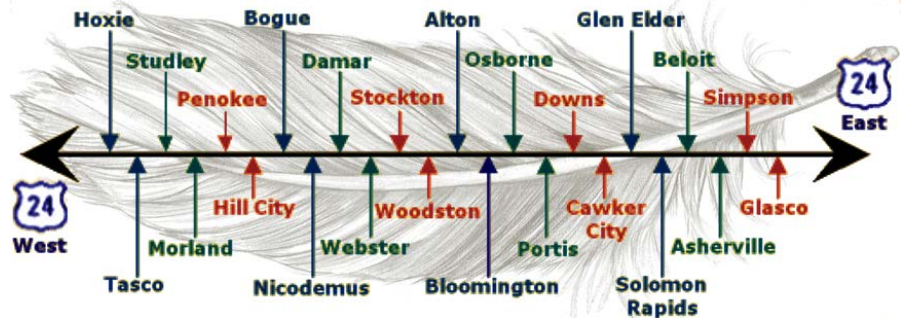
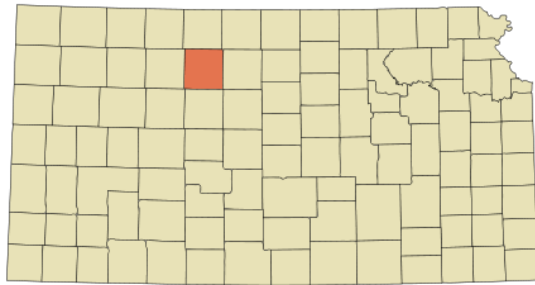




Woodston, Kansas

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History of Woodston

by Leo E. Oliva

[This is the final article in a series featuring the 24 communities in the Alliance. Oliva was instrumental in encouraging the formation of the SV24 Alliance and serves as editor and publisher of the SVA. He is author of a dozen books, including Woodston: The Story of a Kansas Country Town.]

WOODSTON, unlike many towns in the Solomon River Valley, had little direct association with the South Solomon River, other than being located in the valley. Woodston was founded as a railroad town, and its orientation remained primarily with the railroad and, later, highway that came through the town.

Woodston was founded in October 1885 because of a single creating force—the railroad. The fertile valley of the South Solomon River and the uplands both north and south had already been settled by pioneer farmers during the 1870s and early 1880s. The railroad was slow in coming, and there were several towns around to serve the needs of the settlers. The railroad needed another town, however, and Woodston was established.

The Central Branch, Union Pacific, under lease to the Missouri Pacific Railway, completed a line from Downs to Bull City on December 22, 1879. The town of Stockton, established in 1872 and the county seat of Rooks County, located some 18 miles west of Alton, needed a railroad to prosper. Efforts to bring the Central Branch from Bull City to Stockton resulted in the town of Woodston because the railroad would not build to Stockton without another town on the line.

The man most responsible for the construction of the railroad to Stockton and the founding of Woodston was a Stockton businessman and banker after whom the town was named, Charles C. Woods. Woods organized a railroad company and sold bonds, and the Missouri Pacific built the line and later absorbed the company Woods had formed. The railroad to Stockton was completed in November 1885.

Land for the new town of Woodston was offered to the railroad, with one-half interest in the lots and the right of way and siding going to the railroad, and Woodston was located on the SW/4, Section 10, Township 7 south, Range 16 west, nearly a mile north of the South Solomon River. It is interesting that some of the people of Bull City, whose town name was changed to Alton in the spring of 1885, offered to move their businesses and residences to the new town if they would name it Bull City. But the town was named to honor Woods who offered to donate \$500 to build a school if the town were named Woodston.

The new town was laid out and settlers came to establish businesses. It began and remained for many years a service center for farmers in the area, providing supplies and services they needed and offering a market for what they produced. The town grew and prospered until the 1960s, when a

continuing decline in rural population and other factors caused many businesses to close until only a grain elevator and a post office remain open today.

Because there were water-powered flour mills available at Alton, Stockton, and Kirwin by the time Woodston was established, no effort was made to build a dam or mill at Woodston for more than two decades.

Woodston never had a water-powered grist mill, but a local resident built a dam on the river in 1907 and briefly operated a water-powered saw mill at the site. A flour mill was never added. Water in the mill pond was a source of ice cut in the winter months and a place for recreation during summer months. The dam was damaged by a flood and not restored. It was completely gone by 1917.

A grain elevator, the Solomon Valley Milling Co., was built in 1904 and had facilities for grinding coarse grains for livestock feed. In 1920 a gasoline-powered grist mill was built near the railroad tracks, named the Woodston Milling Co., and it was destroyed by fire in 1921 and not replaced.

The Solomon River was an obstacle to trade with farmers living to the south until a wooden bridge was erected soon after the town was founded. That bridge washed away in a flood in 1908, and another bridge was constructed the following year. During the months there was no bridge, merchants in Woodston filled orders from farmers living south of the river and delivered commodities across the river by boat. A flood in 1915 damaged the second bridge, and temporary repairs kept it in operation until a new iron-frame bridge was built in 1921. It was replaced in 1950 by a concrete bridge, the year before the great flood of 1951 which washed out the approaches to the new bridge but did not damage to the structure.

The river was used for fishing and other recreation over the years, and it assumed a new importance after the construction of Webster Dam on the South Solomon and the construction of the Diversion Dam west of Woodston in the early 1960s to take water from the river channel and feed it into the irrigation canal which runs some 40 miles to the east along the river valley.

Within a year after Woodston was founded, there were more than 200 residents and 40 businesses in operation, providing almost all the commodities and services the town residents and the surrounding rural trade area required. The community, as did the state and region, fell on hard times during the drought and depression of the late 1880s and early 1890s, and the population dropped to approximately 120 in 1895. Prosperity returned to the region in the late 1890s and early 1900s, and the population was up to 200 in 1900 and 250 by 1905 when the town was incorporated as a city of the third class. A city government and public services were established. The town continued to grow until the early 1920s, when another farm depression created hard times and another drop in population.

During the 1930s, however, the town grew again as people who had left to find jobs in larger cities became unemployed and returned to their hometown to survive the Great Depression. The population and businesses were fairly stable from the 1940s (when the population was 313) to the 1960s (when the population was 320), but since then there has been a steady decline in both population and businesses.

The growth and decline of Woodston was closely connected to the farm economy until the 1960s. Improvements in agricultural technology, which reduced the rural population dramatically after the 1950s, reduced the number of people needing services and markets offered by Woodston. After that time it was difficult for small businesses to compete with businesses in larger communities within easy driving distance. As business owners retired, no one took their place. No major effort was made to revive the town, find other sources of economic activity (such as manufacturing), or to maintain a community spirit. Woodston became a prime example of a dying town in the Solomon Valley.

It did enjoy social as well as economic prosperity over the years. When established, Woodston quickly developed the social institutions of education, churches, fraternal organizations, and entertainment. These flourished as population grew, then stabilized, and declined when population declined.

A grade school was opened in 1886 in a new, two-story, frame building, and a new brick grade school was constructed in 1907. High school classes were added and the high school was accredited in 1914. A rural high school district was created in 1918 and classes were held in rented facilities until a new high school was built in 1921. A new auditorium and grade school were built south of the high school in 1959. The high school closed in 1968, and the grade school operated until 1974. No school buildings remain today.

A number of churches were established in Woodston, and five denominations were active at various times: Free Methodist, Baptist, Methodist Episcopal, United Brethren, and Assembly of God. Several of these closed after a few years of service, and in 1973 the Methodist Episcopal and United Brethren joined together in the United Methodist Church, the only active church in Woodston today. In addition to the churches, there were Sunday schools, temperance societies, and youth organizations. An Assembly of God church camp was established east of Woodston in the 1920s and continues with an annual gathering today.

Social activities included sports (community and school), skating rink, bowling alley, dances, community band, school music programs, parades, and various organizations. Chautauquas were held during the late 1910s and early 1920s. A public library operated until the 1960s. Some organizations were devoted to town improvement, philanthropic activities, and promotion of the town. Fraternal societies included Modern Woodmen of America, International Order of Odd Fellows, Royal Neighbors of America, and Rebekah Lodge. Veteran organizations included the Grand Army of the Republic and American Legion. There were several women's clubs over the years.

The town, as others in the valley, depended on transportation for development and survival. The railroad was the major means of shipping supplies in and farm products out of Woodston during the early years, but the automobile changed the orientation of the town as highways were constructed. For a time the prosperity of the town depended on the highway as well as the railroad. Later highway developments led to the bypassing of Woodston and its merchants, and railroad service was reduced, contributing to the decline of the town.

Soon after automobiles became common, highways developed. Every town hoped to have a highway connection. In 1913 the Beloit to Colby Cut Off, connecting the Sunflower and Golden Belt trails, was laid out and passed through Woodston. It followed Main Street through town. This was known as the White Way because the route was marked with white bands around telephone poles. In 1917 the White Way was designated a state route, and state funds were appropriated for improvements. In 1918 the name was changed to the Midland Trail, and in 1921 it was named the Roosevelt Midland Trail. The markings were changed from white bands to black and white bands in 1922. In 1925 the Midland Trail became part of the federal highway system, and in 1926 it was designated part of U.S. Highway 40 North. A bus line, operating between Kansas City and Denver, began service through Woodston the same year.

As improvements were made on U.S. 40 North, the route was changed from the Main Street of Woodston to a route along the north edge of town. Some businesses relocated there, and new ones were established, including service stations and a motel. In 1930 additional improvements were made and paving was completed in 1931. In 1936 the name of this highway was changed to U.S. Highway 24, and it remains so today. Following the construction of the Interstate highway system in the 1960s, traffic on Highway 24 through Woodston declined, resulting in the closing of the motel and some of the service stations. The rail line from Osborne to Stockton recently closed, and the rails, ties, and related hardware are presently being removed. Highway 24 remains the lifeline of Woodston today, but the town is going the way of the railroad which created it 125 years ago. There is no reason for Woodston to survive, but it will always remain an important part of the history of the Solomon Valley.

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