



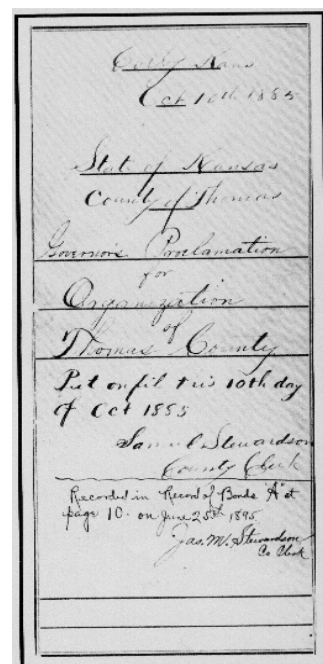
Melissa Alger Wallace Sodhouse

**Melissa Alger
and
Alice Williams
Homestead
in
Thomas County
In 1885**

Men weren't the only ones who could homestead land in Thomas County during the 1880's. Women could also file claim to the land, and two women who did were Melissa Alger and Alice Williams. Melissa Alger came to Thomas County in a covered wagon, arriving here in May of 1885 in the middle of the big boom year.

She made the trip from Kirksville, Missouri, in the company of the Gammaliel Williams family, which included Dee and Alice Williams and their cousin Anna Williams. Homesteading land was not a simple thing--- especially for women. In order to prove up on land, the homesteader had to build (or have built for him) some type of permanent dwelling, break five acres of ground the first year and more than that in the following years, and live on the land at least half of the time.

Melissa took out homestead papers on SW 1/4 Section 4, Township 8, Range 34 and Alice Williams homesteaded NE 1/4 Section 8, Township 8, Range 34. This made their quarters corner each other, and by building their dugouts on these corners, the two girls were very close neighbors. As soon as the dugouts were completed Alice and Melissa moved in and began to prove up. During this time they would not stay alone, however, but would take turns spending the night in each other's dugouts. This kept them from being too lonely and also permitted them to spend the required amount of time on their land.



VOTES FOR WOMEN in Kansas

1859 Women seeking equal suffrage inclusion in the Kansas constitution attended the Wyandotte Constitutional Convention. They were not allowed to speak, but were granted the unprecedented right to **acquire and possess property** and to **retain the equal custody of their children**.

1861 The first state legislature gave women the right to **vote in school elections**.

1867 Kansas was the first state in the Union to consider woman's suffrage, although it was defeated.

1887 Women were granted the right to vote in **municipal elections** and Susannah Medora Salter was elected mayor in Argonia (Sumner Co.), the first woman mayor in the nation.

1912 The **suffrage amendment** passed and gave Kansas women the vote.

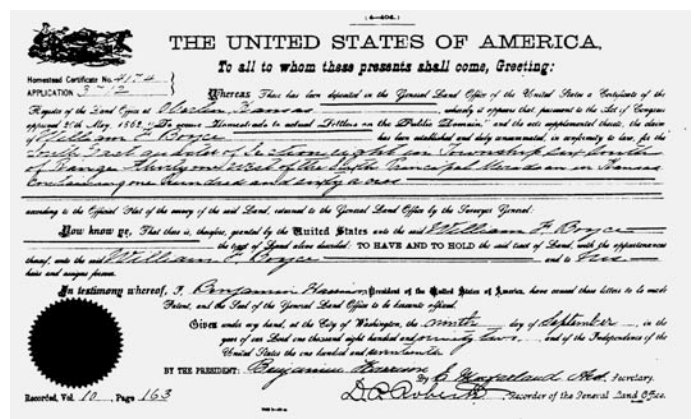
1920 The Nineteenth Amendment is adopted and the women of the United States are finally enfranchised.

Getting the five acres of land plowed that first fall proved to be a tougher matter. Melissa stayed with Gam Williams' family in town while her dugout was being constructed, but since she was eager to get the ground worked, she hired a man to go plow five acres for her, paying him \$5 upon his return. When she went out to the homestead to see how well the work had been accomplished, she found that it had not been done very well. In fact, it just plain had not been done at all.

But she had learned a lesson and didn't hire another man to do the plowing until she was living in the dugout in the spring of 1886. This time, leaving nothing to chance, Melissa followed the man around.

Each third round she would drop corn in the ground, which would be covered on the next round following. By the time the five acres had been broken, a crop of sod corn had also been planted, and the resulting harvest was a good one.

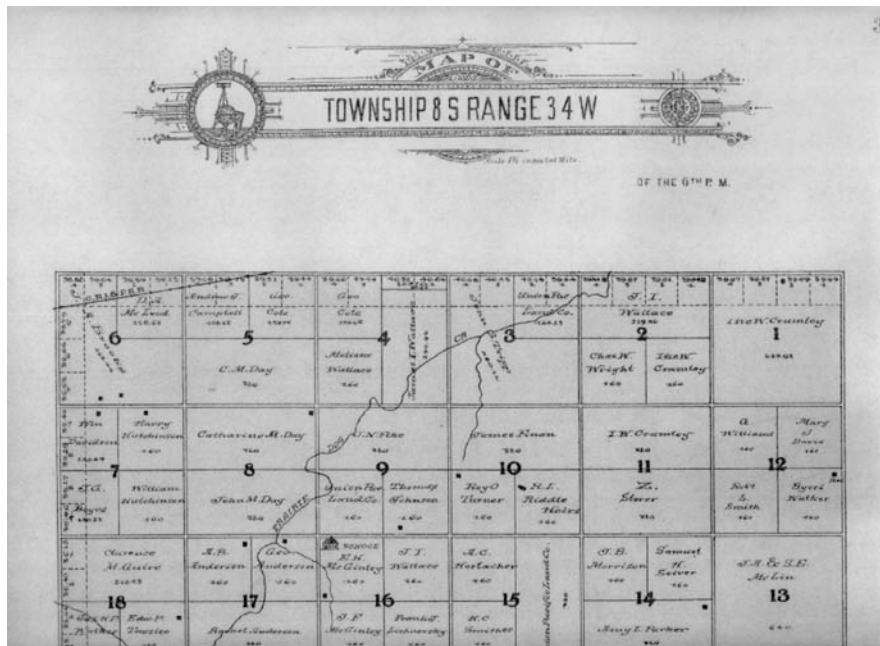
One of the first people Melissa met in Thomas County was a young man named James I. Wallace who had left Decatur, Ill., to migrate west in 1883. He hadn't come directly to this country but worked his slowly, stopping off in Hebron, Neb., for a while to work as a butcher. He was happy in Hebron and probably would have settled there if it hadn't been for an Uncle Jim Mahanna who lived at Oberlin.



James would visit his uncle as often as he could, and became acquainted with the country, and soon decided to make the move. He wrote a letter to one of his boyhood friends back home in Decatur and suggested homesteading in Thomas County. That friend, Harry Davis, was all for it

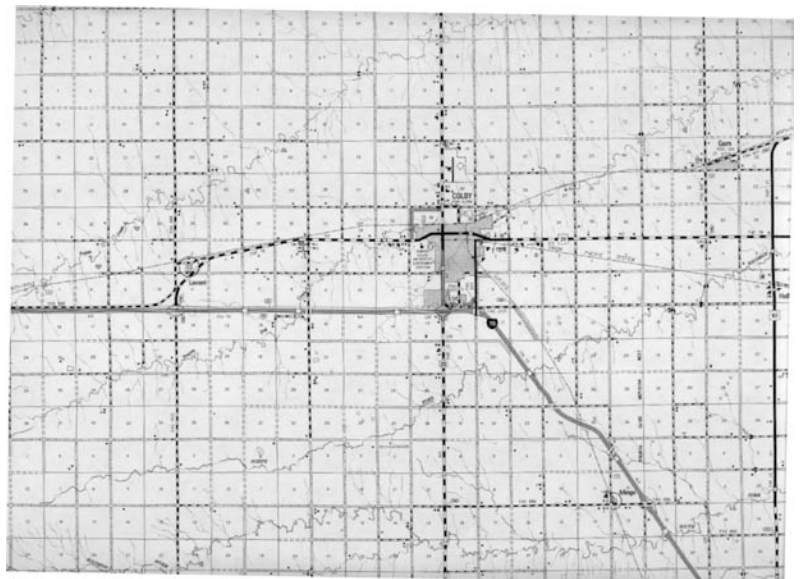
and so the two young men soon found themselves in the land office at Oberlin. “We want a quarter each of level land in Thomas County,” they told the land office agent. “Is there any left?”

“Yes,” the agent told them, “there’s some left, but it’s going fast.” He checked his charts. “Here are two quarters which are near each other.” “Level land?” “You’ll have to take my word for it. It’s level land,” the agent assured them. Harry and James wished they could go see the land, but knew that by the time they got back, someone else would probably have homesteaded the quarters.



“We’ll take them,” the two men said. James took the NE quarter of 26-7-34 and Harry took the NE quarter of 25-7-34. Arriving in Thomas county March 16, 1885, James and Henry spent their first night in a vacant dugout one mile northeast of Colby. The next morning they went to J.R. Colby’s general store and post office to get supplies. At that time, Colby was located three miles south of the present site and was nothing more than a few sod dugouts erected in a group. Early next morning the two newcomers started out to find their claims. The land was all new and there wasn’t much to go by. They had asked Mr. Colby where their claims would be, but since there were no landmarks it had been impossible for him to help them much.

He did tell them about the government markers. When the government had surveyed western Kansas in the 70’s, Mr. Colby said, they left markers on each section line. These markers contained a description of the section and were covered with dirt, which made a mound. Mr. Colby explained that these markers were fairly accurate--- the engineers had figured the distance by tying a rag on a wheel. They then counted the revolutions made by the wheel and laid out the sections accordingly.



With this information Harry and James left the store and headed in the general direction of their property. They soon found one of the markers under a mound of dirt almost two feet high, checked the location, and recovered the stone marker. Following the section lines they finally located their homesteads and marked off their property.

They set about immediately to build a dugout in which to live. Choosing a location which provided a slight embankment, they dug a hole approximately 12x14 which was about three feet deep. After they had squared this hole up, they built sod walls up another three feet, leaving a door in the front wall. They managed to locate some lumber in Colby and used this as a partial roof, covering it with branches, brush, and sod. What nails they used in building the roof, door, and crude furniture, they purchased in Colby. Since Mr. Colby had no sacks, however, they carried the nails to their claim in their hats. About this time in 1885 the location of Colby was moved three miles north to its present site. When the Feehan Meat Market was opened that fall, James Wallace had no trouble getting a job as meat cutter.



He was working in the market when the famous blizzard of January 1886 struck. The morning and early afternoon of Jan. 6 was very warm and the sun was shining brightly. There was no wind, but at about 3:30 or 4:00 p.m. people began to notice a very black cloud forming in the northwest. By quitting time that night the snow was blowing in around the windows of the meat market so bad that James nailed burlap sacks over the windows on the inside before locking up

shop. The blizzard struck in force that night and raged for several days and nights. When James was finally able to return to the meat market he found that the snow was packed solid between the window and the sacks. Several men had lost their lives in this storm and some were not found until months later.

The wind had driven the snow with such terrific force that the creeks and draws between Colby and Oakley were all filled level. When the snow started melting and running off, the water tunneled out underneath the drifts. This made travel over the snow very dangerous and at least one freighting outfit experienced trouble. This wagon was one, which was hauling a load of coal from Oakley to Colby and caved through the snow. The driver reported that the wagon, horses, and driver fell through the crust and tumbled several feet to the bottom of the draw, which still had water running in it.

That spring James Wallace and Melissa Alger began to get better acquainted. Harry Davis was going with Dee Williams, and later the two were married. Alice Williams later married John Bean and Anna Williams married Charles Coover. On Oct. 20, 1886, James and Melissa were married in Colby. They were the nineteenth couple to be married in Thomas County.

After the wedding James continued to work in the Feehan Market while Melissa stayed on her homestead. Most of the time James would walk home at night and back to work in the morning. Alice Williams sold a relinquishment to her property to John Day. Ora Day's Father, in 1886 and they were neighbors of James and Melissa Wallace in the spring of 1887. Samuel and Sarah Alger, Melissa's parents, also came to Thomas County about this time and bought the north half of section 2-8-34 where Forrest Wallace now lives. Mrs. Alger passed away in 1902 and a short time later James and Melissa bought the place and moved their family there.

