

# Fame, Flood, and Fire: The Surprisingly Short, Dynamic Story of Eureka Lake, Riley County, Kansas, 1900-1916



Figure 1: The majestic stone architecture of Eureka Lake Resort, date of photo unknown.  
Courtesy of the Riley County Historical Society & Museum

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A cruel wind is whistling through the bare branches overhead as the early December, 2017 sun begins to set over a thickly wooded ridge of the Flint Hills. Only leaves rustling over the ground are a reminder of what once was here: a vibrant forested river bottom in a summer not really so long ago -- the start of a new century, 1906. Leaves blow now across the corn fields and skip across a dry lake bed, a mere hollow in the landscape overtaken by brush and woods. This too, is a physical reminder of one man's dream that was once alive, prospering, and yet abruptly snuffed out by the forces of nature.

Nestled in Eureka Valley, four miles west of modern Manhattan, was once a small ox-bow lake that resembled a fish hook. It was formed from a bend in the Kansas River suddenly cut off by either erosive waters or a buildup of sediment from a flood. Geologists conjecture that this lake may have been created from the river during the great flood of 1844. Eureka Lake, as it was soon known, was approximately two and a half miles long and anywhere from 200 to 400 feet wide. At its deepest, it was forty feet from the surface to the bed.<sup>i</sup>

The idea of a resort here was conceived by C.P. Dewey of Chicago. It is important to understand the entrepreneurial character of this man, for he always envisioned the future. C.P. Dewey introduced himself to Kansas perhaps twenty years before the creation of the resort. His arrival in Manhattan, Kansas was noneventful; however, it would not remain that way for long. Not even a month after he got off the Union Pacific in Manhattan, he purchased a cattle ranch a few hundred acres in size in southern Riley County. This was especially interesting to the people of Riley County, because C. P. Dewey did not consult a bank but rather paid for the entire ranch on the spot with cash. Soon he bought more land, pushing the ranch to an astonishing 11,000 acres of prime Flint Hills grazing land for beef cattle.<sup>ii</sup> And his ambitions did not stop there. In

Manhattan, with the purchase of Kaw River bottom land, Dewey constructed enormous (for the time) feedlots, as well as “commodious sheds and pens that followed as fast as the carpenters could build them.”<sup>iii</sup> Dewey also held land in Rawlins County, a cattle ranch exceeding 100,000 acres. It was said that the labor force required to keep such an operation running was equivalent to a small town, and that mail sent to the area usually ended up at Dewey’s Ranch, as opposed to the small, long-vanished town of Pantheke located right beside it.

Mr. Dewey also invested in various other projects around the city of Manhattan, aside from his feedlot. One especially notable example was the Dewey Transfer Livery Barn on Third and Houston, extending the length of an entire city block. When he found that the electricity provided by Manhattan was inadequate to sufficiently light his stable, he decided to purchase the city power plant, then retrofit it with the best equipment he could find. Yet of all these grand economic projects, the one that ended up captivating his mind and heart was the little lake in the valley right outside the city.<sup>iv</sup>



Figure 2: C. P. Dewey overlooking Eureka Lake from the veranda of Eureka Lake Resort, ca. 1901  
 Courtesy of the Geary County Historical Society

C.P. Dewey first made plans to build at Eureka Lake in 1899. Originally, he wanted to call the fashionable getaway Manhattan Beach.<sup>v</sup> When the idea came to him to develop the land around Eureka Lake, it was not with the intention of creating a large resort but rather a more humble, personal establishment, a second home that would serve as a respite for him and his close friends.<sup>vi</sup> In the spring of 1900, from owners William and Mary Wood, Dewey secured a lease for the land encompassing the southwest side of Eureka Lake. He began construction on July 16, 1900. The work on the resort was carried out at a feverish pace, reminiscent of Mr. Dewey's other projects. One reporter wrote, "The construction of the buildings will be rushed as fast as the workmen and material can be had."<sup>vii</sup> The haste paid off, for the resort opened later

that year.<sup>viii</sup> Word of the lakeside get-away spread quickly throughout the state. Suddenly, and with little to no effort, Eureka Lake Resort was born. By 1902, visitors were booking rooms at the resort a full two weeks in advance, and many hopeful guests had to be turned away. In October of 1902, Mr. Dewey hired a renowned architect out of Chicago to expand the resort to its final, sprawling size.<sup>ix</sup> Small, private “Manhattan Beach” had disappeared.

The original resort had boasted an impressive three-story building, “consisting of sixteen sleeping rooms, a large dining room, kitchen and billiard room.” The 1903 expansion was an annex described as “160 feet long and forty feet wide and [was] two full stories with a mansard story above a large hall which [ran] the full length.” A first-hand account from a visitor to the resort helps provide an image of what guests would have seen as they walked through the hotel at Eureka Lake:

On each side are large sleeping rooms all fitted with handsome rugs, curtains, dressers, iron beds and bedroom furniture. A number of the rooms are extra large and contain from two to four beds especially designed to accommodate house parties or families desiring to be together. The annex also contains the office, the music room with a piano, pianola music boxes and gramophones. In the second story above the office is the pool room. A large, airy room has been filled up with a ping pong set and games especially for the children. A veranda, running the full length of the building and around the dining room, is an ideal lounging place.<sup>x</sup>

The annex was simply the beginning of the amenities the grand resort provided. Eureka Lake also offered a large bowling alley, an enormous dancing pavilion, a toboggan slide, bathhouse, high dive tower, Shetland ponies, rowboats, and naphtha (gasoline) powered launches.<sup>xi</sup> These boats and the high dive tower were kept at the water’s edge, where guests could rent the launches for an hour-long tour of the entire lake. The equivalent of a modern day zip line was strung from the shore to the center of the lake, and guests used it to sling themselves far out over the water. A pasture and barn with enough space for 25 horses, brought



from the Dewey Transfer Livery Barn, provided open air riding for guests. Slaughter houses sat on the far end of the premises, and hogs, and cattle were butchered for hotel use. Poultry, eggs, and vegetables came from nearby farms. Paths wound along the edge of the lake, where guests could fish or walk along the landscaped terrain, observing the calm water and heavily wooded ridge just behind the resort.<sup>xii</sup> Lights strung up across the property twinkled in the night, and on Sunday evenings, guests would have seen and heard a live band, filling the air with music. Couples danced into the wee hours of the morning.<sup>xiii</sup> Porch swings, rocking chairs, and easy chairs lined the veranda which framed the stone, fort-like construction of the resort.<sup>xiv</sup> Visible in Figure 3 below is the beautiful white limestone cut from area deposits.



Figure 3: The entrance to Eureka Lake Resort as seen from the county road approaching it, circa 1906. Courtesy of the Riley County Historical Society & Museum

Visitors arrived at Eureka Lake via a small country road that ran to both the city of Manhattan and the Union Pacific Railroad depot, not far from the lake.<sup>xv</sup> The resort was at most a forty-minute buggy ride from Manhattan, making it a popular destination.<sup>xvi</sup> Guests often took a Tally-Ho coach with a four horse team and teamster when traveling to and from Eureka Lake.<sup>xvii</sup> Those who took the Union Pacific were just as well off, paying a whopping \$1.75 for a round-trip from Topeka. This trip lasted a comfortable hour and 45 minutes. Guests could stay at the resort for \$2 a day or \$10 for the week. For this, they had access to first class meals from the best chefs, a certified physician from Chicago, and a direct telephone connection to all nearby towns. This was a considerable bargain compared to other summer resorts in the United States at the time and greatly added to the growing appeal of Eureka Lake.<sup>xviii</sup> There was even talk of drilling wells into the lake bed to pump extra water into the lake, creating enough depth to allow steamboat traffic from the Kansas River.<sup>xix</sup> Of course, as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end, and it has never held truer than at Eureka Lake Resort.



Figure 4: Young women enjoying the lake in row boats provided by the resort. Diving platforms and the walkway surrounding the lake can be seen in the background. C. 1906  
 Courtesy of the Riley County Historical Society & Museum

In the late spring of 1903, a series of sleet storms, freezes, tornadoes, hail, and massive rainstorms unleashed a tremendous amount of water onto the Kansas countryside. On May 29, the Kansas River exceeded its banks, flooding Junction City, Manhattan, and Topeka successively; on May 31, Lawrence and Kansas City were inundated.<sup>xx</sup> Despite being on higher ground, Eureka Lake Resort was damaged. Thousands of dollars of C.P. Dewey's property swept away down the Kaw River Valley, never to be seen again.<sup>xxi</sup> Luckily, there were no deaths at the resort; however, mud and debris carried by the roaring river waters almost completely filled in the lake, altering the landscape beyond recognition.<sup>xxii</sup> Restoration attempts ultimately failed, and a year later, C.P. Dewey passed away in Wheeling, West Virginia at the home of a relative. Perhaps the loss of his cherished resort hastened his death.<sup>xxiii</sup>



Dewey's son and heir, Chauncey, had no interest in the property and put it up for sale.<sup>xxiv</sup> On February 2, 1906, paying just \$14,200, the Kansas Grand Lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows purchased the entire 134 acres of resort land and its buildings. C.P. Dewey's total investment had been \$75,000.<sup>xxv</sup> In 1910, the I.O.O.F. also purchased the land between the resort and the Kansas River from William and Mary Wood, who had originally leased the Eureka Lake Resort property to Dewey. The resort was converted into a home for orphans and the elderly. Yet tragedy continued to haunt the area. On November 26, 1916, a fire, encouraged by a brisk south wind, swept through the buildings on the property, leveling them all. This was the death knell for Eureka Lake. Although the buildings were reconstructed and the care home re-opened in 1919, Eureka Lake soon faded into the ether of history.<sup>xxvi</sup>



Figure 5: Dedication of the juvenile center at the Odd Fellows and Rebekah Home. ca. 1906  
Source: Courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society

Today, Flint Hills Job Corps Center stands where Eureka Lake Resort once was. Red brick buildings, parking lots, and a guard shack claim the land.<sup>xxvii</sup> Visitors likely never realize that for a brief decade, this was a place where people danced under the stars and row boats skimmed across the water. A thick stand of trees covers a barely noticeable, fish hook-shaped depression in the land, easy to miss when driving by. Like most things that have come and gone, the resort requires a slowing down of the mind to notice and hear its story. But if you stand still, shin-deep

in the dry, whispering grass, traces will appear: a glint of water in the mind's eye...a glimpse of a ruined stone wall in the distance.

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<sup>i</sup> Winifred N. Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas: A Story of Early Settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies and Sunflowers* (Brooklyn, NY: Theo. Guas' Sons, Inc.), 81.

<sup>ii</sup> The Riley County Dewey ranch became Konza Prairie Biological Research Station, and the stone house and barn still stand.

<sup>iii</sup> "Character Sketch of the Late C.P. Dewey," *The Salina Evening Journal*, June 11, 1904.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas*, 81.

<sup>vi</sup> "An Ideal Summer Resort in Kansas," *The Topeka State Journal*, July 29, 1903.

<sup>vii</sup> "Eureka Lake Club House," *The Manhattan Nationalist*, July 20, 1900.

<sup>viii</sup> Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas*, 82.

<sup>ix</sup> "An Ideal Summer Resort in Kansas."

<sup>x</sup> Ibid. A pianola was a small piano played automatically using a metal music roll.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas*, 82.

<sup>xiii</sup> "Character Sketch of the late C.P. Dewey."

<sup>xiv</sup> "An Ideal Summer Resort in Kansas."

<sup>xv</sup> Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas*, 82.

<sup>xvi</sup> "Eureka Lake Clubhouse."

<sup>xvii</sup> Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas*, 82.

<sup>xviii</sup> "An Ideal Summer Resort in Kansas."

<sup>xix</sup> "Character Sketch of the Late C.P. Dewey."

<sup>xx</sup> "Flood of 1903." *Kansas State Historical Society*. Accessed December 10, 2017.  
<http://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/flood-of-1903/17221>.

<sup>xxi</sup> "Rebekah-Odd Fellow Home," *The Burlingame Enterprise*, January 4, 1906.

<sup>xxii</sup> Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas*, 82.

<sup>xxiii</sup> "Rebekah-Odd Fellow Home."

<sup>xxiv</sup> "Character Sketch of the Late C.P. Dewey,"

<sup>xxv</sup> "Rebekah - Odd Fellow Home."

<sup>xxvi</sup> Slagg, *Riley County, Kansas*, 83.

<sup>xxvii</sup> However, the road leading to the old resort area is still called Eureka Drive.