A brief history of Sterling Kansas

By Mary Martin

U.S. Army explorer and topographical engineer Stephen Long roamed the area west of the Missouri River in the early 1800s and determined the Great Plains were "unfit for cultivation and uninhabitable."

Long said the frontier was comprised of lifeless sandy soil, minimal surface water, no timber for houses or fuel, relentless winds, unpredictable weather, vast herds of thundering bison and tribes of hostile Indians. Long referred to the prairie as the "Great American Desert" and determined the area was not only poor for settlement, but also too dangerous to cross alone or unarmed.

Despite Long's dismal report, pioneers trudged west on William Becknell's Santa Fe Trail, though few were daring enough to stake a claim on the Great Plains. Those who did dotted the prairie with sod houses and braved the hardships of homesteading on the wild frontier. In 1854, the newly created territory of Kansas was officially opened for settlement. Kansas entered the Union as a free state in 1861 and the Homestead Act of 1862 offered cheap land as incentive to those who would be Kansans.

President Abraham Lincoln signed the Railroad Land Grant Bill in 1863 and the face of the Great Plains began to change. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway (AT & SF), destined for Colorado, reached Newton by 1871 and crossed the prairie to the state line a year later. At that time, the railway offered free or low-rate transportation to encourage Kansas settlement and many homesteaders and new immigrants seized the deal.

Frontier towns formed near railway routes and businesses prospered. The Agricultural Colony of Kansas, a Topeka-based company, established an office along the new railroad and the resulting community incorporated as The Peace Town Company in 1872. Peace prospered despite the grasshopper plague of 1874 and the next five successive wheat harvests were bountiful. The surrounding countryside overcame the "Great American Desert" reputation and became known as the "Wheat Belt of the West"

Situated on the mainline of the AT & SF, Peace became the principal trading point. The town flourished and the population steadily increased. In 1876 the community had grown large enough to be considered a city of the third class – the largest in Rice County. To mark its prosperity and in honor of the one of its earliest settlers, Sterling Rosan, Peace was renamed Sterling.

The City of Sterling boasted several factories by the late 1800s including a salt plant, machine shop, washing machine factory, marble works, feed mill, seed cleaners, syrup works, sugar factory, and two flour mills. It was the growing and manufacturing of broomcorn, however, that earned Sterling the title "Broomcorn Capital of the world." Sterling citizens operated two broom factories marketing both broomcorn brush and sorghum cane and shipping trainloads of the prairie's bounty across the country.

Sterling's population grew to around 1,500 by 1885 and supported a thriving service industry of several grocery stores, hardware stores, hotels, shoemakers, jewelers, lodges, newspapers and banks. The prairie town developed into a vibrant community with several churches and quality schools. Higher education became part of Sterling's heritage when Cooper Memorial College was established. The college was built in 1886 and opened in 1887 in honor of Presbyterian Reverend Joseph Cooper. In 1920 the name was changed to Sterling College. The campus and fields of study have expanded and is known as a Christ-centered four-year college with a mission to "develop creative and thoughtful leaders who understand a maturing Christian faith."

While industries have changed, the City of Sterling still offers opportunities to prosper on the Great Plains. The Farmers Co-op Union, JACAM Chemicals, KMW, Sterling Farm Supply, Sterling Sand & Gravel, Sterling Services and United Industries aid Sterling's economy and keep unemployment rates nearly half the national average. Sterling is also home to several franchises, privately-owned businesses and cottage industries with the newest being a student-business endeavor – Stupid Moose Lip Balm. The Chamber of Commerce, Main Street Sterling and Rice Soup are organizations that encourage entrepreneurship and a vibrant downtown.

Sterling's downtown and Lake Park are the backdrops for several annual community events. Held on the first Saturday in May, the Pots n' Pedals clothes the area in spring blossoms and potted plants. Kids pedal toy tractors in the pint-sized tractor pull and pricier pedals are displayed at the annual car show.

Sterling is famous for the Old Fashioned 4th of July event and many Kansans from neighboring counties regularly attend. While the parade and Pronto Pups are definitely crowd pleasers, the turtle races, tournaments and talent show delight families each year. The event ends with thousands seated around Sterling Lake for one of the best small town fireworks displays in the state.

Fire and Smoke BBQ Cook-off and Sterling College Warrior Fest kick off the cool weather in September. Downtown Sterling hosts a block party with games, contests and a chance to snatch an athlete's picture and autograph. The college campus hosts a Warrior tailgate party with free food for all and the evening closes with a football game.

Sterling expresses the heart of service and community with its annual Community Thanksgiving Dinner. Started 35 years ago for Sterling College students who couldn't make it home for the holidays, the event has grown to serve more than 500. The volunteer-led, donation-driven dinner is free to people of all ages and is held at 11 a.m. on Thanksgiving Day.

Winter winds blow, hot chocolate flows and Sterling downtown is aglow in Christmas light. Sterling's Old Fashioned Christmas, held on the Monday after Thanksgiving, offers downtown shopping, Christmas caroling, sweet treats and a visit from Santa.

Commerce and community are part of Sterling's tree-lined streets but it's the top-rated schools, peaceful neighborhoods, friendly citizens and Kansas hospitality that make Sterling a place "where the quality of life shines."

Downtown Sterling in 1909

Raymond - the oldest town in Rice County

by Kelly Young

Raymond has the distinction of being the oldest town in the history of Rice County not to have changed its name or location. It was established in 1871 in the southwest corner of the county with the completion of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. The town was named after Emmus Raymond, a railroad official.

Believe it or not, at one time, the population of Raymond rose to four to five hundred people. This happened when it became the inspection point for cattle on the Chisholm Trail heading to the Union Pacific Railroad at Ellsworth. This famous route is said by local historians to cross the Santa Fe Trail not once but twice before reaching Ellsworth.

Raymond became a cowtown at this point and was known as one of the wickedest towns in the country. The cowtown had become a rendezvous for cowboys, gamblers, and the restless types with its thirteen saloons. At the height of prosperity, the only three story structure in town was built.

This hotel, the American House, soon became the center of social activity. On more than one occasion, a group of rowdy cowboys would shoot out the bright lights on the chandeliers and many mirrors. Bullets could be found in building walls years after the fights were finished.

The end of this period came when homesteaders forced the cowboys, by law and barbed wire fence, to go farther west. Then in 1922, the American House was torn down.

Raymond fell victim to a series of fires on the west side of the main street between 1904 and 1905. The buildings were burned one by one with an uncanny regularity. Out of these fires, a brick business section was constructed.

Over the years businesses came and went. Following are a few examples. George Gill began a drug and grocery store in 1907 which also held the Raymond post office until 1946. At this time, it was moved to the building next door.

In 1909, the F.H. Brown Store was bought out by Brace Sledd and became known as the Sledd Store. This building was torn down in 1970 and the Brown House Cafe was built and named after the pioneer owners.

The Raymond State Bank started in the spring of 1906. It was one of the first banks in the county to take advantage of the state's legislature guaranteeing bank deposits.

Only a few businesses remain, but Raymond still survives as the oldest town in Rice County.

The Raymond post office exterior has not changed much over the years