

By Belinda Larsen

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## Tales of Butler County: Providence lost Part 2

This is the conclusion to a two-part series about the lost Butler County community of Providence.

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Albert Alexander Hyde "A.A." was born in Massachusetts and came to Kansas in 1865. He was a Wichita bank cashier and 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 the 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.

Roxie Olmstead's "Providential Providence" stated that one account said the cypress went first to Illinois for pre-fabrication 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 bath house, 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 Hydес leave Providence

Records show by 1892 Mary Hyde had left Providence and returned East. A.A. Hyde in 1898 contacted Mort Holcomb, Butler County superintendent of public instruction, and asked if he would be interested in purchasing The Rest. The asking 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 100 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 and trees pruned in artistic shapes, seven varieties of cedars and 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?

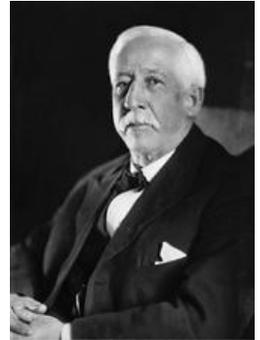
The hotel was the last business building in Providence and for a time it was rented out as a dwelling.

The hotel was advertised for sale in 1929. In the 1930s it was sold, 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 and 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."



PHOTO/ COURTESY PHOTO

A.A. Hyde purchased property in Providence and helped promote the mineral water.

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.”

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, Wichita Eagle, Aug. 22, 1890, The Topeka Daily Capital, April 17, 1892.

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