In The Days of High-Heeled Boots and Tobacco Spit

Imagine you're slogging through a swamp, with mud up to your knees, carrying a surveyor's tripod. You're plotting the swamp so that the mud and grass will soon be replaced by streets and buildings that will soon be transformed into a town with 20 businesses and one of the oldest churches in that part of the area. Imagine that this town is Millard, Missouri, located five miles south of Kirksville on Highway 63.

Much of Millard's history would not be known if it were not for Dorsie Wait, the local historian of the town. She acquired the title of historian because she is a long-time resident of the town and has a great deal of knowledge on the way the town has grown. Mrs. Dorsie (Wolf) Wait, born two miles northwest of La Plata in December of 1904, has lived five miles of where she was born and three miles of where she was raised except when she had lived in Arizona for a few winters with her husband, Porter Baldwin. She moved to Millard in 1946 with her first husband, the late Warren Cody.

According to Mrs. Wait, the State of Missouri granted a section of land in south-central Adair County to James Nicholas in 1866. Mr. Nicholas in turn sold the west portion of that land to the North Missouri Railroad Company, knowing that the railroad wanted to go north to Kirksville. The railroad only went as far north as Macon and Mr. Nicholas figured that it would be good land for the railroad to use.

In 1867, James Long and his wife moved from Pennsylvania to one mile east of present-day Millard, on what is now the Donald Westhoff farm. Mr. Long was sent by the North Missouri Railroad Company as a purchasing agent for railroad ties and bridge timbers for the future railroad. By July of 1868 the railroad came through to Kirksville and on Saturday, July 18 of that year, the first train traveled to Kirksville.

Four years after the railroad came through the area, Mr. Nicholas sold more land to the North Missouri Railroad Company. The railroad then sold the land to Samuel F. and Maggie Miller, who plotted the land into a town and named it Belle Prairie. The name of the town was later changed to Millard in honor of one of the Miller's sons. The Millers did not own the land long though, and transferred ownership of the land to Henry and George Nicholas in February of 1878 because of bankruptcy. It is not known if Henry and George Nicholas are of any relation to James Nicholas.

It has long been said that the church is the "cornerstone" of a community. The same is true for Millard. The beginnings of the Millard Baptist Church, the first church in the town, actually began 12 years before there ever was a Millard. In 1860, some men, their names unknown, organized the Dover Baptist Church which was located three miles south of present-day Millard. In 1872, after the town was laid out, the congregation moved to the townsite, bought a plot of land in the southeast corner of town, constructed a building, and renamed it the Millard Baptist Church. The Baptists did not stay long in Millard. For reasons unknown, most of the congregation moved. In 1890 this society disbanded altogether, with most of its members going to La Plata and Kirksville.

When the Baptists began moving away from Millard, the Presbyterians moved into the vacated Baptist building and
started holding services there regularly. Another group of ten men, their names going down in infamy, organized themselves into a corporation and formed the Millard Presbyterian Church. By 1882, the congregation had grown too large for the church building and two additions were built, one for Sunday school and the other being the bell tower. Services were held there until 1974, when the Hamilton Street Baptist Church in Kirksville bought this church and a brick building on the corner of Route KK and Highway 63. They began holding Baptist services again after a century hiatus, which proves that history repeats itself. There are currently two families attending the church and private school set up there.

The church itself is history and is one of Millard’s oldest buildings. Built in 1872 at the then expensive price of $1,000, it was constructed with the native lumber of the area. The church was built with oak lumber with pine weatherboarding on the sides and walnut for the ceiling. It was known for its fine walnut wainscoat and the chiming of its bell.

A local resident, William Burton, cut the posts and rails from his own timber for the hitching racks for the church. Additional lumber was taken from the land of Levi and James Nicholas and transported to the construction site by horse and wagon. The wagons, due to their height, had “unloading stiles,” or stepping ladders, for the ladies to use so they would not get their Sunday best soiled from the dirt roads that lead to the church. The children didn’t use the stiles as much because they usually jumped out the back of the wagon.

The bell itself has an interesting origin. In the late 1830s, the bell was brought by wagon from Pennsylvania to St. Louis to be used in a St. Louis church. In 1884, the church burned down but the bell was saved by the St. Louis townspeople and bought by the Presbyterian Church in Millard. The bell was used to call people to church services and town meetings and is still in the belltower, but it is not used anymore.

Although Millard has had a history of switching from Baptist to Presbyterian and back to Baptist again, it was not the only church in the town for a time. Several years after the Presbyterian Church in Millard was organized, a society calling themselves the United Brethren Church began services in a two-story house where the Pete Roberts residence is now located. The society disbanded in 1950. The house, which held services on the first floor and Sunday school on the second floor, was torn down by Bill Belzer in 1968 to make way for a new home.

Like many towns in the Midwest and Southwest, Millard was a railroad town. When the North Missouri Railroad Company came through in 1868, the town soon followed with a starting population of about 80 families. Most of the businesses faced the railroad tracks to the west. The stockyards were on the east side of the tracks and a coal chute on the west side of the tracks.

The railroad has had several changes—mostly in companies serving the area. First came the North Missouri Railroad Company, followed by the Wabash Railroad, then by the Norfolk and Western, which is currently serving the area.

Another factor that contributed to Millard’s early growth was business. Among the first businessmen in the town were Alexander and John Denniston, who ran a business together, although their business is unknown. Eventually, 19 other businesses soon followed, with the main activity located on Front Street, facing the railroad, and Stukey Street, which is now Route KK. Mrs. Wait said, “You can hardly believe it now, but back in horse and buggy days, of high-heeled boots and tobacco spit,
The coal chute located on the west side of the railroad tracks in Millard was the highest spot in town. Elmer Miller was the sole worker until the chute was torn down sometime after 1927. (Photo courtesy of Jolene Cody)

This little borough had two hotels, three blacksmith shops, a jewelry store, two drug stores, two dry good stores (one with a post office combined), five grocery stores, a poultry house, depot, section house, and a cheese factory nearby.”

The town was unique in that it had wooden sidewalks, or boardwalks, that ran the length of the main street instead of the concrete sidewalks common today.

The businesses were housed in many buildings, but the largest building in the town was the coal chute, located on the west side of the tracks. Mrs. Wait remembered, “The coal chutes were here on the west side of the railroad tracks and trains would come and push a flat car with coal on it way up on those tracks and Elmer Miller, that lived here in Millard, would unload that coal. Then when the train came along, which were all steam engine trains then, they had dumps which would dump the coal into the train for the power to run it.”

The main business district itself was only two blocks long. A small part of old Highway 63, known as the “slab” by the locals, ran through the district. A single-lane Highway 63 came through Millard in 1926. By 1929 another lane was added. The townspeople wanted the highway, hoping that it might increase commerce in the community. Around 1955 the State decided to reroute Highway 63 and move the road more to the west, clearing the old stockyards to do so.

One of the most disastrous events to affect Millard was the Great Depression of the 1930s. Most of the businesses were forced to close sending the people to the larger towns, such as Kirksville and Macon to look for work. Despite all of this, there has always managed to be at least one business in Millard.

Within a year after Mrs. Wait moved with her husband, Warren Cody, to Millard in 1946, they had opened a filling station and grocery store. This enterprise was located at what is now the Mabel Scott residence. It was originally a wood structure. A few years after the Cody’s opened their business, Jim Baldwin built a metal shop next door and used it as a feed store until 1962. Mr. Baldwin then sold it to Mabel and Lennis Scott. Six years later, Bill Belzer bought the metal shop from the Scott’s for storage. The Scott’s owned a liquor and grocery store immediately south of the shop, and for a long time, was one of the few businesses in the town.

One year later, Leroy and Marty Yadon operated a gas station next to the metal shop for the King Oil Company. They closed the station on July 11, 1970, when the building burned down.

On that date at approximately 2 p.m., a tanker truck from the King Oil Company came to the station to fill the two huge gas tanks located behind the station. The day was remembered by Mrs. Marty Yadon as being very hot and humid. The driver of the tanker was filling up the gas tanks when he accidently over-filled one of them. The gasoline ran down the side of the tank, and managed to seep under the station, where it was ignited by a hot water heater underneath the station. The fire caught quickly and spread back up the tanks where it burned on the sides and tops of them. Miraculously, the fire did not filter inside the tanks.

The La Plata Fire Department responded first, followed by the Kirksville Fire Department, and the fire was contained within one and a half hours after it started. The firemen feared that the tanks would blow up and tried to clear the block of people. The safety of the town itself was uncertain for a couple of hours. While the tanks were on fire, the driver of the tank truck moved the vehicle east on Route KK to the edge of the town to avoid the truck from catching on fire. The fire was so intense at the scene that Mrs. Yadon, who helped run the station with her husband Leroy, said, “The fire was hot enough to melt coins,” which were in the station. Traffic on Highway 63 was blocked a mile in both directions. Fortunately, the fire was
only contained to the tanks and the station, it did not spread to the rest of the town.

Four months after the fire, King Oil Company moved another trailer onto the lot and reopened the station. Bill Belzer operated the station for them until January 1973. Several years after that, Bud Radford rented the lot from Mr. Belzer and ran a Texaco station there. The latest business to open in that particular spot is McClanahan’s Tractor Repair, which was opened this past summer by Charles McClanahan.

Recreation and entertainment always seems to bring out the best in people, and baseball was a form of recreation that always did. Mrs. Wait said, “They mostly had to make their own entertainment.” Men and boys from around the Millard area in the 1920s would usually go out every Sunday afternoon to the Millard School to play ball.

The biggest events in Millard during the twenties were dances. Mrs. Wait recalls that at that time, “John Cunningham had a store building up here. Upstairs, up overhead of the store, why they had dances there, public dances, on Saturday nights back about 58 years ago! My husband and I used to go there to dance and we had our son Gail, who was a baby. We’d borrow a big goods pastyboard box from the storekeeper downstairs and I’d put my coat down in it and make him a bed and put him to sleep in there while we danced.”

In the late ’40s and early ’50s, Warren Cody, Mrs. Wait’s late husband, cleaned out his garage by his filling station, put a wooden floor in it, and began having dances there. Dances were held every Wednesday for the teenagers, who put money in the nickelodeon, or jukebox, and danced to the music. Saturday nights were for the adults, who paid one dollar to get in and danced to the live bands. These bands were usually local people who played the banjo, guitar, piano, or such, and played country, bluegrass, and favorite songs of the day.

During the bicentennial year, 1976, the town hosted various activities. These events included chili suppers, square dances, a carnival (with booths and a concession stand at the brick building at the junction of Route KK and Highway 63), fireworks, barbecues, and a skit put on by the townspeople featuring a wedding—hillbilly style—shotguns were included.

The year 1976 was a milestone year for the little hamlet. It was incorporated into a town and had its first town council, elected by a majority vote. The first council consisted of Charles Gerhold, Darrell McMann, Dorsie Wait, Benny Burton, and Perry Dean Bramhall with Mr. Bramhall elected as mayor. Mrs. Wait said, “Not until we were incorporated in 1976 did we have a town council here.” The town council is now elected every two years.
The drive for Millard’s incorporation began around August of 1976, with the first meeting and town council election held at the Bill Belzer residence. During that first meeting, the council decided on discussing whether or not the town should incorporate.

This council decided to incorporate the town because it needed a sewer system, and government funding would help cover some of the cost. So, in October of that year, the council petitioned the Adair County Court and had lawyer Harry Farr draft an incorporation document for the town. On October 29, 1976, Millard was officially recognized as a town by the State of Missouri and a chili supper was held in honor of this occasion.

Although the town is still waiting for the sewer system to come in, Millard is an example of a town that has reached a peak of prosperity with the railroad and many businesses in the early 1900s and has declined to one business in the community today with a small population of 73. But Millard has survived, and will always be dear to the people who were raised there and to the citizens of Adair County.

Mrs. Dorsie Wait best expressed her feelings and other people’s feeling in this poem:

I was born in Old Missouri
Up in the Northern part
Its hills, meadows and swamplands
Are dear to my old heart.

Missouri state is pleasant
The corn grows fine and tall
The farmers have it gathered
Before the frosty fall.

Up in North Missouri
The streams are clear and wide
It’s here you’ll find good fishing
Along on either side.

In grand old North Missouri
The meadows are so green
The wild flowers are blooming
The prettiest you’ve ever seen.

I love dear old Missouri
There are riches in its farms
I guess I’ll live forever
In Millard, close to where I was born.

By Nial Belzer