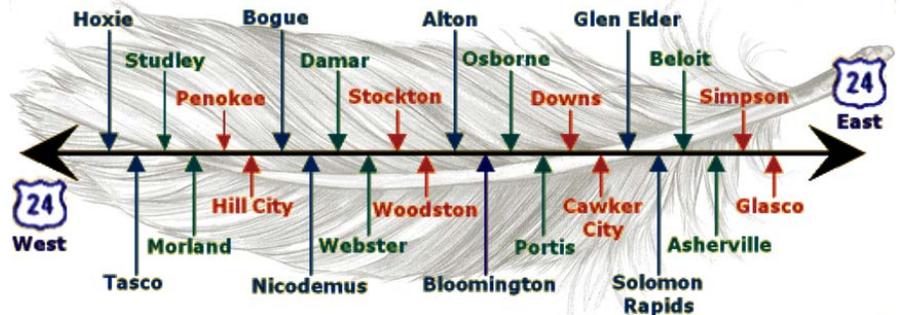
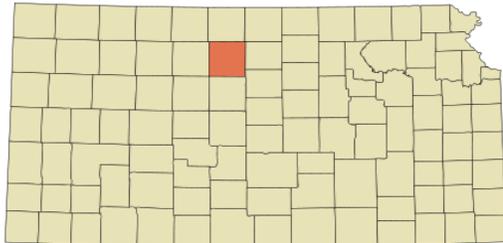




Downs, Kansas

To Read More about
Solomon Valley History
visit our website at

www.hwy24.org



History of Downs

by Darrel Miller

At its founding in 1879, Downs was a railroad town, built by Eastern speculators with the aid of bonds that were voted by local pioneers to help build the Central Branch's rails westward. Today, 126 years later—and despite drastic changes in transportation—Downs somewhat miraculously remains a railroad town, even though much of the Central Branch track has been torn up. Thanks to the new Scoular grain facility here, long unit trains still carry Kansas wheat from Downs to the world's markets.

In the beginning, farmers hauled their grain and livestock to this railroad shipping point along dirt roads, riding in wagons pulled by horses or oxen. Today, large semi-trucks drive into Downs every day on paved roads to deposit grain at the Scoular facility. At harvest time, farm trucks also dump their loads of grain at the Midway Co-op elevator. In addition, Downs trucking firms haul freight along the nation's highways.

The first residents built their wooden business buildings and homes amid the puffing of steam locomotives, the smell of coal smoke, and the shriek of locomotive whistles. In 1879 and 1880, they watched the Central Branch build a roundhouse, a water tower, machine shops, and the other facilities of a railroad division point.

The goal of Major William F. Downs and the promoters who hired him was to build a through line to Denver. When they arrived at this junction, where they began building rail lines up the north and south forks of the Solomon River, they founded a town.

Because Downs was a railroad town, Major Downs located the rails in the middle of town and built the first wooden depot facing onto the main street of Morgan Avenue. As the town developed into a rail center, travelers from up and down the lines passed through the Downs depot, ate at the local restaurants, and slept in the local hotels. The steam locomotives were serviced at the Downs roundhouse and machine shops.

The Central Branch never reached Denver although, at the time it built westward through Osborne County, a golden opportunity beckoned. The only other rail line across this section of Kansas at that time was the original Kansas Pacific line that ran through Salina and Hays.

The Central Branch railroad didn't reach Denver for a variety of reasons, some of which the promoters carried to their graves. For one thing, Major Downs was the prime mover of this construction project—a shrewd, vigorous, and likable man in his early 40s who promoted construction bonds at town after town, organized the construction, bought the materials and the railroad equipment, and dealt with the line's financiers in Boston and New York City. Only five months after our town was named for the major in June 1879, he became ill and never recovered. Within a few years he was dead. The heart and soul of the Central Branch expansion was gone.

In addition, the owners built the line as a speculation and, in November 1879, they sold the Central Branch to railroad magnate Jay Gould. He sold the line to the Union Pacific which was not interested in westward expansion. Other factors entered the equation. A severe drought struck northwest Kansas in the early 1880s, and many settlers left. Though the remaining pioneers clamored for a railroad, they were not inclined to vote bonds to finance its construction on across Kansas.

In reality, Downs became a railroad and farm center on a branch railroad that fed agricultural goods to the nation through Atchison. The Downs economy was boosted by the many railroad employees who lived here, but for years the town didn't reach a population of 1,000. It was not until well into the 20th century that a booming local economy pushed the town's population to the 2,000 range for a few years.

A stylish brick depot was built in 1917. The local railroad improved by installing more powerful locomotives and larger freight cars. The trains became safer and the service was excellent. Then trouble chugged into Downs in the form of the automobile. At first it was a novelty, and the roads were terrible. Everyone had ridden the local passenger trains, but the automobile offered more freedom. More and more automobiles raised the dust along dirt roads.

The Downs businessmen, at the same time that they advised everyone to support the local railroad, organized highway associations and clamored for paved roads. The first "paved" roads through Downs were covered with gravel in the 1920s, which defeated the mud, and the local love affair with the automobile took off.

Numerous local gas stations went into business. Trucks began to haul farm products to market, rolling along highways that were maintained by the taxpayers. The railroad companies complained about unfair competition, but few listened.

So the passenger trains lost their passengers. The mobile society quit the railroad, although public pressure kept the passenger trains running long after most local folks quit riding them.

Then diesel engines rolled into Downs in the late 1940s and that spelled doom for the roundhouse where the steam locomotives had been serviced and repaired. The new diesels were much easier to service than the steamers, and the roundhouse no longer was needed. It was torn down between 1948 and 1952. The coal chutes and the machine shop also disappeared. Now the railroad was down to diesel engines pulling freight trains, and more and more of the freight came to town by truck. By then, Downs had lost most of its railroad workers. The last passenger train left Downs on November 14, 1960.

So the town changed. Early in the 20th century it boasted a soda pop factory, an ice plant for refrigeration, manufacturers of ice cream and potato chips, and a mill where flour and other products were produced from local grain. Local citizens founded their own telephone company and their own power plant. Numerous brick business houses were built during the 1920s.

The Dirty Thirties saw many longtime residents move to states such as Colorado and Oregon, and the trend continued into the following decades. Downs now was a farming center and the much larger farms in the vicinity meant fewer people to patronize local businesses—the fate of most small rural towns.

In spite of all that, Downs has remained active. A drive along Morgan Avenue any day of the week reveals a strong mix of retail stores and business services, including two banks.

This town always has been blessed with unusually progressive citizens. It has boasted of astute and highly successful lumber wholesalers such as H. H. Welty and Billy Hardman; had progressive family bankers such as the Harrisons, Cushings, and Berkleys; along with many other successful business people.

And the same holds true today. Through all of these vast changes, which have virtually wiped out many rural towns, Downs remains a vigorous and forward-looking community. These days, in addition to its active local retail community, Downs remains on the cutting edge as Brush Art Corporation conducts much of its advertising agency business via the Internet, and the Scoular facility loads Kansas wheat into long unit trains. North Central Air wholesales compressed air equipment, and the local pork packing plant plans to reopen. An unusual feature which attracts visitors is Steve Richardson's organ factory.

The community just northwest of Downs was the setting for John Ise's classic book, *Sod and Stubble*, which has brought much recognition to Downs. Professor Ise's book described how his pioneer parents, Henry and Rosa Ise, helped settle the community. The Ise school house and the Ise farm still stand, and local people hope to restore them.

The community is building a new fire station and is the home of Lakeside High School. For the senior citizens, it has a modern Senior Center, a nursing center, and elderly housing.

Hunting and fishing are available at nearby Glen Elder Lake. The town offers bowling lanes, swimming, and a golf course, plus antique and gift shops, and an art gallery. The 1917 railroad depot has been restored, and an attractive gazebo can be seen nearby. The brick Carnegie Library is one of the town's landmarks and this attractive facility is about 100 years old. The historic Howell House has been renovated into a bed and breakfast, and West Lake Inn offers rooms to travelers. Ball fields and parks add to summer recreation.

Downs Arts Council offers monthly entertainment at its Unplugged Coffee House shows, and the Arts Council also presents plays. Downs hosts the state Storytelling Festival late each April, and its annual celebration falls in late July.

Thus Downs has resisted the economic forces that cause rural towns to decline and marches confidently into the 21st century.

Stories Of Land Of Man Of Nature