To Dream a Town

Otterbourne

Quickville, Otterbourne, Zilah, Kuka, Verner - - all these hopeful towns were contending for importance in 1905. But for most, their fate had been decided years earlier when the railroads came to the county and missed them. Earlier, it was anybody's guess which town would end up being the most important. Otterbourne, for example, had the only store in the county in 1882. If the railroads had gone that way, Otterbourne probably would still be a town in Thomas County, and perhaps, an important one. As it is, very little is left of the town except a memory.

In April, 1879, Miss Mary Hay, an experienced

Mary Hay

school teacher from Dubois, Pennsylvania, came west with her father, Lamar Hay, a niece, Ona, and a nephew, Isaac, ages 4 and 6 years, left her to care for by the death of a younger sister. They unloaded their goods from the cars at Grinnell. Then loading them on wagons, they made themselves as comfortable as possible on the loads, and made the journey northwest across the country about 40 miles to the South Sappa Creek. When Mary saw the fish jumping and playing in the water at the ford where they crossed, she exclaimed that this was where they would stop. She homesteaded just a few rods west of the ford.

The area was hilly and rough, with deep draws cutting across the country in a north-south direction. On the divide, drinking water for men and animals was impossible to find. But here in the protected arm of a ravine was all they needed. Here grass was green for livestock, carp and catfish grew plump for the frying pan, creek water was clean and cold, and ground water was available with little digging.

As more people came, the settlement of the South Fork community developed in a linear pattern, following the creek downstream, this made communication among residents more difficult than in a clustered group. They also lacked mail service, their means of news from the outside world.

Seeing that a post office was needed, Mary Hay made application. Two months after she mailed her first letter to Washington, she was in business, officially beginning operation the week of January 18, 1881. She gave the name "Otterbourne" to the community, becoming its first citizen and its caretaker.

Settlers found at Otterbourne the security of an established postal service and a friendly postmistress. Twice a week her sod house became a center of activity as families and bachelors gathered to meet the incoming mail. She let it be known that she preferred to be called "Auntie May."

In 1881 or 1882, her neighbor, William H. Archer, set up a small store in his home where he carried a stock that ran mostly to groceries and provisions. He did have some household items which would most likely be needed by the early settlers. An enterprising businessman, he hired drivers to haul supplies from Grinnell to Otterbourne to stock his shelves at a labor cost of two dollars a load or about fifteen cents per hundred weight.

Otterbourne was well located to attract many of the early settlers of the county. For a few years the store did a good trade with folks who needed staple items. The Archers had a good, hand dug well where neighbors came from miles around to draw water. Later on, the store had one of the first bored wells and a hand pump that was a delightful convenience for the settlers.

A blacksmith also made his appearance on the Sappa in 1880. The smithy, FS See, arrived with his wife, Mary Elizabeth Northrup See, six children, a set of tools and a cash total of thirty-five cents. See was a first-rate blacksmith, becoming the village

smithy for residents at neighboring Cumberland and at Otterbourne.

In 1880 the population of Thomas County was estimated at 161, and there were known to be 46 individuals living in the Otterbourne community in 1881. According to the summary of residents of early Otterbourne, pioneer dwellers along the South Fork of Sappa Creek included the families of WH Archer, FS See, CD Hubbard, ET Smith, and Henry Smith; the Hay-Rich group; the widow Lord and her children; and several unmarried men: the Passell brothers, James and Samuel; the Barber brothers, John and Joe; the Knudson brothers, Henry and JCB; Pat Turney; and a Mr. Underdown.

Grocery, blacksmith shop, and wild-horse corral played their part in making the community a place with personality. Even more than these elements, though, Auntie May herself played a distinctive role. She was not only the person who gave the settlement its name and its post office, but as illnesses and injuries came along, she became nurse, midwife, and a physician for the community. She did not have a medical diploma but relied on experience gained from having treated illnesses and injuries for nearly 15 years.

The first Sunday School in Thomas County was established by Hay with materials sent to her by the Drexell family of Philadelphia. She acquired a license from Bishop Vail of Topeka to read sermons and officiate at funerals. She soon started to provide worship services holding the first church service on Easter Sunday, 1882. Though the church and Sunday School were Episcopalian in the early years services were attended by persons of other faiths, hungry for religion on the western edge of the homesteading line. After that first Easter service, news of the weekly meeting spread. Soon her church was full and overflowing.

Auntie May opened a school in her home in the fall of 1882. Hay also conducted high school level classes at her school and because of the long distance that some of her enrollees traveled, she arranged to accommodate live-in students. She gave it a touch of Eastern elegance in its name, christening her little sod house academy the "Hay Boarding School."

In the spring of 1883, Mary Hay was appointed deputy superintendent for Thomas County when the county was still attached to Sheridan County for judicial purposes. During the early part of her administration, Hay's task was to lay the groundwork of a public school system. At this time only one school, District No. 1 at Colby, had been officially organized. In the first month of her administration, she oversaw the setting aside of land for the second school in the county, District No. 2, at Otterbourne, although it would not be possible to put the school into operation for some time. In the meantime she continued to teach in the school she held in her home.

Her father, Lamar, died just shy of his 78th birthday and one year from proving up his claim, in March, 1884. He was buried on his homestead though later, when the land passed out of family ownership, his remains were moved to the Beulah Cemetery in Colby.

That year, Mary had the post office moved to Wm. Archer's where he assumed the duties of postmaster. The proliferation of other religious gatherings throughout the county brought about her

Otterbourne

decision to close her Episcopalian mission after four years. A community Sunday School was then organized at the Archers' soddy providing nondenominational religious instruction.

But Mary wasn't slowing up, she had ambitious plans. In 1886, she proved up on her claim. She then built a new frame house on land she wished to buy through preemption and transferred the deed for the original claim to Isaac and Ona. A well was dug on the new property. In March 1887, Mary was ready to put Otterbourne on the map, purchasing the preempted land.

She was gambler enough to try to outguess the railroad. Watching the surveyors and noting the direction that the tracks were taking, she felt sure that a branch line would cut across the South Fork of Sappa Creek on or near her land. All she had to do

was establish a town on the route and her fortune would be made.

On September 7, 1887, she recorded a plat of her town at the Register of Deeds in Colby. The county surveyor, SP Chambers, gave his official measurements. "Commencing at a point 8 chains and 18 links south of SE corner of NE 1/4 of 23-6-33 . . ." The description went on with its figures and directions: from the southeast corner the measurement went west 160 rods, then north 129 rods and two feet, then east 160 rods, then south 129 rods and two feet to the point of beginning.

Auntie May's town comprised of 42 blocks. In an age when the average little towns had narrow 20 foot lots, each of her blocks contained generous 27' x 154' lots. From north to south, the streets were North Boulevard, Archer Street, Lincoln Avenue, Washington Avenue, Passell Street, Hay Street, and South Boulevard. The streets running in a north-south direction were numbered from First Street on the east to Sixth Street on the west. She designed a

Chicago,

town square, with her recently dug 44' well serving at the center of the square. But the clearest symbol of her dream, and a guidepost long afterward to travelers passing by, was the town hall.

A few years previously, the hall that was built for overflow Sunday School crowds, soon became known as a place for dances. Although it is difficult to establish a further connection, a possibility exists that the Sunday School hall, the dance hall, and the later town hall may have been one and the same. Whatever the genesis of Otterbourne's central structure, its future function as a meeting place of the citizenry was clear. Hay began selling town lots at $10 apiece. When an item on the front page of the Thomas County Cat praised Otterbourne as being "one of the most lovely town sites imaginable," adding, "it bids fair . . . to become a considerable trading point," Auntie May sold 120 of the 840 lots she had available. The editor of the Cat printed friendly references to the potential of Otterbourne to the early spring of 1888. Then the notices ceased. Otterbourne was bypassed.

The next summer, with Ona getting married, Auntie May found herself in need of money. To be the mother of a town was expensive, and when that town fell ill, the cost was formidable. She sold some of the land to Isaac and took out mortgages on other parcels.

She was struggling and was beginning to suffer from Parkinson's Disease. When she got an invitation from her younger sister, Ellen Brady, to return to Dubois and let the family look after her, she really had no choice . . . she had to go. In 1891, she was in the hands of the loving Brady family. In gratitude, she deeded the land to them, piece by piece. But throughout the 1890s, Auntie May had no way to keep up her mortgage payments. At a sheriff's sale held on the front steps of the courthouse on Saturday, February 25, 1889, her remaining land was auctioned to William Barber for $325. Auntie May Hay died on December 2, 1907.

What about Otterbourne? What was left of the prairie town that the railroad by passed? In August 1916, having passed through the hands of several owners, the land was up for sale because of non-payment of taxes. At that sale, Ray Garvey bought, in effect, all of the town of Otterbourne except for a twenty-five-foot splinter in the center. Although records are inconclusive, this lot may have been the one on which the town hall still sat.

But Otterbourne, of course, was no longer a town. It was a phantom. Its existence, though not ever quite a reality, was the stuff of which dreams are made.