

The Firebrand
Clay Center, Clay County, Kansas, Dec. 1883- Nov. 1884
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*The image above is a scan of the front page of the first issue of “The Firebrand” newspaper of Clay Center in Clay County, Kansas in December of 1883.
SOURCE: This image is from “The Firebrand” courtesy of the Clay County Museum and Historical Society

By the year 1884, just twenty-three years after it became the 34th state in the Union, Kansas was home to 712 newspapers¹, not including the countless numbers of short-lived publications that were created and then failed in prior years. The vast number of newspapers can be attributed to the fact that in this era, prior to the invention of television, the automobile, and the resulting “shrinking” of the world through globalization, people cared most about the people, places, and events that were directly connected to their communities. Citizens of a town, especially in a place like a small, Midwestern community, looked to their local newspapers for their main, if not only, source for general town news, business information, political coverage, entertainment, and other information. Though newspapers were held to a high degree of importance in 19th century towns, their survival rates were very inconsistent. While some of the newspapers created during this era have survived even to the present day, others fizzled out almost as fast as they first made their way through the presses. Though it can be difficult to pinpoint the exact reason or reasons why a newspaper failed, by attempting to do so, it can help to not only understand the constant ebb and flow of forming and fleeting newspapers, but can also provide a reflection of the community it served. The following essay will examine the short life of the small-town newspaper, “The Firebrand,” from Clay Center in Clay County, Kansas during the period from December 1883 to November 1884. It will also argue that the failure of “The Firebrand” may have been caused by the change of ownership in October of 1884, in which the paper’s political focus shifted from Republican to Democratic.

¹ “All newspapers in Kansas in 1884,” database results, accessed May 8 2010, <http://www.kshs.org/library/search.php?city=&title=&county=&state=KS&begyr=1884&endyr=1884&arrange=title&submit=SEARCH>.

Clay Center

Before explaining how “The Firebrand” fits into Clay Center’s history, it is important to understand a little about the community itself in order to better visualize how the newspaper complemented or connected with its citizens. Clay Center is the largest city and county seat of Clay County, located in the northeastern to north central part of Kansas, as shown in Figure 1 below.²

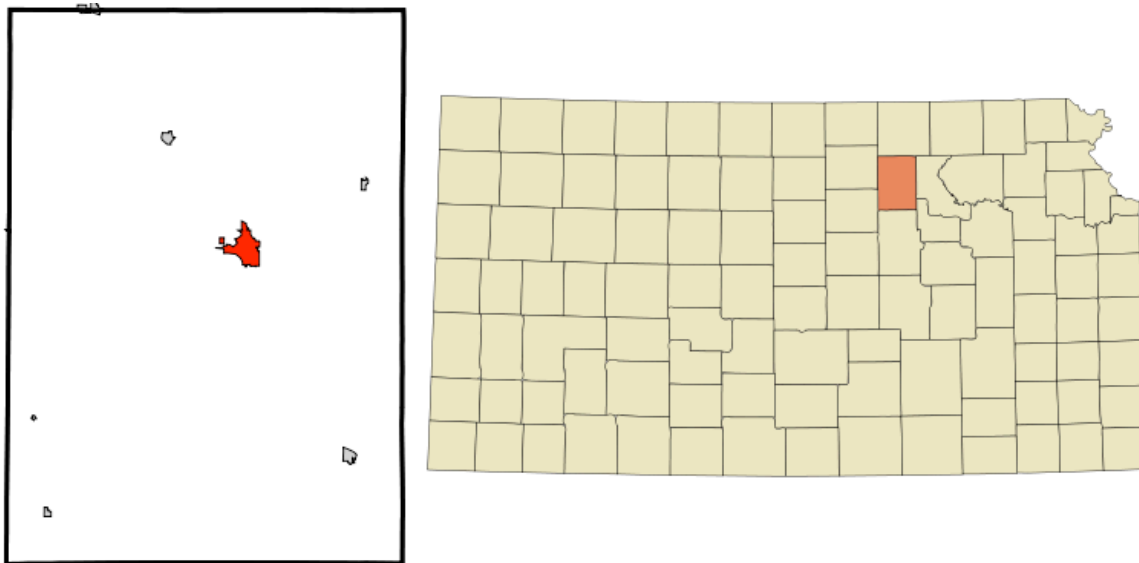


Figure 1. This image shows the location of Clay County in the state of Kansas (on the right), and the location of the city of Clay Center within Clay County (on the left).

SOURCE: This image was retrieved from:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Clay_County_Kansas_Incorporated_and_Unincorporated_areas_Clay_Center_Highlighted.svg

² “Clay County Kansas incorporated and unincorporated areas Clay Center highlighted,” accessed May 10, 2010, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Clay_County_Kansas_Incorporated_and_Unincorporated_areas_Clay_Center_Highlighted.svg.

Role of Small Town Newspapers

Before the great technological innovations of the 20th century that have allowed access to not only local news, but also global news, through multiple mediums, people's main source to stay connected with their peers and the happenings of their town was through their local newspapers. While this was true of almost any location in the United States during the late 19th century, it was especially true in small, Midwestern communities like those in the state of Kansas. Many Kansans of this period had emigrated there from Eastern or Ohio River Valley locations, bringing with them values that placed a high level of importance on education, literacy, and writing. It is not surprising, then, to understand how newspapers not only became a very important part of the life of a Kansan, but also became reflections of the culture and social aspects of the community they embodied. According to Charles E. Rogers, in his essay, "The Role of the Weekly Newspaper," he argues, "the American weekly newspaper reflects with close accuracy the social character of its community."⁵ In addition, he states, "the reason the weekly newspaper is a mirror of its community's beliefs, attitudes, customs, and behavior patterns seems implicit in its survival as an effective social instrument."⁶ In other words, for a small town newspaper to survive, it is important for it to fashion itself in a way that adheres to the values, standards, and beliefs of the community as a whole. People want to be able to conform to a general way of life that allows them to fit in with the other members of their community, and newspapers needed to provide them with that opportunity by showing them the "social rules" specific to their town.

⁵ Charles E. Rogers, "The Role of the Weekly Newspaper," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol. 219 (1942): 151-157, accessed April 1, 2010 from JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1023907>, 151.

⁶ *Ibid.*

The Firebrand

On December 20, 1883, the first issue of “The Firebrand” was available to Clay Center residents. It was published through Miller & Co, which was centered around prominent town resident, J.W. Miller (shown in Figure 3 below).⁷

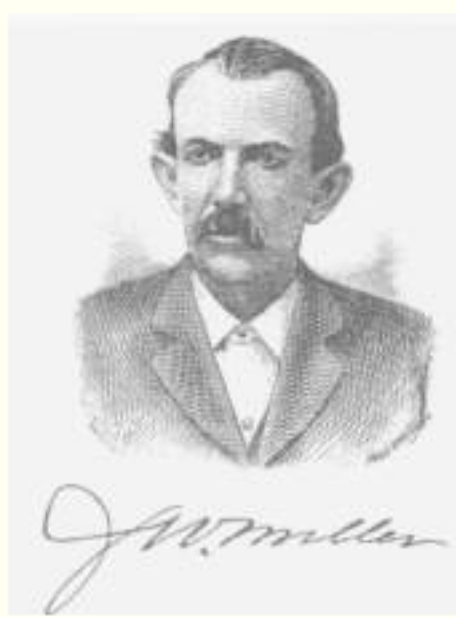


Figure 3: This photograph shows prominent Clay Center, Kansas resident J.W. Miller, c. 1880.
SOURCE: This photograph is courtesy of William G. Cutler’s History of the State of Kansas, 1883.

It was printed as a weekly newspaper, available every Thursday, and could be bought as a one-year subscription with an up-front payment of \$1.00.⁸ The chosen motto for “The Firebrand” was “Hew to the line, let the chips fall where they may.”⁹ This motto was a common selection for newspapers across the United States and was inspired from a speech given by Senator Roscoe

⁷ Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas*.

⁸ *The Firebrand*, Vol. 1, No. 1, December 20, 1883, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Conkling of New York on June 5, 1880 at the Republican National Convention.¹⁰ It is fitting that “The Firebrand’s” motto came from a Republican speech due to the fact that its writers intended the newspaper to be supportive of Republican politics. In the first issue, the writers expressed their focus of their new paper, stating,

“The Firebrand will be Republican in its politics. The great struggle is as it has been between the Republican and Democratic parties, and between these two we must make our choice. Viewing the two parties from a political standpoint, we are compelled to cast our lot with the Republican. The Republican party has ever been opposed by the Democrats, when the Republican party said that slavery must go, the Democratic party said, we will keep it, it is a divine institution, when the Republican party said ‘Kansas shall be free,’ the Democratic party said, ‘Kansas shall abound in plantations, for there shall slavery exist.’”¹¹

Along with offering opinions about politics, “The Firebrand” also provided readers with general information about their fellow residents, information about past or upcoming events, suggestions or advice, jokes, stories, and advertisements. For example, in one issue the writers wrote for an event, “On the 22nd day of February, (Birthington’s Wash day) one of the best carnivals that has ever been held in this ‘neck of the woods’ will take place at the skating rink in this city.”¹² In another example, they printed the following joke, “A lady of this city recently filled her lamp with gasoline, and since then she has not ben-zine.”¹³

The content of “The Firebrand” stayed fairly consistent throughout its lifespan, with the exception of its political focus, which shifted with a change in ownership in October 1884 (this will be discussed in further detail later in the essay). The newspaper’s name and heading design, however, changed on more than one occasion. The heading stayed consistent until the February 7, 1884 issue, in which the design changed with the separation of the word “Firebrand” into two

¹⁰ Henry F. Woods, *American Sayings-Famous Phrases, Slogans, and Aphorisms* (New York: Woods Press, 2007), Google Books edition.

¹¹ *The Firebrand*, Vol. 1, No. 1, December 20, 1883, 1.

¹² “On the 22nd day of February...,” *The Firebrand*, Vol. 1, No. 5, January 17, 1884, 1.

¹³ “Local and otherwise,” *The Firebrand*, Vol. 1, No. 1, December 20, 1883, 3.

words with a figure of a man in between.¹⁴ Then, in the following week’s issue, the owners changed the name from “The Firebrand” to “The Clay Center Fire-Brand.”¹⁵ This progression of changes can be seen in the images of the headings in Figure 4 below.



Figure 4: This image shows the changes in the heading and name of “The Firebrand” newspaper out of Clay Center, Kansas using examples from January 31, 1884, February 7, 1884, and February 14, 1884. SOURCE: These images are from “The Firebrand” courtesy of the Clay County Museum and Historical Society.

Advertising in “The Firebrand”

The ability to have a consistent medium, such as a weekly newspaper, in which to promote goods and services revolutionized the world of advertising. According to Charles E. Rogers in his essay “The Role of the Weekly Newspaper,” he states “A considerable portion of the business structure of a rural community requires for its maintenance and healthy growth a reliable advertising medium which reaches its potential buying public at regular intervals. This

¹⁴ *The Firebrand*, Vol. 1, No. 8, February 7, 1884, 1.

¹⁵ *The Clay Center Fire-Brand*, Vol. 1, No. 9, February 14, 1884, 1.

medium in all but exceptional cases is a weekly newspaper.”¹⁶ He also explains that advertising plays an important role in sustaining the newspaper itself, saying, “Advertising revenue derived from the sale of advertising affords the publisher adequate financial resources to bring to his community a paper fully qualified to exercise its social purpose.”¹⁷ In other words, advertising in weekly newspapers provides a way for businesses to promote their products, a way for residents to find goods and services they desire, and a revenue source for the newspaper publishers to put towards the continuation of their publication.

“The Firebrand” contains a wide assortment of ads that display the creativity of local businesses, whether in content or design. For example, in the March 20, 1884 issue, one advertisement read,

“All you who kick, metaphorically because you can’t buy good goods, for cheap money, should have your left ear cut bias and an assortment of spring style, scalp wound, and a sad expression of the liver if you don’t do your trading in the way of Mica axle at Henry’s Hardware House.”¹⁸

Many of the advertisements contain descriptive phrasing in regard to their location, most likely to try to help orient the rural members of the community to where they can find the stores when they visit town. For example, in the February 21, 1884 issue, an advertisement read, “Brach, the popular photographic artist, is always at home in his elegant parlors, on 6th street, one door south of the Farmers’ Resort, where his numerous friends and patrons are ever

¹⁶ Rogers, “The Role of the Weekly Newspaper,” 156.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ “Business Locals,” *The Clay Center Firebrand*, Vol. 1, No. 14, March 20, 1884, 4.

welcome. His hospitality is boundless.”¹⁹ Many of these written advertisements are also displayed in a design format, as shown in Figure 5 on the following page.



Figure 5: These images show different advertisements for the services of photographer W.G.Brach in “The Clay Center Firebrand” of Clay County, KS in 1884.

SOURCE: These images are from “The Firebrand” courtesy of the Clay County Museum and Historical Society.

“The Firebrand” on the *Dispatch* and *Times*

During “The Firebrand’s” brief run, two other newspapers that were prominent at the same time were the *Dispatch* and the *Times*. Each newspaper’s writers held a different, general political stance and the editors of “The Firebrand” made it a point to display that fact frequently. The following are just a few of the many examples of “The Firebrand” writers’ dissatisfaction with their journalist counterparts:

- “The *Times* had just taken its ‘leap in the dark’ into the whirlpool of democracy crying out as it went, ‘The Republican party must go.’”²⁰

¹⁹ “Brach, the popular photographic...,” *The Clay Center Firebrand*, Vol. 1, No. 10, February 21, 1884, 1.

- “The *Dispatch* got a hemorrhage, last week and the county became a cuspidore for its gangrene.”²¹
- “We want the people to know where we stand and then if they don’t like our position, they can get on the other side of the fence, or like the *Times* and the *Dispatch* of last week, climb to the very topmost rail on the fence, and place one foot on each side and be ready to jump which every way the wind blows, and then be able to say after the battle is fought and lost or won, ‘we told you so.’”²²
- “With the *Dispatch* independent, and the *Times* Democratic, the *Firebrand* is the only straight Republican paper in the county. We will try and make it lively for them however.”²³

Political Climate and its Impact on “The Firebrand”

The presidencies and elections following the Civil War included the assassination of Lincoln, the rocky term of Andrew Johnson including an impeachment trial, the two terms of war hero Ulysses S. Grant, the controversial election of Rutherford B. Hayes, the assassination of James Garfield, and the term of Chester A. Arthur.²⁴ This period of scandal, tragedy, and frustration created a heated political climate across the United States, leading to a tense and anticipatory climate as the election of 1884 drew nearer.

²⁰ “Good Morning,” *The Firebrand*, Vol. 1, No. 1, December 20, 1883, 1.

²¹ “The Dispatch got . . .,” *The Firebrand*, Vol. 1, No. 8, February 7, 1884, 1.

²² “Fish or cut bait,” *The Firebrand*., Vol. 1, No. 6, January 24, 1884, 2.

²³ “Seven months old,” *The Clay Center Fire-brand*, Vol. 1, No. 32, January 24, 1884, 2.

²⁴ Robert McNamara, “The Election of 1884 Between Cleveland and Blaine was Marked by Scandals,” *About.com*, accessed 2010, <http://history1800s.about.com/od/presidentialcampaigns/a/electionof1884.htm>.

When reading “The Firebrand,” it is evident that the writers believed the upcoming election of 1884 to be of upmost importance. They wanted to make sure that they made it clear to their readers how much they believed in the importance of voting for the Republican candidate. In addition, they wanted to inform their audience as to why the Democratic party is unworthy of receiving votes. The following are some examples of their political commentary leading up to the campaign of 1884:

- “...after the smoke of the battle of 1884 has cleared away, the Democratic party will then see clearly that the laboring men have again stood by the party that has all these years so carefully guarded their interests. The Republican party will stay.”²⁵
- “The Republican party has not entered upon a campaign in the last twelve years with as many assurances of success and an easy victory, as it has at the present time. The dilly dallying do-nothing-ness of the Democratic party is wholly incompetent to manage the affairs of this great nation.”²⁶
- “Blaine and Logan, two of the greatest, best and straightest men in the nation, and victory has already perched on the Republican banners.”²⁷
- “Blaine of Maine is a man of brain and it is brains that the people want in the office of chief executive.”²⁸
- “The Democrats are always consistent in one thing. They always say one thing and do another.”²⁹

²⁵ “Protective Tariff...,” *The Clay Center Fire-brand*, Vol. 1, No. 9, February 14, 1884, 2.

²⁶ “By the time this paper is issued...,” *The Clay Center Fire-brand*, Vol. 1, No. 25, June 5, 1884, 2.

²⁷ “Blaine and Logan...,” *The Clay Center Fire-brand*, Vol. 1, No. 26, June 12, 1884, 2.

²⁸ “The Democrats have begun...,” *The Clay Center Fire-brand*, Vol. 1, No. 28., June 26, 1884, 2.

²⁹ “The Democrats are always...,” *The Clay Center Fire-brand*, Vol. 1, No. 31, July 17, 1884, 2.

- “Christians should oppose the election of Grover Cleveland... Why, to bestow the loftiest of public favors upon such a man would be to approve of his evil courses, to demoralize the general conscience, and to incite the young to imitate his wicked example.”³⁰

Why “The Firebrand” Failed

From “The Firebrand’s” inception, it seemed to gain in favor and popularity as time went on. For example, in one issue the editors quoted the *Concordia Times* as stating,

“The Clay Center Fire-brand has just purchased a new Campbell Power Press and is being published at home. Heretofore they printed on the Times’ press. The Fire-brand is one of the best papers in Kansas, although not five months old boasts of over thirteen hundred subscribers.”³¹

While the growing number of people subscribing to “The Firebrand” could have chosen to do so for a variety of reasons, the radical Republican edge to the newspaper makes it likely that most of the subscribers favored Republican politics and values. As a result, “The Firebrand” probably gained a contingent of loyal, Republican devotees who aligned their political views with their weekly newspaper.

Thus, it was likely a shock to most of “The Firebrand” readers when, after the newspaper was bought out by proprietor Fred Theis, their October 30, 1884 issue favored the Democratic ticket in the election. The issue quoted the *Abilene Reflector*, saying,

“Mr. Fred Theis, of Clay Center has purchased the Firebrand of that city and will here after run it as a Democratic paper. Capt. O.M. Pugh, an experienced news-paper man, and one of the best writers in the state, will be the editor and manager. The Reflector welcomes the Firebrand in to the fold, and is glad to see Democratic papers in Kansas on the increase.”³²

³⁰ “Christians should oppose...,” *The Clay Center Fire-brand*, Vol. 1, No. 42, October 2, 1884, 2.

³¹ “The Clay Center Fire-brand has just purchased...,” *The Clay Center Fire-Brand*, May 22, 1884, 1.

³² “Mr. Fred Theis...,” *The Clay Center Fire-brand*, Vol. 1, No. 46, October 30, 1884, 4.

The political tone of the paper was a complete, 180 degree difference from what it had been under the previous owners. Now, it was the Republicans being criticized in the print. For example, in the last issue of the newspaper on November 13, 1884, the new writers stated, “Our Republican brethren die hard. They are beaten, and however bitter the pill they have to swallow it, and they should do it gracefully, and allow the return of activity in trade and attention to commercial affairs.”³³

The last issue of “The Firebrand” on November 13, 1884 came just 9 days after the Presidential election, in which Grover Cleveland would eventually be found the winner after all of the votes were tabulated. It seems unlikely that it was a coincidence that the paper lasted just one issue following the election. Due to the fact that many of the subscribers to “The Firebrand” were likely Republican because of the original political tone of the newspaper, many of them likely expressed discontent in the paper’s new direction. Also, the newspaper’s sudden change and loss of its loyal followers good will likely discouraged other Clay Center residents from subscribing. It is also possible that some of the advertisers who had been regulars in “The Firebrand” may have decided to discontinue their ads and look to another source if they felt they were unhappy with the new leadership. In addition, the Democrats of Clay Center more than likely were already affiliated with a newspaper like the *Times* and probably did not see much incentive to subscribe to a newspaper that had been notoriously Republican for almost the past year. All of these aforementioned examples may have come together to discourage the new owners of “The Firebrand” from continuing to come out with new issues. If they saw that they would likely be unable to earn the revenue required to keep such an operation going, they

³³ “Our Republican brethren die hard,” *The Clay Center Fire-brand*, Vol. 1, No. 48, November 13, 1884, 4.

probably came to the decision not to move forward with their venture, even though they had only run but a few issues.

Conclusion

Though “The Firebrand” may have only lasted a year, it undoubtedly left an impression on those who followed in its short course. While it is difficult to pinpoint exact reasons why “The Firebrand” failed, evidence from the newspaper issues themselves used with an understanding of the political environment that surrounded the citizens of Clay Center in 1884 can help to provide possible theories. To many of today’s world of fast and easy access to a wide range of information through various mediums, understanding the fate of one small-town newspaper may seem insignificant. However, even one small-town newspaper can provide an image of the culture and social life in the community it served and through this image, communities can examine how their culture has evolved over time, for the good and for the bad.

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