

# **Saddle Horse Days: Maple City, Cowley County, Kansas, 1872 – 1961**

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This is a short history of Maple City in Spring Creek Township, Cowley County. Only four miles from the Oklahoma border, this small post-village never had access to a railway. The hilly, rolling terrain made horses and ranching a way of life, but the town could not compete with Winfield or Arkansas City and began to fade by World War I. This sketch relies on two excellent family histories, many newspaper clippings, interviews, and site studies of the terrain.

## *Saddle Horse Days: Maple City, Cowley County, Kansas, 1872 - 1961*

At the far southern end of the Kansas Flint Hills, Maple City perches on tableland surrounded by rolling hills and some steep ravines. It is easy to see why horses were so important to the early settlers, for railroads and paved highways, even dirt roads, do not figure very much in the history of this place before WWI. Settlers walked across prairies; children rode ponies and horses to school; and even early bi-planes became important. *Edwards' Historical Atlas of Cowley County, Kansas*, published in 1882, described the county as having three topographies. The western third was rich valley land; the eastern third had higher hills, more surface rock, was more rolling, and featured narrow valleys; the middle third, where Maple City lies, was a blend of the “two extremes.”<sup>1</sup> Within six months of its founding in 1872, Maple City moved from a creek valley location up to a higher elevation. At the same time, the name changed from Clarence to Maple City. The old and new town sites lay between Spring and Grouse Creeks in Spring Creek Township, and Maple City became the closest Flint Hills town to the Oklahoma border – just four miles north.<sup>2</sup> At the time when frontier settlers arrived, they encountered tall grass prairie and rocky limestone hillsides. Trees grew along streams and creeks and near upland springs. “Woodland environments do exist in the tall grass prairie, but they are generally isolated islands within the sea of grass.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “History of Cowley County, Kansas,” in *Edwards' Historical Atlas of Cowley County, Kansas*, 1882, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Winfield Tribune*, Sept. 1, 1886.

<sup>3</sup> See this information in “The Topography of the Flint Hills,” Flint Hills Discovery Center Permanent Exhibit, Manhattan, Kansas. Created October, 2012.

Very little is known about the early town site and first name, Clarence. Perhaps the valley location made the new village vulnerable to flooding. An early newspaper account said that Maple City was named for the “beautiful groves [of silver maples] that everywhere dot the landscape and give name to the place.”<sup>4</sup> In October, 2015, my husband and I drove down through the Flint Hills to find the almost-disappeared Maple City town site. In that moment, as we made a turn to the south, we understood why early settlers had chosen the area for their homes. What a gorgeous view!



**Fig. 1 Modern view approaching Maple City from the north. Photograph by Colina Stanton, October, 2015.**

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid; see also the *Arkansas City Daily Traveler* for Aug. 21, 1914, advertising a Harvest Home Picnic one and a half miles west of Maple City: “The Grove is Large Maples.”

## A Post Village is Founded

Early atlases often use the term “post village” to refer to towns founded with little more than a post office and a store. Maple City initially was one of these towns. Farmers on small -- and large --holdings around the town in all directions supported it with weekly visits but did not live there. In April of 1872, the village of Clarence had received a post office, but this was moved up to Maple City in December of the same year, and Clarence faded almost instantly.<sup>5</sup> Ten years later, the first atlas of Cowley County recorded Maple City as large enough to have a plat. Four sections of land were donated by four farmers to create this cross-roads intersection that became a town: W.J. Gilkey, C.R. Andrews, James Jordan, and Henry Sutliff.<sup>6</sup> A newspaper account of Maple City from 1886 states the town was laid out by Henry Sutliff who built the first store. Later, though, a very prosperous and well-remembered general store was built and run by the Gilkey family: “[It was a] large frame store, 20 x 50 feet, costing \$1,100 and fitted with every convenience.”<sup>7</sup> This store shows up often in the memories and accounts of Maple City residents before WWI. The store in Maple City continued to be critically important for the community. By the 1930s, the Anderson family owned it, and interviews with Maple City residents reveal vivid memories of that store: cold strawberry soda, kerosene, “white gas” and petroleum being sold, and tires and tire repair services as well as groceries.<sup>8</sup>

A description of Maple City in 1886 shows a developing town that had grown far beyond a post village. By then, Maple City was functioning as a trading center and included “four general

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<sup>5</sup> See the Kansas State Historical Society Post Office data base at [kshs.org](http://kshs.org).

<sup>6</sup> *Edwards' Historical Atlas of Cowley County, Kansas, 1882.*

<sup>7</sup> Biographical Sketches, “Albert Gilkey,” in *Cutler's History of the State of Kansas, Cowley County*. Chicago: A. T. Andreas Co., 1883.

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with Ida Rush Finney and Bernice Bowman Rush, May 27, 2016, by Bonnie Lynn-Sherow, Maple City, Kansas.

merchandise stores, one hardware and implement house, two blacksmith shops, one wagon shop, two carpenters, a painter, a lumber yard, one livery stable, a good hotel, barbershop, two real estate and loan agencies, and one doctor.”<sup>9</sup> The growth of Spring Creek Township was very rapid at this time; over 500 people had moved in after the area was opened for settlement, post-Civil War.<sup>10</sup> Fortunately for future researchers, one of those arriving families left an important written legacy. The Rush family, arriving in Cedar Creek Township, Cowley County, had left mountainous Kentucky for better prospects in Kansas. Almost a century later, a Rush family descendant, Blanch Carroll Rush, wrote two vivid books about the experiences of the Rush and Carroll families near Maple City: *Saddle Horse Days* (1971) and *Jayhawk Children* (1983). Mrs. Rush documents the hilly landscape that reminded the family of Kentucky, mentioning a prominent escarpment known then as Lookout Mountain. This landscape would play an important part in the history of southern Cowley County, as it created many problem in road building and also, prevented the construction of a railroad to Maple City.

In the 1880s, farmers were beginning to struggle with shipping their crops out from the Maple City area. The county history states that many of the more successful farmers were raising corn, millet, and oats but also beginning to ship stock, which was proving more profitable.<sup>11</sup> Farmers and ranchers experimented with hog breeds and sheep as well as cattle. In 1878, the nearest railway shipping point was Independence, Montgomery County, Kansas; a stage route ran from Independence through Maple City and on to Arkansas City. By 1900, *Saddle Horse Days* documents that even stock shipping for Maple City farmers was difficult, occurring mainly at

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<sup>9</sup> *Winfield Tribune*, Sept. 1, 1886.

<sup>10</sup> “History of Cowley County,” in *Edwards’ Historical Atlas of Cowley County, Kansas, 1882*.

<sup>11</sup> “Patron’s Directory of Farmers,” in *Edwards’ Historical Atlas, 1882*. See also “Spring Creek Township” in *Cutler’s History of the State of Kansas, 1883* (Chicago: A. T. Andreas Co., 1883).

Silverdale, eight miles away, or at the Esch Railroad Spur, five miles west of the town. The Missouri Pacific was built from Independence to Winfield but did not pass near enough to Maple City for grain shipping. However, ranchers and farmers could drive their stock overland to the Esch Spur or north twelve miles to Dexter. Even that was an arduous undertaking, as described in *Saddle Horse Days*: “There was no public road and the trip [to haul winter feed from Esch Spur] had to be made over the pastures, across Grouse Creek and the numerous hills.”<sup>12</sup> The Rush family also traveled to Dexter in a wagon, over rolling prairie, to buy coal and cotton-seed cakes for stock feed. These glimpses of the transportation difficulties in Mrs. Rush’s work help us today to understand why Maple City did not survive much past WWII, even with the advent of the automobile. The year 1900 marked the peak of thriving, small town life in Maple City -- and also its highest population, 150.<sup>13</sup>

**“It is a pleasant village, well-located.”<sup>14</sup>**

### **The Prosperous Years, 1900-1910**

Towns showing growth and development always had churches and a grade school. Maple City was no different. Families settling in the Maple City area at first used a one-room country school built north of town. Children who lived farther away than two miles rode ponies and horses over the hilly landscape. Everyone rode horses – the cowboys and hired hands who worked cattle, children, women, even the elderly residents. Oral history today, based on interviews with Ida Rush Finney, includes a story told by Mrs. Finney of her childhood pranks: as a girl, she rode her horse right into the one-room school! “After that, I was banned from the

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<sup>12</sup> Blanch Carroll Rush, *Saddle Horse Days: The Story of Danny* (Chicago: Adams Press, 1971), p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Town population of 150 recorded in the *Polk Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1900.

<sup>14</sup> “Maple City,” in *Edwards’ Historical Atlas of Cowley County, Kansas, 1882*.

school,” she recalls.<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Finney also recalls riding an old mare, with her sister, to Silverdale for breeding. They made the trip in the hot dusty summer and stopped for sodas at the general stores along the way.<sup>16</sup> As early as 1873, a two-room school had been built in the town itself by settler Robert Goodrich; this school was then replaced by the “new school” of 1918.<sup>17</sup> Both Goodrich and Danny Rush, a son of the original migrating Rush family, served on the school board of District 85, Maple City.<sup>18</sup> Danny Rush also helped to build the Methodist Church in Maple City, probably sometime between 1906 and 1908. This church was described as “the little white church with its steeple pointing toward the sky... with a clanging bell which summoned all to worship.”<sup>19</sup> A description of this church from *Jayhawk Children* also mentions that it stood on a high point at the south edge of town and had green shutters and large, flagstone steps. Vigorous singing was a feature of the early church meetings. A *Dexter Dispatch* newspaper article from May 20, 1915, stated, “There was singing at the chapel Saturday evening...improvement in their singing is something we need in this community!”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Ida Rush Finney, Maple City, Kansas, May 27, 2016 and informal interview, June, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Ida Rush Finney, May 27, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> See biographical sketch of Robert Goodrich in *Cutler’s History of Cowley County, Kansas, 1883*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Blanch Carroll Rush, *Saddle Horse Days*, pp. 61, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Blanch Carroll Rush, *Jayhawk Children*, (Chicago: Adams Press, 1983), p. 158; *Dexter Dispatch*, May 20, 1915, in clippings collection of Ida Rush Finney.



**Fig. 2 A photograph of the Maple City church from October, 1958. SOURCE: Private Collection of Ida Rush Finney.**

In July, 1905 church revivals began to be popular. The first one, called a “tent revival,” was held on the school grounds. Revivals were also held to the west, at Beaver Creek.<sup>21</sup> The first revival was described as “a lively and rousing affair” and may have lasted two or three weeks! The number of 37 conversions was proudly recorded in Mrs. Rush’s account.<sup>22</sup> These revivals, bringing together several denominations, such as Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian, have been a marked feature of the area church history and are vividly remembered even today in interviews with residents from the Maple City area. Although the Methodist Church in town became known and is still known as Hicks Chapel, it is today a “community church,” described this way by Bernice Bowman Rush, who also recalls revivals being held as late as the 1940s. A 1945 revival “revitalized the whole community,” she remembers; after this, the church became a true, blended

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<sup>21</sup> *Saddle Horse Days*, 60.

<sup>22</sup> *Saddle Horse Days*, 61.

community church. In those days, people dressed in their best clothes and stayed with friends and relatives to attend the week-long revivals.<sup>23</sup>



**Fig. 3. A modern photograph of Maple City Church, also known as Hick's Chapel, by Tom Parish, May 27, 2016.**

## How We Remember a Town

The first decade of the new century was hopeful for Maple City. “There were literary societies in the country school houses and parties in the homes of neighbors.”<sup>24</sup> By 1910, the first telephone had appeared in the town.<sup>25</sup> Also important in Maple City were fraternal

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Bernice Bowman Rush by Bonnie Lynn-Sherow, May 27, 2016, Maple City, Kansas.

<sup>24</sup> *Saddle Horse Days*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> *Saddle Horse Days*, 63.

organizations, especially the Masonic Lodge and the Order of the Eastern Star.<sup>26</sup> Today, the old Masonic building is one of the last structures still standing at the town site. Bernice Bowman Rush recalls that after the Masons left, the building functioned as a community hall: a testament to the power of meeting places to hold a dispersed rural population together.<sup>27</sup>



**Fig. 4. The old Masonic Hall building in Maple City. Photograph by Tom Parish, May 27, 2016.**

However, Blanch Carroll Rush's books also document financial and environmental struggle and the beginnings of significant changes for rural people. The devastating grasshopper plague

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<sup>26</sup> *Saddle Horse Days*, 100.

<sup>27</sup> Bernice Bowman Rush, May 27, 2016.

had occurred back in 1878, but in 1912 a smaller outbreak of grasshoppers occurred. Although the grasshoppers were not as severe as in 1878, they nonetheless did much damage. A newspaper account stated, “Residents of this vicinity, who have lived here for many years, say that have never before seen grasshoppers in such numbers.”<sup>28</sup> The denuded land dried out, and a water shortage ensued. Birds became voracious pests in any field. Mrs. Rush wrote, “Crows devoured grain before it was allowed to ripen.”<sup>29</sup> As WWI loomed in Europe, Maple City began to lose population. The county seat of Winfield and booming Arkansas City to the west were eclipsing it, as both centers had railroad connections for stockmen. Then in 1918, Spanish influenza hit Maple City; the entire Rush family contracted this terrible disease as it hit epidemic levels in Kansas. Danny Rush’s eyesight was ruined by the high fever, and people in other families died.<sup>30</sup> During the decade 1910-1920, the automobile arrived as well. The Rush family bought their first car in 1917 from the Radcliffe Dealership in Dexter, a Ford Model T.<sup>31</sup> Mrs. Rush noted that the family could now live “in a home free from the steep and almost impassable hills.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “Grasshoppers in Kansas, Maple City, Kansas,” *Alma Enterprise*, Aug. 9, 1912.

<sup>29</sup> *Saddle Horse Days*, 81.

<sup>30</sup> For an account of this epidemic, see Blanch Carroll Rush, *Saddle Days*, 90-100.

<sup>31</sup> *Saddle Horse Days*, 88.

<sup>32</sup> *Saddle Horse Days*, 89.



**Fig. 5 A photograph of Danny Rush’s car, circa the 1920s. SOURCE: Private collection of Ida Rush Finney.**

Along with automobiles came tractors, mechanized threshers and combines, and a change forever from the small ranch and farm landscape based on the prized saddle horses of herders, ranchers, and stockmen. A leading agricultural historian, David B. Danbom, wrote, “The twenties foretold the course of agriculture over the rest of the century. Farming would become highly mechanized and scientifically and technologically sophisticated.” Danbom also states that as a result of this change, the number of farms and ranches would shrink.<sup>33</sup> This certainly began to happen in Spring Creek Township. Local residents recall that at one time, you could see “twenty-two houses from the four corners of Maple City...the small farms surrounding the

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<sup>33</sup> David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 197.

town.”<sup>34</sup> At first, though, families like the Rushes attempted to hold on to their ranching land although they had left Maple City. This was the beginning of what became known as known as “pasturemen,” ranchers who owned land locally but lived elsewhere, even out of state.

After WWI, when a demand for teachers, doctors, and lawyers swept across the country, high schools began to be built in county seats. Winfield had a high school by the early 1920s, and families began to move closer to that school. The Rush family moved from Maple City to Winfield in 1924 so that their children could attend high school. In his Model T, Danny would drive to his ranch holdings near Maple City.<sup>35</sup> But gradually ranches became larger and more heavily capitalized. The Great Depression and its drought severely stressed rural Kansas, and even though Cowley County did not lie in the far western Dust Bowl, the effects of the great drought and Depression combined to drive farm loss all across the Plains states.<sup>36</sup> Oral history supports this conclusion, but for the Maple City area, older residents also assert that the opening of the Boeing aircraft plant in Wichita in WWII drained away struggling farmers and ranchers desperate for a cash income. Area women were also called to defense work, and as their worlds broadened and they met new people, many did not return home.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps Maple City had begun to slowly decline after its peak years in the early twentieth century, so slowly at first that residents did not realize the reality. Dreams of its growth and prosperity had been high, but as early as 1912, lots in the 1905 planned Huffman’s Housing

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<sup>34</sup> Bernice Bowman Rush, May 27, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> *Saddle Horse Days*, 108.

<sup>36</sup> See Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 223-229.

<sup>37</sup> Bernice Bowman Rush, Maple City, Kansas, May 27, 2016.

Addition to the east were being vacated and sold.<sup>38</sup> This continued through the 1920s and 1930s, despite the appearance on plat maps of the addition. Maple City shrank to a crossroads village with a post office and school. The post office stayed open until 1961, and the school still operated until sometime in the 1960s. After 1912, in fact, the small village of Maple City was hit with many blows. In addition to a post WWI agricultural depression, severe blizzards stressed the area as well. In February, 1922, Blanch Carroll Rush records a remarkable story that lives on today, known as “the flying coffin.”

### *The Flying Coffin*

In February a terrible, week-long blizzard hit Cowley County. An elderly man, a Rush family member, had died and was awaiting burial. He lay frozen solid on boards in the Rush family parlor. Families were trapped for days, as snow had drifted “over eight feet between the hedge rows.” Desperate, the mortuary in Arkansas City strapped a coffin onto the wing of a bi-plane to fly it out to Maple City. Against great odds, the pilot landed in a pasture west of town. He almost froze to death in the cockpit before being rescued. Neighboring farmers then “dug out a road of sorts” to haul the coffin to the Rush home and then on to the cemetery.<sup>39</sup>

The Flying Coffin story illustrates the problems of isolated location and transportation that played major roles in Maple City’s decline. Today, Maple City Cemetery and the town school remain. The school is lovingly cared for by long-time residents A.J. and Alan Hollowell.

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<sup>38</sup> A plat map from the *1905 Atlas of Cowley County* shows the Huffman Addition in place, but it was never filled with homes and businesses; see also the *Winfield Daily Free Press*, October 23, 1912.

<sup>39</sup> Blanch Carroll Rush, *Saddle Horse Days*, 101-102.

Below is a photograph of Maple City School, the “new school” built in 1918 and mentioned so often in accounts of the town’s social world.



**Fig. 6 A modern photograph of Maple City School by Tom Parish, May 27, 2016.**

Maple City itself remains a quiet, four-corner intersection with the restored school building and one long-abandoned and graying structure, the town Masonic Hall. Bernice Bowman Rush calls her community “this little place.” In the pastures surrounding the intersection, cattle still graze, connecting us to a past world of thriving ranching, stock raising and cattle breeding. Yet because of memories, books, stories, proud signs, and preservation efforts, the tiny post village still is still alive in Cowley County. The physical town of Maple City may no longer exist, but the school and the well-maintained and still-in-use cemetery are testament to people’s need for a sense of place to call home.

**“Home is where I’m comfortable.”**

**Bernice Bowman Rush, born August 7, 1923**



**Fig. 7 A photograph of Maple City Cemetery by Colina Stanton, October, 2015.**

Former Maple City Resident Robert Johnson, who lived near the town until 1896, wrote a poem fondly recalling Maple City. Published in a church bulletin in the 1970s, Mr. Johnson built a vivid word picture of a place he loved:

“Two general stores sold groceries and wares,  
Two blacksmith shops catered to farmers’ repairs;  
Two hotels where travelers could rest for a spell,

And two livery barns cared for their horses as well.  
John Clayton had a small leather shop where  
Harness and saddles were brought for repair;  
A carpenter shop fashioned woodwork to sell,  
A barber shop made the young men look swell;  
A doctor lived here with M.D. on his door,  
And drugs were for sale in Zeb Gilkey's store.  
There was a post office, though the building was small.  
The postmaster's name was Old Jim Ball.  
For several years, a twenty-piece band  
Presented music that, to us, seemed quite grand.  
On Fourth of Julys, folks came from miles around  
To celebrate in Gilkey's grove, the picnic ground.  
Here Gene Tooman's shop-made merry-go-round  
Gave us kids thrills nowhere else to be found.  
Sure were old times in this Maple City.  
Now, See what a change! And O, what a pity!<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Robert N. Johnson, "The Town of Maple City," Maple City Community Church Program, November 27, 1974.

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