

Centropolis

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Dreams and aspirations came easily to our pioneer forefathers as they carved out lives in the rough, wild frontier. Myriads of small towns, some surviving, some present day ghost towns, give mute testimony to this truth.

Centropolis is a fascinating example of those dreams and aspirations. A special dream to the town's founding fathers it was, for they had hope of making it not only the county seat of Franklin County, but also the state capital, as well. The group, which included Cyrus K. Holliday, later one of Topeka's founders, laid out the townsite before 1856. They must have been eloquent in their selling techniques, for the town grew rapidly and lots sold for what seemed an exorbitant price in that time--\$500.

By 1856 the town boasted a number of residences and businesses, including grocery and dry goods stores, hotels and boarding houses, a restaurant, livery stables, harness shops, four saloons and a prosperous gambling house.

Also in the fledgling town was Franklin County's first newspaper, the *Kansas Leader*, started in 1856. When the boom moved to the town of Minneola, just east of Centropolis, the paper

Moved there and was renamed the *Minneola Statesman*. In 1864 a small boys' paper, *The Journal*, was founded which acquired a circulation of almost 500 during its short life. The first mail service in the area was between Ottawa and Centropolis post office, the run made by horse and wagon several times a week.

Neither education nor religion was neglected in the new town. The first school term was begun in the fall of 1855, and its first teacher was William Cator. Four church sects were listed as having been organized by 1858: Methodist, Christian, Union Baptist and Dunkard, or Old German Baptist. Three of these, Christian, Baptist and Dunkard, were still serving the community in 1991.

By 1860, it became apparent that none of the dreams of the founding fathers were destined to come to pass. Ottawa was named the county seat, the townsite of Minneola had beat out Centropolis as the capital of Kansas Territory, even though that proved to be a "one-day wonder," and the railroad bypassed the new town in favor of Norwood, LeLoup and Baldwin City. From that time on, the small town found growth almost impossible.

Even in the face of adversity, the townspeople continued to hold the faith. With the advent of the telephone, shares of stock were sold in the Centropolis Telephone Company. Service was furnished to outlying areas, using the barbed wire offences to carry the service. The switchboard was located in the front room of a home, and calls were “put through” from morning until evening. Only emergency calls were allowed after hours, and often a crusty, sleepy operator, impatient at being wakened, would demand to know the nature of the message before completing the call. If he decided it was not of a truly “emergency” nature, he merely dropped the key and went back to bed, the call not made. This system, surprisingly, lasted until 1969, when the company was sold to Contel Telephone. It was one of the last independent telephone companies in Kansas to “go modern,” putting an end to many frustrated callers!

The Great Depression of the 1930s was even harder on the town. One of its doctors left, the harness making shop closed, bowing to the inevitability of the automobile, and the bank failed. Finally only two general stores, the blacksmith and garage, a barber shop, and the restaurant remained.

The restaurant, whimsically named “The June Bug,” was a favorite gathering place for the townsmen. Old timers fondly recall the old building, and how one of the village characters, “Dinger” Turner, would empty the restaurant in record time. It seems that Dinger, when he grew tired of listening to the general conversation, would enliven things by whipping out his pistol and shooting flies off the ceiling—guaranteed to cause a speedy retreat by all present!

The years following the Great Depression found little change in the town. A few new homes were built, but basically it remained the same. The school closed in the 1960s with the pupils attending the Appanoose Grade School, a part of the USD 287 district. Crist Auto Sales moved into the empty lot beside the general store, then eventually moved on out to their present farm location (they are now located at Keokuk and I-35 exit #187.) A lumber yard was started in the 1980s, but closed after two years operation. A township hall was built to house the volunteer fire department which was organized to serve as a base for community functions.

Two businesses survived the ups and downs of the small town. One was Gilliland’s, a garage and tire shop started in 1926 by Elmer Gilliland. For a time it also included a sawmill and an icehouse, and provided electricity to fourteen houses in the town, finally selling out that portion to Kansas City Power and Light about 1940. It continues to serve the community, operated after Elmer by his son Leland “Bud,” and now by his grandson, Gene, and his son-in-law, John Bowman, and is recognized by the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. as the second oldest continuously operated dealership in eastern Kansas.

The other mainstay of the town through the decades was the Farmers Union Mercantile, fondly called “Olga’s” after Miss Olga Simmons, who came to work there in 1924. She continued on, first as clerk and then as proprietor, for 57 years—until illness forced her retirement in 1981. The old store was auctioned off in 1983, and purchased by Leland and Mabel Gilliland, owners of the garage and tire shop across the street. For a time, new life was breathed into the old store when it was reopened by the Gilliland’s daughter, Robyn Bowman. She operated the store until the fall of 1988, when the difficulties of delivery service for supplies and the lack of help forced her to close. Since that time, the building has stood empty, giving mute testimony to the echoes of a boisterous past and an almost forgotten dream.

Centropolis is considered the first town in Franklin County although it shares a settlement date with Lane. In 1855, Perry Fuller established a store in the Centropolis site for the purpose of trafficking with the Indians of the area. In 1856, the Centropolis Town Company was formed. According to records, the population in 1860 was 175; in 1910, 117.

By Mabel Gilliland, 1993, with updates by Deborah Barker, 2011.