

Winter wonderland



The ground has been covered with white since the area received six inches of snow Thursday, but the sight of heavily frosted trees greeted Goodland citizens Sunday morning with spectacular beauty as the limbs of the trees throughout the city were heavily covered. Photo by Tom Betz / The Goodland Daily News

Small towns continue to die

DEATH, from Page 1

Ingalls was lured to Sumner in Atchison County by a lithograph showing a town with churches, factories and schools.

What he saw was much less. "He expected a prosperous town and found nothing. He was totally blown away. He was sold a bill of goods," said society historian Virgil W. Dean.

Some towns like Ravanna died out after failing to become the county seat.

On its upswing, Ravanna had a newspaper, a couple of hotels, stores, a blacksmith shop — and even a courthouse in hopes of being the center of government for Garfield County.

By the 1890s, Garfield County was part of Finney County and Ravanna's dreams were dashed. All that remains of the town are a few foundations and parts of the courthouse's limestone walls in an open field.

Not all the towns that once flourished have dried up. Case in point: the town of Mildred in Allen County, population around 50.

In 1907, a cement plant was built in a cornfield and Mildred boomed. Population peaked in 1912 with 2,000 people and the town had a newspaper, two hotels, assorted stores and even a town band. But in the 1930s, the cement company closed. Boom went bust.

But Mike Becker, the town's mayor and owner of Mildred's only general

store, likes the small-town life.

"You couldn't get me to move to Iola or Wichita. People here are so nice and helpful. They treat you more like a person than a number," Becker said.

One key influence on a town's survival were the railroads that crisscrossed Kansas, said Tom Schmiedeler, a historical geographer at Washburn University in Topeka.

Railroads often established towns as commercial centers, where nearby farmers could bring crops and livestock and shoppers could find what they needed.

"If merchants weren't located in towns with a railroad, they often would pick up lock, stock and barrel and move," he said. "If you were a merchant you could get a lot more in your hardware store if you were near a railroad."

Schmiedeler said Cuba, settled in the 1870s in Republic County, moved two or three times until it landed near a railroad track. White Rock merchants moved to Esbon in Jewell County to be closer to the tracks.

"Some towns were in the wrong spot and never had a chance," he said. "Their connection with other places was poor."

Automobiles and paved roads signaled the end for many smaller towns catering to those living nearby.

"Traveling was easier and where the roads were built was where the people traveled," Dean said. "People didn't need as many towns as they traveled

greater distances."

At the start of the last century, technological advances meant larger and fewer farmers — a trend that continues today.

"Fewer people were needed for farming, so many moved to larger towns and cities as technology changed," Dean said.

In some western Kansas counties, settlers arrived in the 1880s when crops flourished and times were good. But drought, bad crops and a depression in the 1890s changed things.

"People settled these towns and when hard times came, they couldn't make it," Dean said. "They moved on."

History repeated in the 1930s when a combination of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl sent people packing.

Between 1930 and 1940, state population dropped by about 80,000 — the only time when Kansas' population actually declined from one decade to another.

"Many counties in western Kansas were losing population in the 1930s and there were not that many people to begin with," Dean said. "Many hit U.S. 66 for California and others headed back east."

Still, tiny towns teeter.

"It's something that always has gone on. It's part of the history. The reasons may be different, but just because it always happened doesn't mean it's a desirable thing," Dean said.

Costs can grow fast in state budget

BUDGET, from Page 1

year's budget.

At least a few of the costs facing government can grow significantly faster than the Consumer Price Index.

For example, in fiscal 1999, the average cost of providing medical services for a poor Kansan increased a whopping 18.1 percent.

In addition, the effects of some decisions compound.

For example, state law rewards civil service employees who complete a year of service satisfactorily by moving them up a step on the state's pay grid. That "step movement" is worth a 2.5 percent pay increase.

Also, the state puts money into each employee's pension. The state's contribution is a percentage of its total payroll; as the payroll increases, so does the contribution.

In addition, some policy decisions have long-term consequences.

For example, the state rewrote its formula for distributing money to public schools in 1992.

It set a statewide property tax levy — lower than most districts' levies — and increased sales and income taxes to make sure districts didn't lose money.

During Graves' first term, the state cut the property tax levy. In a budget twist conservatives found perverse, the

tax relief was budgeted as spending, because the state replaced property tax revenues with general fund revenues.

For fiscal 1992, the state spent \$2.5 billion from its general fund. For fiscal 2002, Graves proposed more than \$4.6 billion in spending.

"It makes it look like state spending has gone up, when in fact spending on schools have been very tightly controlled," said Senate President Dave Kerr, R-Hutchinson.

Finally, the budget debate is framed in a peculiar way.

When legislators revise the current budget, they talk about how it differs from the version passed the previous year.

Employee salaries on county agenda

County Attorney Bonnie Selby is scheduled to talk with the Sherman County commissioners about employee salaries at their Tuesday meeting.

The commissioners also plan to discuss leases on county owned land. They are looking at switching the leases from a crop share basis to a cash basis.

The matter was tabled from their last meeting. They will also review mail and make corrections to the tax rolls if there are any. The commissioners will meet at 8 a.m. in the commissioner's room at the courthouse.

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