

# Irving, Kansas: 100 Year Survivor

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Figure 1. Partial View of Irving, Kansas. Circa, 1890  
Historical Society

Marshall County Museum and

## Irving, Kansas: 100 Year Survivor

It was February, 1860 and Kansas was going through one of the worst droughts ever recorded.<sup>1</sup> The land was bare without trees, the soil, dry with thirst, and the wind howled through the tall grass that covered the prairie. The United States government had made an effort to encourage settlement on the open range of Kansas by establishing the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854.<sup>2</sup> The country was also preparing for civil war, and Kansas became a battle ground of guerrilla warfare, later described as “Bleeding Kansas.”<sup>3</sup> Although Kansas was experiencing a rough time in history, it became prime real-estate for in-coming settlers.

The township of Irving, Kansas, became a destination area for settlement which had potential for great success. Irving was founded by educated abolitionists who choose an area located along the Big Blue River.<sup>4</sup> Irving had all the potential to survive but faced many diverse challenges. Ironically it was the federal government that led to the destruction of the town.

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<sup>1</sup> Horace Greeley, in the New York Independent of Feb. 7, 1861, said: "Drought is not unknown to us; but a drought so persistent and so severe as that which devastated Kansas in 1860 is a stranger to the states this side of the Mississippi. No rain, or none of any consequence, over an area of 40,000 square miles from seed time to harvest. Such has been the woeful experience of seven-eighths of Kansas during 1860." (Standard Pub. Co. Chicago :1912 2002)

<sup>2</sup> Schilling/Sellmeyer, 2009. Opened up the land for legal settlement and allowed residents of these territories to decide by popular vote if it would be a free or pro-slavery state.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid..

<sup>4</sup> Rickson, Esther, Robert Hull, Myrtle M. Davis, and Dale Comer, A History of Irving, Kansas. Marysville, 1979 p. 1.

In 1859 a group of fourteen men from Lyons, Iowa, took advantage of the opportunity and decided to travel to Kansas to organize a township “somewhere on the Great Frontier”<sup>5</sup> Among these settlers were three lawyers, two doctors, one teacher, one minister, two merchants, and a hotel keeper.<sup>6</sup> W. W. Jerome was the chosen leader to journey by railroad to St. Joseph and meet Samuel Pomeroy, an abolitionist leader whose portrait is shown below. Pomeroy helped organize settlements for pioneers with ant-slavery beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Samuel Pomeroy led W.W. Jerome to a piece of land that he described as, “a most beautiful tract of land on the west side of the Big Blue River, between the junctions of the Little Blue River and the Game fork with the Big

**Figure 1. Samuel C. Pomeroy posing for a photograph for the library of Congress between 1865-1880. Library of Congress**



Blue.”<sup>8</sup> Irving was also conveniently located along the Central Branch Railroad of Atchison, Kansas.<sup>9</sup> The rest of the settlers followed Jerome to the southwest portion of Marshall County and named the new town, Irving, after the American author, Washington Irving.<sup>10</sup> Marshall County is named after Frank Marshall who founded the county in favor of pro-slavery. A large majority of residents in Marshall County was in favor of slavery, but the founders of Irving

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> “jumping-off place.” In Esther Rickson, et al, A History of Irving Kansas.

<sup>8</sup> Rickson, Esther, Robert Hull, Myrtle McAfee Davis, and Dale Comer, A History of Irving, Kansas. Marysville, 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Robert K. Mills, 1883.

<sup>10</sup> Robert K. Mills, 1883.



were not. They were Protestant abolitionists<sup>11</sup> from the Midwest with rich values of education, and freedom.<sup>12</sup> The settlers of Irving were strong in their beliefs, even in the face of the ridicule from pro-slavery supporters. The pro-slavery men were not fond of the Union supporters from Irving, calling them “Blue-bellied Yankees” and “Damned abolitionists.” The rumor was that if Kansas joined the Confederacy, the Irving citizens would be hanged.<sup>13</sup> The profane nicknames did not intimidate the Irving settlers to abandon their beliefs. They continued building schools, churches, and businesses that would further help them prosper as a community.



Figure 3. The brick addition to the Irving School House, Circa 1919  
Marshall County Museum and Historical Society.

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<sup>12</sup> (Committee, et al. 1979) The Founding and Early History of Irving: Pg. 1  
Figure 2. Grade school class photo taken outside of the rebuilt school house in Irving,  
Kansas, 1881 Marshall County Museum and Historical Society

<sup>13</sup> (Committee, et al. 1979) The Founding and Early History of Irving: Pg. 1

Irving organized the second school in Marshall County, which in 1869 was also used for church services. This two-room building stood for ten years and was destroyed by a tornado in 1879, but the people were not discouraged; they quickly built a wood framed, two-room school house.<sup>14</sup> The school brought an increase in enrollment and continued to grow until it could no longer provide enough space for the teachers and students.<sup>15</sup> The Irving people decided to build a brick addition to the school house, which had a gymnasium-auditorium.<sup>16</sup> Irving citizens, with help from the famous Dr. Charles Parker<sup>17</sup> lead the efforts to start the Wetmore Institute.<sup>18</sup> The school was fortunate to have well educated and accomplished teachers. The Institute was a great improvement to the community and showed the lasting values' of education that the citizens of Irving have.

“It was a school for young ladies to learn how to teach. There were many ladies who came, but over time there was not a high enough student enrollment to keep it afloat and there just wasn't much motivation to go.”<sup>19</sup>

The rise in student enrollment was in direct correlation to the market economy that was also thriving in the community. On February 10, 1873, Kansas legislation granted permission to build a dam on the Big Blue River.<sup>20</sup> General Warden from Darlington, Wisconsin, moved to

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<sup>14</sup> Figure 2: Two-room, wooden framed school house shown standing in perhaps the 1930s.

<sup>15</sup> (Committee, et al. 1979) Schools, Public Schools: Pg. 7

<sup>16</sup> Richter et al, “Schools: Public Schools”. pg. 7

<sup>17</sup> Richter, et al, 1979, “ Dr. Charles: A famous blind preacher of the pioneer days.” pg. 9

<sup>18</sup> Richter et al, “Wetmore Institute”. Pg. 9

<sup>19</sup> Skinner, 2010 “Former Irving Citizen”

<sup>20</sup> A. M. F. Randolph, 1880 Volume 23: pg. 747

Irving and dammed the river and built the town's first mill.<sup>21</sup> General Warden<sup>22</sup> had said, "the power at Irving was sufficient to run twenty plants the size of the same mill."<sup>23</sup>

"Gen'l Warden dammed the Big Blue, and created one of the finest mills in state. As soon as the mill was in running order, Irving took a boom and doubled in size and population inside of two years, and continued at that rate for some time..."



**Figure 4. General Samuel Wardens Mill in the Southern territory of Marshall County, along the West bank of the Big Blue River, Township of Irving, Circa 1870  
Marshall County Museum and Historical Society.**

<sup>21</sup> Deibert, 1999 Notebook kept by the Deibert Family. Copy available at Marshall County Museum and Hist. Society

<sup>22</sup> Leonard, 1886 "Civil War General from Wisconsin"

<sup>23</sup> Richter et al., 1979 "The Mill at Irving." pg. 12

The Irving mill was in constant competition with the mill at Blue Rapids, Kansas.

The Irving mill had five years of success but in 1881, the dam was flooded and washed out. The citizens rebuilt the dam, only to see it get washed away again by a flood in 1883.<sup>24</sup> They finally decided not to reconstruct the mill and take the losses. Natural disasters plagued Irving but couldn't break the spirit of the citizens. The fourteen founders of Irving arrived in 1860 during a horrific drought. Just six years later in 1866, a thick swarm of grasshoppers horded all the vegetation along the prairie; the area was revisited by the insects in 1875.<sup>25</sup> On May 30, 1879, an F-5 level tornado ripped through the town, destroying much of the town; just minutes after it had passed, another F-5 tornado was tearing through what was left of Irving. Thirteen people were killed and fifty injured, along with 34 homes, and most businesses and



Figure 5. Photographs of Irving, Kansas after the destruction of two tornadoes on May 30, 1879. Marshall County Museum and Historical Society

<sup>24</sup> Richter, et al. 1979, "The Mill at Irving". Pg. 12

<sup>25</sup> Richter, et al. 1979 " Many Tragedies." Pg. 2

local buildings were destroyed.<sup>26</sup> This natural disaster was devastating to the community but again, the resilience of the Irving citizens encouraged them to rebuild the town. The disasters continued with more flooding along the Big Blue River in 1903.



The floods tore over the land and drowned any hopes of the Marshall County farmers for raising a successful wheat crop. Local roads around Irving were covered for miles with water from the Big Blue River. The disasters didn't stop there; in drier years,

**Figure 8. Flooded roads along the Central Branch Railroad crossing in Irving, 1903** Marshall County Historical Society

unpredictable fires burned local houses and businesses.<sup>27</sup> "Resilient settlers had one bad thing happen after another."<sup>28</sup>

President Teddy Roosevelt spoke from a train to the Irving citizens of the possibility of a dam that would eventually be the reason for Irving's destruction. Many years later on December 17, 1960, the plans for Tuttle Creek Dam were unveiled and much of the land north, up the Blue River Valley, would be allocated for the dam spillway. The citizens of Irving would have to find a new place to live and put all the

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<sup>26</sup> Rapids Times, Blue Rapids, Marshall County, Kansas 1957)

<sup>27</sup> Richter et al., 1979 "Many Tragedies". Pg. 3

<sup>28</sup> Fenstermacher, 2010.



memories behind them. “It was a devastating realization to have survived all the disasters in the town, to be kicked out by the U.S. government.”<sup>29</sup>

Irving citizens were victim to many challenges, but for 100 years, they remained resilient and showed great grit in times of tragedy. The town was founded by stalwart, educated leaders who knew how to endure. Irving had all the potential to survive but faced too many diverse challenges. Ironically it was the federal government that led to the destruction of the town. Today, a stone marker points to the old town site, as do many such markers along the Blue River. They are granite signposts of a time when thriving river towns and their busy mills hummed in the valley.

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<sup>29</sup> Skinner, 2010.

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