

## **History of Silkville**

**By Janelle Richardson**

**Great-Great-Granddaughter of early settler, Claude Clair.**

**In 1869 Claude Clair, a silk ribbon maker in Saint Etienne, France, was recruited to come to Silkville to set up and operate the looms.**

Silkville was not a town. It was an attempt to form a socialistic commune on a large tract of land of 3500 acres, located about three miles south of the small town of Williamsburg, Kansas in southwest Franklin County. Today it is a working ranch called the Silkville Ranch.

### **Silkville Established as Commune**

Silkville was first established and named in 1869 when a wealthy Frenchman, E.V. de Boissiere, purchased the unimproved land to form a commune based on the Fourierist socialistic principles. He had a dream that Silkville would be a self-sustaining rural cooperative educational and industrial community where participants would share the wealth. Workers had to pay their own way and be self-supporting until profits were made.

De Boissiere was described as an intelligent, portly man in his sixties who loved books, music, and helping the underprivileged. He was born June 9, 1810 near Bordeaux, France into an aristocratic family, but made a fortune of his own through fisheries and forestry. For political reasons, he left France in 1852 and came to the United States. After a failed attempt to help establish a school and orphanage for black children in New Orleans, he looked elsewhere to implement some of his humanitarian ideals. He found his location in Kansas. He bought the land and poured money into the establishment of Silkville. During the early days when accommodations were crude, he endured hardships. He was committed to Silkville and became a citizen of the United States on November 6, 1874.

Garrett R. Carpenter, a graduate history student at Emporia State University, reported his research findings about Silkville. He said the commune was intended to be self-sustaining. A prospectus was issued in 1873 to invite socialists and others to join. Workers were to be associates and were to be remunerated in proportion to their productivity. Destitute persons were not admitted. Each worker was required to give a \$100 deposit and to provide for their own needs and to pay rent for their rooms two months in advance. The style of living was to be frugal and inexpensive.

### **Production of Silk Ribbons was to be Main Industry**

The production of silk and silk ribbons was to be one of the main industries. Seventy acres of the choicest land were set out with mulberry trees to feed the silk worms. A large stone building was built to house the looms and the location where the worms were to be kept. By the year 1872 the three looms at Silkville had a capacity of making 224 yards of ribbon a day. Interest in silk production spread throughout Kansas. During the first few

years, more than forty French immigrants came to Kansas. Most of them were experts in the production and manufacture of silk.

De Boissiere exhibited his manufactured silk products at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia where his products were awarded first prize over entries from all over the world. De Boissiere took a personal interest in exhibiting his silk products. He was known to have taken charge of displays at fairs in Bismarck Grove, near Lawrence, and the state fair in Topeka.

### **Silkville Diversified**

Mr. Charles Sears, who was the former president of the Fourierist North American Phalanx, came from New Jersey and became the commune manager in 1876. His son, Charles T. Sears, was put in charge of developing the farm, orchards, and the stock raising. The farm was well stocked with the finest bred cattle and horses, and a cheese factory was established. Large vineyards and orchards were put out and they engaged in farming of all kinds. Workers from all over the world (France and Sweden primarily) came to be a part of the community. Most workers did not stay very long, preferring to invest in private property rather than a communal enterprise. It is believed that no more than about forty or fifty workers lived at Silkville at one time—maybe even fewer.

### **Many Buildings Built**

Substantial improvements, which were very modern for the time, were made at Silkville. A limestone fence four feet high was built around the entire place, making a total of fifteen miles of fence. All the buildings were limestone. They built a large cheese factory and creamery, a building for a blacksmith shop and workroom, several large barns and sheds for stock. A total of six hundred acres were put in cultivation, and five hundred acres of prairie-grass were reserved as hay land. The remainder was used as pasture land that was supplied with water from a dozen artificial ponds.

For workers, a three-story, sixty-room stone manor house, 36 by 95 feet, was completed in 1874 where people shared meals in the dining room but lived in separate apartments with their families. It was so grand that the local people referred to it as the “chateau” but de Boissiere preferred the less pretentious name of “phalanstery” ---the home of a “phalanx”. It was said that as many as one hundred people could be housed there. It had spacious parlors and a large dining room. A library of 2,500 books, the largest in Kansas at that time, was established. Silkville was also a flag stop on the Kansas City, Burlington and Santa Fe Railroad.

A stone building was built at the north corner of the property as the schoolhouse for the children at Silkville. Although de Boissiere was on the school board, it was part of the regular Franklin County school system.

### **Some Workers Leased Land**

Some workers were allowed to lease land and build their own homes paying about \$10 to \$36 a year for a lease to last twenty-one years. This property was diagonally southwest across the field from the main manor house. It was located at the junction of two section roads now known as Arkansas and Cloud Roads.

### **Local People Visited Silkville**

The first few years, very few outsiders visited Silkville. Local people were curious about what went on there. Lem Woods, who wrote an article based on the Fogle family memories for the Ottawa newspaper in the 1930s, described a party held at the commune. He wrote, "Early in the summer of 1874, notices were printed in the Ottawa and Burlington papers that on a certain Sunday, excursion trains would run to Silkville, and everybody was invited to come and see how silk was made. A large crowd came to visit, eat, and dance. They all had a good time and were impressed." Writers wrote about the spacious buildings and the good production of the cheese factory. The orchards were thriving and the vineyards were producing wine.

### **Commune Failed**

Boissiere was disappointed. His ideas of a commune were not successful. Not enough associates could be attracted to Silkville to live the communitarian way of life with the cooperative labor scheme. Many associates left the farm. Workers could make higher wages elsewhere. People had to be hired and paid wages. By 1882 Boissiere began to find the competition for silk products from the Orient was growing. Silk could be imported cheaper than his workers could make it at Silkville. The silk industry could not become profitable. From 1881 on, the silk activities were curtailed and only retained on an experimental basis until they were abandoned in 1886.

All this caused the philanthropist's dream to come to an end. General agriculture and stock-raising did continue for a period of time but it was clear that the idea of a cooperative commune was dead.

### **De Boissiere Deeded Property to Odd Fellows**

At the age of eighty-two in 1892, de Boissiere returned to Kansas from France. He knew the idea of a commune had failed. He wanted to devote this Kansas land for the greatest possible good for humanity. When he made his wishes known, many representatives from charitable institutions visited him hoping to secure the property. Representatives of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows of the State of Kansas approached de Boissiere about devoting his property to establishing an orphans' home and industrial school for the children of deceased Odd Fellows of the State of Kansas. First de Boissiere studied the constitution, laws, and literature of the order. He indicated that he didn't want to give the property to the Odd Fellows so they could sell it. He wanted it kept together. Terms were agreed upon and the property was deeded to the Odd Fellow's Grand Lodge of Kansas.

According to the Annals of Kansas, 1892, page 138, "May 11, Ernest Valetton de Boissiere, Frenchman who founded Silkville, deeded all his real and personal property, amounting to nearly \$150,000, a trust for founding an I.O.O.F. orphans' home. The gift included a 3,100-acre farm with nine stone buildings, an apple orchard, a mulberry grove and a walnut grove." On June 7, 1894 the Odd Fellows Orphans' Home, designed by noted Kansas architect George P. Washburn, was dedicated.

On Oct. 11, 1892 the Grand Lodge accepted the gift and voted to enact a \$1.50 per capita tax to its members to support the running of the home. Some members were opposed to establishing the home and legally fought the case. In 1894, the Grand Lodge passed resolutions severing its connection with and withdrawing further support from the home. When de Boissiere died on January 12, 1894, certain lawyers believed that the rejection by the Grand Lodge nullified the original transaction and the title of the property should revert to the heirs of de Boissiere. A long legal battle developed over the ownership of Silkville. L.C. Stine of Ottawa, who was a great friend of de Boissiere, and who had gotten him to deed the place to the Odd Fellows, made a grand and noble fight for the order.

### **Legal Battle over Ownership**

Once the I.O.O.F. had repudiated the gift, ownership fell into the courts. The law firm of Troutman and Stone of Topeka claimed that de Boissiere's sister, Madame Corrine Martinelli, was the heir to the property. In 1896 James Troutman, for \$4500, got Madame Martinelli to sign a quitclaim deed to their law firm. Litigation commenced and was in the courts for years. The Odd Fellows claimed that de Boissiere intended the property to be an orphans' home and had deeded the property to them, that they had invested \$34,000, and that the lawyers fraudulently got Madame Martinelli to deed over the property. The Supreme Court of Kansas on January 9, 1903, decided in favor of Troutman and Stone declaring the original trust deed to the Odd Fellows was void. On September 1, 1910, Troutman and Stone, Topeka lawyers, sold Silkville, near Williamsburg, for \$130,000.

Post Script: On April 29, 1916, the Silkville original manor house, valued at \$40,000 was partially destroyed by fire. It was rebuilt at about one-third of the original size and used as a farm house. During the 1960s, the John Netherland family purchased the Silkville Ranch. In 2003 the ranch, still containing the original land, was sold to a Kansas City man.

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