

Strawberry, Kansas  
Washington County



SOURCE: Past Journeys

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Strawberry, Kansas was a destination for people traveling from afar. Its cheerful name was aligned in spirit with its famed dance hall and pavilion. This small town thrived for nearly 100 years from 1868 to 1951. Although the story of the town's demise is just like those stories of many other lost Kansas towns, Strawberry's short history includes many unique aspects and illustrates why life in Strawberry should never be forgotten.

Citizens from the northern part of Clifton Township presented a petition to the county board on July 2, 1871 to form a new township. The petition was granted and the town of Strawberry was born. Roger Howley and a Mr. Alcott are credited with naming the town. The men were inspired by the wild strawberries growing in the area (Strawberry, Kansas 1868-1951). Located in Washington County, Kansas eleven miles northwest of Clifton and Linn, Strawberry began its bustling life (Strawberry, Kansas: The Early History). The approximate location of the town is shown on the map in figure 1. The town is said to have been named for a large bed of wild strawberries growing near the center of the town near Parson's Creek ("More about the History of Strawberry"). Strawberry's landscape included high prairie that was tillable for farming. Several well-timbered creeks ensured that the lands were watered. Parson's Creek flowed south and through the center of the township. Peach Creek flowed along the northeast corner while Dry Branch Creek flowed south in the western part of Strawberry. (Strawberry, Kansas: The Early History).

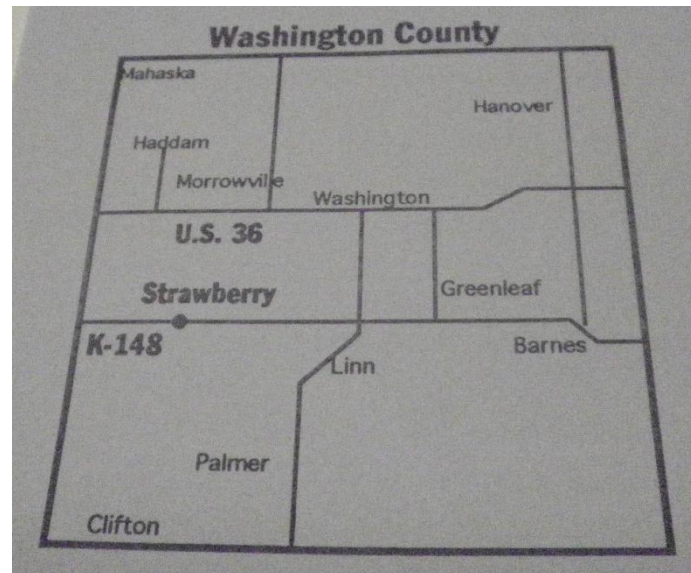


Figure 1. Map of Washington County showing the location of the Strawberry Township.  
SOURCE: Strawberry, Kansas: The Early History

The first settlement was said to be made by John Gieber and John Millfelt in the spring of 1861. Other settlers followed, with Peter George Stegman and William Bell arriving in 1865 and 1868, respectively. John Gieber later had the honor of the town's first wedding with his marriage to Miss Susan Keifer on January 1, 1868 (Strawberry, Kansas: The Early History).

Although Strawberry has a bright and cheerful name, the story of the town's first death is somewhat of an eerie tale to behold. One evening in 1870, Miss Katherine Myers started to drive home her cattle after they had been feeding on the abundant prairie grasses near her father's home. At nightfall Miss Myers became disoriented and eventually became lost. It is said she wandered into Republic County near to Elk Creek and found her way onto the dooryard of a settler in the area. In the darkness of the night, the settler mistook her for a wolf and shot her. She was killed instantly and the settler did not discover his grievous error until he discovered the body of the poor young woman the next morning (Strawberry, Kansas: The Early History).

There was a general store located near the center of town. The store and post office are shown in the figure 2 below. Art Leiszler owned and operated the little store, which is said to have been the center of the community. Citizens of Strawberry often met up with their neighbors at the store for a chat and to catch up on local news. Some residents participated in a game of cards at the store as well. The Leiszlers bought eggs and cream and stocked many of the store's goods from Clyde. The Leiszlers also ran the post office and the combination dance hall and skating rink which was quite popular with folks from a large vicinity surrounding the town of Strawberry ("Interest in Strawberry is Spreading").



Figure 2. The general store and post office.

SOURCE: Picture from Mary Calgrove, stored at Washington Co. Museum.

Strawberry was home to School District #18. The one room schoolhouse was constructed from native limestone and was located near the store in town. One teacher was in charge of teaching all eight grades. Records of early school days have been lost, possibly casualties of a March 1870 fire that destroyed the County Courthouse. As in many other farming communities, older children only attended school when there was no work to be done at home. The school year varied in length from year-to-year

and once only lasted three months. In the early days school years were cut short due to inclement weather, wide spread illness or simply lack of funds (Strawberry Kansas 1868-1951). Miss Hulda Ellsworth is said to have been the first teacher in the Strawberry school, teaching the first term in 1872 (“More about the History of Strawberry”). A photo of the school’s attendees in 1926-27 is shown below in figure 3. The students are photographed with their teacher, Ms. Mildred (Wagner) Vathauer. A photo of the schoolhouse is shown below in figure 4.



Figure 3. School children and their teacher in the 1926-27 school year.  
SOURCE: Washington County Museum

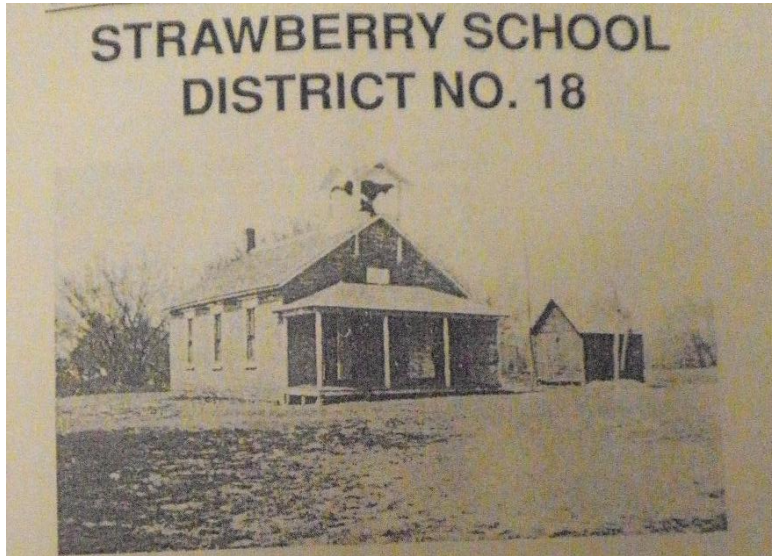


Figure 4. The Strawberry schoolhouse.  
SOURCE: "Strawberry Kansas 1868-1951"

Although Strawberry was not officially a township until the petition in 1871, Peter Gieber became Strawberry's postmaster in 1868 and this is the most commonly cited year for the start of the town. The post office received the mail by horseback. The post office was disbanded in 1904, resulting a total longevity of only 36 years compared to the 83 years (1868- 1951) that the town existed ("More about the History of Strawberry").

The population of Strawberry was said to be 436 "at the outset," 934 in 1878, and 1258 in 1880 (Strawberry, Kansas: The Early History). By 1910 the population of Strawberry was reported to have been about 52. Poor roads and slow transportation were the leading cause of the town's population decline. Slow progress after the Great Depression and World War II was a "death knell" for this small rural town ("More about the History of Strawberry"). The remaining buildings were demolished to make way for a new highway, now Kansas Highway 148. Parson's Creek and Peach Creek were made into one waterway with a bridge for crossing the creek (Strawberry, Kansas: The Early History).

The town also had a bed and breakfast type hotel. Strawberry's dance hall was "wildly popular". "Fisticuffs" were reported during dances ("More about the History of Strawberry"). A clipping from the Linn County Newspaper illustrates one good time had in Strawberry's dance pavilion. The untitled clipping dated November 1942 reports the FFA held a roller skating party Friday, October 22 with 26 people in attendance. Apparently, only one freshman was present and potato chips were served following the skating. The dance hall/roller skating rink was so popular that many cars in the area were sporting spare tire covers that read "I Danced at the Strawberry Pavilion" back in the 1920s and 30s, pictured below ("Interest in Strawberry is Spreading"). An ad for a dance that appeared in an unknown newspaper is shown below.

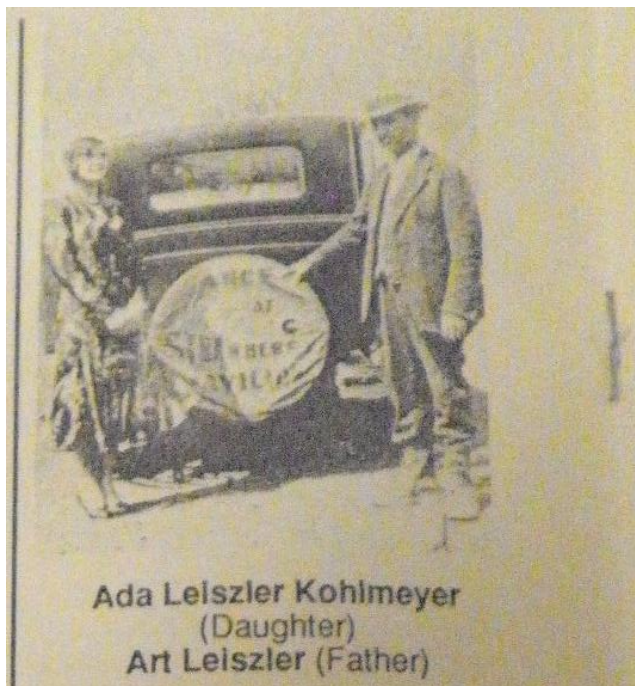


Figure 5. Strawberry's Dance Pavilion tire cover.  
SOURCE: "Interest in Strawberry is Spreading"

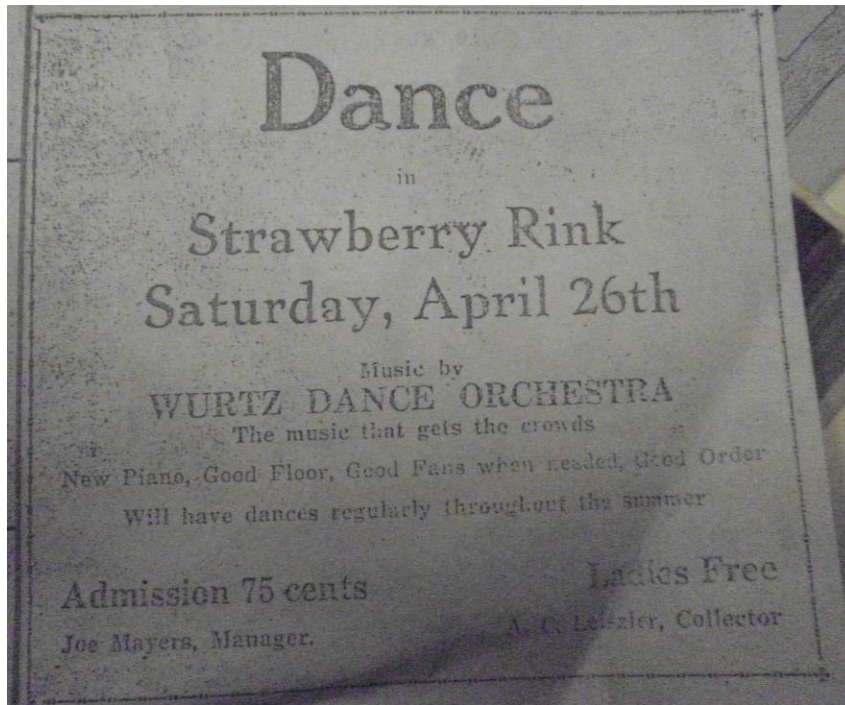


Figure 6. Ad for dance at Strawberry Rink.  
SOURCE: "More About the History of Strawberry"

On August 12, 1990 a marker was placed near the site of the former town of Strawberry to keep the town's memory alive (shown in the cover photo). About 300 people attended a ceremony where a local archivist, Dan Fitzgerald of the Kansas State Historical Society, spoke about ghost towns. The marker was donated by Maurice Geiber of Belleville and others from the Strawberry community. As for memories of life in Strawberry Glenn Leiszler, son of the former storekeeper said "It was a nice place to live" ("Interest in Strawberry is Spreading").



### References

"Interest in Strawberry is Spreading." From unknown newspaper. Jan. 11, 1990.

"More about the History of Strawberry." *Courier*, Summer 1990.

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Strawberry Kansas 1868-1951. Brochure. Available from Washington County Museum.

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"Untitled." *Linn County News*, Nov. 1943.