Street in Murdock, KS, ca. 1910. Photo courtesy of the Kingman County Historical Museum.

In south central Kansas lies a small unincorporated town by the name of Murdock. Murdock is located in the eastern portion of Kingman County in Dale Township. Kingman County's boundaries were defined March 2, 1872, after being surveyed by a government surveyor by the name of Smoot in 1866 and 1867.¹ There is a creek running four miles north of Murdock that is located next to Midway, which is another lost piece of history from Kansas' past, named Smoots Creek after this surveyor. The landscape around Murdock varies from flat, open farm ground with trees to the south and east to hilled pastures to the northwest. A majority of the land around Murdock is used for farming while the remaining land is mainly used as grazing for livestock. The population of Murdock currently stands in the area of 375 people.



Figure 2. Photograph of Main Street in Murdock, KS, in 2012. Photograph taken by Austin Smith.

¹ Tom Kinkaid, *History of Murdock, Kansas* (N.p.: n.p., 1979), obtained from Kingman County Historical Museum.

Murdock, Kansas, was not always named Murdock. When the town was founded on March 17, 1884, it was under the name of New Murdock. This was due to the fact that in Butler County, KS, which is the second county to the east of Kingman County, there was another town with the name of Murdock. New Murdock was named after the Murdock family, who were the founders of *The Wichita Eagle*.² It was more specifically named in honor of Marsh Murdock. New Murdock was laid out and sold by the Arkansas Valley Town and Land Company.³ It is said that the town was located where it was because it was thought that there needed to be a town located four miles west of Oakland, which died after a short period of existence. At that same time it was believed that a town needed to be where Cheney, KS, is located. Cheney is still in existence today and holds a population of approximately 2,100 people. The Wichita and Western Railroad, which is now the Santa Fe Railroad, was built through this area in the same year that the town was founded and was opened in October of 1884.⁴

Some of the early families to begin settling in the town of New Murdock included the Sykes, Mustoes, Hodges, Furrows, Gerings, Youngs, Harners, Colemans, Hansmans, Holders, and Powers.⁵ Harry and Cable Sykes came to the area in 1877. Cable built the first elevator in New Murdock in 1891, and he and his father Harry shipped cattle and wheat out of town by use of the railroad. The elevator that Cable Sykes built was located at the old mill that was built with the railroad depot.⁶ The elevator was in operation until the 1930s.⁷ In 1887, Russian immigrant Peter Grearing built a flour mill west of town on the Ninnescah River.⁸ People brought their

² John Howell and Susan Howell, "History of Murdock," *Blue Skyways*, 2001, <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/counties/KM/murdock.html>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kinkaid, *History of Murdock, Kansas*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

wheat and corn to the mill to have it ground into flour.⁹ Peter's son J.P. Gearing took over the family mill in later years. There was also a steel and plow factory called New Murdock Steel and Plow Company in the early years of the town; however, no information was found on the years that the factory was in operation.¹⁰ In 1909, B.T. Robinson came to New Murdock and started a bank. The bank was very strong and survived until it was shut down September 11, 1992.¹¹ Two different newspapers covered New Murdock. The paper known as the *New Murdock Herald Weekly* lasted less than one year. The *Herald* was started April 8, 1887, and closed December 23, 1887. Although this newspaper lasted a very short time, the New Murdock news was covered in the *Kingman Leader* and the *Kingman Weekly Journal*.



Figure 3. Line of wagons at Sykes Elevator ca. 1905. Photograph courtesy of Kingman County Historical Museum.

⁹ Howell and Howell, "History of Murdock."

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

The year 1910 not only marked a new decade for New Murdock, but it also gave the town a new name. On January 4, 1910, New Murdock was renamed Murdock, as the former town of Murdock, which was located in Butler County, closed its post office in October of 1902.¹² In Murdock's early years, the community built a two-room schoolhouse that had one teacher. The back room of the schoolhouse was often used to hold boxing matches.¹³ At one point in Murdock's history, there was a doctor's office, drug store, three grocery stores, a newspaper office, an implement dealer who also sold trucks and automobiles, a lumber yard, a bakery, two grain dealers, stockyards, a restaurant, a barber shop, four filling stations, a depot which also had a telegraph service and railway express, and cream-buying stations.¹⁴

In 1884, the first Methodist church was organized.¹⁵ The first services were held in the hall above the Van Fossen and Peck store.¹⁶ There was often a dance held in the hall Saturday nights followed by the church service on Sunday morning. Once the schoolhouse was built in the town, the services were moved there. In 1902, the first church building was built.¹⁷ This building was struck by lightning in April of 1914 and the church burned down. Soon after that the church was rebuilt. In 1974, the church once again was burned to the ground.¹⁸ The third church that was built shortly after still stands to this day, as shown in Figure 4. The pastors in the church often did not receive a salary. One such pastor was Pastor Irvin. He had been with the church for two years and was going to leave due to not receiving a salary, so the

¹² Kinkaid, *History of Murdock, Kansas*.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Howell and Howell, "History of Murdock."

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kinkaid, *History of Murdock, Kansas*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

congregation held a collection for him. The collection consisted of three dollars in cash, a wagonload of corn for his horses, and a wagonload of groceries for his family.¹⁹

Today Murdock is a quiet community where the only remains of the once-booming town are the remains of the buildings that are commonly vacant and the memories that were kindled here in the minds of the remaining citizens.



Figure 4. United Methodist Church in Murdock. Photograph taken by Austin Smith, 2012.

¹⁹ Kinkaid, *History of Murdock, Kansas*.



Figure 5. Photograph of the Murdock Bank, closed in 1992. Photograph by Austin Smith, 2012.



Figure 6. Photograph of the Murdock post office in 2012. Photograph taken by Austin Smith.



Figure 7. Photograph of Methodist Church in Murdock, n.d. Photo courtesy of Kingman County Historical Museum.



Figure 8. Photograph of Mustoe Livery Stable Fire ca. 1906. Photo courtesy of Kingman County Historical Museum.



Figure 9. Photograph of Murdock Public School house ca. 1910. Photo courtesy of Kingman County Historical Museum.



Figure 10. Photograph of the lumberyard in Murdock, KS ca. 1912. Photo courtesy of Kingman County Historical Museum.



Figure 11. Photograph of the Murdock Train Depot ca. 1910. Photo courtesy of Kingman County Historical Museum.



Figure 12. Photograph of the Ratzlaff Brothers grocery store on Main Street in Murdock ca. 1912. Photo courtesy of Kingman County Historical Museum.



Figure 13. Photograph of drug store on Main St. in Murdock ca. 1912. Photo courtesy of Kansas Memory.



Figure 14. Plat map of New Murdock ca. 1903. Photo courtesy of Kansas Memory.

Bibliography

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