

Colby: There and Back Again!

When J.R. Colby first brought his family to western Kansas he had a dream of starting a town. Selecting a homestead site in the center of the county, he erected his soddy and attempted to attract others to the nearby claims. J.R. homesteaded on the NW 1/4, Section 18, Township 8, Range 33. (Where Village Inn stands.)



J.R. & Mary Colby

Joseph Ritner Colby and his family were counted in the 161 residents of Thomas County in the 1880 Federal Census. He was born on Oct. 1, 1839 in Cussawgo, PA. One family story tells of his father and two brothers who walked from Scotland to England to catch a boat to America. Like many of the early settlers to Thomas County, J.R. was a Union Civil War veteran. He enlisted August 10, 1863 at Camp Chase, Ohio in company M 2nd Regiment of Ohio Heavy Artillery. He served as a private and was honorably discharge in June 1865. He and his wife Mary Welton Colby came to western Kansas from Ohio.

His dream of starting a town was fulfilled when he secured a government patent for his town on April 10, 1884. (Old) Colby was located in the NE 1/4, Section 24, Township 8, Range 34. (This is the location of Colby Fertilizer) J.R. was successful in getting a post office established and Anna Colby, J.R.'s daughter started the first school. On March 12, 1885 the *Thomas County Cat* issued its first paper from a 12' x 14' sod shanty, which was also used as boarding house. Subscriptions numbered only fourteen the first month, then the editor agreed to take anything but native fuel as payment for subscriptions and circulation grew.

The grand rush of settlers to the county began in March of 1885 and the need for a town in the central part of the county was felt more than ever. Since things were not going well in Old Colby a group of investors asked Mr.

Colby to move his town. On March 10, 1885, the group of investors called the Colby Townsite Company recorded the original plat for a town three miles north of Mr. Colby's site. The Colby Townsite Company's purpose was to purchase real estate in Thomas County, establish a town, sell the lots in the town to citizens and get the railroad to come to the new town. Mike Donelan was the Vice-President of the corporation. In not wanting to compete with Mr. Colby, a compromise was worked out to move his town north and name it Colby.

The new town of Colby was on the S 1/2, Section 31, Township 7, Range 33 on railroad land. "This was a beautiful tract of land with slope enough for good drainage and where water could be had from the earth at a moderate depth. One hundred acres in the center of the half section was surveyed in April and the lines were plowed with oxen." For two months there were 40-50 men boarding at old Colby waiting the start of the new town. "The first hotel in Colby was a rather crude affair on a ground floor. It resembled a railroad boarding camp and consisted simply of joists set in the ground, boarded up and covered with plank. The hotel did good service the first three months in Colby and guests each day numbered over 100."

Mike Donelan opened the first store at the SW corner of 4th and Franklin. The first building to be completed in new Colby was to house the *Thomas County Cat* at 452 N. Franklin. J.R. received a business and residence lot in the new town.

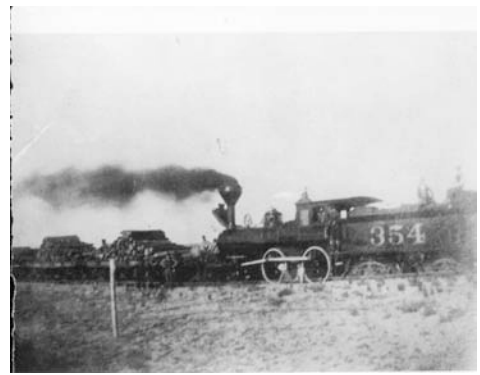


He built the Colby House, a hotel on the SE corner of 4th & Chickamauga.



It was later moved to 250 S. Grant as a home.

Thomas County was first surveyed in 1869 and the first settlers arrived in 1879. The first town in Thomas County was Otterbourne. Mary Hay arrived in the county in 1880 with her father and they homesteaded on the South Fork of the Sappa. "Auntie May Hay" as she was known, was



UP, first train into Colby, 1887

a doctor, minister, farmer, first superintendent of schools and platted the town of Otterbourne.

For a few years the region had remained sparsely settled, but in 1885 the county population exceeded 5,000. On October 8, 1885, Governor Martin proclaimed the organization of Thomas County.

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.

In 1887 the Thomas County Cat reported that three railroads were making plans to come into the county. In the southern half of the county, the Union Pacific Railroad owned odd numbered sections for twenty miles on either side of the track. With the assistance of the U.S. government the railroads, received millions of acres of public land as land grants. The railroad companies then sold the land to make money, built their railroads, and contributed to a more rapid settlement of the West.

The first railroad to enter Thomas County was the Union Pacific's Oakley-Colby Branch, which was completed in September 1887. The Union Pacific laid one mile of track west of Colby and fully intended to build to Colorado, but never did. The Rock Island, known then as the Chicago, Kansas, and Nebraska Railroad, had their tracks laid as far as Norton. The company threatened to stop operations at that point unless the people of Thomas County would pay them \$60,000 dollars. A bond election provided for the funds, which were paid to the company, and the first train on that line came into Colby in June 1888. The other railroad to enter Thomas County was another Union Pacific branch, which was known as the Lincoln and Colorado Railroad. The L. & C. laid track into the county in Colby in 1888 and it established Zillah and Verner now known as Menlo and Halford between Colby and Thomas-Sheridan County Line.

The towns of Quickville, Otterbourne, and Cumberland were all but abandoned after the railroad tracks were too far away to serve them directly.

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.

By 1887, J.R. had sold the Colby House to Mike Donelan and moved away. J.R. and Mary later lived many places including New Mexico, California and Oklahoma. J.R. died in 1919 in Peek, OK.

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 service stations to the trains and as trade centers for the town people and surrounding community.

On June 29, 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act, which initiated the construction the U.S. Interstate Highway System. As it was constructed in Thomas County, it crossed over the original homestead of J.R. Colby. The 1965 opening of I-70 has had a major effect on the development of Colby. The community continues to be drawn south to Interstate towards the original site of Colby, just as the town was moved north to the site of the coming of the railroad over 120 years ago.