

Brief History of Hamilton County Kansas

Hamilton County was named after Alexander Hamilton. The county is located in the southwest part of Kansas, and contains an area of 996 square miles of land, which makes it three quarters the size of Rhode Island. Located within the Great Plains, the county is relatively level, mostly treeless, and semi-arid. It receives an annual precipitation of 16.69 inches. The prevailing winds are southerly, except during the winter months. The population in 1990 was 2,388.

Eighty seven percent of the land area is used for agriculture. Livestock ranked first in value production, with four commercial feedlots currently in operation. The world's largest beef-packing plant is located fifty miles east of Hamilton County, which is the major reason the cattle business is prominent in the County. Wheat ranked second in value production, and is the major crop, followed by hay, corn, and sorghum. Irrigation plays a prominent role in the agricultural economy.

The County consists of three communities, Kendall, Coolidge, and Syracuse, the county seat. In the 1880's the county had more than thirty school districts. The number has dwindled to one school district located in Syracuse. In 1989, 421 students were enrolled in kindergarten through twelfth grade.

The Santa Fe Trail, an ancient passage way, was used regularly after 1821 by merchant traders traveling to Santa Fe, New Mexico. It followed the Arkansas River through Hamilton County. The importance of the trail faded with the coming of the railroad in the early 1870's.

A stage coach station was located in Hamilton County at Spring Creek. It was formally established as a fort in September of 1865, and named after Francis Xavier Aubry. Fort Aubry was organized because of the need for protection on the Santa Fe Trail from Indians and renegades. No major battles were ever recorded at the fort. The troops lived in sod buildings and dug-outs. The number of troops stationed at Fort Aubry reached its peak in December with 363 soldiers. By April of 1886, after only seven months of operations as a fort, Fort Aubry was deactivated.

With the construction of the Atchison-Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad in 1871-72 through Hamilton County, came a wave of advertising by the railroad to convince people to homestead in Kansas. A group of people from Syracuse New York decided to scout out the land. They found the land of Hamilton County to hold countless possibilities, and convinced 25-40 families to settle there. The railroad offered to move the settlers free of charge and if they were dissatisfied, would move them elsewhere. At that time, Syracuse consisted of a side track and a water tower and was called Hollidaysburg, named after C.K. Holliday, president of the railroad. The group arrived at Hollidaysburg in March of 1873. Soon after settling in Hollidaysburg, the townspeople decided to change the name of the town to Syracuse, in honor of their hometown.

They built homes of sod and imported lumber. The first home built of lumber was constructed by president of the colony, E.P. Barber. It served as a home and also as a refuge for the townspeople during the Indian Scares. The house still stands is preserved by the Hamilton County Historical Society.

The crops planted by the settlers were not suited to the Kansas climate, and adversely affected by a drought and Rocky Mountain locust plague, the first crop failed. Many of the colonists became discouraged and took the railroad up on their offer to move them elsewhere. By 1884, only three of the original settlers remained, E.P. Barber, James Gates, and H.N. Lester, founder of the local newspaper. In the 1880's, more settlers came to Syracuse from Ohio and Illinois. The county experienced a boom.

Coolidge, a town fourteen miles west of Syracuse, was born via the railroad also. It was named after T.J. Coolidge, president of the railroad. The Santa Fe Railroad used Coolidge as a base of operations, which created the need for stores, saloons, stables, and other services. Coolidge was also a division point of the railroad where they would change crew, load up with coal, water, grease, and repair. The town took shape, more businesses were being built all of the time. One of these was a \$75,000 opera house which gave one performance, before it burnt to the ground. Its peak years were 1885-1887. The town was platted in 1886, making it the first organized city in Hamilton County. In the late 1880's, Coolidge enjoyed a huge cattle trade and had a floating population of 800-1000. The division point was moved from Coolidge to La Junta, Colorado, in 1890 and the population began to decline steadily.

Kendall was platted in February, 1885, and by May, 200 houses had been built. The town was originally called Aubry, but was changed to Kendall, after the Kendall brothers who were popular merchants in the area. Kendall was named temporary county seat in 1886, but the seat was moved to Syracuse by a Kansas Supreme Court decision in July 1888. Kendall survived losing the county seat but remains a small unincorporated community.

Today, the communities of Kendall and Coolidge exist with a population of less than 100 each, and Syracuse has a population of 1,623. The people of Hamilton County have survived countless droughts, floods, depressions, blizzards, heat waves, wars, and technological changes. The pages of the past help the citizens of this county to look to tomorrow with continued steadfast determination.