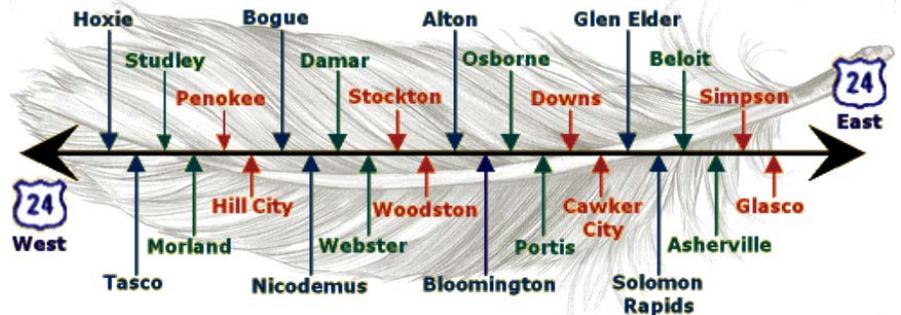
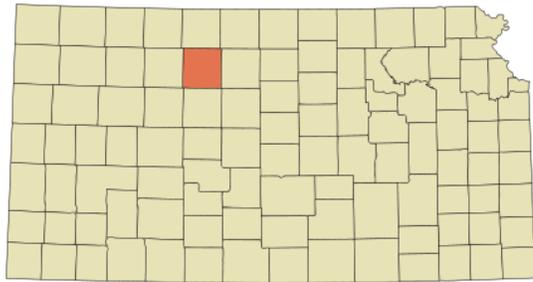




Webster, Kansas

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History of Webster

by Jean Lindsey

[This is twenty-third in a series featuring the 24 communities in the Alliance. Jean Lindsey grew up in the Webster community and has collected the history for many years. She has served on the Alliance board. The valley communities will be presented in alphabetical order, so long as the community provides the material by deadline (September 1). Next issue will be Woodston, completing this series.]

CAROL (Grover) Devlin wrote in her recent book, *What Do You Do with the Yolks?* (2009), a personal memoir of life in rural Kansas in the 1940s, these words about Webster:

"Eight miles west of Stockton on Highway 24, one of Kansas' main paved east/west highways, intersected a dirt road that dipped into a valley a couple of miles south. Nestled under a canopy grove of trees, a rarity in western Kansas, which was practically treeless, sat the town of Webster. My lifelong quest for tranquillity stems from the too-few years of my youth spent there with our relatives. Snatches of conversation and the memories of that town are forever imprinted in my mind.

"Thick trees made the sound and feel of the air in the grove remarkable: everything so quiet, calm, soft and cool. The combination of the town being in a low valley, as well as in a grove of trees, protected it from the Kansas wind. Birds were plentiful, and as they settled in for the evening, twittering softly to each other, cicadas tuned up throughout the town. Mourning doves cooed back and forth to each other. A car passing in front of my grandparent's house created great interest.

"Webster's streets were lovely, silky dust, so soft to walk on barefooted, much better than asphalt and concrete, which burned our feet. We rarely wore shoes in the summer and enjoyed watching the floury dust puff up between our toes. Rain barely penetrated the fine, dense dust. Puddles formed on top of the dust and dried fusing together a smooth quarter-inch crust, which broke into odd shaped puzzle pieces that curled up around the edges. We loved to step on them barefooted and feel the crinkly crust dissolve into fine powder without leaving a trace of the puddle.

"A lone gas pump, with its hose hanging on the side, stood in front of the store. The store carried all the necessities for daily living: groceries, hardware, parts for cars and farm equipment, ice cream, and a counter where they served light meals and coffee. Grandpa

caught up on the news with the locals while we rummaged through the ice in the pop chest for our favorite drinks. Mine was Chocolate Soldier, but sometimes I got orange or grape Nehi as a change of pace."

In 1876 a trading point was established eight miles west of Stockton in the broad Solomon Valley to serve buffalo hunters and early settlers in Belmont Township in the western part of Rooks County. Due to an abundance of underground water, deep fertile soil, and the flowing Solomon River, a settlement was soon established on the south side of the river with one store, but due to flooding soon moved across the river.

There were still buffalo and antelope in the area in the spring of 1878 when the village called Belmont was surveyed but not filed at the county courthouse until March 24, 1881. A patent for 48 acres for the town of Webster was issued in June 1885, surveyed June 23, with the plat filed two days later. The new patent for Belmont for 120 acres was issued September 15, 1885, adjoining the south side of Webster. Both towns shared two common avenues, Main Street which ran north to south connecting them, and Broadway Street running east and west separating them. On November 10, 1885, both towns were surveyed, platted again, and listed as Webster with no mention of Belmont. Neither town was ever incorporated. When application was made for a post office named Belmont, it was denied as that name already existed in Kansas, so Webster it was!

Webster boomed in 1885 when the railroad was being built from Downs west along the Solomon River into Rooks County. During 1886, 36 new buildings were constructed, the lumber hauled 60 miles from Hays. In 1888 the Webster Enterprise reported that nearby farmers and Webster's 300 residents were served by two doctors, two churches, a school, and 24 businesses, and had an advertisement showing a manufacture of soda pop. But the railroad came only as far as Stockton. Again, in 1907, Webster's hopes were revived with a north-south railroad being surveyed. The road bed was built from Plainville to just north of Webster when the money panic hit the country and rails were never laid.

The Solomon River was important in the lives of Webster residents: it was necessary for watering livestock; ice was cut and stored for summer use; it was used for baptisms and boating, swimming, fishing, and ice skating were all enjoyed. To cross the Solomon there was a ford about a mile southwest of town. There was an early wooden bridge, location unknown, which soon washed out. Blacksmith Will Cline stated in an interview that "I made over four hundred plow lays from the iron pilings of the old bridge." (Blauer) On August 23, 1888, a \$2424 contract was let for an all steel bridge which was completed just south of town by November 1888, which stood until being washed out by the 1951 floods. It was soon replaced by a low water bridge.

Webster School District #23 was organized March 20, 1879, in an old log house with a dirt floor, the 21 grade school pupils sitting on planks on blocks of wood. The school session was taught for three months during the summer of 1882, and the teacher's salary was \$12 per month with the privilege of boarding with Webster families. That fall a small one-room limestone rock school was built. In 1886 a two-story frame grade school building costing \$1200 was built. It was a village school until 1911 when it consolidated with adjoining districts in Belmont and Rush townships, totaling 27 sections. Consolidation was an experimental project, Webster being only the second in the state. The new school, Union #3, voted bonds to build a modern two-story brick building with grade school in the lower story and high school upstairs. It was dedicated January 1, 1914, the students being transported by horsedrawn, heated and enclosed busses. The high school was soon fully accredited with courses in Vocational Agriculture, Home Economics, Normal Training, and Music, with the first class graduating in 1918. In the 1920s it was the only school in Rooks County qualified to meet the requirements of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Soon a shop was built west of the school and an auditorium with new opera chairs was added on the north. A room was added west of the shop when the government lunch program began in the 1940s.

Religion was an important part of the lives of the pioneers of Webster. Records of early church denominations show: (1) That an early Catholic missionary priest from Plainville included Webster in his circuit but a church was never established; (2) Seventh Day Adventist's preached in homes, the school house, and other locations, but had no church building; (3) The Methodist Episcopal Church was on a circuit with the Mt. Pleasant and Liberty country churches, with the first regular pastor sent to the Webster charge in 1881. They and the Baptists held separate worship services in a little stone building, also used as the town hall. In 1886 plans were begun to build a church. The Baptists were in charge of the enterprise but both groups worked together to build a small wooden structure. Both denominations worshipped in this building for several years until difficulties between them arose.

The Methodists purchased a hall on Main Street, previously a pool hall and saloon. In 1892 they selected a building site and laid the cornerstone, but due to hard times the project was abandoned. In 1901 a small parsonage was built, with an addition in 1905. Again, in 1910, they began to raise funds to build a new church. \$3200 was raised in the first two months and the foundation begun. Miss Alice Mott was visiting in the community at the time and offered to give \$250 if the church be named Philander Mott Memorial in honor of her father. The donation was accepted and the church became known as the Philander Mott Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church. The \$6000 cinder block building with beautiful stained glass windows was free of debt for the June 11, 1911, dedication service and greatly enjoyed by the community for 33 years until destroyed by fire on Sunday evening, December 17, 1944. Some thought that in pre-warming the church for the evening Christmas program a small stove exploded causing the fire, but others said it was arson. In 1947, \$500 of the \$2000 insurance check was used to purchase Fairview District #99 country school house which had recently consolidated with Webster. Church services were held in the High School auditorium until 1950. The school was moved to the church location, remodeled and refurbished, mostly by volunteer labor, with dedication services held May 21, 1950; (4) Early Methodist church records show that the Baptist Church was active in the early years. A 1915 newspaper article mentions them trying to get services started again. One source said the small stone church was built by the Baptists. Memories tell us that their last services were held around 1922; (5)

The Pentecostal Assembly started holding services in the small stone town hall building on Main Street in the early 1920s. When the Baptists closed their doors, the Assembly purchased their property.

In early years, times for entertainment were few, but they made the most of them. The Last-Day-of-School Celebration, hay rack rides in the summer, sleigh rides and ice skating in the winter, literary debates, box suppers, church activities and revival meetings, organizations, and sporting events were all times to socialize. School sports were: basketball (both boys and girls), baseball, and football, although football was taken out in the early 1920s due to a death occurring in a game. Residents were active in many organizations: Union Labor Organization, Knights of Labor, Grand Army of the Republic, Sons & Daughters of Justice Lodge, Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Ladies Aid, Young Women's Christian Association, Rooks County Poultry Club, Neighbors Circle, Home Extension Unit, and the 4W-4H Club to name a few. But the big annual affair in Webster was the Jubilee Celebration, in later years called Pioneer Settlers Reunion. It was a two-day affair held after harvest under the towering cottonwoods in the "grove" with a basket dinner, visiting band, political speeches, a merry-go-round, baseball games (including a girl's team), horse shoes, checkers, and children's games on the schedule.

There was also horse racing one-half mile east and north of town. The following article from the Rooks County Record, August 13, 1915 stated:

The fourth annual Jubilee Celebration in Webster was a great success, both as to attendance on both days, and the quality of entertainment given. The weather was particularly pleasant and nothing occurred in the way of heat, wind or rain to disturb the comfort of the happy crowds assembled. Saturday found a crowd of fully 2000 under the towering cottonwoods of the public park. (called 'The Grove'). The Woodston band was discoursing excellent music, several refreshing stands, amusement booths and a merry-go-round were

operating. People were moving about greeting acquaintances seldom met except on such gala occasions, all wearing that happy look betokening conditions and circumstances favorable to peace of mind and comfort of body, a quiet and jolly crowd. It had rained the night before helping to swell the crowd for the threshers laid off all hands, including the farmer and his family and all went to the Webster Reunion. The chief entertainment on both days was baseball, even girls teams.

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The people of Webster exhibit a surprising enterprise for so small a place, but they are adopting the course that will in time make a big little town. It already has the model country school of Rooks County if not the whole Northwest, an elegant church building, several large supply stores and a considerable trade territory. There are a number of fine residences, one of which is a bit of the palatial equal to a city mansion. The large city park, mentioned above, which many a town twenty times its size might envy. In fact, Webster already is a mighty good town to live in. We returned home feeling that the celebration had been most enjoyable." These celebrations were held until around 1921. (Blauer)

In the 1920s and 1930s there was still a post office, a bank, several repair shops, an elevator (without a railroad track), a hardware store, at least three grocery stores, two churches, and approximately the same number of residents as earlier. Four newspapers tried their luck in Webster: Webster Eagle, 1885-1887; Webster Enterprise, March-November 1888; Merchants Journal, 1894-1895; and Webster Blade, 1909-1913.

There were two telephone centrals: one on the south side of town answered to Belmont; the other answered to Webster. Joe Randal was Webster's first telephone operator and repairman in the early 1900s. To be connected, you cranked one long ring and when he answered you would say "Hello Joe, give me (name)" and he would connect you to your party.

Dr. Sackrider was an interesting early doctor in Webster. He used only three kinds of pills and an old-time standby remedy called "calomel." He would tell his patients that he would give them a dose of sweet calomel and send them to heaven. One man was told he would give him a dose of calomel, then come back tomorrow for another dose if he was still alive. The doctor ate only fish and tea made of cottonwood leaves but every time he saw smoke coming from someone's chimney he would go eat with them. The women in town hated to start a meal because he would soon be at one of their homes for dinner. (Blauer)

With the coming of cars, a highway was built from Stockton following the river on the north side, going through Webster on Broadway Street and on west to Alcona. In 1920 the highway was moved two miles north, leaving Webster isolated. The last bank closed in 1929. In 1948 the Rural Electrification Association brought electricity to the area and dial telephones were installed in 1952.

As early as 1932, Webster resident, Mrs. Lavina Fry, was in correspondence with Kansas State officials urging that a dam be built over the South Solomon River for flood control. Her scrapbook held 228 column inches on the subject from the Rooks County Record, 22 letters, and her statement that she had 82 from the state regarding a dam as well. In 1938 an organizational meeting was held in Webster and a committee formed to circulate petitions, getting 1186 signatures, which were sent to the Army Corps of Engineers. In 1940 the Kansas Reclamation Association was formed to promote such projects. The Water Resource Division of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture became interested. The Webster Unit was approved and authorized for construction under the Flood Control Act of 1944 as a unit of the Missouri River Basin Plan. Following the Kansas River Flood of July 1951, which was very destructive all the way to the Mississippi River and which also washed out Webster's steel bridge, there was increased demand for adequate flood control. This led to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation surveying three sites in the area: (1) one mile west of Stockton; (2) between Stockton and Woodston; (3) the Webster town site location. Approximately one million dollars was appropriated for the foundation of the dam which was completed December 2, 1953, but there were still doubts about Congress allowing money to complete the dam. But after much persuasion from Kansas politicians and citizens, the last of December 1953 a contract for

Completion of the Webster Dam was awarded in the amount of approximately six million dollars with work to begin in March 1954 and to be completed in July 1956. (Brown)

After many town meetings, the new town site was founded two miles southeast of old Webster. A new \$186,000 school structure was built and the Methodist Church and several residences moved to the new location. Sixty-six adults and fifty-nine children moved out of the Webster Reservoir area, but only a dozen or so residents moved to the new town, the rest moving to other locations of their choice. Approximately 30 buildings were moved to the Stockton area. One of the largest was the home built by J. J. McCombs in 1915 and mentioned in the Jubilee Celebration article. Stockton Monument Service moved the 278 bodies from the Webster Cemetery, most to Stockton and the remainder to other parts of the state. Dr. H. C. Brown, the last medical doctor in Webster, moved his practice to Stockton. The Methodist and Pentecostal Assembly Churches, Fry's Store, and Northup's Store that included the post office, were the last churches and businesses in Webster. The last stamping at the Webster post office, never known by any other name, was June 30, 1953. The 1954 High School class was the last to graduate from the old 1911 brick building, one of the many brick and limestone buildings demolished due to building of the Dam.

The dam was completed July 26, 1956. Water was impounded May 13, and by July 23, 1956, water covered 700 acres, marking the end of old Webster. The program of dedication was held October 5, 1956, in Stockton with a parade on Main Street and a dance in the evening at the city auditorium. The official dedication was held the next day, October 6, at the Webster Dam site with a free barbecue meal. Mrs. Lavina Fry, Mother of the Webster Dam Project, was seated among the attending dignitaries. (Brown)

The main purpose of the dam is for flood control, but irrigation, recreation, fishing, and wildlife habitat are all important reasons for its construction. The dam stores flood runoff of the South Fork of the Solomon River to permit the irrigation of 8500 acres of lands in the lower valley between Woodston and Osborne. The maximum water storage during a flood period is 415,000 acre feet, covering a surface area of 19 square miles. When the dam was built the highway was moved a mile south to be closer to the lake, and a small airstrip was put in at the south end of the dam (which has since been closed). (Brown)

Now the little village of new Webster includes five resident families and two seasonal homes. The church, later used as a community building, and the school are both privately owned. After a fire, the convenience store/bait shop closed in 1997. The last high school graduating class was in 1963, and the grade school transferred to Stockton in 1969.

All that is left of the town of old Webster are pictures and fond memories, but more important has been the control of flood waters for towns and farms along the South Fork of the Solomon River below the Webster Dam. Over the years there have been times when the lake was so low you could walk the streets of old Webster, but at this writing it is two feet above conservation level. As water is still coming in, they are letting a little out to keep it from flooding the river road south of the lake. Now the area abounds with hunters, fishermen, boats, campers, hikers, bird watchers, and other wildlife and nature enthusiasts.

Devlin wrote: "The Webster Lake now covers 700 acres including the town of Webster. They say you can't go back home, but I can still transport, in my mind, back to the peaceful evenings in Webster and experience complete tranquility. Life in Webster imprinted on my soul the true meaning of peace and love. The grove of trees will always be there for me."

References:

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2009 - Carol (Grover) Devlin, What Do You Do with the Yolks?: A Happy Childhood on the Prairie of Western Kansas (iUniverse).

CONNECTING TEXT AND PLACE

THE SV24 Alliance made a dream come true. That is to have authors read on the land their writings spring from, giving history and energy to the landscape. And to have artists there to share in that reading, and then, in turn, lead a painting class to help all there capture the visual reality: the landscape enhanced by text.

In the fall of 2008, three such experiences occurred in Simpson, Stockton, and Hoxie, with artists working in pastels, water colors, and ceramics. In every case, the sense of wonder and delight, that special inner pleasure that says, "This is good. This is worthwhile. I've grown today," was the response to these text to landscape experiences.

This initial project was designed by the Alliance and supported by the Kansas Arts Commission. Our response is to encourage local groups to create similar blended workshops in their communities. The ingredients are: (1) an artist willing to share a technique; (2) a writer or two willing to relate the tales and moods associated with the area; and (3) friends looking for a unique, thoughtful exploration of landscape. Together, they will create a mutually delightful event.

If you would like more information on this process, please contact Joan Nothern, e-mail jnothern.334@usd334.org or phone 785-568-0120.

If you do try this collaborative experience uniting text and landscape, please send us information on the results. We would like to be a partner in bringing voice and art together in the Solomon Valley.

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