

# Mosaic of a lost community:

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Oak Mills, Walnut Township, Atchison County,  
Kansas 1855-1945

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This report contains historical journal references, history obtained through genealogical archives, investigative local folklore, maps spanning several decades, and photos and references from the author's personal knowledge and affiliation with the site.

The history of an established town is generally pulled together by good documentation, persisting families and oral accounts of those who have withstood the test of time. When a town is lost, its history can be fragmented into bits of information found only in dusty archives and vague recollections of those who may have some distant connection to the location. Oak Mills in Atchison County, Kansas is one of those lost communities whose long and diverse history is only found in shards of information gleaned from the stories of nearby communities. These shards combined with geographical details and tales of local folklore come together in a “mosaic” that shows the richness of a little town on the northeast banks of the Missouri River.

Oak Mills first appears in the annals of the great American West in 1724 through French-Indian connections to a small area just south of the present day town-site referred to only as the Fort village. The outpost was credited by Etienne de Veniard, Sieur Bourgmont, a French explorer, as being the first white-man’s settlement on the west side of the Missouri River.<sup>1</sup> The origination of the name Kansas was actually thought to be coined from a term “Kanses” which the French used to describe the many Kansa Indian settlements in the region. The land that stretched from the Grand Village in Doniphan County to the Fort village of Oak Mills was one of the richest locales for commercial supplies and trading.<sup>2</sup> It continued to be an area of importance as relations with the Indians and later American settlers were negotiated through various treaties and counsels. This reference to the French-Indian trading outpost shows the establishment of the

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<sup>1</sup> Kansas State Historical Society, *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, Volume 10* (State Printing Office, Topeka, 1908) pg. 341

<sup>2</sup> Ibid pg 341

present day Oak Mills almost 290 years ago.

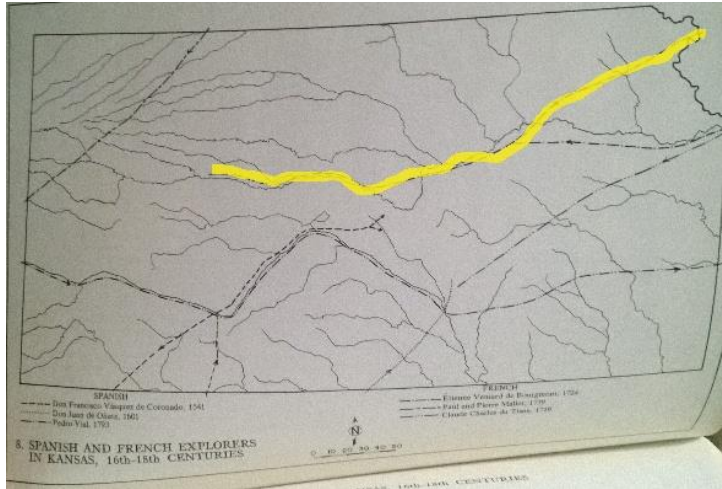


Figure 1: Map 9 Spanish and French Explorers in Kansas, 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries. SOURCE: *Historical Atlas of Kansas 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*; Homer E. Socolofsky, Huber Self. Note: The highlighted area is Bourgamont's route through Kansas in the 1700's.

The next historical reference to Oak Mills came in the form of two important explorers, Lewis and Clark. On July 3, 1804, a day before their famous July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration at Independence Creek, the explorers passed by a little outcropping in the Missouri River named by the French, Isle De Vache or as the locals knew it, Cow Island. In their journal they referenced the remains of a trading house on the western bank of the Missouri across from the island as being all that was left of the previous French fort. Here they found a “very fat horse, which appears to have been lost a long time.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1818 Major Stephen Long utilized Cow Island to hold a peace council with the Kanza and Osage Indians. This counsel sealed peaceful dealings between the neighboring Indians, the growing military and white settlers in the area.<sup>4</sup> This pact lasted through the reorganization of Indian reservations in the 1830s and continued with the Kickapoo tribe who resided in Oak Mills until the mid- 1850s. In her book, “*Early Settlements of Atchison County*”, Rita Noll credits F.P. Goddard, J.B. Goddard, James Douglas, Allen Hanson, and George A. Wright as the founders of Oak Mills. These five settlers traveled

<sup>3</sup> Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition 1804-1806* (New York Dodd, Mead & Co. 1904) pg 65

<sup>4</sup> Kansas State Historical Society, *Kansas Historical Quarterly- The military post as a factor in the frontier defense of Kansas 1865-1869* (State Printing Office, Topeka) pg 50

across the river in June 1854 to homestead land directly west of their current homes in Iatan, Missouri.<sup>5</sup> This crossing is significant because it historically predates the settling of Atchison, and Atchison County, Kansas.<sup>6</sup> It is said that an old Kickapoo Indian chief by the name of Jim Corn and his small tribe maintained a residency near Oak Mills, but by 1855 most of the Native American population had dispersed or relocated elsewhere. The Kansas-Nebraska Act opened the area up to a large influx of Kentuckians, Upland Southerners from Missouri, and German immigrants.

During October of 1855, in the neighboring town of Kickapoo, just five miles south of Oak Mills, a political firestorm was brewing. The recently established town of Kickapoo was vying for the Leavenworth County seat. During the election, the town boasted of only 500 residents but more than 1000 residents were counted in the election.<sup>7</sup> This was due mainly to the call-to-arms made by pro-slavery Missouri residents to help establish a slave state within the newly formed Kansas territory. In a speech given in Platte City, Missouri, Senator David Atchison, acting Vice President of the United States and an outspoken pro-slave antagonist, summed up the ideal of the Missouri border jumpers at the time,

“If we cannot get Kansas by peaceful means, we must take it at the point of the bayonet, if necessary.”<sup>8</sup>

This rally cry kicked off the period known as “Bleeding Kansas” and proved to be a boon for the blossoming economy in Oak Mills.

Located in a prime spot on the Missouri River, Oak Mills was situated in a valley created by the natural protective bluffs overlooking the river. The hills rolling above it were abundant in hardwood oak trees and grazing ground for livestock. The river bottoms and sloughs, created by the ever-shifting Missouri River channel, held rich crop ground and flat docking sites for river ferries. It was this exact feature that attracted two popular ferry operations, Lewis Point and Farley’s Ferry. Lewis Point, named for Capt. Calvin Lewis, was the first established running ferry operation to obtain a charter by the Kansas

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<sup>5</sup> Rita Noll, *Early Settlements of Atchison County* (Atchison County Kansas Genealogical Society, 1997) pg. 11-15

<sup>6</sup> William G. Cutler, *The History of the State of Kansas* (A.T. Andreas, Chicago, 1883) pg 369

<sup>7</sup> Zach Baker, *Battle for Supremacy: Kickapoo Township, Leavenworth County, Kansas 1855-1910* (Chapman Center for Rural Studies, 2012) pg 6

<sup>8</sup> George Washington Martin, *The first two years of Kansas-An Address* (State Printing Office, Topeka, 1907) pg 9

Territorial Legislature in the region.<sup>9</sup> Lewis Point was a rocky outcrop located directly above Oak Mills that made an ideal ferry landing.<sup>10</sup>

The second ferry operation (probably the most infamous) was operated by Nimrod Farley. Mr. Farley was considered quite the character in his day on both the Missouri and Kansas side of the border. His family was well known in the area as his brother was responsible for founding Farley, Missouri in 1850. An avid businessman, Nimrod would routinely take out space in local papers to advertise the use of his ferry crossing. An ad placed in *The Western Argus* of Wyandotte County March 1855 shows the dedication Mr. Farley to his business and the cause of the pro-slave movement. The ad reads,

“Election Kansas-The Ferry that Never Stops. A report having got out that one of our boats had been carried off by the ice, we take the liberty of contradicting it. Ours is the only ferry that never stops. We keep two good boats and when one can’t run the other can. All who wish to be in Kansas in time to vote, go to Iatan, and you will not be disappointed for old Nim is always ready.”<sup>11</sup>

Nimrod was also able to obtain a Kansas Territorial Legislature charter giving him exclusive rights to his ferry operation on a section of the Missouri River directly across from Iatan, Missouri. This effectively made Oak Mills the exclusive crossing point from Missouri to Kansas on that stretch of waterway. The business was eventually sold to George McAdown who ran “Farleys Ferry” until it was infamously destroyed before the Civil War by local Jayhawkers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> George A. Root, *Kansas Historical Quarterly-Ferries in Kansas; Part I Missouri River* (Kansas State Historical Society, 1933) pg 3-28

<sup>10</sup> Sheffield Ingalls, *History of Atchison County, Kansas* (Standard Publishing Company, 1916) pg 128

<sup>11</sup> Kansas State Historical Society, *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, Volume 10* (State Printing Office, Topeka, 1908) pg. 127

<sup>12</sup>George A. Root, *Kansas Historical Quarterly-Ferries in Kansas; Part I Missouri River* (Kansas State Historical Society, 1933) pg 3-28

As “Bleeding Kansas” raged into the early 1860s, the pace in Oak Mills started to slow into a quieter roll. Families started to purchase large tracts of land and build homesteads that can still be found today. Between 1855 and 1860, Oak Mills saw an influx of farms that ranged from 80 to 200 acres in size. Products ranged from the fruit orchards run by a Prussian immigrant named Henry Sacks (whose family still lives in the area to this day) to the stock and crop farms of Kentucky transplant John Waddle.<sup>13</sup> In 1860, the Oak Saw Mill from which the town derived its name, burned to the ground. It was reconstructed shortly after and ran by a Mr. Cannady until it was taken over in 1874 by a German miller, of John Davitz.<sup>14</sup> Mr. Davitz would go on to become one of Oak Mills’ more important land owners as he purchased the eight acres the village originally sat on. He continued to run the mill for three years until he turned his attention to his general store. He branched out into other avenues to include cotton and stock farming, lumber, and rock commodities, as well as serving in different community positions.<sup>15</sup> The Davitz family persists in Oak Mills until their last recorded census in 1910.<sup>16</sup>

The time between 1860 and 1875 proved to be a growth spurt for Oak Mills. Not only did it bring seven new large and prominent farmsteads, but it also proved to be a heyday for riverboat traffic between Kansas City, Atchison, and St. Joseph, Missouri. In the fall of 1869, a Missouri physician and surgeon named George Redmond relocated his practice from Platte County Missouri to Oak Mills. Dr. Redmond coined the term “Slabtown” in reference to Oak Mills’ rough and tough river town atmosphere. Boasting three general stores, a rock-walled one room jail, a continuing ferry operation, and a tavern, the town had turned back into a busy trading area reminiscent of its French days.<sup>17</sup> The relocation of a post office from nearby Plum Grove, Kansas in 1868 had made Oak Mills an official incorporated town.<sup>18</sup> John Waddle, a local farmer and school board member, served as the original Oak Mills Post Master for two years, overseeing the town’s incorporation and the eventual welcoming of a new rail way.

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<sup>13</sup> William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas; Atchison County, Part 38* (A.T. Andreas, Chicago, 1883) pg 1-6

<sup>14</sup> Rita Noll, *Early Settlements of Atchison County* (Atchison County Kansas Genealogical Society, 1997) pg. 11-15

<sup>15</sup> William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas; Atchison County, Part 38* (A.T. Andreas, Chicago, 1883) pg 1-6

<sup>16</sup> Ancestry.com, *Kansas State Census: 1910* (Accessed online, December 2013)

<sup>17</sup> Rita Noll, *Early Settlements of Atchison County* (Atchison County Kansas Genealogical Society, 1997) pg. 11-15

<sup>18</sup> Kansas State Historical Society, *Kansas Post Offices 1828-1961* (Accessed online, November 2013)

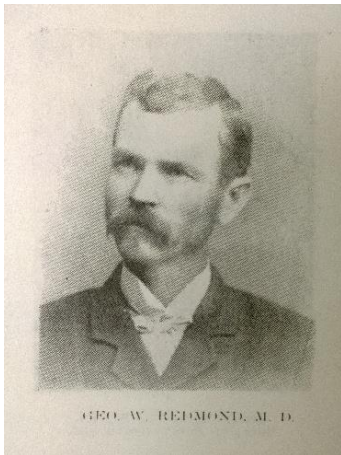


Figure 2: A photograph of George W. Redmond M.D. circa 1925. SOURCE: *Combined standard atlas of Atchison County, Kansas, 1887, 1903, 1925* pg 59.

The Missouri-Pacific Railroad, or MoPac, was founded out of St. Louis in 1851. From its inception through the turn of the century it laid rail lines westward towards the coast. In 1869, the central branch of the railway rolled south through Atchison into Leavenworth County. MoPac designated Oak Mills as a flag and telegraph station, officially putting the town on the map on a national level.<sup>19</sup> George Wright, father to seven, widower and one of the original five settlers, joined the rail line as a worker. The Wright family persisted on through the 1800s, disappearing from the census in 1910.<sup>20</sup>

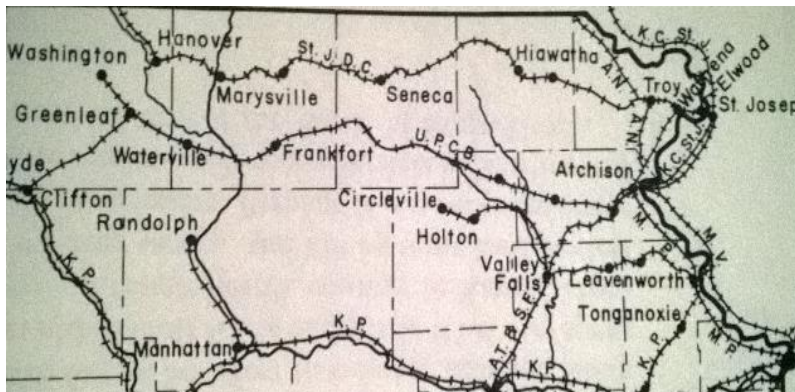


Figure 3: Map 30 Railroad Development in Kansas, 1878. SOURCE: *Historical Atlas of Kansas 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*; Homer E. Socolofsky, Huber Self. Note the “M.P.” initials running between Leavenworth and Atchison. This indicates the Missouri Pacific rail line that ran through Oak Mills.

<sup>19</sup>Rita Noll, *Early Settlements of Atchison County* (Atchison County Kansas Genealogical Society, 1997) pg. 11-15

<sup>20</sup> Ancestry.com, *Kansas State Census: 1910* (Accessed online, December 2013)

As the 70's continued the town went quiet. Community members continued to work successfully on their farms, prominent figures assumed roles as school board members and road trustees, and sat in on county advisory boards. Life in Oak Mills seemed to be content and pleasant until a large flood in 1881 shifted the Missouri River into its westerly channel. Very little is documented about flood damage in rural communities. However, the channel that the river moved into was previously a slough rich in farmland. The flood certainly wiped out this land, but it could be speculated to have caused damage to surrounding low-lying farms and buildings. The channel shift also redefined the boundaries of Cow Island, aligning it with mainland Missouri, and cut off its Kansas occupants from their voting and post office precinct in Oak Mills.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, a series of floods between 1881 and 1908 brought devastation on a wide spread basis over the northeastern Kansas region. The flood of 1903 started in May with heavier than average rainfall over central Kansas. The Kansas River officially reached flood stage in Kansas City on May 30. The ensuing weeks brought devastation to the Missouri and Kansas River valley on a massive scale.<sup>22</sup> While the northern part of the Missouri River valley was spared, the destruction set the stage for another flood less than five years later. The June flood of 1908 mirrored the flood of 1903, but this time rain water also came from northern states such as Nebraska and Montana. The Missouri River officially reached flood stage on May 28 and didn't completely recede until July. It was one of the longest flood durations in the region's history along with massive damage.<sup>23</sup>

It was this combination of devastating floods and river channel shifts that led the eventual decline in Oak Mills. While very little historical documentation is found about the damage of flooding in outlying counties, one only needs to see the damage done in more urban areas to understand what citizens must have endured. The river near Oak Mills shifted slightly and the area began to fill with sedimentation. The ever-changing landscape of the river way, coupled with the efficiency and popularity of cargo transport

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<sup>21</sup> George Remsburg, *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society Volume 8: Isle de Vache* (Kansas State Historical Society, 1902) pg 441 to 442

<sup>22</sup> Kansas State Historical Society, *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, Volume 10* (State Printing Office, Topeka, 1908) pg. 560

<sup>23</sup> IBID pg 562 to 563



via railway, brought a steep decline to river traffic through the 1890s and 1900s.<sup>24</sup> It's during this time that the shards of Oak Mills' history start to become scarce. At some point between 1910 and 1920, MoPac abandoned its Oak Mills flag station, leaving the line to eventually become just another section of adjoining track between Atchison and Leavenworth. By 1910 the population of Oak Mills had dropped to less than 100 residents, and over the course of the next thirty- five- years those numbers dwindled rapidly.<sup>25</sup>

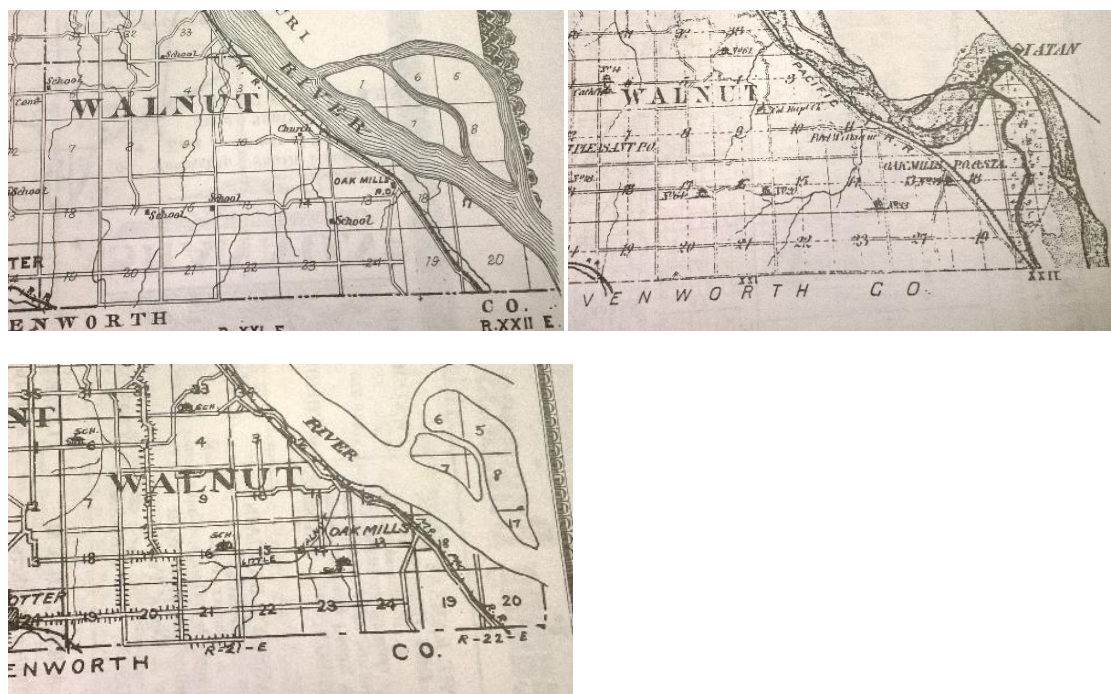


Figure 4: Atlas of Walnut Township and Oak Mills as depicted in 1887, 1903, 1925. SOURCE: *F* pg: not given, 7, and 35.

The 1925 Atchison County Atlas shows a significant number of landowners in the area. However, the sections were farmed by a small handful of people who remained on their properties or who rented the land to outside interests.<sup>26</sup> On March 31, 1945 the Oak Mills post office permanently closed its doors signaling the death of the town and ending 220 years of history for the area. Oak Mills exists now as a

<sup>24</sup> The Columbia Encyclopedia.com, *Missouri River; United States* (Accessed online, December 2013)

<sup>25</sup> Legends of Kansas.com, *Extinct Towns in Atchison County* (Accessed online, December 2013)

<sup>26</sup> *Combined Standard Atlas of Atchison County, Kansas, 1887,1903,1925* (Windmill Publications, Mt. Vernon, 2001) pg 35

small handful of houses at the junction of back roads that stretch from Atchison to Leavenworth. The railroad tracks still run through the area, the river still flows lazily by, the farming land is still fertile, and the bluffs are still full of trees. The only remains of the once thriving community is a crumbling stone-walled- one room jail cell and a hand painted sign erected by the local chapter of Atchison County FFA that reads:

“Oak Mills est. 1855. Site of Kansas Indian village before a French fort was built in 1720’s. First white settlers arrived in 1854 about 1 mile west. First permanent establishment of white man’s authority in Kansas. Post office was there 1868 to 1945”.

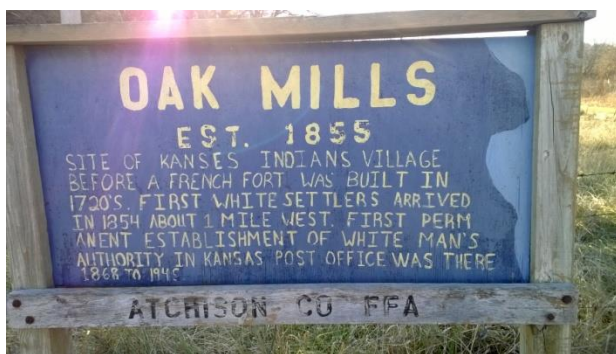


Figure 5: A photograph of a hand-painted sign erected by the Atchison County FFA circa 1990’s. SOURCE: Photograph by author November, 2013.



Figure 6: A photograph of a stone walled one room jail house. SOURCE: Photograph by author November, 2013. Note: This is one of two original Oak Mills buildings left standing on the abandoned town site.



Figure 7: A photograph of a gravesite located in Hottle Family Cemetery, Oak Mills, KS. Circa 1980. SOURCE: Private collection of Gayle Grape. Note: the spectral image sitting atop the headstone. The day after the image was taken the gravestone was mysteriously knocked off its base.

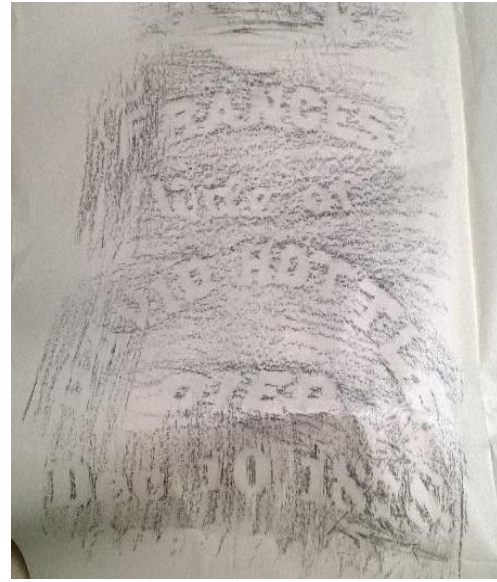


Figure 8: A grave etching of the tombstone photographed in Figure 7. SOURCE: Etching by author December, 2013. Note: The headstone belonged to one of the longest lasting more prominent families in Oak Mills.



Figure 9: A photograph of the author etching the headstone of Francis Hottle at the Hottle Family Cemetery, Oak Mills, KS. SOURCE: Photograph by author December, 2013. Note: The broken base of the ghost image headstone lies to the right of the author as well as another 200 lb. headstone that was also found mysteriously knocked over.

Table 1: A table listing some of the more prominent families that resided in Oak Mills between 1855 and 1910. SOURCE: 1865 Kansas State Census for Atchison County, KS. John A. Ostertag. 1825-1955 Kansas State Censuses for Atchison County, KS. Ancestry.com Note: The table includes known birth and death dates, the number of family members listed in the census, a miscellaneous fact about the family found during research and the date the year of the census.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Birth</u>	<u>Death</u>	<u># in family</u>	<u>Misc. Fact.</u>	<u>Census</u>
Adamson, Maggie	1813	Unk	3	Originally a Hottle. Was widowed at age 20	1910
Boten, James	1834	1900	7	Was originally buried in Hottle Family Cemetery, moved to Branscom cemetery.	1865
Brown, Harrison	Unk	Unk	6	Prominent farmer who married twice with 11 total children	1865
Davitz, John	1844	1923	Unk	German immigrant. Owned the 8 acres that encompassed the Oak Mills village.	1910
Douglas, James	1829	Unk	8	One of the original five settlers from Iatan.	1865
Goddard, F.P.	1835	Unk	Unk	Original settler. 1940 census shows family moved to Easton, KS.	1875
Goddard, J.B.	1827	Unk	Unk	Original settler. Emigrated from Kentucky.	1875
Grinter, Charles Freemont	1885	1940	Unk	Buried in the Hottle Family Cemetery	N/A
Groff, Hiram	1835	1884	4	Buried in the Hottle Family Cemetery	N/A
Hottle Family	Ranges	Ranges	7-10	Original family who farmed rented land. Hottle Cemetery is maintained on old homestead with "ghostly" apparitions present.	N/A
King, Abraham	1807	Unk	5	Part of a large original family in the area	1865
King, Richard	1837	1925	3	Prominent member of Oak Mills. George Remsburg wrote an article about him in the April 1925 Leavenworth Times.	1865
King, William	1840	Unk	2	Farmer and possible relation to larger King family.	1865
Lynch, Moses	1826	1903	9	Irish immigrant who lived for 10 years in New England.	N/A
Potter, Joseph	1819	Unk	8	An original pioneer of Oak Mills.	1865
Sacks, Henry	1827	1914	11	German immigrant who was married twice. Family still lives in Oak Mills present day.	1865
Waddle, John	1835	Unk	3	Mr. Waddle was the first Oak Mills post master	1865
Wright, George	1826	Unk	9	One of the original five settlers.	1865

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