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Tales of Butler County: Providence

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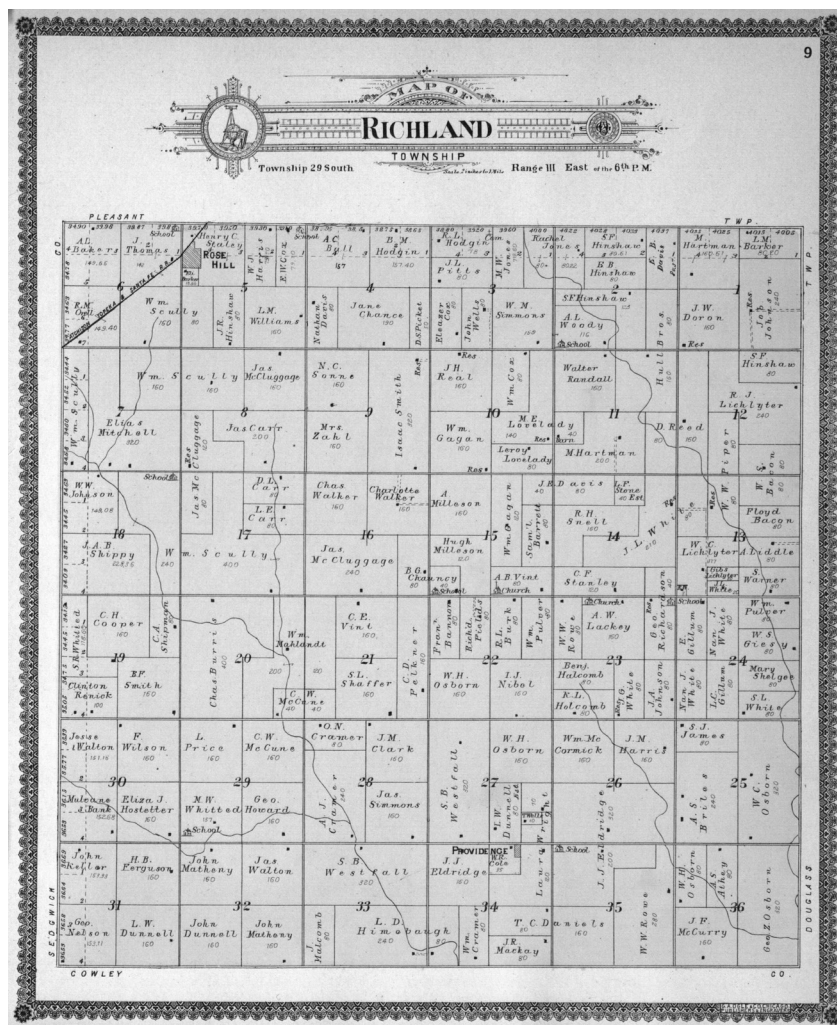
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1905 Standard Atlas of Butler County
Kansas State Historical Society

TALES OF BUTLER COUNTY: PROVIDENCE

PART 1

WHERE WAS PROVIDENCE?

The Kansas prairie was home to many towns, villages, and settlements which have long passed away and been forgotten. Butler County had a number of such towns, many of which were oil towns with schools, churches, and businesses.

Providence was a booming community in Richland Township between Douglass and Rose Hill, but oil was not its lifeline.

In 1873 C.F. Dunnell bought a farm six miles southwest of Douglass between the Walnut River and Maple Creek. When digging for a well, he struck solid rock at ten feet. After blasting and excavating at forty feet, he used a six-inch drill and worked day and night without finding water. He was losing hope when at 144-feet, the drill dropped through the rock into white sand and a spring of water gushed up, filling the well almost instantly within sixty-feet of the top.

Dunnell's hopes were dashed again upon tasting the water heavily charged with minerals. He boarded over the well. A neighbor, a Frenchman named De Rusha, tasted the water and advised it resembled some spring waters he had known in France. Because he had been afflicted for years with a chronic digestive disorder, he pleaded with Dunnell for the use of the water.

Dunnell removed the boards, a jug of water was drawn, and De Rusha carried it home. Within a short time De Rusha reported

feeling much better. Another neighbor tried the water and reported being cured of his ailment. Soon the well became the source of medicine for many residents in the area so Dunnell removed the boards permanently, erected a windmill, and began selling the water.

With a population of eighty in the new settlement, the need for a post office arose. An application for a post office was completed on June 21, 1881, and the proposed postmaster was Lloyd W. Dunnell, brother of C.F. Dunnell.

“That was the first written record I found with the name Providence. Most agree it was named after the Providence Mineral Well,” said Roxie Olmstead, local historian and author formerly of Augusta.

A WOMAN STEPS IN

C. F. Dunnell knew he had something special, but he didn’t have the finances needed for development

He contacted his sister Laura Pratt, a widow in Illinois, for assistance. Pratt came to Kansas and built a hotel and bath house near the mineral well in 1881. The hotel was a large, two-story building with an office, lobby, parlor, dining room, kitchen, thirteen bedrooms, and two

smaller rooms for pantry and storage.

There was also a large porch.

An ad that ran in the local newspaper in 1881 stated the house had accommodations for fall and winter with heated rooms. There were “Nature’s remedy for the cure of rheumatism, dropsy, dyspepsia, erysipelas, general debility, liver and kidney complaints, ague, and other complaints. Baths every day of the week to the public, except Sunday.” A sign on the hotel read “The Providence House.”

Laura Pratt returned to Illinois after the initial building of the house and left the operation to the Dunnells. C. F. and his wife ran the hotel and bathhouse, and Mrs. Dunnell did the cooking.

The mineral water was stocked by stores in Douglass, Wichita, and other area communities. Testimonials poured in extolling the virtues of the water.

Richland Township erected a sturdy iron bridge across Eight Mile Creek in 1882, making Providence more accessible from Douglass.

Laura Pratt returned to Providence in 1882, taking charge of the hotel while Dunnell continued managing the bath house.

The mineral well became a popular resort, and it wasn’t unusual to have



Untitled Plein Air
Zak Barnes

more than one-hundred people on any given Sunday.

The hotel was filled to capacity during the summer.

Pratt purchased land from the Dunnells in 1883, and the two parties agreed that the hotel belonged to Pratt and her heirs. Each party would share half of the expenses of running the bath house.

The hotel register indicated visitors from around the world, as well as local patrons.

PROVIDENCE BUSINESSES

A general store was needed for the residents, area farmers, and guests at

Providence. At one time there were two stores with several different proprietors.

John Copner operated the first store in 1884, located on the south side of the east/west road. Later another store was built on the north side of the road. That store eventually was called Holcomb Brothers. Hannibal Holcomb was a postmaster, sold ice, made a pool, and farmed. He and his brother Mort managed the hotel and bathhouse in 1892. Hannibal eventually became the sole owner of the store and moved it to Douglass in 1896. He had married Jennie Dunnell, daughter of C.F. Dunnell, and their two children were born in Providence.



Earth and Sky 3
Laura Berman

Providence also boasted a thriving blacksmith business, operated by George Radcliff. Other blacksmiths were N.M. Hare and Lon Harp.

Dr. John Adams, medical advisor at the Providence Mineral Well, built an apothecary shop on Mineral Avenue west

of the bath house, in 1884. Adams was also a postmaster.

There was a need for a livery stable to handle stagecoaches, buggies, and horses. In 1888 Robert Warrender and Frank Reedy built a livery stable and feed barn.

PART 2

Albert Alexander (A.A.) Hyde was born in Massachusetts and came to Kansas in 1865. He was a Wichita bank cashier, but there is no record on how he became involved with the Providence Mineral Well. He was best known as a philanthropist and founder of the Mentholatum Company, but that was after his involvement with Providence.

Hyde purchased land north of the mineral well and a lot on Mineral Street in 1886.

By 1887 he was building a cottage and ice house to store ice that was cut from the river on his property north of the well.

He deeded land for a road to the Providence Mineral Wells Co. in 1888, and his land in town was platted into lots. Hyde's property became known as the Prospect Addition with Avenue A, Avenue B, River Street, Reserve B, and Reserve C. The Company also planted about 1,000 trees in the spring of 1888.

Hyde and his wife had nine children. He kept his Wichita residence and used the Providence cottage as a summer home. The three-story house was known as the Hyde Cottage but was later called "The Rest."

The cottage was built of cypress, which was shipped by train.

According to Roxie Olmstead in "Providential Providence," the cypress went first to Illinois for prefabrication before coming to Kansas, and carpenter Frank Beedy came with it for assembly. Beedy stayed for six years.

Hyde's sister Mary came to Kansas to help with his growing family, and she purchased a couple of lots in the Prospect Addition in 1888.

A TRAVEL DESTINATION

The Rest became synonymous with hospitality. Visitors from far and wide came seeking mineral water and serenity. Guests included people from all walks. L. D. Lewelling, who was elected governor of Kansas in 1892, was a frequent guest, along with his wife and close friends.

In addition to the hotel and bathhouse, the resort featured hunting and fishing as part of the lure. The Walnut River was teeming with bass, catfish, and sunfish.

Not only were the grounds attractive with flowers and trees, but there was a merry-go-round and a platform for dances. A park was located east of Mineral Avenue.

A baseball club was organized and lawn socials with lemonade and ice cream were popular.

**THE HYDES LEAVE
PROVIDENCE**

Records show by 1892 that Mary Hyde had left Providence and returned East. A.A. Hyde in 1898 contacted Mort Holcomb, Butler County superintendent of public instruction, asking if he would be interested in purchasing The Rest. The price was attractive, and Holcomb quickly made the deal.

Hyde had invested heavily in Wichita property and had influenced the Providence Mineral Well Co. to do the same. Hyde and the company went bust. He created his Mentholatum ointment in 1894, and the product was an immediate success. A large factory was built in Wichita in 1909.

Back in Providence, Mort Holcomb also purchased property belonging to Mary Hyde and persuaded his aging parents, Turner and Sarah Holcomb, into giving up their farm and moving to The Rest. The couple lived there until their deaths, Turner in 1904 and Sarah in 1922.

Mort Holcomb continued living there and hosted an average of a hundred guests

each week. He was known to be a scholar, an artist, an author, an equestrian, a designer of feminine evening gowns, and a grower of rare shrubs and flowers. The Rest became a show place under his ownership. There were beautiful shrubs, flowers, trees pruned in artistic shapes, seven varieties of cedars. People came from miles around just to see the grounds.

He enjoyed entertaining and placed long benches under the huge trees on Sundays for people to enjoy basket lunches. Holcomb had an extensive library, rare art work, and a music room. After he was married to Abbie Potts of Wichita in the late 1920s, they used The Rest as a summer home. His brother, Hannibal of Douglass, was the caretaker when they were absent.

Holcomb sold The Rest in 1947 to his niece and her husband, Zoe and Claude Alley. They resided there until the 1950s when they moved to Douglass.

**WHAT BECAME OF
PROVIDENCE?**

The hotel was the last business building in Providence, and for a time it was rented out as a dwelling. The hotel was advertised for sale in 1929. In the 1930s, it was

sold and dismantled, and the lumber was hauled to Rose Hill.

The other buildings had been razed or sold and moved to nearby farms.

There was renewed activity at the well in 1953. Providence Minerals Wells, Inc. was organized with Clarence Copeland of New York as chairman of the board; Raymond Holcomb of Wichita as president; C. L. Haden of Wichita as vice president and general manager; Fred R. Viex of Augusta as secretary; and Meyer Dvorkin of New York as treasurer. Copeland and Holcomb were originally from the Providence area.

The well was drilled out, cemented, and piped. A new, attractive stone well house was built. There was even talk of building a motel and health resort. The water was again sold with a label that read “Drink for health Providence Mineral Water from the deep sands of Kansas, discovered in 1873. Nature’s Own Remedies Prepared in the Earth’s Great Laboratory. Approved. Providence Mineral Wells, Inc., Wichita, Kansas.”

The re-opening of the well met with failure. The water simply did not sell, and the dreams of a health resort died.

The last original building was The Rest. It was still occupied in 1996 but was in

an extreme state of disrepair. On March 25, 1996, The Rest burned to the ground. A sad ending for Butler County’s once thriving health resort.

The following is an excerpt from a poem written by a grateful guest dated June 21, 1891.

*On June the 13th of ninety one
After the setting of the sun,
A light in the distance did plainly tell
That we were approaching this
wonderful well.
As the clock struck nine on that
beautiful night
With the moon and the stars in the
heavens so bright
All so weary from a thirty mile ride
We land at “Rest” in charge
of Miss Hyde.*

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