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Volland: A Flint Hills Story

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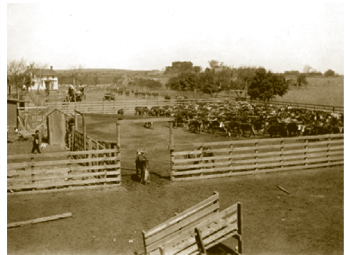
GRAND OPENING OF THE KRATZER BROTHERS' STORE, 1913
Wabaunsee County Historical Society

Volland: A Flint Hills Story

After the Kansas Territory was created in 1854, settlers from the East eagerly anticipated the opportunity to obtain the new land. On May 30, 1867, Franz Fritz acquired a land patent from the United States government giving him property at what is today Volland. On the same day he acquired the property, Fritz sold the land to Henry and Barbara Volland, who were among the numerous German immigrants that had settled Washington Township just west of Alma.



Throughout the 1870s, the number of towns continued to grow in Wabaunsee County. Each community anxiously awaited the proposed route of the first railroad to enter the county. Although the Manhattan, Alma & Burlingame Railroad brought the first rail line in 1880, it was not until bonds were approved for the Rock Island Railroad in 1887 that towns in Washington Township experienced the growth heralded by the railroad. As the Rock Island began buying right-of-way for its line, it also began planning towns along the route that could provide water and fuel for the steam engines. One of these towns was Grafton, platted on property acquired from the Vollands, located



THE KRATZER BROTHERS'
FIRST STORE IN VOLLAND,
CIRCA 1904

VOLLAND STOCKYARDS

VOLLAND DEPOT

Courtesy of Cleo and Julie Schultz

nine miles southwest of Alma. A depot, water tower, coal chute and cattle loading pens were constructed along the rail line

where it passed through the new town. The first post office there was established on September 20, 1887. On January 7, 1890, Henry Volland successfully petitioned the State of Kansas to change the name of Grafton to Volland.

A one-room store was established on Volland's property, and for a short time, John Cromer operated this store. However, on March 22, 1904, Barbara Volland sold the property, including the store, to J.W. "Bill" Kratzer of Alma. Kratzer had worked for his brother, Gustav, at an Alma grocery before purchasing the Volland store. Bill Kratzer made his youngest brother, Otto, a partner in the business. By 1904, Volland was a bustling center of commerce with farm goods and cattle being shipped out on the trains while manufactured goods from the East were imported for settlers. It was a perfect climate to promote growth for aspiring merchants like the Kratzers.

The Kratzer Brothers' store prospered and grew with the town so much that the brothers purchased land across the road for a new store. The Kratzers

held a grand opening at the new two-story brick store on October 16, 1913. Hundreds of people attended the event.

The Kratzers' store became the centerpiece of Volland. While the store offered groceries, dry goods, hardware, and farming and ranching supplies, it was also the social center of the community. Located halfway between Alma and Alta Vista, an Alma phone line was installed on one wall and the Alta Vista line on the opposite wall. Long before many rural farmers had phone service in their homes, they could make their calls from Kratzers' store.

Otto Kratzer became a dynamic, driving force in the Volland community. When his brother Bill died in 1930, Kratzer and his wife, Mabel, became the sole owners of the store. They had two children, Vernon, and a second son, Waldo, who was born with a learning disability. Shortly after acquiring the first Volland store, Otto purchased a folding Kodak postcard camera. He began taking photographic postcards of

events and people around Volland. This was a vocation and hobby that Kratzer enjoyed his entire adult life. He created a portfolio of thousands of images of life in Volland that now reside in the Wabaunsee County Historical Museum, where they may be viewed upon request.

In 1945, the railroad closed the Volland depot due to a lack of freight and passenger customers. The outbound mail was snatched from a hook by the tracks, and the inbound mailbag was thrown from the passing train. Otto became the postmaster of Volland, operating out of the store. Cattle trains continued to stop at Volland and provided transportation for the thousands of cattle that were grazed on the rich Flint Hills pastures during the summer months. The loss of the depot was disquieting to some in the community. However, they adapted to its absence.

In 1955, with another blow to the independence of the community, the U.S. Post Office closed its Volland office. The mail would be delivered by a rural carrier



VOLLAND SCHOOL
Courtesy of Cleo and Julie Schultz

working out of Alma. From that time, no one would use a Volland address again.

Again, Volland survived. Otto Kratzer continued to operate the store; however, with rail service discontinued, he had to travel to Topeka by car to purchase goods for the store. At 69 years of age in 1955, Kratzer found the job of maintaining the store at Volland becoming increasingly difficult.

While Volland had been fortunate to be platted by the railroad and was given the advantages of being on the rail

line, it had not been so fortunate with regard to the State Highway Commission.

During the 1950s when the major state highways were being defined, a route to Alta Vista was paved along K-4 highway, leaving Volland on the unpaved, older K-10 road. The benefits of commerce favored towns on the highway, and the gravel road was just another challenge for Volland and Kratzer. In 1959, the railroad discontinued using cattle cars, and cattle trains no longer stopped at Volland.

As the population of the rural areas

continued to shrink, and competition from stores in Alma and Alta Vista became tougher, the store began to decline. Kratzer was unable to carry the stock that he once could. He began to feel the desperation that thousands of small general store owners across Kansas were feeling in the 1960s with the coming of the urban supermarket. Faced with near constant downsizing, Otto continued business throughout the 1960s as the family lived upstairs above the store. In 1970, Mabel died, leaving Otto alone to face the waning days of Volland. In less than a year, Otto died on April 21, 1971, one day short of his 87th birthday, having spent 67 years as a storekeeper at Volland.

The store closed immediately after Otto's death. Son Waldo moved to the nursing home in Alma, and the first of two planned auctions of the store merchandise was held. The second was never held. The store was locked by Kratzer's other son, Vernon. Volland, the town that lived and died with Otto Kratzer, officially became a ghost town.

In the last decade, Volland has experienced a modern renaissance. In 2001, Wabaunsee County paved Old K-10 highway from Alma to Alta Vista. Nearly a dozen young ranching families have moved to the Volland area in the last ten years to carry on the traditions which have prevailed there for more than a century and a half. Also, a number of non-residents have purchased property in the community and have restored historic houses and barns to enjoy them as second homes. Another good example of this activity is the recent renovation of the Volland schoolhouse. These changes have breathed new life into Volland, the likes of which have not been seen in many years.

Greg Hoots is a noted photo-historian of Kansas history who has authored three books for Arcadia Publishing Company. His latest book, Images of America: Flint Hills, was released in May 2011. For the last 32 years, Hoots has worked for UPS providing service to Wabaunsee County and the Flint Hills. Hoots lives in Kansas City, Kansas, with his wife, Cheryl.