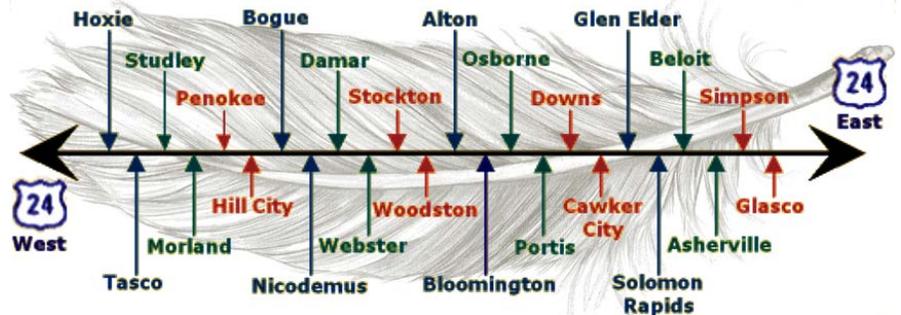
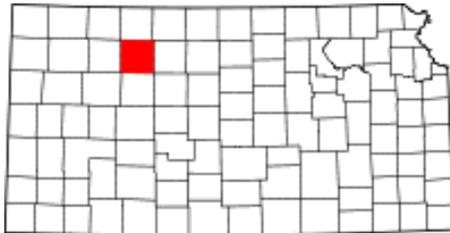




Hill City, Kansas

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History of Hill City

by Lowell Beecher

Perhaps no other settlement in the Solomon Valley Highway 24 Heritage Alliance experienced so difficult a birth or so tumultuous an adolescence as did Hill City, county seat of Graham County.

Saints and sinners, egotists and entrepreneurs: the sundry individuals who shaped Hill City in its first three decades of existence were driven by motives both individual and collective; nevertheless, they worked to tame a harsh land and, in doing so, established a small city with a history which reflects its frontier roots.

Hill City's journey began in September 1876 when W. R. Hill, a diminutive-but-energetic Kentuckian, visited the area which would later bear his name and, aided by O. G. Nevins, master of the Houston post office near Bow Creek, utilized a pocket compass to plot a course south to the Solomon River, locating the site of his planned settlement.

Returning to Topeka, Hill, on December 26, 1876, began the trek west with 13 wagons loaded with potential settlers; however, one of the worst blizzards ever to ravage the area struck the small party just east of Stockton, and most of the group eventually turned back.

On February 1, 1877, Hill and the six-member John Stanley family, Canadians, reached the proposed Hill City townsite. A dugout in the southwest portion of the site was excavated to establish the future settlement's first residence.

The charter to establish Hill City as a legal townsite was filed on January 7, 1878; further, the Homestead Act, which enticed westward movement through the promise of free or cheap land, prompted rapid growth of the immediate Hill City area in 1878 and 1879. Land speculators arrived, and fledgling businesses sprang up to support an exploding rural population.

By late summer of 1879, most of the free lands in the yet-unorganized county had been claimed, and the new settlers encouraged organization to exploit the advantages county recognition would bring. Thus began one of the most adversarial periods in the area's history.

Nicodemus (previously founded by Hill), Gettysburg, Roscoe, Millbrook, and Hill City all entered into the fray to become Graham County's seat. Newspapers in each of the villages printed libelous statements about the other settlements and their inhabitants. Ill-will prevailed; the area seemed intent upon destroying itself.

When Kansas Governor John P. St. John designated Millbrook the temporary county seat on April 1, 1880, and when this designation was substantiated by countywide referendum in both 1880 and 1881, Hill City seemed destined to failure, and many of its residents moved to Millbrook, to farms, or to other out-of-county sites.

Then, when drought and hot winds decimated the area through the summers of 1880, 1881, 1882, and 1883, Hill City became a virtual ghost town; in fact, in the autumn of 1883, only Tirzilla Garnett, wife of Thomas Garnett, surveyor and real estate agent, remained at the town site, managing a single store and its accompanying post office amid boarded and abandoned buildings and dugouts.

Thankfully, 1884 brought the best crops ever harvested in the county, people returned to the area, and optimistic speculation prevailed. Promoters and entrepreneurs flooded to Hill City. Stores and hotels were built, and talk of railroad service to the town excited its inhabitants.

The impetus for much of the rapid expansion of Hill City during the 1880s may be credited to the close association between W. R. Hill and James P. Pomeroy, a Boston multimillionaire, heir to the Pomeroy Coal Company fortune, and a speculator whom Hill had met at Atchison, Kansas. Hill was a man who had never abandoned the prospect of having "his town" named the county seat, and Pomeroy was a man who had the finances, influence, and power to make Hill's dream a reality.

After no fewer than four failed petition-attempts to wrest the county seat from Millbrook, J. P. Pomeroy constructed a \$25,000 stone building - though elements of archival data suggest that Hill money was also involved - and promised to give the structure to the county for use as a courthouse if Hill City were named the county seat. The result: Hill City received 876 votes to be named the center; only 120 opposed the move, and the relocation was made official on March 6, 1888.

Nevertheless, the two men's commonality of purpose and seemingly-indissoluble friendship evaporated when Pomeroy, despite his own limited financial interests on the city's Main Street, dedicated himself to advancing his considerable business holdings on First Street (renamed Pomeroy Avenue) and to his residential interests on the north side of town. (Note: Eight of J. P. Pomeroy's original ten native stone "cottages" still stand in the city park area.)

Contrariwise, Hill's primary interests lay on Main Street, and his goals, and those of his followers, were couched in those east-and-west blocks.

The gully which runs through the 200 block of North Pomeroy became a kind of demarcation line: each town faction had its own opera house, bank, grocery, and hardware; in fact, for a period of time, the north side of town was called "Pomeroy," and the South, "Hill."

A review of Abraham Lincoln's "house divided" speech of less than three decades earlier would have offered content applicable to those who inhabited the two "sides" of the divided and divisive town, but it fell upon the shoulders of a handful of citizens twenty years later to take steps necessary to facilitate reconciliation: Mr. and Mrs. John Welty constructed The Midway, a theater/stage presentation venue atop the topographical dividing line in 1920, and an extraordinarily forward-looking board of education built the 1923 Memorial High School as close to that line as possible, thus giving all of the townspeople areas of mutual interest.

As was the case with virtually every town located in the vast Dust Bowl and victimized by the Great Depression of the 1930s, Hill City suffered appreciably. True, prices received for farm products during and after World War II provided economic stability, but it was not until the 1950s that Hill City experienced a "boom" comparable to that created by Pomeroy money sixty years before.

During several years of the 1950s, Graham County was the top oil-producing county in Kansas. The population of Hill City increased by nearly 1,000 citizens during that period. A new county courthouse, a new high school, hundreds of new homes, vast infrastructure expansions, and a myriad of other changes were wrought by oil moneys and the tax revenues oil income generated.

Then, the boom dissolving, Hill City suffered significant population declines in the 1970s and 1980s and was left to wonder why resources had not been devoted to attracting stable industrial development. Many businesses vanished; still, those which remain have become very "lean and mean" to meet the competition thrust upon Hill City by larger towns within easy driving distances.

To say that Hill City, in the first decade of a new century, prospers is an optimistic overstatement; however, a number of economic development agencies peopled by individuals with faith in rural Kansas are working hand-in-hand to revitalize the town, and their efforts are beginning to bear fruit in the form of a number of small manufacturing concerns - with more almost within reach. A secondary oil "boom" has hit the county, and many new wells are pumping revenues into the community.

Hill City continues to be blessed with excellent schools, a progressive and forward-looking health care establishment, a city council involved in renewal and revitalization, and a citizenry that understands and appreciates the unique flavor of small town life and the sense of "community" inherent in its very nature.

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