North Against South... GIFFORD

It is hard for us to realize how important railroads have been to the towns in America. Railroads were the backbone of many communities. Gifford, Mo., is one such town, for the railroads both made and destroyed this community.

Gifford is located in northwest Macon County, about 25 miles southwest of Kirksville. Gifford was founded as a shipping point on the Iowa and St. Louis Railroad to replace the livestock drives to Hannibal, Mo.

Controversy developed in the settlement over the location of the railroad depot. Some wanted the depot to be built in the north part of town and others wanted it in the south part.

Grover Belfield recalls, "Allen Pudley of South Gifford owned some land where the depot could be built, but he wanted a good price for it. The Nelson brothers of North Gifford (David and Ike) gave the railroad company six acres of land from the Adair County line south. So the depot was built in North Gifford.

“These North Gifford fellers had a contract with the railroad company. They would give the company that land, and in turn, the railroad agreed that there wasn’t to be another depot or stockyards within three miles of North Gifford."

This contract did not make South Gifford happy. Town meetings were held to try to change it; Grover attended some of these meetings. But the agreement was not changed.

A swamp several feet wide divided North and South Gifford and became known as no-man’s land. A path across no-man’s land connected the two towns.

The business district of North Gifford included a post office, a livery stable, Crow’s Hotel, a hardware store, T.I. Murray’s General Store, a box factory for egg cases, a lumberyard, a tile factory, a restaurant, a Baptist Church and a bank operated by Clay Surbeck.

The first place of business in South Gifford was a post office operated by John and Martha Lagles. Other businesses included a hotel, a poultry house, a feed store, a tile factory, two banks and a Christian Church.

Rivalry continued between North and South Gifford but an agreement was finally decided upon. The first town to reach a population of 100 would claim the name. In 1914, Bernice Mock was born in South Gifford to make the 100th person, and South Gifford became the official name. North Gifford had only reached a population of 89. The winner also claimed the railroad depot and it was moved to the location where it stands today.

South Gifford had two banks at one time and Virgil Buck recalled the time one of them was robbed. "The Gifford Bank was robbed one time and they knew who robbed it, but they never did catch him. The robber was a feller from up around Yarrow. He took one or two hostages from the bank. Around Cameron, Mo., he turned them loose and gave them enough money to get back to Gifford. I’m not sure what they got, but it might have been around $800."

Virgil remembers the type of entertainment that went on in Gifford. "They used to have free shows there every Saturday night and people from all around would come with horses.

The hardware store in Gifford served as the background for this photo of several Gifford townspeople. The man with the badge is George Kelly, the sheriff of the town.
and buggies and walk down to the picture show building. Sometimes Vaudeville would come in and they would have a show that would last a week. Once in a while a carnival would move in.

“The high school would have track meets and other schools would come into Gifford to compete. That was a big day.”

In the early 1920s, baseball games played an important part in most small towns and Gifford was no exception. During this time, Gifford had one of the best baseball teams in the area. The two most important games played were against Hannibal and Kirksville. Gifford defeated them both, downing Hannibal 3-1 and Kirksville 8-1.

Virgil said Emmett Corrigan’s Novinger team travelled in style. Emmett owned and operated several coal mines around Novinger and managed the town’s baseball team.

“Whenever Novinger would come to Gifford, Emmett would go over to Milan and hire the whole train to bring the players to Gifford. The train would sit down there at the station until the game was over and then take them back to Novinger,” Virgil said.

Gifford players during that time included: Grover Belfield; Jim Mock, catcher; Earl Green and Buck Lynch from Goldsberry; M.E. Dudley; Albert Hays; Lloyd Hays; Bill Gray; Albert Sadler and Lewis Pole.

Pitchers were Dutch Lagle and Irving Hartgrove; the manager was Harry Davidson. “The Gifford team once held their opponents scoreless through games that totaled 57 innings,” Grover said.

After the glory of the baseball games, Gifford’s end was near. During the depression, the Bank of Gifford went broke. The town managed to survive while other towns were ruined.

The final blow came in the late 1940s. The Iowa and St. Louis Railroad was waging a legal battle with the Santa Fe Railroad over crossing rights. The courts decided against the Iowa and St. Louis Company and Gifford’s fate was sealed. Soon after this the railroad abandoned its interest in Gifford. Gifford’s population melted away and the few businesses that survived the depression were ruined by the decrease in business.

Above, Virgil Buck and Ray Easley are two of the men pictured in front of the MFA Exchange. Left, the Christian Church was located in South Gifford along with the post office, hotel, a poultry house, feed store, and two banks.

By John Buck