

Kansas State University

Early Ludell, Rawlins County, Kansas, 1887-1933:  
A Town with No Name has No Future.

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

Hist 533 Lost Kansas Communities

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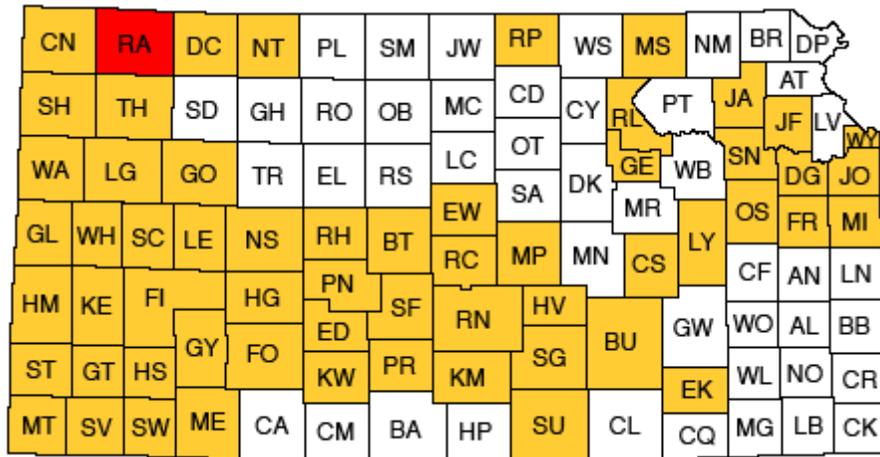
This study of Ludell, Kansas and the lack of name continuity in Rawlins County includes a map analysis, a printed memoir-history by a resident, photographs of the town site, and an author's firsthand accounts of interviews conducted with those who lived in the community.

Continuity is crucial for a town's survival; if a town cannot attain continuity it will simply fade away into the annals of history. Such is the case for the town of Ludell, Kansas. The lack of continuity began with the changing of names, businesses, and county seats. When a population settles an area, their first task is the naming of the permanent location. A name allows for a distinguishing attribute that no other area around that town can claim. When a town is unable to distinguish itself from a surrounding area, residents are simply swallowed by those around them. No individual wants to stay in a town of constant change and flux. When a family settles in an area, they want the guarantee of permanence. Permanence in an area can be ensured with a name, school, and sturdy healthy businesses. Ludell, Kansas, lacked every single one of these attributes to make it a successful township and settlement.

Ludell was settled by Thomas Jefferson Goodin and his father-in-law, William Henry Dimmick in 1880.<sup>1</sup> The choosing of the location was a very wise and thought out process. The town site was located in the northeast corner of Ludell Township in Rawlins County; this is the southeast area of the county. Ludell was a twin town to not only one town but also two that were within ten miles: Atwood, which was settled in 1885, and Herndon, settled in 1879.

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<sup>1</sup> Hayden, Ruth. *The Time That Was: The First Forty Years*. Colby, Kansas: H.F. Davis Memorial Library, 1993, p. 62.



**Figure 1: Location of Rawlins County, Kansas. SOURCE: Walters, Kenneth L. “Geology and Ground-water: Resources of Rawlins County, Kansas”. *State Geological Survey of Kansas. Bulletin 117. Kansas Geological Survey, University of Kansas, 1956.***

These three towns would all be in a competition for the county seat, which was decided in 1906. Homesteaders chose to settle in an area that was relatively flat, full of trees along creeks, and wildlife. The group that settled in the Ludell Township was of German descent. They came in 1880 along with five other families who joined them in the journey. Thomas Goodin’s father-in-law, William Henry Dimmick, and the Blume family joined him in Ludell. Many of the Germans who settled in the area were from Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup> They brought with them their devotion to religion and education. One of the first buildings in Ludell was the church, and soon to follow was the one room schoolhouse. The school was not located inside the city limits of Ludell; it was one mile east of the town center. This would pose a troubling situation a mere three years later. Many of the early settlers’ names are hard to find since there was not a city cemetery until the 1920s. Many families had their own cemeteries on their farmstead. Today, people in the area believe that settlers used these burial grounds as property markers.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, James. “Binennial Report of the Secretary of State.” No. 20 (1880) pp. 1-3.

Since many of them are on private property, they are inaccessible to the public to see and research. However, there are a few early graves in the cemetery that were built around the existing gravesites.

The first settlement happened along the banks of Beaver Creek in southeast Rawlins County.<sup>3</sup> While Beaver Creek was the main source of water and flora for the settlers, it was not the only waterway that passed close by. Sappa Creek lay only five miles from the settlement and offered many of the same benefits of the Beaver.<sup>4</sup> The settlement so close to both creeks offered the settlers many resources that someone settling farther away may not have had.



**Figure 2: Beaver Creek in Ludell, Kansas, often dry now. Rawlins County, Kansas. SOURCE: Personal Photo, November, 2013.**

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<sup>3</sup> Socolofsky, Homer. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972. Map 6.

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## **Farming**

Settlers had access to wood, plants, and a natural irrigation to their low lying fields. While there is no present evidence of these ditches, many of the farming practices used flood irrigation to water their crops. This is evidenced by similar practices from the surrounding communities. Atwood, which lies only ten miles northwest of Ludell, still has ditches dug into the sides of the Beaver Creek leading to fields for irrigation. The southeastern part of Rawlins County also offered a more protected area for the settlers. They were at a much lower elevation than those townships farther to the west and north. This lower elevation led to easier access of the water table. Easy access to water with the technologies of the 1880s was crucial for town survival. If a town could not obtain water, then residents had no way of crop growing, animal rearing, and basic survival. The water table depth is supported by the mass amount of natural tree growth and fertile crop land. The trees lining Beaver Creek were used in the construction of the town's elevator, business district, and the houses in the area.



**Figure 1: Ludell, Kansas grain elevator built by Mr. Blume in 1889. Rawlins County, Kansas. SOURCE: Personal photo, November, 2013.**

While the area around Ludell was very suitable for farming and raising cattle, it also presented many challenges to the settlers that I also believe led to its demise. The amount of land that was taken up by Beaver Creek is very substantial and the loss of crop land is evident. The town and its area are also surrounded by high rising rocky bluffs that were simply impossible to farm. This resulted in many farmers expanding both to the east and west of Ludell. Their amoeba like tendencies led to population displacement into surrounding communities such as Herndon and Atwood. Farmers had a much shorter haul to these elevators and rail lines than if they were to haul their crops into Ludell. The placement of the town directly in between these two other towns led people to disperse to the surrounding communities. One advantage that Ludell had over the surrounding communities was the presence of fertile pastureland that grew short prairie grass. This led Ludell to have the largest dairy farming family operation in Rawlins County owned by

the Holste family. Their operation still is in existence today, although it is the only surviving business from early Ludell Township.

### **Geographic region**

Ludell is located in the short grass prairie of Kansas, and there is not a lot of ground cover or natural vegetation. The selection of the town site seemed to be based on the natural water source and the vegetation that was already growing in the surrounding area. The low lying town center offered protection from the elements that often plague northwest Kansas. Thunderstorms, blizzards, and tornadoes often stress this area. The protection offered by the natural windbreak of the tree line and the surrounding hills offered a sense of security from these unpredictable elements. Ludell is a very closely built town -- nothing is more than a block from the center of the business district. There is only one main street with many trails or alleys leading to the center of the town. These alleyways connect the entire town. These alleys all lead to the only stone building in the town, at this time a private club. There is no history on this building that can be found; however, the construction date on the foundation is 1891. This leads me to believe that since early settlers had come to Indian territory, mainly occupied by the Northern Cheyenne, that the threat of an attack made this building a de-facto safe house for the citizens.<sup>5</sup> There are no military bases or encampments remotely close to this settlement so that lack of support more than likely led to this fear.<sup>6</sup> The people of Ludell had the right to fear an Indian Raid or attack on their settlement. In a letter written to Edward

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<sup>5</sup> Socolofsky, Homer. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972. Map 11.

<sup>6</sup> Socolofsky, Homer. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972. Map 20.

Chrisman an Indian attack is described in detail. The attack was carried out by the Northern Cheyenne tribe led by Dull Knife.<sup>7</sup> The letter claims that as many as 15 people were killed including women and children. So the need for protection from these raids was essential for the survival of any community. The main source of wood readily available for the settlers was the cottonwood tree. This was used in all of their construction projects from homes to businesses and fence lines. Many of the trees harvested in the region were used to fence in large amounts of pasture land for range for cattle and horses.

## **Railroad**

In 1889, the B&M railroad came through Ludell.<sup>8</sup> The railroad brought about a big boost in the economics of the town. Residents added 25 businesses including two hardware stores, a grain mill, and two stables for livestock. The railroad also brought about the implementation of large scale farming in northwest Kansas, with the arrival of families such as the Holstes and Kastens, both of whom came into the area during the early 1900s. These two families took advantage of the ease of transportation for their crops and other goods. The one major factor that Ludell lacked -- and this would come back to haunt them -- a grocery store. They had the bank to hold deposits and other stores for people to shop and gather at to share local news.

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, Emerson. "Indian Raid Claims, 1881." *Kansas Memory*. (1881) pp. 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Socolofsky, Homer. *Historical Atlas of Kansas*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972. Map 30.

## **Twin Town**

Ludell had the unfortunate circumstance of being a twin town to not one community but two. Ludell is located ten miles southeast of Atwood and nine miles west of Herndon. The competition among these locations led to fierce battles over the county seat and population during the 1880s. In 1881, Atwood was permitted the temporary county seat by the state of Kansas.<sup>9</sup> This was not made permanent until 1906 when Atwood constructed the first courthouse in Rawlins County. The building of the courthouse led to rising tensions between townships. Those who settled in Atwood and supported the county seat coming to Atwood created many of the historical writings of this time period. The history of Ludell is an afterthought to many of these writers as they saw giving Ludell any credibility would diminish that of Atwood. The two towns never competed in athletics or extra curricular activities of any sort, as Ludell was too small to field any sort of teams. They did, however, compete economically. In the period from 1910-1933, often known as the Golden Age of Small Towns, Ludell hosted 20 businesses and a bustling social life for its townspeople.

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<sup>9</sup> Smith, James. "Binennial Report of the Secretary of State." No. 20 (1880) pp. 1-3.



**Figure 4: The abandoned Ludell Business District, 2013, Rawlins County, Kansas. SOURCE: Personal photo, November, 2013.**

However, with the Dust Bowl of the 1930s and lack of money, Atwood took full advantage of its county seat status. They accepted federal money from the government to put people to work constructing a man-made dam and lake.<sup>10</sup> The lure of jobs and stability drew people away from Ludell and into the city limits of Atwood. In one account, a farm hand was making \$.75 per day working for a local farmer. When the construction of Lake Atwood began, workers were offered \$1.00 per day, free room and board, and free clothing.<sup>11</sup> The decision for these young men with families was very easy: move out of Ludell towards a brighter future. They were guaranteed work, and they would not be laid off in the winter months such as farmers often did with day laborers.

<sup>10</sup> Army Corp of Engineers, "Atwood Lake Report," 1929, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Hayden, Ruth. *The Time That Was: The Second Forty Years*. Colby, Kansas: H.F. Davis Memorial Library, 1997, p. 73.

No longer were people doing business in Ludell, as it was easier to take care of all errands in Atwood during the workday.



**Figure 5: Lake Atwood and Dam (completed in 1934) built by the Civilian Corp of Engineers. SOURCE: Rawlins County Historical Society.**

By 1934, Ludell had only a bank left in the city limits.<sup>12</sup> All of the businesses moved into the city limits of Atwood to set up shop around the growing community. Herndon also drew people away from Ludell. During the 1930s, a chicken hatchery opened its doors in Herndon. The owners offered employment opportunities as well as free eggs and chickens for those who worked there.<sup>13</sup> At one time the hatchery grew to a size of 5,000 chickens with daily shifts of people feeding, watering, and collecting eggs for their pay. Herndon soon drew a grocery store, bank, school, and various pool halls. The lack of social interactions in the city limits of Ludell led to a population influx into these other, busier areas of the county. By the 1940s, Ludell was down to less than 20 families who still called Ludell their home and did business in the town.

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<sup>12</sup> Hayden, Ruth. *The Time That Was: The First Forty Years*. Colby, Kansas: H.F. Davis Memorial Library, 1993, p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> Hayden, Ruth. *The Time That Was: The First Forty Years*. Colby, Kansas: H.F. Davis Memorial Library, 1993, p. 61.

## **The Changing of Names**

Ludell was founded in 1876 by Willim Dimmick and his son-in-law, Thomas Jefferson Goodin. With them traveled five other German families to the area; however, the only family listed in any historical accounts is the family of Bella and August Blume. The Blumes set up the first post office in Ludell in 1876, and it lasted until 1879. This is the first mention of the earliest name of Pub; while some believe that it served as only a post office, many others believe that Pub contained other goods for travelers since many travelers were going from Herndon to Atwood and vice-versa. There is no listing of the goods or activities that occurred in this dugout so these accounts cannot be proved or disproved by historians. Though it was a logical stopping point halfway between the two locations, the Blumes realized that they would have to formally establish the township with the assistance of Dimmick.

With Dimmick's assistance and support of his family, his wife and daughter Luella, the Blumes were able to establish a permanent post office inside current Ludell. The structure no longer exists and the exact location is not known. They were also able to build the first church just to the northwest of what was now known as the town of Dimmick.



**Figure 6: Immanuel Lutheran Church marker 1956, Rawlins County, Kansas. SOURCE: Personal photo, November, 2013.**

The church was established in 1910 and by this time, Ludell had already experienced two name changes in a matter of years. With the changing of names so rapidly I believe that this discredited the township early on in its years as a viable place for settlement and permanent living for families. At a time when families were already picking up and moving from one side of the country to the other, many were seeking something stable to sink their roots into. A town that was in flux with something as important as its name could and did scare off possible settlers. This was not the last time Ludell's name would change; in fact, this small town would undergo five other name changes before the concept of Ludell was even discussed. These other names included Praug, Balaen, Danube, Willis, and Kelso City. While some of these names sounded foreign to travelers in the area, they fit right in with the demographics of the settlers. There is no historical proof of this the name Danube could come from the Danube River that passed through Germany. Yet given that many of the first settlers were in fact from Germany, this would seemingly fit right in with the idea of trying to establish a hearth culture and give their settlement some sense of home. Germans were not the only families to settle in the area. Czech people also settled the area closely surrounding

Ludell. The only family that can be verified is the Buck Frank family, and their history is almost non-existent.<sup>14</sup> There are some accounts of three other Czech farming families who lived close to them and were eventually consolidated. The name Prague comes from the capitol for the Czech Republic, Prague. Given the Czech lineage that was in the area, this name also makes sense.

The naming of Ludell as Willis is very confusing and muddled. In records that could be found there are no families named or having family members by the name of Willis. So this name offers little insight as to why it was chosen to represent Ludell and the settlers there. The final name given to Ludell before its formal, permanent name was Kelso City. The Kelso brothers were very prominent businessmen in the area. They owned the hardware store, were major funders of the bank, and helped to build the stockyards.<sup>15</sup> Their store was one of the first businesses to be built in the city limits. In 1879 they brought in economic revenue like Ludell had never seen and would continue to see up until the 1930s.

In 1906, after losing the battle of the county seat to Atwood, the people of Ludell finally settled on the final name changes for Ludell except for the spelling. Given demands by the Postal Service, Ludell had to have an official town name. In respect for the Dimmick family and their daughter, the town was named Luella after Luella Dimmick. This did not suite the Postal Service as they said the town could not end in a

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<sup>14</sup> Craig Cox, informal interview, Rawline County Historical Society, November, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Hayden, Ruth. *The Time That Was: The First Forty Years*. Colby, Kansas: H.F. Davis Memorial Library, 1993, p. 62.

vowel.<sup>16</sup> Spelling changes would follow the original name including Luell and Ludel before finally settling on and receiving approval for Ludell. In a span of 23 years, Ludell's name had changed 11 times, thus giving the town no significant roots or permanence for its residents to claim as their own. Ludell also had no shortage for the changing of their newspaper. In the span of six years, Ludell would see the newspaper change names and owners three times. The *Review* was first released in 1881 and lasted for only one year. Following that was the *Settler*, printed from 1884 to 1887. Finally, the last newspaper the Ludell published as a city was the *Gazette*, which began circulation in 1887 and lasted until 1893 (see the listing of Rawlins County newspapers at kshs.org). The newspaper and its contents often held small towns together. Ludell's lack of news and social interaction could have been one factor driving people out of the area and into the surrounding communities.

I believe that the changing of the names was a major factor in the decline of Ludell and its settlers. People who are moving into a new place are looking for something to hold on to and claim as their own. They are not looking for constant change. Over time, Ludell offered little for them to hold onto; yet initially, by 1891, the town boasted 19 businesses, a school, and a church.<sup>17</sup> Ludell was home to a livery stable, a grain elevator, and a hotel. Mr. Blume opened the elevator in 1889, citing the building of the B&M railroad as his primary motive for this. The elevator is surrounded by Beaver Creek; this turned out to be the demise of the elevator itself.

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<sup>16</sup> Hayden, Ruth. *The Time That Was: The First Forty Years*. Colby, Kansas: H.F. Davis Memorial Library, 1993, p. 65.

<sup>17</sup> Hayden, Ruth. *The Time That Was: The First Forty Years*. Colby, Kansas: H.F. Davis Memorial Library, 1993, p. 68.

As crops began to become more bountiful, farmers needed more space to store their crops. Given the location of the elevator, Blume was unable to expand the building's capacity for crops. Farmers soon realized this and began sending their harvest to Atwood and Herndon where elevators could hold more. Farmers could unload faster and get back to the fields earlier. This allowed for a more productive harvest for all involved in the farming community. By 1914, Ludell had lost its stable, hardware store, church, and hotel. All of these businesses had moved to Atwood where a larger population could surround them. Atwood also now published the only newspaper for the entire county. Thus began the slow decline of the town of Ludell. By the 1930s, the entire state of Kansas had fallen on hard economic times in the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Atwood was granted federal aid to construct a dam and lake inside Driftwood Township. The Civilian Conservation Corps was offering \$1.00 a day pay with free room and board for the workers. This far outweighed that which a farm hand was making anywhere else. So the population began to shift to the county seat of Atwood where jobs were more readily available and where families did not have to travel far to find the goods they so desired.<sup>18</sup>

Ludell is the perfect example how the lack of a concrete foundation can lead to the demise of a settlement. The lack of continuity can be seen in something as simple as a name for the town or as complex as maintaining a steady workforce. Another critical factor that led to the downfall of Ludell was the location and proximity to both Atwood and Herndon. Though Herndon never grew at the rate of Atwood, it did in fact take people and lead to population vacuum out of Ludell. Many of the people in Ludell left for

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<sup>18</sup> Army Corps of Engineers, "Lake Atwood Project," 1929. Copy at Atwood Public Library.

more social interaction, better employment opportunities, and a more stable living environment. Ludell was not the town that popped up around the railroad and soon diminished after the completion, nor was it a doomed instant town. The families who chose the location for Ludell did not provide the necessary foundation for a successful and permanent settlement, beginning with the continuity of a name for Ludell, Kansas.

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