

History of the Building/Structure

The Symns-Shafer building, which has housed many industries throughout the years, is a large part of the physical landscape in Colby. Located along the southern end of Downtown at 190 North Franklin, the former glory of the Symns-Shafer building has slowly crumbled away, much like the remaining brick and stone that presently support the structure. What is one of the largest buildings in Colby was once a grand vision and major employment center, but today, it stands, a vacant, uncomfortable reminder of what could come.

Colby, like virtually all other communities in the area, was founded and prospered in large part because of the railroad: "All during 1887, speculation was rampant concerning railroads that were supposedly coming to Thomas County and Colby. These included, at one time or another, the Rock Island, Santa Fe, Burlington and Missouri River, Missouri Pacific, Leavenworth and Denver Short Line, and the Chicago and Northwestern" (Wingo, 13). Ultimately, two railroad companies, the Rock Island and Union Pacific Railroad lines, were established approximately a half mile away from each other; together, these two railroads created the north and south boundaries of present-day Downtown Colby. As a result, numerous businesses situated themselves along Franklin Avenue, the dissecting thoroughfare between the two railroads.

One of those businesses was the Carpenter and Shafer Company, a mercantile and grocery wholesale business that began operating in the fall of 1916. As the name implies, the Carpenter and Shafer Company was the vision of two businesspeople with completely different stories, one being F.D. Carpenter. Research regarding the life of F.D. Carpenter is limited, but my investigation has uncovered that he was a successful businessperson and important figure in establishing Colby as a major commercial center. In 1902, Carpenter began what would be known as the F.D. Carpenter Hide and Wool Company. He "was quite interested in land holdings," and the expansive Kansas prairie was ideal for his endeavors (Evans, 8/23/1928). On August 23, 1928, Kenneth Evans wrote the following in an article about F.D. Carpenter and his business venture:

Colby, one of the most important commercial centers in western Kansas is rated as a dependable marketing center and has the distinction of having the largest and best organized hide, wool, cream market in this section of the state... Since 1902 Mr. Carpenter has been interested and identified with the development of Colby, Thomas County and western Kansas. Starting on a small scale he has developed a marketing center for a wide range of trade territory, reaching out further and bringing businesses in to Colby than the markets in the average community of this kind. He is probably one of the best known business men in the western part of the state and has an enviable reputation for fair business dealing and encouraging the maximum development of the commercial and industrial resources of Colby and Thomas County. (Evans, 8/23/1928)

Obviously, Carpenter was a respected, highly successful member of the Colby community; however, not until he met W.G. Schafer did Carpenter's business begin to thrive.

W.G. Shafer, an entrepreneur originally from Ft. Smith, Arkansas, came to Colby in the fall of 1916. At the time of Shafer's arrival, Colby was a city of about 900 citizens and was growing fast. In fact, as described in Frank Blackmar's *Kansas Cyclopedia*:

Colby, the county seat and principal city of Thomas County, is centrally located on Prairie Dog creek at the junction of the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific, and two divisions of the Union Pacific railroads. Prior to 1907, it was a part of Morgan Township, but in that year, it was made an independent corporation. Colby has 2 banks, 4 grain elevators, a flour mill, a creamery, 2 weekly newspapers (the Tribune and Free Press), a public park, graded schools, the county high school and churches of five different denominations. The city and high school buildings were erected at a cost of over \$40,000. Colby also has a money order post office with three rural routes, express and telegraph offices, a hotel, some good stores, an opera house, and is said to have more miles of cement sidewalk than any city in western Kansas. The growth during the last census decade was almost phenomenal, the census of 1900 showing a population of 641 and that of 1910 reporting 1,130. (Blackmar, 389)

Before moving to Colby, Shafer had operated a “wholesale poultry, eggs, ice cream, and ice business” in Butler, Missouri. “After being in Colby about a year he could see the possibilities of this country, which he thought would in the future develop and expand in a business way” (*Carpenter-Shafer Start Booming...*). It was then in 1917 that Carpenter and Shafer started a business partnership that would lay the foundation for the future progress of Colby.

Carpenter and Schafer constructed “their first wholesale house just north of the Union Pacific tracks in 1917. They began with \$9,000 in capital and did not take money from the business except to live on until the business was sold” (Lamm). Standing two stories tall and measuring 36’ X 125’, this building originally housed egg and poultry operations, as this was the company’s specialization at the time. However, in 1918, the business added potatoes and vegetables, and by 1919,



Figure 1: Symns-Shafer building around 1918

“Carpenter and Shafer were persuaded by grocer jobbers to add a line of groceries” (Lamm).

As a wholesale business, the Carpenter and Shafer Company essentially acted as a middleman. They would purchase cream, poultry, and eggs from area farmers upon, and the goods would be shipped via railroads to major markets, such as Chicago, to be resold. In return, products like bananas and soap, among others, would be transported back to Carpenter and Shafer by way of the railroad and distributed by traveling salesmen to area grocery stores and farmers.

Not until 1924 would the established business of Carpenter and Shafer transform into the Symns-Shafer Mercantile Company: “In the spring of 1924, Symns of the Symns Wholesale Grocery Company of Atchison and Concordia was in Colby hunting for a place to open a branch location” (Lamm). While visiting Colby, Symns was advised by a local bank teller that it would be unwise to compete with the Carpenter and Shafer Company. Instead, the teller advised Symns that he should negotiate “with the two owners and see if some arrangement couldn’t be worked out that would allow Symns to purchase an



Figure 2: Lines of grain trucks on Franklin Avenue in 1924 with Symns-Shafer building in the background

interest in Carpenter and Shafer”

(Lamm). Eventually, the three men

agreed on a deal that would require “the Symns Grocery Company to add \$100,000 in cash and incorporate for \$200,000 with \$160,000 paid” (*Carpenter-Shafer start booming...*). In return, both Carpenter and Shafer received \$60,000 in stock, which was divided equally between the two. Carpenter subsequently retired from

the business, and Shafer continued with the company as vice president and manager of the new Symns-Shafer Mercantile Company.

It would prove unwise to discuss the history of this property further without briefly discussing the Symns Wholesale Grocery Company and its founder. The Symns Wholesale Grocery Company was founded by A.B. Symns, who was born in 1831. Originally from West Virginia, Symns, like many other people in the mid-nineteenth century, was drawn to the West and the opportunities that the newly settled frontier held. At the young age of 27, Symns opened a grocery store in Doniphan, Kansas, a prospering town during 1858. However, in 1872, Symns relocated his business to Atchison, Kansas, and began “wholesaling in a small way in connection with his retail business” (Ingalls). Proving very successful in the wholesale business, Symns eventually expanded his operations to service customers in the states of



Figure 3: Symns-Shafer building with trucks about 1920

Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Missouri, Texas, Colorado, and Utah (Ingalls). He passed away in 1905, leaving an estate valued at more than \$300,000, or approximately a little more than \$7 million in today's currency.

Since A.B. Symns passed away in 1905, the Symns who bought controlling interest in the Carpenter and Shafer Company was likely a close relative. Research didn't uncover the first name of this individual, but it is known that A.B.'s two brothers, Sam and William, were both active in the operation of the Symns Grocery Company.

Once the Carpenter and Shafer Company became the Symns and Shafer Mercantile, the business flourished. As the company grew, it was “necessary to install cold storage rooms and facilities... In the fall of 1930 and completed in 1931 this additional plant was added to the wholesale grocery, at an expense of about \$52,000... The new addition added to the building was 60 X 125 feet containing four floors and nine cold storage rooms. The rooms being on an average of 25 X 40 feet, all insulated with cork and well equipped” (*Carpenter-Shafer Start Booming...*). Sometime between when the original structure was built and the 1931 addition, a third story and approximately 14 more feet were added to the width, creating a three-story 60' x 125' facility. According to an article in the *Thomas County Herald*:

They (Symns-Shafer) then had a plant that was not equaled between Kansas City and Denver. They had under their management a creamery, which made over 800,000 pounds of butter in 1934 from cream bought directly from the farmers in the surrounding territory. They also had a well equipped egg and poultry dressing plant with the very latest and up to date equipment... In 1931 they added an egg breaking plant, turning out 600,000 to 800,000 pounds of broken eggs yearly. (*Carpenter-Shafer start booming...*)

Relying on previous interviews published in the *Colby Free Press* centennial edition on September 28, 1985, former employees Bob Fitzhugh and Eleanor Epard detail their experiences working at the Symns-Shafer company. Fitzhugh first started as a truck driver for the business in 1928 earning just \$16 a week: “According to Fitzhugh, who worked for Symns-Shafer for 33.5 years, the company boasted a large fleet of trucks that serviced an area 250-300 miles wide” (Landon). The company was a major employer having nearly 50 employees during the winter months, “while the summer payroll grew to include many more” (Landon). Epard, whose family was friends with Shafer, recalled “an assembly line of 35 women who ‘candled’ eggs (‘candling’ eggs is when eggs are held up to a flame and checked for freshness) and another line of 25 women who plucked chickens” (Landon). Epard’s job was to create invoices for poultry that had been shipped as far east as Chicago and New York (Landon).

Research has shown that Symns-Shafer was a powerful industry in northwest Kansas. Newspaper articles from 1934 mention the numerous events and galas that the company hosted to showcase the business’s prominence. These events were open to residents and business partners within a 150 mile radius, and attendees received guided tours of the plant, demonstrations of various goods and products, a parade, and even a dinner supplied by the Symns-Shafer company (*Symns-Shafer Day Brings...*).

“In the mid 1930s, Shafer lost control of the company. During the next 30 years, the store changed hands five or six times until it was liquidated in 1962” (Landon). Bob Fitzhugh, who had by this time worked his way up to become manager of the business stated, “The business was really booming, in just never should have been closed, there [were] as many as 50 people still working there in 1962” (*Carpenter-Shafer Start Booming...*). Interestingly, my great-grandfather, J.O. Gunnels, was one of the men who purchased Symns-Shafer in 1960. An article published prior to the company’s closing leads readers to believe the new owners had every intention of continuing the business:

Symns-Shafer currently is serving some 700 to 800 accounts in Kansas, Colorado, and Nebraska with more than 6,000 items... the new owners are currently stocking the warehouse and have assured their clients that merchandise required for their operations will be in the retailers hands within the week. Further announcements will be forthcoming regarding expansion and modernization plans in the very near future. (*“Ownership Change...”*)



Figure 4: Egg candling department

Little did Bob Fitzhugh, other employees, and citizens of Colby realize at the time, but just two short years later, “the inventory would be sold to another grocery wholesaler and the balance was auctioned off” (*Carpenter-Shafer start booming...*). Once the Symns-Shafer business ended, the building was sold to Bill Randall. Randall still resides in Colby; however, attempts to interview him proved unsuccessful.

From 1963 until very recently, the building has housed numerous businesses, sometimes more than one at once due to its immense size. In many ways, the Symns-Shafer building has acted as an incubator for numerous Colby businesses (refer to Appendix A for a complete listing of businesses located in the structure and their corresponding dates of occupancy). Unfortunately, during this time, upkeep was minimal, and the building has slowly

deteriorated. Today, the structure stands vacant apart from use as extra storage by the owner.

It was disappointing to learn that my great-grandfather was integral in the closing of the Symns-Shafer business, but perhaps at the time he understood the impact that the interstate system would have on the economy of Colby. The passage of the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act transformed the transportation sector and numerous other industries. My great-grandfather’s tractor implement dealership was located directly across the street from the Symns-Shafer building, but when the Union Pacific Railroad line that serviced both my great-grandfather’s business and the Symns-Shafer building closed, he likely realized that the business opportunities once presented by the railroad would come to an end.

In many ways, the exterior of the building has remained the same since 1931. It is known that at some time, the loading docks along the north side of the building were enclosed, but an accurate date of when they were remodeled could not be supplied. Attempts to view the interior of the building were unsuccessful, as the current owner of the property expressed little interest, but I assume that not much has changed. For many years, the building sat partially vacant, and today it is completely unoccupied aside from the items it stores. The façade has slowly deteriorated over the years, and is unlikely that any interior work has been done; however, this is all speculation. Since the building was traditionally used as a warehouse, it is believed that the current layout is very conducive for future plans.



Figure 5: Building with railroad cars-mid-1950s

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