

Colby Building History

The existence and location of Colby can be attributed to industrialization of America and the trend to build towns along railroad lines. The railroad towns served as stations to service the trains and as commerce/trade/supply centers for the town people and surrounding community.

Thomas County was first surveyed in 1869 and the first settlers arrived in 1879. For a few years the region remained sparsely settled, but in the fall of 1884, the grand rush of migration began and in 1885 Thomas County population was estimated at over five thousand.

In 1882 J. R. Colby had settled on his homestead and secured a patent for his town in 1884. The Colby Post Office was located in the NE 1/4 Section 24, Township 8, Range 34. There were sod homes offering room and board. One housed the shop of the first paper in the county, the *Thomas County Cat* issued on March 12, 1885.

In March 1885, a group of investors called the Colby Townsite Company recorded a plan for a town three miles north of Mr. Colby's site. A compromise was worked out with Mr. Colby to move his town north and name it Colby. He received a business and residence lot in the new town. The first building to be completed in new Colby was to house the *Thomas County Cat* at 452 N. Franklin.

Early settlement had been in the northeastern part of the county, but the first incorporated town, Colby, was located near the geographical center of the county in April 1885. Thomas County was organized on October 8, 1885.

Colby's main street is Franklin Avenue with the Union Pacific tracks on the south and the Rock Island rails on the north bordering downtown. Towns with the prospect of a railroad were commonly laid out or grew as a "T" or "+" where the tracks intersected the business main street. Colby's layout though, with two rail lines, takes on the shape of an "I."

By January 1886, Colby was a thriving town. Two brickyards were established along the creek that flows into Colby from the south. Many business structures were built of Colby-produced brick.

During the early settlement, sod houses were the first buildings to dot the plains. Quickly, with the addition of lumberyards, houses were constructed using lumber. Typical house forms from the era are the Prairie Cube, which is a one story home with a hip roof and the American Foursquare, which is the two story version. Some of the early Colby houses adopted the shape and style of the Victorian Era house.

The boom did not last long. Over the next few years prosperity came and went with the rain. The population declined, as the weather conditions proved unfavorable. During the good years, Colby grew and businesses were added. Farmers were able to purchase more products in town and businesses prospered. Increased rainfall in late 1890s improved agriculture. Starting in 1897, winter wheat was established as the most important crop in the county. Mechanization also helped to increase yields and production. Colby benefited from the recovery in agriculture.

For many years Colby was known far and wide as the "Windmill City", as nearly every household in town had a windmill.

1900s

In 1901, a meeting was held to arrange for the purpose of putting in a telephone system and by 1910 the city light and power plant was operational. The city council

voted to construct concrete sidewalks, which replaced the boardwalk on Franklin Avenue between the two depots in 1916. Improvements to convert the area known as Carp Lake to Fike Park started in 1907.

For the next few decades, two major building styles dominated construction in the United States. The Arts and Crafts movement replaced the high style, ornate Victorian Period, with a style based on craftsmanship. The Craftsman style home emphasized the use of natural materials that would blend into the environment. Craftman and the Bungalow style houses are very common in Colby. The other major influence of the early 1900s is Frank Lloyd Wright. His Prairie School highlighted the horizontal using wide roof overhangs.

Fike Park was originally Carp Lake. The 1890 Newspaper reported that the favorite occupation of the young people during the pleasant spring evenings was boating on Carp Lake. The lake formed by the railroad grade would only fill up during times of heavy rainfall. At other times, the livery stables would use it to deposit manure, which made sanitation an issue.

1910s

In 1911 the drought returned to Northwest Kansas. With the drought, a great many people sold their land at a low prices and left.

A significant change of this period was the advent of the automobile. An early highway of the county was the Golden Belt Road that ran from Oakley to Colby and then west. Another road was the Sunflower Trail that connected to the Golden Belt Road and ran east to Beloit. There was also the Rock Island Highway later called the Ocean to Ocean Highway that ran alongside the railroad to Norton. In the teens and twenties, livery stables became gas stations.

One sign of prosperity during the 1914-1917 period was the need for houses. Many farmers bought property in Colby so their children could have a place to live while going to Thomas County High School.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, men left to serve their country. The government encouraged farmers to increase production to meet the demands of the war. The war brought prosperity to the area.

In the September 14, 1911 newspaper it was reported that electric lights were being installed in Colby homes. The lights will blink at 15 minutes till midnight as a warning and the power will be turned off at midnight. Some young fools, hoping it might be a false alarm stayed out a little longer and found that the powers that be, meant what they said.

1920s

Colby enjoyed another building boom in the 1920s and was the scene of a good deal of construction of both homes and businesses. This period of construction is influenced by the Art Deco or Art Moderne period of style. This style embraced the use of designs such as zigzags, chevrons and geometric designs.

Dire conditions of the streets prompted to the laying of the brick streets in downtown Colby in 1920 at a cost of \$160,000 with an additional \$50,000 for a city sewer system.

Following the war, the bottom fell out of the commodity markets but demand remained high. To increase production and to reduce their cost of production, farmers invested in

combines, tractors and trucks. During the 1920s farmers plowed and planted every piece of land that could be farmed.

In the second week of October 1927, the first Thomas County Free Fair was held. The old tabernacle on 4th Street and Range, along with the barn, was moved to the permanent site for the Thomas County Fair. The Northwest Tractor and Implement Show was organized in 1929 and continued into the 1960s.

1930s

The end of the decade brought the crash of the stock market and the country went into a depression. Compounding the problem, in the 1930s, a drought hit the plains and farming was almost impossible. Plagued by blowing dirt and a depressed economy, many left farming and moved.

In spite of the depressed conditions of this period many significant building programs were developed during the 1930s in Colby. These were publicly funded projects as very few homes were built during the depression. President Franklin Roosevelt implemented the New Deal and through the Works Progress Administration or WPA thousands of unemployed men were given government funded jobs.

Locally, the city government eased unemployment with the beautification of Fike Park including the addition of a Greek-type theater and a 1,200 pound concrete lion, Zimba.

Federally funded projects in Thomas County in the early thirties included sanding the streets, building a club house at the golf course, graveling thirty-eight miles of county roads, improvements at the Fairgrounds and refinishing walls and furniture at the Court House. Roadwork included work on Highway 25 in 1933 and a viaduct over the Rock Island track in northwest Colby in 1934.

City Hall was an early public building constructed in Colby using the WPA funds. The limestone building materials were quarried in Logan County on the Smoky Hill River south of Monument. The Foster Lumber Company architects of Kansas City prepared the design of the building. Suit and Blanchard, architects of Garden City, surveyed the land and suggested plans for the building. The final figures show that the building cost a little over \$23,000. In 2002, the City Hall was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.

Colby Community High School was built in 1935 and complemented the 1906 Courthouse with its brick and stone construction and Romanesque detailing. Mann & Co. of Hutchinson planned the building with a total cost to build and equip the new high school at \$213,000. In 2002, the Colby Community High School was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.

St. Thomas Hospital was constructed in 1941. WPA funds were used to build the hospital using the Colby-made bricks from the demolition of the old high school building on the same location. Architect Joseph Radotinsky from Kansas City designed the hospital. Overend and Boucher, Wichita architects, designed the 1948 addition.

Colby Municipal Swimming Pool built in 1941 is a Modernistic Movement, Art Deco style building. It was one of over 20 pool projects of the WPA built in Kansas. Murray Wilson of Paulette and Wilson engineering firm of Salina detailed plans and specifications of the 1941 pool construction. The Colby Municipal Swimming Pool was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in June of 2002.

1940s

With the entrance into WWII in 1941 and improved weather, farming rallied and Colby prospered. A nationwide building halt took place during the war.

1950s

The farm-to-city movement of population in the United States was evidenced in a small way in Thomas County with most of the population of Thomas County concentrated in Colby in the postwar years. With the lifting of the restriction on materials, another boom took place in the 1950s, which included public, business and home construction. Following WWII, the government offered assistance for the construction of commercial storage facilities. These became the "Castles on the Plains."

Some of the public building projects include the Colby Airport in 1949, the Colby Primary Building in 1952 and the new Junior High in 1961. Dedication ceremonies were held on November 11, 1955 for the Colby Community Building.

1960s

Several sub-divisions were added to Colby in 1961 to meet increased residential demands. Dominating construction across the nation was the Ranch style house. This style grew out of the earlier Craftsman, Prairie and International styles.

Community growth continued with the construction of KXXX in 1961, a new National Guard Armory and Thomas County Rest Home in 1960; Pioneer Memorial Library and the establishment of Colby Community College in 1964.

The 1965 opening of I-70 has had a major effect on the development of Colby. In the 1970s, 80s and 90s, construction fluctuated with the economy. Growth included the addition of the industrial park on South Country Club and the tourist related businesses on South Range. The Prairie Museum of Art and History opened in 1988 and the new Colby High School was constructed in 1996, both on South Franklin.

The settlement of Colby shows a growth from the center outward, as do most cities. Post World War II additions are the suburbs and these include the newest growth in Colby. Just as the railroads in the 1880s influenced the development of Colby's downtown, road travel in the latter part of the 20th century continued to shape the town. Colby continues to grow south towards Interstate 70 and closer to the original Colby townsite.