

The Detective Story of Bellegard/Mariadah: The Case of the Two Towns with One Face



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Against all hopes, Bellegard, the Swedish farming oasis, never truly became a town. But in symbiosis with Mariadahl, both “towns” persisted for approximately 30 years before Bellegard dissolved. Their union was the only thing that kept either town alive. Bellegard was home to the famous “cutting edge security” post office and a school. From a single scrap of evidence, our two man investigative force pieced together a riveting story of this one town with two faces, which we know as Bellegard and Mariadahl.

Imagine if you will, it is 1850 and you are an Irish immigrant, working with your young, Swedish business partner. You have been driving cattle from Galesburg, Illinois, and are just about at your wit's end. You are walking through the extremely tough, hilly terrain of the Flint Hills with steep slopes and break-neck inclines, with fatigue dogging your every step; you are only moments from succumbing. You know that you have to be close to something great, an untouched oasis, or something of the like, where you can rest. You see another hill, not one unlike all the others you have seen; and just like all the rest it seems to go for days. You trek it, because you know the payoff could be worth it. Once you reach the other side you see it: your oasis, nirvana: flat, lush land, a strong, but gentle Blue River, and you can all but see your many generations working on their prosperous crops, their children frolicking and laughing. “It was, at the period of their settlement, a wild prairie, not a house to be seen as far as the eye could scan, only wild animals, such as deer, buffalo, and smaller game.”¹ You can see a town, your town: Bellegard and Mariadahl. This is but a glimpse of what William Shannon and John A. Johnson may have seen and felt when they discovered the valley that sheltered and became home to Bellegard and Mariadahl.

¹ *Portrait and Biographical Album: Jackson, Jefferson, and Pottawatomie Counties, Kansas*. Copy at Riley County Genealogical Society, Manhattan, Kansas.

Moving West

Being an Irish immigrant was not easy in the 19th century. William Shannon made his way from New York to Illinois and began ranching and raising cattle. He came to Kansas in 1855 as a rancher with approximately 500 head of cattle. He was in the search of cheap, prosperous land. By 1857, he was a registered voter. One can presume that one of the motivations for his journey to Kansas was to sway the popular vote to allow Kansas to enter the Union as a free state. Shannon later died sometime before 1890, but the date that he died is uncertain. Upon his death, his land would become the location of the Children's Home.

John A. Johnson, Shannon's hired hand, may have encouraged Shannon to relocate to Kansas, having been fortunate enough to purchase land that had been granted in the Scrip Warrant Act 1855. We believe this land was purchased prior to the men leaving Illinois for Kansas.

Johnson was born in Linkoping, Sweden on July 30, 1831 and came to America with his wife Emma and his younger

brother Nels P. in 1852. The co-founder of Bellegard and Mariadahl, Johnson was a poor man when he reached the shores of America. Even when he came to Kansas under Shannon's employ, it was a humble beginning. A shrewd

businessman, Johnson continued to prosper, purchasing a good portion of land with Nels at a Government land sale in 1859. Johnson eventually acquired roughly 1800 acres over time.

Approximately 700 of these acres lay in the Big Blue Bottom, famous for the fertility of its soil.



Figure 2: Portrait of Honorable John A. Johnson circa 1890. SOURCE: Portrait and Bibliography Album: Jackson, Jefferson, and Pottawatomie Counties, Kansas

Not all of the Johnson's life was just building a farm, breeding horses or raising a family, John was part of some exhilarating events in 1864. It was in this year that he joined the State militia, about the time Quantrill's raid was happening.² He spent time searching the plains to pursue Indians but had no engagements. Indians around the Blue Valley, mostly the Kansa, were pretty peaceful, and there were no conflicts between the people of Bellegard and Mariadahl and the native tribes. John Johnston also started the bank of Randolph privately, and he was its president and owned almost all of the stock. He also had stock in the First National Bank located in Westmoreland. He bred Norman horses and was a member and stockholder of the Blue Valley Stock Breeders' Association. Johnson was very active in the community that he helped to found. "Mr. Johnson was the first Justice of Peace in the Blue Valley Township, and held the office for six years."³ That is not the only title or office he held. "In 1876-77 he was the County Commissioner of Pottawatomie County. In the fall of 1884 he was elected as Representative to the State Legislature, serving the two sessions of 1885-86, taking an active part in the discussions, and serving on the Committee of Railroads, the Committee of Assessments and Taxations, and others."⁴

Once Johnson and his family were all settled in Bellegard, Emma Johnson, John A. Johnson's wife, began writing letters back to friends and family still in Sweden, telling them how good their new home was and that they should move to America with them. The newspaper in Sweden actually posted these letters in the local weekly edition.⁵ This was a time in Sweden when crops had been poor for several years. Farmers were bankrupting and people were unemployed, many wanting to leave Sweden for America. This brought a flock of family,

² Biographical information on John Johnson taken from *Portrait and Biographical Album: Jackson, Jefferson, and Pottawatomie Counties, Kansas*.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ http://www.kancoll.org/khq/1963/63_1_lindquist.htm

friends, and people trying to start new lives. The Johnson family holds the title of having the first Kansas children born of Swedish parents.⁶ Their two children, John William and Clara J also led lives in the Blue Valley and continued their parent's work.

Birth of The Big Blue Valley

Some of the things the duo would have seen in the Blue Valley, where Bellegard and Mariadahl

were founded would be:

sloping hills, most of them

majestic but some very steep,

few trees or shrubbery, and of

course, the Big Blue River, a

point of pride of locals even to

this day. But the place they

would call home is the western

part of Pottawatomie County,



Figure 3: Photograph of present day Mariahdahl, November 2012. SOURCE: Taken by Alexander Doll

a veritable oasis to the settlers of this land. Mariahdahl, which means Mary's Valley and is a tribute to Johnson's mother, is the nirvana that Johnson found when he crested the final hill before settling.⁷ He hoped to bring family and friends from Sweden to begin a new life with him here in the rich soil of Kansas. Even though they followed him, the town was not officially named Mariahdahl until 1871. By 1859, there were 10 families in the valley, although a good number of them were related. Slowly, people were coming. In 1863, a Lutheran congregation was organized, and one of their first acts was to purchase 30 acres of land for the church from

⁶ *Ninety-Fifth Anniversary: Mariadahl Lutheran Church, a historical sketch 1863-1958* Cleburn, KS.

⁷ *Ninety-Fifth Anniversary: Mariadahl Lutheran Church a historical sketch 1863-1958* Cleburn, KS.

John A. Johnson. Three years later, the Mariahdahl Lutheran Church was built in 1866.⁸ Prior



Figure 4: Photograph of Mariahdahl Lutheran Church circa 1960 SOURCE: Scrapbook of Deanna Barnes

to the formation of the church, community

members had to wait for ministers to make the

trip to them. One of the ministers who made this trip was Reverend Washington Marlatt, a professor at the Bluemont College, who often rode a big white horse.⁹

⁸ <http://www.museofhistory.com/collections/johnson-bob/mcscs.html>

⁹ Ibid.

While Mariahdahl was still slowly growing, separated by nothing more than a hill, a post office was built in Bellegard with ‘cutting edge’ security in 1872. The first and only postmaster was James P. Shannon, who held the office from August 27, 1872 through April 24, 1879.¹⁰ The post office, which was included in the interior of a home, still stands today. One story of



Figure 5: Photograph of Bellegard post office, November 2012. SOURCE: Taken by Alexander Doll

particular interest regarding the post office was the security measures that were taken when it was built. The year before, the Grand Jury of Kansas took “great pleasure in complimenting Maj. John M. Crowell in his efforts of ferreting out post office robberies and defalcations throughout the state.”¹¹ In

this particular post office, when handling mail and packages, there was a hole in the wall where patrons could give or receive mail. This precaution was taken because of the rise in post office hold ups happening at that time. Bellegard, named for a city in present day Poland, was considered the cutting edge in post office security when it was built.¹² Since then, the post office building has been converted into the home of a ranch hand, and the hole has long since been cemented over and covered. You can almost still imagine its former glory as you pass by. We speculate that Bellegard was chosen for this innovative design because there had been many post office robberies in Kansas. We were unable to uncover any evidence that the Bellegard post office had fallen victim to such robberies; however, residents took extraordinary precautions in

¹⁰ Kansas Post Offices 1828-1961, http://www.kshs.org/geog/geog_postoffices/search/page:1/county:PT/sort:enddate/direct

¹¹ *White Cloud Kansas Chief*, November 16, 1871.

¹² Bialogard." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, last modified 11/21, accessed 12/11, 2012, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bialogard>.

protecting their neighbors' mail. During the seven years that Bellegard had an operating post office; one was also built in Mariahdahl in 1876.¹³ The post office in Bellegard was closed in 1879, leaving only the school house remaining.

It seems evident that there was initially an expectation of growth in Bellegard, as a school house was built there during the 1870s. Although the date that classes officially began has been lost, all accounts indicate that classes probably started in the 1870s.¹⁴ The school house would have served the growing agrarian society, as well as the Mariahdahl Children's Home which was built and dedicated in 1880. Records indicate that Bellegard District 23 sometimes had attendance as high as 80. There was a wide variation of ages, usually ranging from 5-20. The males able to work on the farm went to school during the winter when they were not focusing on crops or livestock. They mainly just wanted to learn the English language and get a basic education.¹⁵ The life blood of the Bellegard School was the Children's Home. One interesting fact was that since nearly all of the locals were Swedish, the home, in its early years, only spoke Swedish. Although steps were taken to organize a children's home as early as 1873, it took several years before it would come to be. Opened in 1880 with only three children, the Children's Home had 470 acres of land and several buildings in good condition. It was a working farm that operated from 1880 to 1959 and was expanded during that time to house up to 30 children at once.¹⁶ During the nearly eighty years of its existence, 620 children were taken into the home where they were loved and taught to be useful Christian citizens until good private homes were found for them.¹⁷ Donating his lands to the building of the Children's Home is the

¹³ Kansas Post Offices 1828-1961,

http://www.kshs.org/geog/geog_postoffices/search/page:1/county:PT/sort:enddate/direct

¹⁴ Westling, Gerry and Lois. *A Centennial History of Olsburg, Kansas*. Vol. 975. Potta H2o.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ <http://www.museumofhistory.com/collections/johnson-bob/mcscs.html>

¹⁷ Deanna Burns, Interview.

last verifiable record of William Shannon's presence in the town, and it is one that continued long after he departed.

During this time, Mariahdahl began to experience great growth. Businesses began to open, and soon the Church was joined by a blacksmith, two stores, a harness shop, a blacksmith, a wagon shop, a carpenter shop, and the post office that had opened in 1876.¹⁸ Railroad tracks were laid on the west side of the river, just a stone's throw away.



Figure 6: Aerial Photograph of Mariahdahl circa 1940. SOURCE: Scrapbook of Deanna Barnes

The post office was located inside Farmer's Store, but when the store

was later closed in 1889, the post office was moved to the home of John Ekblad where it remained until 1903.¹⁹

Music was important to the community, and residents formed a brass band in 1890. It was officially named the "Blue Valley Band" but was quickly known by locals as the "cousin band" because nine of the ten members had the last name Johnson.²⁰ A 'church boat' was also built to help settlers on the west bank of the river attend church, because crossing could often be dangerous. This made it imperative to be punctual; missing the boat meant that you had to make the long trek back home without having attended church.²¹

¹⁸ "Ninety-Five Years of Mariadahl's History." In *Mariadahl Lutheran Church; A Historical Sketch 1863-1958*.

¹⁹ <http://www.museofhistory.com/collections/johnson-bob/mcscs.html>

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Expanding

Other settling families, of note the Maxells, Knudsons, Gustafsons, Swansons, Eriksons, and Carlsons began arriving in the 1860s.²² One family that is prominent in the Bellegard to this day is the Holt family. C. J. Holt traveled from Sweden to America in 1863.²³ In Chicago, he married Anna Swanson, a young lady he knew in Sweden, and they had two children. The family made its way to the Blue Valley in 1870, after receiving letters from C. J.'s sister. They also had other friends who had preceded him. Initially his name was Carl Johan Peterson, but he became distraught when he was not receiving his mail and later found out that since there were so many Petersons, someone else was likely getting his mail and throwing it away. He got the idea for his new name from his family farm in Sweden - Ekhult, and shortened it to Holt. The new surname was adopted by the incoming family when they came to America.²⁴ Mr. Holt became involved in the community right away, becoming the first Deacon of the Mariahdahl Lutheran Church.

Many of the settlers came for land and a chance to start a new life after immigrating to America during difficult times in their homeland. However, they also had anti-slavery sentiments, and more than one of the newcomers served the Union in their newly adopted country. Knudson joined the newly formed state militia in 1864 for a short time, while other citizens had a more lengthy service.²⁵

²² *Portrait and Biographical Album: Jackson, Jefferson and Pottawatomie Counties, Kansas 1890.*

²³ *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie. Kansas Counties: Clay, Geary, Marshall, Pottawatomie, Riley, Wabaunsee, Washington. Riley County Genealogical Society, 1976.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Portrait and Biographical Album: Jackson, Jefferson and Pottawatomie Counties, Kansas 1890, p 241.*

“Mr. Swanson participated in a number of notable conflicts of the Civil War, including the siege of Atlanta and was proud of the fact that his service was in the Brigade commanded by General Harrison.”²⁶

Lineage Today

There are still descendants living in the Blue Valley to this day, one of them being a valuable source in our research, Deanna Burns. She is a descendent of both the Johnsons and the Holts. The Johnson family still owns the land that John A. Johnson settled and claimed over 150 years ago. They have lived in the Blue Valley their entire lives. They have persisted, raised families and horses, and farmed their ancestor’s land. Deanna continues to carry on her family tradition of being active in the community and is well known.

Deanna was supposed to attend the Bellegard school, but the year before she would have started, the school was closed by a vote of the patrons of the town and all the students were sent to the Cleburne school.²⁷ She remembers the children who lived in the Children’s Home and is proud of the adults it turned out. The post office in Bellegard was gone long before she was born, but her father always told her the story about how it used to be the Bellegard post office. Her only regret is that she was too young to ask more questions about what she remembers as ‘the hired hand’s house’.²⁸ A search of the area today still reveals the same last names of pioneers who lived there 150 years ago.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Gerry and Lois Westling, *A Centennial History of Olsburg, Kansas*. Copy at Riley County Genealogical Society, Manhattan, Kansas.

²⁸ Interview with Deanna Barnes, Pottawatomie County, Kansas, November, 2012.

Dam Foolishness

Bellegard and Mariahdahl were never sister towns. They were not persuading and coercing people over who had the better general store, or where the school was. These two places were essentially one town, but they had two identities. Mariadahl had the Children's Home and a steady economy; Bellegard was where you could find the Post Office and for a while, the school. It was on the river which helped with the ability to send and receive goods. Mariahdahl was where the first settlers, in what was later named Blue Valley, called home. In fact “the Mariadahl community is the oldest Swedish settlement in Kansas,” according to the Mariadahl Lutheran Church's Anniversary Album.²⁹ The only thing separating the two communities is a bluff. Deanna Burns, a local resident who has lived in the Blue Valley her whole life, said that she “wouldn't call Bellegard a town as much as a school”.³⁰

Even though Bellegard was not thriving as Johnson had hoped, Mariahdahl continued to be the community that he envisioned. The final blow for the towns and the people who inhabited them was the building of the Tuttle Creek Dam. The area residents fought a valiant fight, even chartering a bus to Washington D.C., and launching their own letter campaign against the construction. According to Deanna, “A secretary of a state representative in Washington, when we were in the elevator, said that she wished she would have never heard of Tuttle Creek Dam in response to the flood of letters that she had received.”³¹

As the story begins in Mariahdahl, so it ends. The last remnants of community disappeared in 1960 as the town was closed when the church was closed; the town was eventually leveled by the oncoming dam. Even though parts of the town were saved, like the steeple of the church that

²⁹ “Ninety-Five Years of Mariadahl's History.” In *Mariadahl Lutheran Church; A Historical Sketch 1863-1958*. 975.8 Potta K2m ed. Osborne, KS.

³⁰ Interview with Deanna Barnes, November 2012.

³¹ Ibid.

was moved to the cemetery in Olsburg and the bell that was sent to the Lutheran Church in Manhattan, Kansas, the building of the dam effectively worked to scatter the dreams of the people who settled the Blue Valley. Their descendants still hold tightly to the lands their

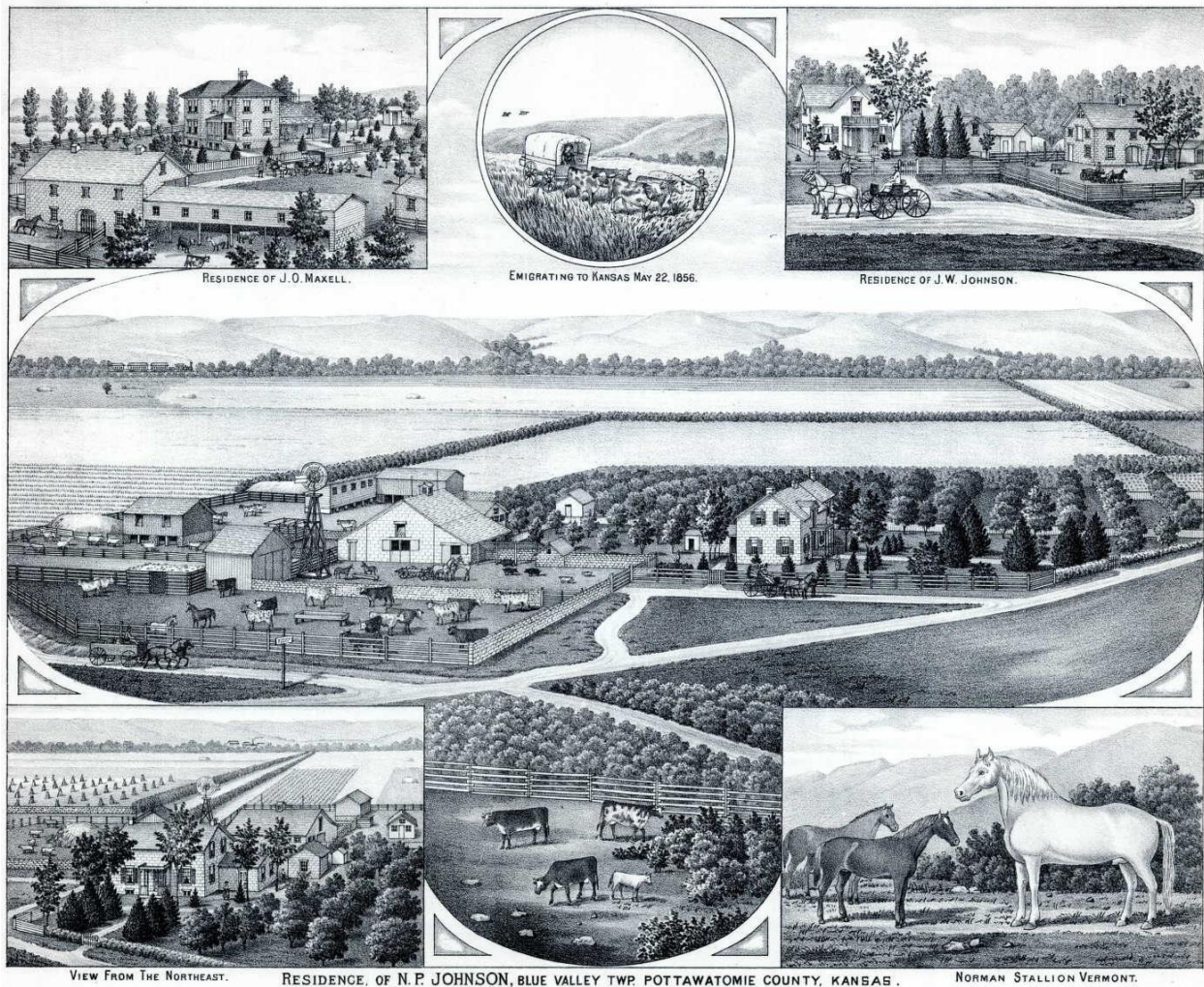


Figure 7: Drawing: Renditions of the J. O. Maxell, J. W. Johnson, and N. P. Johnson Farms. SOURCE: 1880 Pottawatomie County, Kansas Atlas

ancestors claimed. Bellegard and Mariahdahl are not forgotten.

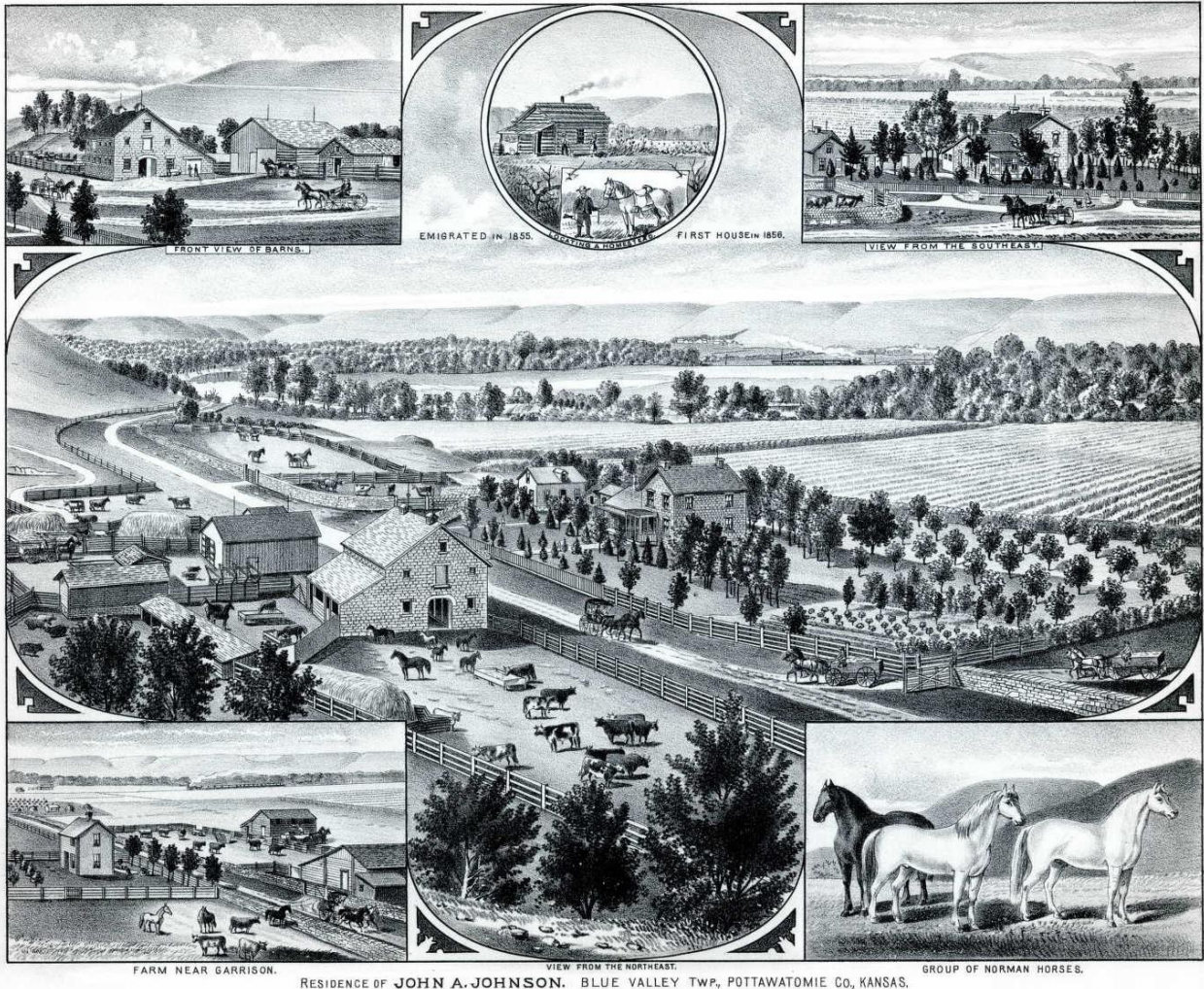


Figure 8: Drawing: Rendition of John A. Johnson Farm. SOURCE: 1880 Pottawatomie County, Kansas Atlas

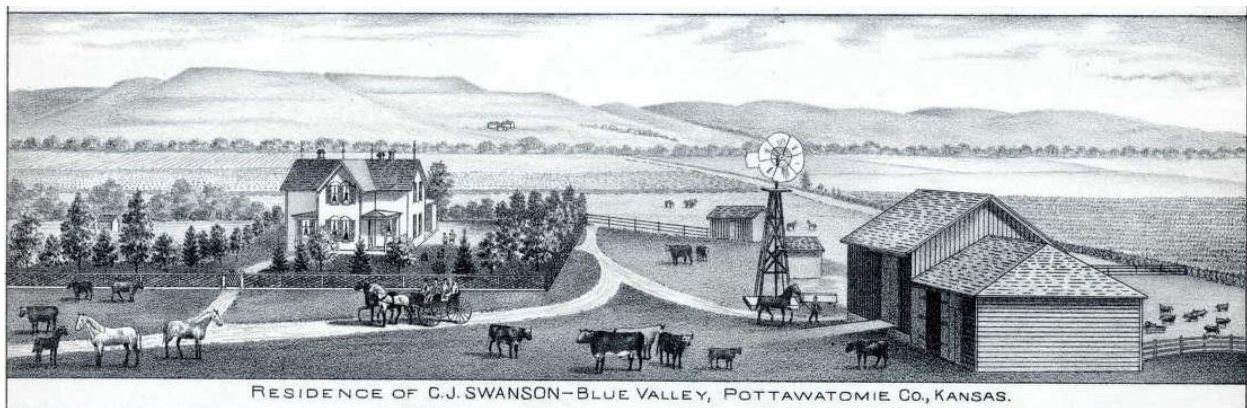


Figure 9: Drawing: Rendition of C. J. Swanson Farm. SOURCE: 1880 Pottawatomie County, Kansas Atlas

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