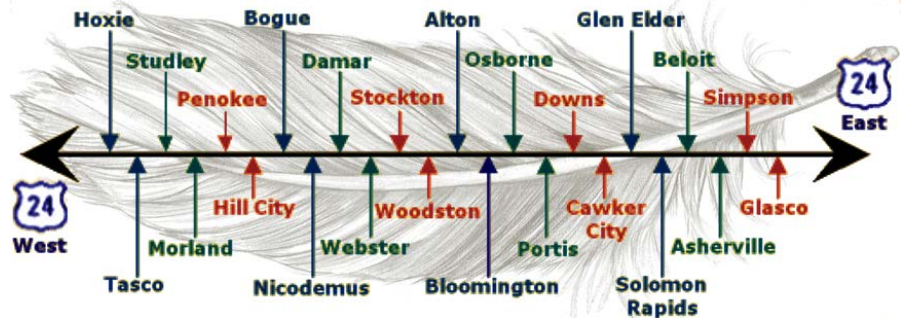
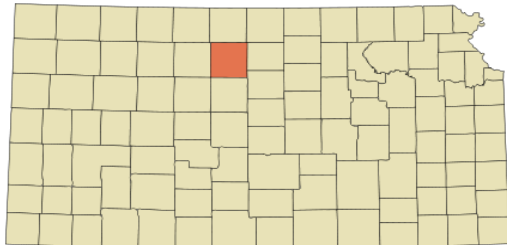




Portis, Kansas

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History of Portis

Compiled by Laura McClure

The town of Bethany was founded in 1871 and platted by Samuel Chatfield and Philander Judson in 1879. That August the Central Branch of the Union Pacific Railroad was built through Bethany and with it came the problem of the town's mail being mixed with that of Bethany, Missouri. On February 16, 1880, the town and post office changed their name to Portis in honor of railroad official Thomas J. Portis.

In the fall of 1879 Samuel Beardsley erected the first and only hotel ever opened in Portis, the Northway. Three newspapers saw life during the city's early years. The *Portis Patriot* began in 1880, later became the *Whisperer*, and in 1904 the *Portis Independent* reported the weekly news until 1943.

A drug store was opened in the 1890s and finally closed in 1949. A number of restaurants operated in the city over the years, with the last closing in the 1990s. A theatre was started in the Portis Opera House and then moved into a building of its own, closing in the late 1920s.

In earlier years, townspeople gathered at the Opera House to watch the legendary Portis Dynamos town basketball team. Put together in 1918, for many years they dominated all other town teams from across northern Kansas and southern Nebraska. A Dynamo loss was so rare that they are simply not remembered.

Portis Driving/Walking Tour:

1. City Park. Melvin "Tubby" Miller was born in 1900 in Portis; as Mel Millar he drew several of the earliest Porky Pig features. The native limestone Porky Pig Marker located in the Portis City Park is in his honor. Also seen here is a memorial to longtime Portis physician Dr. Claude Burtch, which features the limestone step that all his patients used in going to visit their favorite doctor and friend.

2. Grace Brethren Church. First organized in 1883, the current Grace Brethren Church dates from 1922.

- 3.** Former home of Hud & Nina Turner. For much of the 20th Century Hud and Nina Turner were the heart and soul of the community of Portis. They worked in the bank, as postmaster, for newspapers, insurance, and a host of other business-related activities. Hud & Nina were also members of numerous civic and fraternal organizations. Both were active well into their 90s. Among many things they were responsible for the placement of the Porky Pig Marker in honor of Hud's boyhood friend Tubby Miller.
- 4.** Site of first Portis Grade & High School. From 1906 to 1950 this was where the first substantial school building stood.
- 5.** Ruins of Burtch Hospital. Opened in 1925 and many times expanded, Dr. Claude Burtch operated this private hospital until 1952. Patients recuperated on the first floor while surgeries were performed on the second floor. Among the many surgeons who assisted him was Dr. John Outland (for whom college football's Outland Trophy is named to honor), who would periodically fly from Kansas City to Portis for serious cases.
- 6.** North Solomon Church of the Brethren. Organized in 1883, this church building was erected in 1898. Services were held here until the mid-1980s. East of the church can be seen the home of Wallace & Nellie McDanel, members of the Osborne County Hall of Fame. Wallace was a Brethren minister, and his wife Nellie was a dedicated historian and civic booster.
- 7.** Portis United Methodist Church. This church was first organized in 1881. This structure was erected in 1915 at a cost of \$5,500.00. Weekly services are still held here.
- 8.** Fire Station.
- 9.** Midway Co-op elevators. A grain elevator has stood at this site since the late 1880s.
- 10.** Former Portis State Bank. The Portis bank was established in 1885 and the next year renamed the Portis State Bank. This distinctive building was built in 1887 to house the bank. In 1904 it was renamed the First State Bank of Portis. Over the years four attempts were made to rob the bank, the robbers being caught every time. The bank closed in the early 1990s.
- 11.** Portis Opera House. The Opera House was built in 1911 by local contractor Basil Wood. 74 feet by 32 feet in length, the building has been used as City Hall, a community center, and has hosted dinners, plays, Vaudeville shows, dances, roller skating, and basketball games. It was at one time also a mill where grain was ground, and a feed and seed store. The legendary Portis Dynamos town basketball team called it home for over three decades.
- 12.** Site of Continental Sculpture Hall. From 1955 to 1984, nationally-renowned folk artist and Osborne County Hall of Famer Inez Marshall operated an art galley here that featured her marvelous work with limestone carvings. Today the collection can be seen at the Grassroots Art Center in Lucas, Kansas.
- 13.** Portis City Office.
- 14.** Former Franco's Restaurant. A building used for just about everything throughout Portis's history, this two-story structure is most recently famous for housing the town's last restaurant. On the north side can still be seen the famous "Wife" advertisement.
- 15.** Portis Post Office.
- 16.** Gene Coop's Classic Cars. Local resident Gene Coop has restored several classic cars; the collection is available for viewing upon request.

17. Northway Lumberyard. Lorenzo started this lumberyard in 1909 and sold it to Harold Wolters in 1944. It closed upon his death in July 1969.

18. Site of Tubby Miller home / second Portis Grade & High School. On these historic grounds the first house in the community was erected in June 1871. Mrs. Louise Lindley, a Civil War widow, also served as the town's first postmistress. In 1900 Melvin "Tubby" Miller was born in a house that once stood here. In 1950 the new Portis Grade/High School was built here, and classes were held until 1967 when the school merged with nearby Osborne and Alton. In 1972 the building became a community center and now is owned by Portis native Jim Wolters.

19. Wolter's Auction House. Catch the sight and sounds of a genuine country auction at Wolters Auction Service, found just west behind the former school building. Auctions are held almost weekly throughout the year. If you are lucky enough to attend one, don't forget to visit the food stand in the back with the homemade pies.

Melvin Miller, Portis Artist

Portis native Melvin Miller was born May 6, 1900. He received the nickname of "Tubby" due to his being round as a tub as a boy. In school his talent for sketching became evident as he filled his textbooks with drawings of the lesson he was learning at the time.

Melvin graduated from Portis High School in 1918 and then attended the Kansas City Art School in Missouri. He was later hired by Leon Schlessinger Productions in California. Upon arriving in Hollywood he changed his name for professional reasons, and Mel Millar was seen on theater screens across the country. Under Schlessinger, Mel worked on numerous "Looney Tunes" and "Merry Melodies" cartoons. For many of these he sketched the famous Porky Pig. Some cartoons also featured the character Portis Pig, named after his hometown. And whenever a Porky Pig feature was being shown near Portis the people there would call and tell each other so that few would miss seeing Mel's creations.

Later Mel moved on, working a while for Walt Disney Productions and then teaching at the Hollywood Art School. He married Helen Hefner in 1957 and continued to live in Burbank, California. From time to time he came back to Portis to visit and to attend alumni reunions, where he always entertained his friends with stories and made presents of his drawings. He published several cartoon books and did drawing until his retirement.

Mel died December 30, 1980, and was buried in the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Burbank. Through the efforts of lifelong friends Hud and Nina Turner, a limestone memorial was erected in the Portis city park in 1992 to Melvin "Tubby" Miller, so that the accomplishments of a jovial native son will be long remembered. Miller is also listed in the Osborne County Hall of Fame.

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