

## Wrath of the Cottonwood: Saffordville, Chase County, Kansas, 1872-1957



**Figure 1: The stone shell of an old auto garage in Saffordville. Photo by author, taken September 2007. Note that the trees growing out of the building site are as tall as the trees surrounding them.**

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History 533: Lost Kansas Communities

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

Spring 2013

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The ghost town of Saffordville, in eastern Chase County, was established in the 1870s along the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroad. The town never incorporated, but by the early 1900s had a myriad of commercial businesses and over two hundred people. However, it was located in the flood-prone Cottonwood River valley, and when the river catastrophically flooded in 1951 the town was seriously damaged and soon abandoned. This study illustrates the history of Saffordville through newspapers, maps, photographs, and books.

## A Quiet River

Today, walk by the Cottonwood River in eastern Chase County and you will most likely observe a quietly meandering river, slowly flowing eastward through the heart of the Flint Hills towards the Neosho River and well-contained within its banks. Over fifty years ago, however, this quiet river was a scene of destruction and disaster. After over nine inches of rain fell on the days of July 8th and 9th, 1951, the river swelled to over a mile wide, burying any building within close distance under five feet of water.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the hardest hit area in the entire county was the railroad town of Saffordville, which suffered total destruction from the high water. After almost eighty years of success, the town was abandoned after being destroyed by the flood. Through my research I have come to the conclusion that Saffordville became a ghost town due to the Great Flood of 1951.

## Early History

Saffordville is located immediately south of U.S. highway 50 two miles west of the Chase/Lyon county line in Toledo Township. The town is over a mile north of the Cottonwood River; however, Bull Creek and Buckeye Creek flow closer to the town and the town lies right in the middle of the Cottonwood River floodplain. It was founded in 1872 as Safford, shortly after the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe railroad built across Chase County.<sup>2</sup> By the end of 1872 it had a post office, a depot and a store, and by 1901 it had a creamery, a hotel, and at least twenty houses.<sup>3 4</sup> By 1887, mail was getting sent to the town addressed for the city of Stafford, in Stafford County, so in that year the town's name was changed to Kenyon.<sup>5</sup> Then, mail began arriving in town addressed for Cañon City, Colorado, so in 1888 the name was very briefly changed back to Safford before

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<sup>1</sup> "4<sup>th</sup>. And Worst Flood In All History Hits Tuesday", Chase County Leader, issue date July 11, 1951

<sup>2</sup> Bruntzel, Melvin D. *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing Towns and Places With Selected Trivia and Truths: Volume 1: A-L*, Belleville, 2010. "Safford"

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Chase County, Kansas, Plat Map, 1901, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209375/page/9>. Note that the town is still called "Safford".

<sup>5</sup> Bruntzel, Melvin D. *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing Towns and Places With Selected Trivia and Truths: Volume 1: A-L*, Belleville, 2010. "Kenyon"

becoming Saffordville after a group of railroad workers painted "Saffordville" on the train depot.<sup>6</sup> The town was named after Judge Jacob Safford, the Supreme Judge of the District Court of Kansas in the 1860s and a man who was influential in getting the Homestead Act passed in 1862.<sup>7</sup>

### Peak Success, early 20th century



Figure 2: A photograph of downtown Saffordville circa 1900. Source: Chase County Historical Museum in

Cottonwood Falls, May 7, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Selves, Michael. *Chase County, Kansas: History: Saffordville*. 1994. Source can be found at <http://genealogytrails.com/kan/chase/history1.html>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

By 1910, the city was described as “one of the thriving villages of Chase county” and had “a bank, telegraph and express offices, and a money order post office”, as well as a population of 200.<sup>8</sup> The Toledo Township High School, which still stands today, was built in 1916, and the Saffordville Methodist Church was built in 1902.<sup>9</sup> By the 1930s, the town had a doctor, five different social lodges, and “three stores, a blacksmith shop, restaurant, barber shop, bank, garage and a produce shop” as well as a maintained population of 200.<sup>10</sup>

### **The "Worst Flood in All History"**

When the earliest settlers reached the Cottonwood River valley and Chase County in the 1850s, native Kansa Indians there warned them about the river, saying that they had seen the water from bluff to bluff, covering the entire floodplain. The early settlers ignored their warnings and built several towns along the river anyway. The first documented flood to damage Saffordville was in 1904, when it was reported that water “flowed into almost every house.”<sup>11</sup> Yet the residents stayed on, and the town maintained its population.

The year 1951 began as an average year for the town. It maintained its population of approximately 200 and the school and Methodist Church were active and busy. In May, the high school graduated a class of only four students, perhaps a sign of the decline of rural schools that would eventually lead to consolidation later.<sup>12</sup> A small flood in May kept the Cottonwood River full within its banks as summer began.<sup>13</sup> Then on July 8th and 9th, 1951, over nine inches of rain fell on the floodplain, and the already swollen Cottonwood River rose more than ten feet in two days. The headline on the July 11<sup>th</sup>, 1951 issue of the Chase County Leader newspaper read “Worst Flood In All History Hits Tuesday”. Many towns were flooded badly, including the small town of Elmdale, which reported water rising up to the eaves on the one-story buildings on Main Street.<sup>14</sup> But none of the towns

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<sup>8</sup> Blackmar, Frank W. *Kansas, a cyclopedia of state history, embracing events, institutions, industries, counties, cities, towns, prominent persons, etc. Volume II*. Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912. Source can be found at <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1912/s/saffordville.html>

<sup>9</sup> Selves, Michael. *Chase County, Kansas: History: Saffordville*. 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Chase County Leader, issue date May 16, 1951

<sup>13</sup> Chase County Leader, issue date May 1, 1951

<sup>14</sup> “4<sup>th</sup>. And Worst Flood In All History Hits Tuesday”, Chase County Leader, issue date July 11, 1951

in Chase County were affected as badly as Saffordville.



**Figure 3: An aerial photo likely taken less than a week after the 1951 flood, showing the entire city of Saffordville as well as land up to a mile north of town completely underwater. Source: Chase County Historical Museum in Cottonwood Falls, in a photo album titled "Floods."**

The city was a disaster area. Newspapers reported that “buildings of every nature [were] deposited in the most improbable places” and that “buildings [were] lurching like drunken men against each other. Residents reported water heights of up to 51 inches in their houses.<sup>15</sup> The town’s residents had to be evacuated, and once the waters receded, many of them moved their damaged homes to the higher ground of Cottonwood Falls, Emporia, or the tiny town of Toledo, two miles up the hill. Only two families stayed on after the flood, and the

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<sup>15</sup> “We Saw Saffordville”, Chase County Leader, issue date July 18, 1951

town struggled to stay alive without its residents.<sup>16</sup> By 1957, most of the houses and the church had been moved to Toledo, and that year the post office closed, sealing the town's death.<sup>17</sup> The Toledo Township High School in town stayed open until it consolidated with Chase County High School in 1966.<sup>18</sup>

### **PrairyErth's Author Makes a Visit**

“Had there been an economic reason for Saffordville to continue, these repetitions of muddy water would’ve been serious drawbacks, but, without reasons beyond the inertia of official settlement, the Cottonwood, like a wronged red man, finally drove out the town.”

-William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth, A Deep map*, page 30

In his book *PrairyErth*, William Least Heat-Moon describes a visit to Saffordville in 1991. The town had only five residents living in four houses, and the depot by the elevator was still visible, with a fading sign on it saying "Saffordville".<sup>19</sup> He describes interviews with Frances Staedtler and Edith McGregor, two of the last remaining residents of the town. An elderly 82 in 1991, Edith described her life in the town from 1947 to present, saying that a boat came to take her from her house shortly after the Great Flood, but she refused to leave. She said she used to be able to count eight houses along Hunt Street, and now only four remained. Frances Staedtler started crying when recounting her experience with the flood to Heat-Moon. “It’s too much remembering how we all were in those days, when we were strong enough to fight it. We were together.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Saffordville Today**

Longtime Chase County resident Sue Smith recalled that Saffordville, already down after the flood, suffered another death blow when the Eisenhower administration moved U.S. Highway 50 north of town in the mid-1950s, cutting off travelers from the few businesses left in town.<sup>21</sup> Today, Saffordville is covered in tall grass and trees, and little can be seen from a quick glance. Coming into the city area from the southwest on Old

<sup>16</sup> Heat-Moon, William Least. *PrairyErth, a Deep Map*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1991. Chapter 1, pg. 29-30

<sup>17</sup> Bruntzel, Melvin D. *Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost-Found-Missing Towns and Places With Selected Trivia and Truths: Volume 1: A-L, Belleville*, 2010. “Saffordville”

<sup>18</sup> Toledo Township High School: About. Source can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Toledo-Township-High-School/350522121691239?id=350522121691239&sk=info>

<sup>19</sup> Heat-Moon, William Least. *PrairyErth, a Deep Map*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1991. Chapter 1, pg. 29-30

<sup>20</sup> Heat-Moon, William Least. *PrairyErth, a Deep Map*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1991. Chapter 1, pg. 38-39

<sup>21</sup> Smith, Sue. Personal interview by Matthew Leverich. Cottonwood Falls, KS, May 7, 2013.

Highway 50, the dirt road suddenly becomes concrete, and the narrow concrete road reminds a traveler of old paved highways from many years ago. As the old concrete highway approaches its end, on the south side of the road sits an old tin elevator and a few other assorted sheds, all of them rusting away, one of them with a large sign on the front saying "Nutrena Feeds." The concrete road ends at a T intersection with ZZ road, and only 50 feet north sits the current Highway 50, with cars and semi-trucks whizzing by oblivious to the ghost town just to their south.

Drive south on ZZ road and you cross two railroad tracks and then drop steeply, about 10 feet, onto a flat plain. You now have arrived at the town. A concrete chimney sits awkwardly standing on a foundation, the most notable remnant of a wooden home that has burned down. To the east, well-hidden in the trees, is the stone shell of an old building, once known as Navett's blacksmith shop. The building was also used as an auto garage and gas station.<sup>22</sup> Today, only the four exterior walls remain, and trees as tall as the ones surrounding them grow out of the middle of the old building. To the west lies a grass path. This was once one of the streets in the city. When I visited the town in 2007, I could travel down this street, where I observed sidewalk remnants and the ruins of a house in the trees. Today, however, a newer-looking chained fence and a "No Trespassing" sign met my path on the road, so I could not return to the inside of the old town. Traveling down ZZ road, look closely and you will observe old sidewalks, bricks and chunks of concrete all over the empty lots facing the road. Travel about 1000 feet south and you will come across the only living remnants of the town, two occupied houses and the two-story brick Toledo Township High School. One house is now being used as a bed-and-breakfast and the other is owned by Dr. Tom Bridge, an elderly man who has done several interviews I have come across during my research for this town. Along ZZ Road on the east side, a few tree stumps stick out of the ground, and from a certain angle they look like gravestones, a fitting scene for this dead town.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 4: A photograph of the east side of ZZ road (formerly Saffordville's Hunt Street) in Saffordville. Photo by author, taken May 7, 2013. Note that the empty lots are fenced off. Also note the tree stumps.**

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