



CLAYTON'S MAIN STREET filled with horses and buggies as people came to shop in the early days. At one time, the town had 400 residents. First and second graders in 1929-1930 are shown (below) with their teacher, Nina Noyes, top. Others identified include (row 1, from left) Dean Vessey and Gene Cole; (row 2) Velma ?, Norma Bird, Duane Vessey, Bradley

Broyles, Keith Wiley, Victor Rule, Frances Rule and Nadine Hixon; and (row 3) Marjorie Housh, Genevieve Kirk, Jo Milner, Doyle Blackwell, Weldon Brooks, ? Rowh, unknown, Jewett Cole and Clark Housh.

Tour to take history buffs to Clayton

The Oberlin Arts and Humanities Commission will offer its annual local history tour on Sunday, April 27, visiting Dresden, Clayton and Jennings. This is the first of a series of stories about the three communities. For details, call Ella Betts, (785) 475-3557 or Mary Henzel, (785) 470-0218.

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Though the tiny town of Clayton, on the east edge of Decatur County, now has only three active businesses, it once was a bustling community with 400 residents.

Gwynn Ward and Weldon Brooks, lifelong Clayton residents, say they remember when the town had more than three dozen businesses: two groceries, two elevators, the telephone exchange run by Florie Miller, Bush-Rowh Harness and Shoe Repair, Rosie's Creamery, Matthew Blacksmith Shop, three gas stations, the Ben Willey Chevrolet and Willis Knight car agencies, two garages, a bank, a lumber yard, Matthew Drug Store, two cafes, two hotels, a livery barn, Milner General Store, a creamery, a city dray, a barbershop, post office, Heany Tobacco and Confectionary, a meat market, Green Brothers Hardware and John Deere Agency, Farmers Union, and Lyons Feed and Seed, along with cattle and horse buyers and traders.

Mr. Brooks said he remembers well the dust storms of the 1930s and the exodus of families that moved away after many farms were foreclosed.

He said that the first brick school in Clayton burned in 1920 and a new high school and grade school were completed in 1922. The few students left at Clayton, which is mostly in Norton County, have been bussed to Norton since the Jennings school closed.

John K. Gallentine said that the town of Clayton means much to his family, since his uncle, James Gallentine, was in the first high school graduating class in 1914; his mother, Thelma Tapp Gallentine graduated in 1929 from Clayton High School and was later on the school board; he and his sister, Delores graduated in 1954 and 1951, respectively, and a brother, Jerry Gallentine, was in the last graduating class in 1958.

After he graduated, he said, he earned a degree in biology at Fort Hays Kansas State Teachers Col-

lege, then was stationed at Fort Diedrick, Md., while serving two years in the Army. There he met his future wife, Ann Volpe, who was attending Hood College in Frederick, Md., and after they were married on Nov. 25, 1962, he brought her back to Clayton to the farmstead which his grandfather, Elmer Gallentine, had bought in 1893.

He started teaching at Clayton that fall and he served as principal and taught junior high in Clayton for five years before the school unified with Jennings. He then taught junior high and coached 27 years at Jennings, along with farming.

"I remember many individuals in Clayton growing up, including Jim Riggs, Blakey Rule and the Brooks Brothers," he said. "Living in a small town, everyone knew you and made sure you didn't do anything wrong or get out of line."

Mr. Brooks also recalled the many country schools in that area. He said he graduated in 1940 and his wife, the former Merris Goodman, graduated in 1942. He said that the Norton County population in 1882 was around 6,000, grew to nearly 12,000 and is now back down to 6,000.

CLAYTON HISTORY

It was in the spring of 1878 that John Cameron and his son Roderick arrived in Norton County and selected a site for a homestead, according to a history written by the late Byron Salisbury, a longtime resident of Clayton. Since they were among the first to settle in the area, they had their choice of land, and homesteaded on the Norton-Decatur County line about a mile north of Prairie Dog Creek.

The closest store and post office were at Norton, and Mr. Cameron soon realized the need for something closer. In 1878, he opened a small store on his homestead. The limited amount of merchandise he offered for sale had to be purchased at Kirwin and hauled in by wagon. His store was designated as the Clayton post office and he became the first postmaster in 1879.

In addition to the Cameron Store, the town soon had a general store operated by the Worrel Brothers. J.S. Salisbury established a sod hotel in Clayton in 1879 and he also operated a livery barn. Dennis Gibbs opened a blacksmith shop and Dr. J.W. Thomas became the first druggist. There were 22 students

of school age, so a school was also organized in 1879.

Mr. Ward said he remembers his uncle, Charlie Gallentine, telling him that the students would put their lunches in the coat room attached to the building, but would often discover when noon time came, dogs had gotten into the building and eaten their food.

Decatur County had not been organized in 1879, so there was no tax money available to hire a teacher, he said. The 10 families agreed that one of the Gettys girls could teach for \$10 a month.

In 1888, the Rock Island Railroad laid track westward between Norton and Jennings and residents hoped the route would swing through Clayton. However, the line was built a mile south, and it became apparent that there was no future for the town at its original site.

The Rock Island purchased the present townsite of Clayton from John Pathamore that year and it was surveyed and plotted for business and residential lots. The first frame dwelling in new Clayton was built by John Diemer. Mr. Salisbury vacated his sod hotel in the original town and erected the Commercial Hotel in the new town in 1888.

F.J. Castle and Dr. Thomas came from old Clayton and built the first store, stocking it with drugs and hardware. R.M. and F.G. Vessey built one of the first buildings in the new town, a hotel. They also built and operated a livery barn.

E.L. Pease, who had succeeded John Cameron as postmaster in old Clayton, became new Clayton's first postmaster, a position he held for 21 years. The Clayton State Bank was organized by W.P. Anderson and others in 1888. The Railroad Hotel was built by Roll Ward in 1898 and he also planted the first trees on Main Street.

Clayton was incorporated as a city of the third class on Feb. 4, 1907. N.G. Kelley was the first mayor and councilmen were G.W. Bressler, Charles Nelson, Bert Page, G.W. Folsom and F.S. Vessey. W.A. Eakin was city clerk.

When the town observed its 20th anniversary, the City Council set July 15 for the removal of all board sidewalks on Main Street, which were replaced with concrete.

Down through the years, controlling speed was a problem the council attempted to solve in 1917



with an ordinance stating that "no automobile or other motor vehicle shall run on any public street or highway within the thickly settled or business part of the City of Clayton at a speed in excess of 12 miles per hour, with mufflers closed."

In 1919, residents voted \$10,000 in bonds to supply the city with electric lights and power and in 1929, the city annexed a tract on the north edge of town to build a park. Another improvement came in 1935 when the city approved \$9,000 in bonds to pay the city's share of the cost of building a waterworks.

"I remember Saturday evenings in Clayton, which were great," Mr. Ward said. "Everyone came to town to do their trading, and Main Street would be lined with cars on both sides. The stores did a big business."

"The farmers brought in their eggs and cream and the women would buy their groceries while the men visited and traded stories. Sometimes there would even be a movie run by Glenn Vessey in one of the buildings on Main Street in the 1930s."

"Even though it was during the depression, sometimes I would get a nickel to spend on Saturday night, and then was the big decision whether to get an ice cream cone or a candy bar."

"As a child of 5 or 6, I didn't realize how hard the times were. We had milk cows, chickens, a garden, cattle and hogs and sometimes butchered, but to a child, things seemed fine. However, in reality, the farmers couldn't raise enough crops to make their payments and the banks were slowly foreclosing and people were moving to Colorado, California or Oregon."

He said he started school in the country in 1936, but since there were few students, the school closed



THE FIRST BRICK SCHOOL in Clayton burned in 1920 and was replaced by separate elementary and high schools the following year. The last high school class to graduate was in 1958.

and they all went to Clayton. By 1947, there were only nine boys in high school, so the next year the district was consolidated with New Alamo.

The last class to graduate from Clayton High School in 1958 included Evelyn Fought, Jerry Gallentine, Sharon Higgins and Cecile LaSalle. After that, students then went to Jennings, Norcatour or Lenora.

Though Clayton had electricity, Mr. Ward said, his folks had a kerosene cooking stove and a Coleman gas light which he used to do his home work. In 1946 and 1947, electricity came to the farms, which modernized things a great deal.

The church has always been an important part of the town. The

present United Methodist Church, which consolidated with the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968, observed its centennial in 1981. The Rev. Ray Gilstrap serves the Clayton church, along with those in Norcatour and Almena.

The three businesses which remain in Clayton today are the Ag Valley Co-op Elevator, Don Brooks Manufacturing and Bill LaSalle Woodworking. A community building was built after the school was demolished and the area has many productive farms, Mr. Ward said.

Dave Ward is the only Clayton resident on the Decatur County of the town today. Everyone else lives on the Norton County side, which comprises most of the town.