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Tales of Butler County: Providence, a lost resort

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 10 feet. After blasting and excavating at 40 feet, he used a 6-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 60 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 80 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 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, 13 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 bath house and Mrs. Dunnell did the cooking, too.

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 more than 100 people on any given Sunday. The hotel was filled to capacity during the summer.

Pratt purchased land from the Dunnells in 1883 and agreement was reached 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 bath house 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.

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 Ave., 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.

Read about the prominent philanthropist and founder of the Mentholatum Company's involvement with the Providence Mineral Wells, and what became of the



PHOTO/ COURTESY

The early days of the Providence Mineral Well House and Bath House.

once-thriving town in Saturday's Times-Gazette.

Sources: "Providential Providence" by Roxie Olmstead, *The University Geological Survey of Kansas, Vol. VII, special report by E.H.S. Bailey, "History of Providence City"* *The History of Butler County, Kansas* by Vol P. Mooney, 1916.

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