

**Iuka, Kansas: The History of Pratt County's Longest
Surviving Town**



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During the settlement days of Western Kansas in the 1870s, the appeals of the area were few. Western Kansas was desolate, dry, and often underwent violent temperature swings throughout the year. Yet, some pioneers sought out the plains of Western Kansas, as they longed to escape the overcrowding of their homes back east. Take for example, the founders of Iuka, Pratt County, Kansas, brave men who wanted the solitude of western Kansas. They envisioned creating a town with broad human values, a place where their children could receive the finest education in Kansas. In 1877, they began their westward journey in hopes of creating their ideal community.

In the spring of 1877, Reverend R.T. Peak and Judge Robert Anderson of Bloomfield, Iowa, set out for the western plains of Kansas, seeking to establish a new life where few ventured. After arriving in Hutchinson, these two men learned that suitable land could be obtained in Pratt County, about 50 miles south. When the two men arrived in Pratt County, they were awestruck by the beauty of plains and departed for Iowa immediately to gather a wagon train of men and families to take back to Kansas. The first man to settle the area, Reverend Andrew Axline, filed on the northeast quarter of Section Four, Township 27, Range 13, the center of the county. Afterwards, the settlers constructed the town of Iuka on the northeast corner of Axline's property.¹ Within a few months of settlement, homesteaders and townspeople had already constructed homes, blacksmith shops, as well as the first store named "Daums". The store would eventually be the first structure on the town site of Iuka. By July 28, 1878, settlers of the area formed a town company, initially calling it "Ninnescah". However, another town in Kansas already claimed the name; therefore, they changed it to "Iuka", named after an Indian

¹ J. Rufus Gray. *Pioneer Saints and Sinners*. Pratt Rotary Club: Pratt, KS, 1968. p. 43-44

chief in Mississippi who supposedly cured his rheumatism at a mineral spring.² Like many towns in Kansas, Iuka boomed immediately after its creation. By the fall of 1878 it obtained a drug store, medical office, hotel, Pratt County's only bank, as well as the *Pratt County Press*. It took three years before a rail line came to Iuka; however, by 1881 the Missouri Pacific railroad ran through the town.³ At its peak in 1884, Iuka grew to over 500 people and was in contention for the Pratt County seat with Saratoga. However, as with many Kansas counties, the boundaries of Pratt County changed, no longer making Iuka the center of Pratt County. In 1884, men from McPherson and Iuka decided it was necessary to form a town in the center of the county, naming it Pratt. Just three years after its creation, Pratt obtained the Rock Island rail line as well as a depot, causing the town to boom.

Sadly, Iuka could not keep up with Pratt's growing pace and eventually lost the county seat battle in 1888.⁴ Yet, unlike Saratoga, Iuka persevered after losing out on the county seat race. Sometime in the late 1880s, a post office was established in the town which survived until the 1960s. In 1915, Iuka organized its first co-op and built a 10,000-bushel wooden elevator. After years of wear-and-tear, the board of directors decided to reconstruct the elevator in 1947, putting in its place a 100,000-bushel concrete and steel elevator. In addition, the town had received a second elevator in 1941, brought over by the Commander Larrabee Milling Company of Kansas City.⁵ To this the day, Iuka continues to use its grain elevators. The elevators serve as

² Ibid

³ Rowland R. Peters. "Iuka – The Cradle of Pratt County's History." *The Pratt Tribune*. Vol. 34, no. 157. , Thursday, August 30th, 1951. p. 1, 9

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

a symbol for citizens of Iuka, as they show the town's ability to survive and withstand anything thrown their way, even severe competition... In fact, the Taylor Store, built in 1879, continued to operate throughout the 1950s, "serving Iuka as one of the most complete and modern merchandising establishments to be found in any town in the United states of Iuka's size and many, many others much larger than Iuka."⁶ However, eventually even this store closed as well, perhaps sometime in the 1960s (an exact date is unknown).

Today, only the grain elevators operate in Iuka, as the town has spread out into a small farming community with 163 citizens.⁷ Perhaps with time, Iuka, much like many other small towns of Kansas will die out, leaving only the grain elevators standing. Yet, much like its founders, Iuka embodies strength and toughness. It has "withstood more than many other villages are forced to withstand to be what it still is – the proud village of Iuka."⁸

⁶ Ibid

⁷ "Iuka." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iuka,_Kansas. Accessed 3/31/2011.

⁸ Iuka – The Cradle of Pratt County's History