

The Growth and Decline of the Alta Community: A Case Study of Dead and Dying Towns in  
Kansas

Renaë Stucky

History 481, 482  
Kip Wedel and Mark Jantzen  
April 7, 2016

**Abstract**

This study explores the story of the small Alta community that once existed in south central Kansas, which reached its peak in the early twentieth century but eventually declined and became one of Kansas' nearly 6,000 dead and dying towns. The paper explores its rise to significance made possible by its ability to meet the physical and, more importantly, the social needs of the local residents. Most significantly the small milling town became an important social hub where local farmers came to meet their social needs by creating networks of support both in economics and in personal relationships. The mill and the community thrived until urbanization, technological advances, and lack of access to main transportation routes led to its decline. As the economic benefits waned the social structures also deteriorated. This study points out that these small-town social structures of connectivity and interdependence are extremely valuable to American society. Consequently, the phenomena of dead and dying towns in Kansas is not to be ignored. Despite the high cost in time and resources that it may take to save small towns today, it is worthwhile as the loss to the social landscape would be great.

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## Introduction

The story of the Alta Mill began in 1876 near the Little Arkansas River, just eighteen miles northwest of Newton. Joseph Schrag and Jacob Gering bought twelve acres of land on the eastern bank of the “Little River” and were the first to build a mill there. A small brush dam was constructed and the burr mill was powered by a water turbine, fed by the river. In 1884, Peter M. Claassen bought the land and mill from Schrag and Gering. He invested resources into updating the machinery adding a roller mill, replacing the brush dam with a wooden one, and in 1898 building a three story building that is today recognizable in photographs as the “Alta Mill.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite the improvements Claassen faced many challenges at the mill. Most taxing to him was the regular and extensive flooding that reached up the banks to the mill and his nearby home.<sup>2</sup> Two consecutive years of bad flooding occurred in 1903 and 1904 and the Alta Mill was not spared. The newspaper from the nearby town of Moundridge, the *Moundridge Journal*, reported that the flood waters were the highest water levels ever recorded in the area with up to a foot in the Claassen home and causing upwards of \$1000 worth of damage to the mill.<sup>3</sup> The next year, the water was reported to be at least six inches higher than the floods of the previous year, again causing extensive damage to the miller’s property and home.<sup>4</sup> Discouraged by the costly damage and with encouragement from his wife, Claassen decided to sell the mill and move to Newton.

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<sup>1</sup> Ida Plank Yoder, “The Story of a Mill” *Mennonite Life*, January 1956, 21

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “High Water Does Damage All Over the State...” *Moundridge Journal*, June 5, 1903.

<sup>4</sup> “River Six Inches Than Last Year,” *Moundridge Journal*, July 8, 1904

A group of Moundridge businessmen bought the land and the mill, forming the Alta Milling Company. Claassen retained eight shares of the company and stayed on at the mill for one year to help train the two new millers: brothers John E. Stucky and Jacob B. Stucky. Under the care and direction of the Stucky Brothers the mill thrived for nearly 45 years. During this time the mill site transformed into a rural trading center, complete with a general store, a blacksmith shop, a car dealership, and of course an increasingly successful wheat milling operation. Patrons came from miles around to have their flour ground into wheat. The hospitality of the Stuckys, their wives, and families, also transformed the community into a social hub. A park near the river provided a place to form and maintain friendships, for children to play, and for hardworking locals to relax.

Despite the enormous success and popularity of the mill and the little Alta community, the Alta Milling Company eventually dissolved in 1949 and the community was lost.<sup>5</sup> Today the small community of Alta is just a collection of crumbled foundations, trees, and wheat fields and has earned a spot on the list of Kansas' 6,000 dead and dying towns accordingly. Centered around the Mill, it reached its peak in the early part of the twentieth century having become an important economic and social hub. It, like other small towns in the state, became a place where people could ward off social isolation, go for help in times of crisis, and create mutualistic beneficial relationships with their neighbors in the small town setting. It was successful for decades because of these social and economic benefits that drew locals to it. In the 1940s however, it began to decline due to the effects of urbanization, technological advances, and a lack of access to main transportation routes, and by the 1960s it had disappeared completely. Its positive social impact has not been forgotten, however, as it was perhaps the small community's most defining

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<sup>5</sup> Yoder, "The Story," 21.

characteristic. This pattern of rise and fall in Alta has happened in similar ways in other small towns over time and across the state, and the trend continues today. While some researchers argue that working to save small towns might be a waste of resources the loss of small-town of mutual support and a vested interdependence would be an even greater loss. A study of the rise and fall of the Alta community, and the stories of other towns like it, can show us what social benefits we have in our small Kansas towns, why it is important to our culture, and why we should attempt to preserve it.

### **The Growth of Alta Community**

The first Alta Mill was created in 1876, not fifteen years after the prairie was opened for resettlement by the United States government. The Russian Mennonite immigrants, the group to whom the original owners of the mill belonged, were some of the thousands of people who came to Kansas. Fleeing their homes in Russia to avoid military service and conflict with certain Russian government reforms, they were attracted to the prairie as it had a similar climate to where these farmers had lived in Russia. They sought fertile, affordable land on which to start over with the rights to live according to their religious convictions.<sup>6</sup>

A massive advertising campaign by the Santa Fe Railroad Company caught the attention of a few American Mennonites who sent word to their brothers and sisters in Russia. Intrigued, the Mennonites from Russia sent a reconnaissance group to the United States to survey the land that the railroad company offered them. Finding it satisfactory, the delegates agreed to purchase the land in 1873. By 1874, these Russian Mennonites had packed up their lives and moved to

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Stucky, "The Story of the Mill," Brian Stucky. [http://brianstucky.com/altamill/Story\\_of\\_the\\_Mill.html](http://brianstucky.com/altamill/Story_of_the_Mill.html) (accessed March 17, 2016).

America and began to make a life on the Kansas prairie.<sup>7</sup> Life on the plains was not easy. The settlers were exposed to scorching summers, bitter winters, high winds, tornados, grasshopper infestations, and uncertain rainfall conditions. The harshness of the prairie meant that the new arrivals were dependent on each other for survival.

When the Alta Mill was first built on the prairie it became a necessity for the new arrivals. These people were miles from the nearest town without the benefits of modern transportation to get them to large settlements to purchase supplies. The mill community obviously served its most basic purpose as a flour mill complex. According to historian Norman E. Saul, “Almost every community in the 1850s-1870s had a mill of some sort to provide a valuable service in producing flour, cornmeal, feed for livestock, and basic staples for the households and communities.”<sup>8</sup> The mill provided grinding services to the local farmers in the Alta township. A cluster of families lived within a few miles of the site and visited the mill at regular intervals to have their wheat ground directly, and they left with fresh flour as part of the “custom” style of milling that dominated at the time. However the mill was well known and was patronized by customers from dozens of miles around including Newton, Hutchinson, Halstead, Burrton, and others. Some even made the trek to the mill once a year from as far as Meade, Kansas, and as far south as Oklahoma.<sup>9</sup> The mill was obviously an integral part of life in rural Kansas as ready-made flour was not conveniently available for purchase, nor was it quite socially acceptable to do so in the small communities that surrounded it. The Alta Mill was

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<sup>7</sup> Norman Saul Ph. D., “The Migration of the Russian-Germans to Kansas,” *Kansas History*, Spring/Summer 2000, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Saul, “Mill Town Kansas,” 27.

<sup>9</sup> Stucky, “The Story of the Mill.”

valuable to the rural community, because it provided them with the flour to make staples like bread and noodles, and Mennonite specialities like verenika and zwiebach.

Farmers were also taken to the mill site by the need for a blacksmith. The blacksmith shop's location is highly contested since nothing remains of the building but memories clouded by time. Some believe it was on the east side of the road directly adjacent to the mill, some assert that it was slightly further north, some say that it was as almost a quarter of a mile north, and there are even claims that the entire "complex" was built along the river, the west side of the road. No matter its exact location, it was an important part of the Alta community that allowed it to thrive. The shop was especially important to farmers who were trying to tame the prairie ground into farmland. Metal farming equipment such as plowshears and the like were created and serviced there. To survive and thrive as farmers in this land, farmers depended on their equipment. Nearly all the settlers in the Alta township toiled as farmers, making this blacksmith shop especially important, and adding to the Alta community's success. Farmers were also catered to in other ways. While mostly known for its excellence in flour milling, the mill also processed corn and other grains for products like cornmeal and animal feed. These products were an important part of the inventory for a business in a mutualistic relationship with a farming community.<sup>10</sup>

Its convenient proximity to the isolated farmers of the Alta township also made it a necessity for survival, because it provided a place in which locals could come to meet their social needs as well. One of the difficulties on the early prairie was that farmers did not have neighbors in near proximity. In fact, many people lived several miles away from their nearest neighbor.

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel E. Friesen, "The Alta Mill," in *Harvey County History* (Dallas: Curtis Media Corporation, 1990), 63.



This left many families hungry for more than just bread but also for social interaction. Farmers and their families were eager to go to church on Sundays and any trips to “town” were special affairs. The physical location of the mill, and the fact that everyone was going there for flour made it an easy place for people to gather and socialize. Waiting in lines up to a quarter of a mile long offered the farmers a chance to see their busy and distant neighbors. They would probably speak of the weather, crops, family, and maybe even politics as they waited their turn to have their wheat ground into life-giving flour. Their children would come and play with each other or perhaps they would go to the Stucky houses and play with one of the eighteen children that belonged to the Stucky brothers, John, Jacob, and Chris the latter whom who eventually moved to the Alta community as the resident mechanic. Some romantic relationships were nurtured there as well. Mill worker, John Pauls met his wife there.<sup>11</sup>

Business was not the only excuse that locals found to meet at the mill. The mill site had greatly expanded and a large grassy opening had turned into a park of sorts. Customers and socializers alike came to relax here. Children played and adults mingled. Jacob Stucky’s daughter, Amanda Nightengale, remembers nothing but fun. When asked if she had any negative memories about the mill she simply answered, “No.”<sup>12</sup> Even at the wise age of 96 she remembers playing in the river hardly deep enough to swim in, playing house, and playing yard games like croquet. The youngsters who lived at or who visited Alta experienced one of the many blessings of childhood; being able to play until they were completely worn out.<sup>13</sup> Saturday night gatherings, picnics in the park, and winter skating parties on the river were held at the Alta site and were of great value to those who attended. Today, former visitors lament the loss of Alta,

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<sup>11</sup> Stucky, “Story of the Mill.”

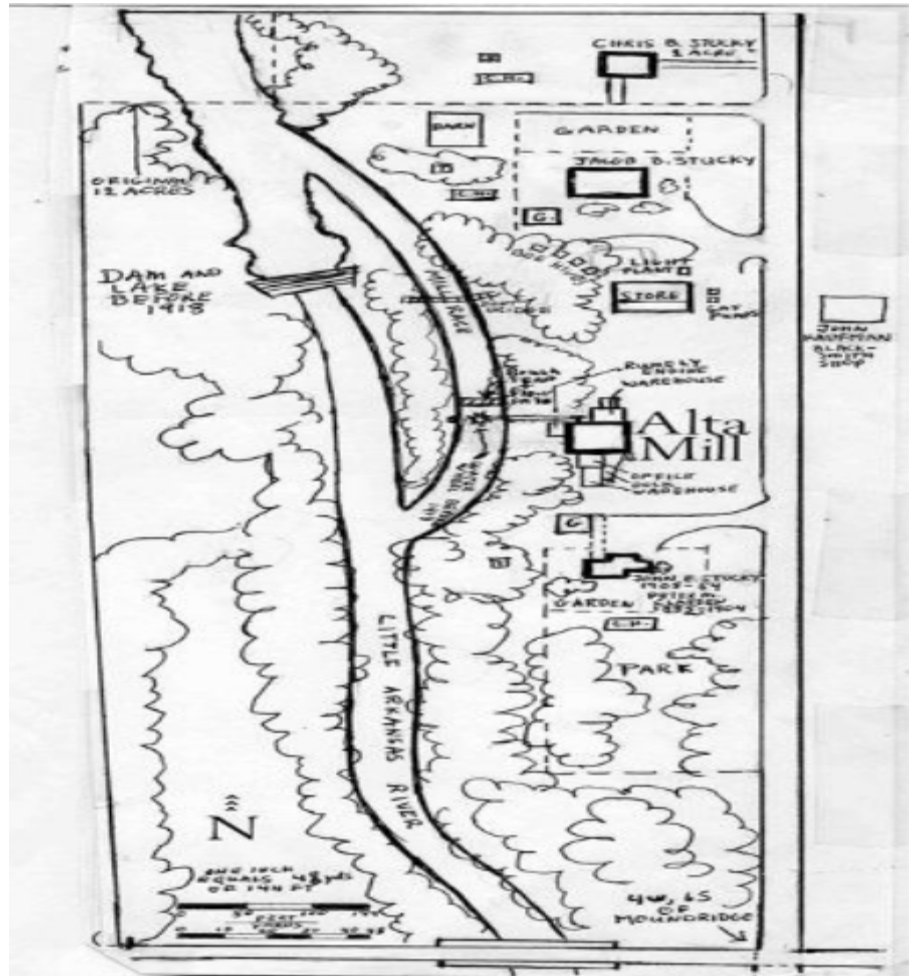
<sup>12</sup> Amanda Nightengale interview by author, Halstead, KS, 15 June 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

more for the memories of human interaction and social connections than the business that went on there.

The mill community served as a meeting place for local families and customers, but it also served as a venue for outside organizations meeting the needs for a common space for groups such as religious groups, camping associations, athletic teams, and public debates.

During Claassen's ownership of the mill it was said to have hosted a series of religious revival meetings complete with baptisms in the Little Arkansas River. Claassen



Brian Stucky, "The Story of the Mill," Brian Stucky. [http://brianstucky.com/altamill/Story\\_of\\_the\\_Mill.html](http://brianstucky.com/altamill/Story_of_the_Mill.html) (accessed March 17, 2016).

extended warm hospitality to the leading evangelist and his guests.<sup>14</sup> Other religious camping meetings were held here as well. Travelers also found shelter at the park. The Frank Welshes were among the earliest campers when they honeymooned in the park. The park also came into

<sup>14</sup> Melvin Gingerich, notes on the Alta Mill, MLA. SA II 742.

use as a convenient in-between for the Christian educational institutions of Bethel and McPherson colleges when members from each college gathered there to compete. In the spring of 1910, a debate was held between the two schools with P. S. Goertz arguing for McPherson and P. R. Schroeder competing for the Bethel team. Many students made the drive to watch their schoolmates engage in the debate. The colleges also played ball games and tennis matches in the park. These events demonstrated the needs of the early Kansans to have a place to connect, meet, collaborate, talk, and how Alta helped provide for those needs.<sup>15</sup>

As a part of being a social center, the needs for entertainment were also being met. The Stucky family was a musical one and had formed an orchestra which was “in great demand.”<sup>16</sup> In 1910 the first music group was formed. The group known as the Alta Mill Band was formed in 1921 and played together until 1928 and was made up of members of the millers’ families and neighbors. Members numbered into the twenties. The band boasted string instruments as well as multiple clarinets and saxophones.<sup>17</sup>

A third group, The Stucky Orchestra, replaced the Alta Mill Band in 1928. Its members included John, Jake, and Chris, as well as a number of their children. The orchestra was even given an offer of free travel to California on the Santa Fe Railroad on the condition they would play and entertain other passengers along the journey. The offer was declined due to other commitments.<sup>18</sup> On Saturday nights, the Stuckys often held get togethers at the mill site, with music provided by their band. In addition the group played for meetings and other official gatherings held at the mill by outside parties. Neighbors came to visit and enjoy an evening with

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<sup>15</sup> This paragraph was a combination of Melvin’s notes; *Harvey County History* pg. 80; Stucky, “Story of the Mill”

<sup>16</sup> Mennonite Life, Yoder, 23

<sup>17</sup> Stucky, “The Story of the Mill.”

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

friends. These evenings were needed by the farmers who worked so hard. The Alta community provided a common space for socialization, making it more than just a place of business and ensured the longevity of its success through social connectivity.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the thing that made Alta so successful, as both as an economic and social hub, was the hospitality and kindness offered by the families who ran it. The Stuckys were known for their hospitality. Mrs. John E. formally Katie Friesen, and Mrs. Jacob B. formally Mary Friesen were friendly and caring women. These ladies took it upon themselves to make sure that everyone that visited the mill felt welcome. Travelers were always fed and neighbors were often impromptu dinner guests.<sup>20</sup> Current Moundridge resident Barbara Stucky remembers spending time with the sisters. She can most clearly recall Katie, describing her as a friendly woman, tall at least to a child, with yellow (not blonde) and grey hair. The sisters were famous for their bread, made with the flour milled by their husbands of course, bread that they never hesitated to share with travelers or guests. Their warmth was certainly important to the success of the Alta community as a social hub.<sup>21</sup>

When asked what was the most important factor to Alta Mills success, local Alta authority and grandson of miller John E. Stucky, Brian Stucky, replied “the people.”<sup>22</sup> The kindness and hospitality most surely did add to the success of the mill. During the Great Depression, when many farmers were struggling and crop prices had plummeted, could customers expect fair dealings at the Alta Mill. The millers worked out an exchange system explained on their sale bill:

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<sup>19</sup> Barbara Stucky, interview by author, Moundridge, KS, June 25, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Clint Stucky, “A Case Study of Mennonite Business Practices” (Mennonite History, Life, and Thought Essay, Bethel College, 1983), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Stucky interview

<sup>22</sup> Brian Stucky, interview with author, June 8, 2015.

There is only one place where you can get flour at the right price. Take your wheat to the Alta Mills and exchange it for flour, at the rate of 7 sacks for 10 bu. of wheat testing 57 pounds or more. This would mean if your wheat is worth 80c per bushel your flour will not cost you over \$1.15 for a 48lb sack of the best flour.

This system was especially attractive to the nearby farmers who were in the midst of dire economic circumstances *and* fighting a drought. This system allowed farmers to continue to eat, even when people all around the country were starving. Their generosity was displayed in other ways as well. When the desperation of circumstance led some to steal from the Stuckys' mill they refused to take action against them, even if their identity was known. No locks were ever placed on any of the mill properties. Jacob Stucky said, "If they need it so bad that they have to steal it, then they should just have it."<sup>23</sup>

Brian Stucky knows that his grandparents were also the saviors of many by their extension of credit during the Depression. Once he was approached by a retired farmer from the area who asserted that John E., Brian's grandfather, had saved his life. When he struggled during the Depression the Alta millers extended his credit. He was not the only one who was helped in this way. In fact, during the Depression period, the mill wrote off \$30,000 in debt. Such service as this to the community brought great respect to the business and people continued to patronize the mill, even in hard times.

One might guess that such generosity during such uncertain times would have reduced the profit of the company. There were hard times but in the early 1930s the Alta Mill reached its peak prosperity. Dividends reached almost 35 percent in 1931. A steady decline followed, but the mill survived the Great Depression. The mill was still successful as it met the physical, social, and economic needs of its patrons and neighbors. However, hard times were coming and

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<sup>23</sup> Stucky, "A Case of Mennonite Business," 11.

Alta's success would wane and the company and community would soon disappear despite its former success.

### **The Decline of the Alta Community**

In the early years, the mill was necessary for more primitive survival reasons both physical and social, but as the time passed and there was both technological and social change, the mill changed too. It remained an important place for those who lived near it, meeting the changing needs of the its patrons. It was still important for physical and social needs, but increasing individualism and consumerism in the American culture called for certain adjustments in the nature of the Alta community.

As technology advanced, life changed for the people in rural Kansas. With the invention and widespread use of automobiles, the central location of the Alta Mill to the community was not nearly as vital a part of its success as it had been at its founding. Cars made driving to Moundridge, Burrton, Halstead or even nearby cities like Newton, McPherson, or Hutchinson much more realistic for rural families. Alta adapted to the use of cars by opening a car dealership on the site. Chris Stucky, brother to John and Jake, was the main operator of the Reo dealership and was also the mechanic in residence. The dealership was right on the mill site and was a convenient stop. they also put in a gas pump to accommodate those who were now driving their car or truck to the mill instead of their rig. In this way, the Alta community was able to continue to meet the needs of providing flour for their customers, but also keep themselves relevant for a time that period of change.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Stucky, "Story of the Mill."

As the milling industry changed the millers also adapted their milling techniques to keep up with competition. They sold a variety of products including multiple kinds of flour. The new practice of bleaching flour was also adopted as it grew more popular, despite the Stuckys' reluctance to use the chlorine gas. Their reluctance was overpowered by their need to stay relevant and necessary, in changing times. Despite their best efforts, the Alta Milling Company would eventually fall behind.

When the Second World War came and went, as time and progress marched forward, things began to change in America, changes that altered economics, business, and society in such a way that would spell the end for Alta. The company struggled economically from the beginning of the new decade. From the 1940s until its dissolution in 1949 the Alta Milling Company struggled financially. In the mill's official papers John Stucky wrote:

Gentlemen:-We wish to say that we are not doing very much here at this country mill anymore since the War, all our customers have been lost on account of the Tire and Gas Rationing through the War and my Brother and myself are up in age and ailing. I have prepared the report the best I know.<sup>25</sup>

The rationing was part of the struggle. However, Alta was also affected by forces of which John Stucky and his brothers probably could not have been aware. Fortunately, hindsight is twenty-twenty and one can see that more than just war rationing affected the Mill and brought about its close. That also meant the slow deterioration of the Alta community that was centered around this mill. This unique community, important to so many in its early years, faded into the memory of those who once visited it out of necessity.

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<sup>25</sup> Dissolution papers of The Alta Milling Company 1949, Private manuscript collection, Brian Stucky, Goessel, KS.

Despite the great success of the mill in the early years, and even into the beginnings of the Great Depression, the milling business was changing in such a way that the Alta Mill suffered. In its early years it was central to the local community. Its existence was significant, just as every other small town was all across Kansas and the newly settled West. The mill was created out of necessity and lasted for nearly forty years out of necessity. When it stopped being a vital part of life for those near it, it started to dwindle. One could get everything he or she once purchased at Alta more conveniently elsewhere. Social needs could also be met in large communities more easily with the invention of cars and more passable roads. Entertainment needs were met more thoroughly elsewhere as well with the invention and widespread ownership of the radio and later the television.

A major change in the milling industry was a large part of Alta's demise. Alta kept up with changes as they happened. When the burr mill, powered by a water wheel became obsolete, roller mills replaced them. In 1907 the Stuckys added a gasoline engine, and the mill moved forward with the rest of the industry. However, the industry soon surpassed it. Mills began to increase in size, consolidation leading many small mills to close. The markets began to change and the mills grew in size as they began to cater to national and international markets.<sup>26</sup>

This was made possible by access to railroads so that mills might ship out their large orders with ease. Alta, however, had no such convenience. Its low position, close to the river, made it difficult to accommodate a rail line.<sup>27</sup> In the spring of 1903, representatives from the Alta township did make an effort to recruit an extension of the Burlington Railroad coming south from Kansas City. They petitioned the line along with representatives from Wichita, Halstead,

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<sup>26</sup> Saul, "Mill Town Kansas," 32.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 29



Bridgeport, McPherson, Lindsborg, Assaria, and Salina. Alta's petition was denied and in a way this sealed the fate of the mill, for it could no longer hope to compete with larger mills.

With the increased use of automobiles came another chance at gaining easy access to main trade routes. However, once again, the highways and major roadways missed the small community. Even now, the only way to get to the mill is to brave rough gravel roads full of wash-board like bumps and deeper potholes. The area's reputation for major flooding and its position surrounded by larger, more established towns kept it once again out of reach of the much needed transportation links.<sup>28</sup>

This new access to cars, so widespread that one could even buy a car at the Alta Mill, was surely also partially responsible for the failure of the Alta community. "Soon, with the ease and speed allowed by paved roads, people began traveling farther to do their shopping. Larger communities offering a wide variety of goods benefitted from an efficient network of roads. Towns unable to satisfy the tastes nor pocketbooks of their clientele slowly declined." This was true for Alta, as well, and proof of this unfortunate pattern is obvious in its story. Not only were there no large stores with a wide variety of products, but its speciality, unbleached wheat flour, was going out of vogue, even in the breadbasket of the world. Instead, bleached flour and white bread were the style, and were much more conveniently available in the grocery store at Moundridge. Barbara Stucky remembers the novelty of going to the grocery store and buying the special new white bread that signaled a special occasion. The draw of these new, exciting products with cars to get them, made Alta's local proximity much less important than before.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Daniel C. Fitzgerald, *Faded Dreams: More Ghost Towns of Kansas* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994), xii.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

It was not only the lack of transportation that hurt a local mills' business but also the changing ways that flour was used. During the early years of the mill, families used the flour they had brought back from the mill to make homemade bread, however, as American society changed, so did the way families shopped and consumed. It became easier and more socially acceptable to buy their flour at a grocers and to buy pre-made bread bought from "large-scale baking operations." According to Kansas flour mill authority Norman E. Saul, "By the 1920s much of the flour from Kansas was sold directly to consumers, but at home and abroad, by the carload, to large baking companies." Alta, with a small local customer base and with no access to rail transportation could not keep up with these trends.<sup>30</sup>

The owners blamed World War II rations for the failure of the mill and the deterioration of the Alta community. The war definitely had a large impact on the survival of the mill, and even after the War ended, its aftershock was still felt and still had a serious impact on the Alta community. Any time a nation comes out a period of extreme conflict, it emerges changed. World War II was just such a time, and as America emerged victorious it entered a stage of prosperity different than any before.

Wartime production had helped pull America's economy out of depression and from the late 1940s on, young adults saw a remarkable rise in their spending power. Jobs were plentiful, wages were higher, and because of the lack of consumer goods during the war, Americans were eager to spend. During the same years, young couples were marrying and having children at unprecedented rates. New and expanded federal programs, including the G.I. Bill of Rights, allowed many young families to purchase their own homes, often located in rapidly expanding suburbs.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Saul, "Mill Town Kansas," 41.

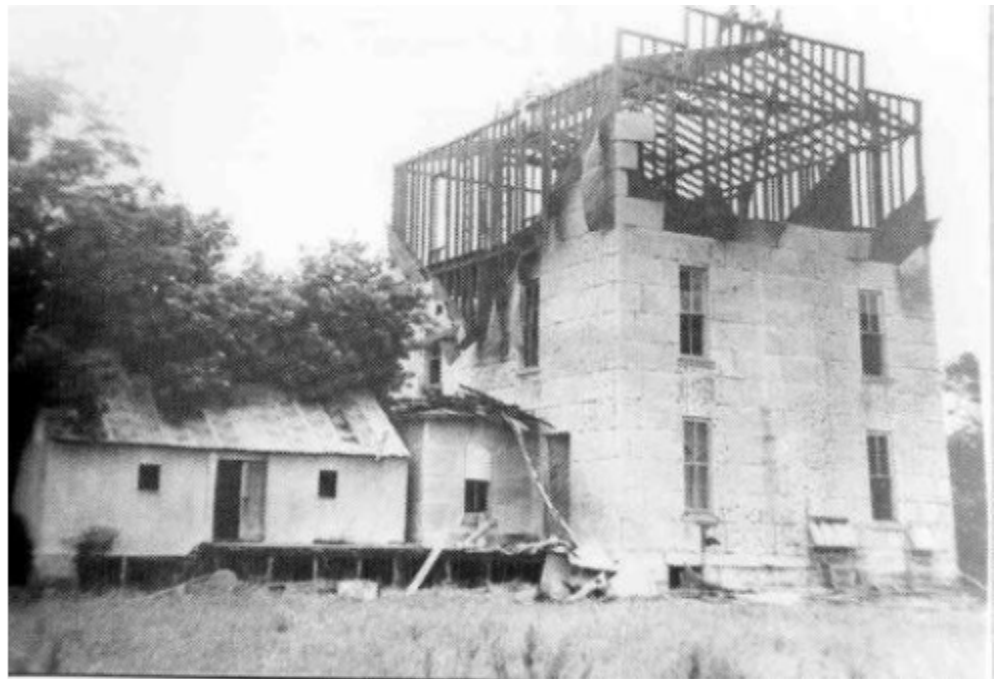
<sup>31</sup> Public Broadcasting Station, "The Rise of American Consumerism," Public Broadcasting Station, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/tupperware-consumer/> (accessed 17 March, 2016).

The increased spending power and prosperity made Americans eager to consume the newest and the best. Often these products could not be made nor found in Alta. In consequence, the mill and the community suffered after the war and by 1949 as American consumerism began in earnest.

In addition to the changing times, the owners and operators of the mill were advancing in years and decreasing in health. The Stucky brothers no longer had the energy to try to save the Alta Milling Company. Jacob Stucky's daughter, Amanda Nightengale, recalls that the closure of the mill like it was no overwhelmingly sad event in her family. The family seemed ready to accept its closing and move on through life with a positive spirit. And so, in 1949, President John E. Stucky signed the papers of dissolution and the Alta Mill ceased operation. In the mid-1950s the Stuckys moved to town, the land was sold, and by 1960 the new owner Jake Schrag had torn down the mill.<sup>32</sup>

While the closure seemed to have brought no real sadness to the Amanda Nightengale home, there were many who were extremely saddened by the event.

The reality was however that its



Brian Stucky, "The Story of the Mill," Brian Stucky. [http://brianstucky.com/altamill/Story\\_of\\_the\\_Mill.html](http://brianstucky.com/altamill/Story_of_the_Mill.html) (accessed March 17, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> Nightengale interview; Stucky, "The Story of the Mill"

dissolution was a consequence of a lack of business from these very mourners. The Alta Mill, no longer necessary as an economic center was also less and less a social hub, and lost its customers and its reason to exist.

The mill's cessation was a significant event in its time and it is still significant today. The mill is gone now torn down and overgrown. Today all that marks the site is a few foundations; but its story has not been forgotten. Nor should it ever be, for its story, similar to those of other small dead and dying towns can teach us something about society and perhaps lead us to a better understanding of the plague that is sweeping Kansas, killing towns and leaving skeletons of Kansans' communities in its wake.

According to the Kansas author, historian, and ghost town expert Daniel Fitzgerald there are "6,000 extinct geographical locations or 'ghost towns,' that were born and died in the history of the state."<sup>33</sup> If every one of these ghost towns had survived, Kansas would be able to claim one town per twelve square miles and Kansans would not have been able to drive in any direction more than seven miles without passing through a town. He defines "ghost town" as "a town that has disappeared completely or is only a shadowy remnant of what it once was."<sup>34</sup> It is a sad reality that Kansas has 6,000 geographical locations that fit this description of "shadowy remnants." And the count is not complete. There are towns that may not be on the list yet, but are on the decline.<sup>35</sup>

Like the Alta community, most of the other ghost towns were formed out of necessity, and nearly as many failed for similar reasons. They were no longer necessary to meet needs for supplies, transportation, or social human needs of connectivity. The time of change and progress

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<sup>33</sup> Daniel Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas: A Traveler's Guide* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), xiii.

<sup>34</sup> Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas*, xii.

<sup>35</sup> Fitzgerald, *Faded Dreams*, x.

that seemed so positive to those benefitting was, and is still, detrimental to the survival of small Kansas communities just like Alta.

It is safe to say that advancements and progress in transportation were a major cause of the decline of the Alta community and many others. King City in McPherson county was one such community. Founded in 1871, the town was formed by a group of Civil War soldiers who had returned home to find no work waiting for them. After exploring seventeen counties in the new state of Kansas the settlers almost unanimously chose McPherson county. Within a year the settlement had several residences and businesses including a lumberyard, a blacksmith shop, and hotels. Sadly, the Sante Fe Railroad and the Kansas State Legislature,

...Sliced the tier of townships from the county so that the railroad could make county seats out of Newton and Hutchinson. This had a devastating effect on King City, placing it too far from the center of the new boundaries of McPherson County to make it a suitable contender for county seat...Settlers began moving their homes out to adjoining claims or to Mcpherson until King City was nearly depopulated.

When the town of Elyria was built just north of King City it was the proverbial nail in the coffin. If the railroad would have sought a closer route, the story of King City may have been drastically different. The story of the dead town of Empire in McPherson County also ends with the railroad missing the town by a few miles. Similar stories exist with towns that were missed by highways. Without access to transportation routes, towns suffered and few could overcome this challenge.<sup>36</sup>

Transportation made a real difference between whether a town thrived or dwindled. It was especially important as consumerism and commercialization took root in American culture. The trends that made Alta Milling Company obsolete were making other small towns unnecessary as well. Pumpkin Center in Reno County is an unfortunate example of this trend.

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel C. Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas: Volume Three, 28th Anniversary Edition: 1982-2010* (The Daniel Fitzgerald Company, 2010), 179-180.

Once it was a small community center. Like Alta its main functions were to provide supplies and a place to socialize. The reality of consumerism spurred on by post-war prosperity of the late 1940s set in. “At the end of World War II, people began to drive to Wichita and Hutchinson for shopping.”<sup>37</sup> Progress, consumerism, and a booming new economy made towns like Pumpkin Center and Alta lose economic relevancy and dwindle instead of thrive.

An agricultural economy made access to trade routes absolutely necessary for successful farming operations. “Progress” in Kansas seemed synonymous with how well the farming community was keeping up with markets. The fate of small towns in Kansas also relies on the agricultural economy. When farms were numerous and small so were the towns. When farms began to grow larger and less numerous so did Kansas’ towns. “Whether the number of farms was declining or not, towns were also affected by how well the farms were faring economically. As a rule, towns grew during this period if agriculture prospered but declined if agriculture did less well.”<sup>38</sup> Current and future progress in the farming industry will lead to an even smaller rural population as technology like drones will remove the need for manpower; removing employment opportunities and forcing small town residents to look elsewhere to make their livelihoods. It is clear that “progress” has and will continue to mean the end for small towns in Kansas. Depopulation caused by farm consolidation, and mechanization will mean depopulation of rural areas that support small towns. Small town are decreasingly able to meet physical needs with the efficiency that urban centers can and this is a recipe for rural decline.

### **So What?: The Economic and Social Implications**

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<sup>37</sup> Amy Bickel, *Dead Towns of Central and Western Kansas* (Newton: Mennonite Press, Inc, 2011), 70.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 135.

So what does it matter if these small towns have withered away? Society is surviving and functioning without them today. It's true, but when Alta died so did a community that nurtured its members. Its nature as a social hub created a special kind of connectivity among its members that helped define it as valuable. While Alta was a special case in many ways there are also many towns who have similar stories. Hopewell, Kansas, is one of those places. The Pratt County town was founded in 1904 when a post office was established there. The post office was named Hopewell in 1921 and the town was named for this establishment. The town was optimistic for growth as it boasted a general store, lumberyard, hardware store, elevators, a school, a church, and even a hotel. Life was simple in Hopewell, just like it was in Alta. Leisure time consisted of interacting with other families by going to school, church, or social events such as rabbit hunting contests. Despite hopes that the town would grow it dwindled instead. The train tracks were pulled up in 1940, an almost guaranteed death sentence for small towns in Kansas. The post office closed in 1973 and when the owners of the general store retired, it too closed its doors.<sup>39</sup>

Local resident Terry Smith called the gradual decline of the town sad, "For Hopewell, he said, was more than just a town. It was a community. 'Residents would gather in (the store) everyday...you'd get your mail; pop was a dime a bottle. Farmers would congregate there during the day to visit with their neighbors.'" Pratt County farmer, Greg Giles remembers that, "It was a good community...there wasn't a house that I hadn't been in where I didn't have cookies and milk."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Bickel, *Dead Towns*, 47.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

As interviews have been conducted, research has been done, and articles and essays have been written it is clear that the emotional connection is strong to these small towns. In general, Kansas towns did not fail because they were not friendly places to live. On the contrary these things examples of hospitality, accountability, and family are what made these places special and imperative to a healthy social landscape. When towns like this Hopewell and Alta disappeared so did the strong social structures of support that existed in these towns. Alta was a model of civic engagement, the social ingredient that creates a healthy society and happy inhabitants.<sup>41</sup>

A study published in the *Rural Sociology* in 2002 asserted that small towns hold the secret to civic connectivity, the concept that asserts that social cohesion can both enhance and be strengthened by the local economy of a community. The theory is that a small town society and economy foster interdependence among its inhabitants and “nurture trust and cooperation among citizens.”<sup>42</sup> Members of a small community realize that their lives are so interconnected that the best way to survive is to help those around them, because in the long term it will benefit everyone. For example, a business owner will work hard to treat his or her customers fairly, because they provide his livelihood just as he provides them a good or service. Not only does this result in economic success, but it also creates real social connectivity that leads to healthy communities with happy inhabitants.

This study is articulating what could already be assumed about the value of small communities from the story of the Alta township. We can see an example of this civic community expressed in the story of Alta’s unusual success during the Great Depression. As

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<sup>41</sup> Charles M. Tolbert, et al. "Civic Community in Small-Town America, How Civic Welfare is Influenced by Local Capitalism and Civic Engagement," *Rural Sociology* 67, no. 1 (March 2002): 90-113. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 6, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 2



mentioned earlier, Alta Mill reached peak profit in the early 1930s. In 1931 the percentage of dividend declared to stockholders reached thirty five percent. This is surprising because of the dependency of the mill on farmers who faced severe challenges during the 1930s. Firstly, farmers in Kansas were faced with the problem of crop surplus. Prices dropped to below thirty cents per bushel, and a harvest that once promised a positive outcome now held the promise of economic hardship. The problem was compounded by a devastating drought. The Stuckys responded with sound business practices that both provided economic success and helped to strengthen personal relationships and community bonds. The mill's approach resulted in a high rate of productivity that allowed the return of a significant percentage of dividends to its stockholders during this era of economic hardship.

The mill's business practices led to high profits, but the owners were not motivated by profit alone. They were also driven by a deep concern for their community. Mutualistic relationships with their friends and neighbors ruled the day. The Stuckys used their position to care for those who were without funds or crops with which to barter. In fact, years after the dissolution of the company, owner Jacob Stucky confided to his family that during that period the mill wrote off approximately \$30,000 in customer debt. Along with unpaid debts the mill was plagued by thefts during these hard times. The owners responding with forgiveness and generosity simply responded to these crimes with, "If they need it so bad that they have to steal it, then they should just have it" even if the culprit was identified. It is clear by these benevolent business practices, in addition to their well-established reputation for hospitality, that the small community was glued together by social connections defined by generosity and friendship that allowed its members to experience security in a time of uncertainty. In short, Alta was exhibiting

the characteristics of civic community in which economics and social connections create a special space that allowed for happy and secure citizens.<sup>43</sup>

This cohesion of civic community created by this interdependence can be seen in other institutions beyond the economic sphere. Churches and other similar organizations can also be vehicles for civic engagement. The study by Charles Tolbert and a team of sociologists also points to the significance of local hangouts in the civic community. “Local hangouts and gathering places can be an important institutional mechanism for linking individuals together in a community.”<sup>44</sup>

Alta was firstly a milling community and its rise and fall ultimately depended on the economic success of the Alta Milling Company, but as we have seen it also served as a one of these “local hangouts.” The park was a space for mingling, conversing, spiritual renewal, friendly competition, enjoying the arts, and building friendships. It really was just as important as a place for creating community through civic engagement--fostering interdependence--as it was for selling flour, cars, or gasoline. The community of Alta became linked together in a way that improved each member’s quality of life by creating a safe space that met both physical and social needs.

These qualities that are so essential in community building and increasing quality of life, are most easily identified in small towns. Economic and social systems in a small communities are much more conducive to this brand of civic engagement and mutually beneficial relationships. When a group of human beings are interdependent, a community begins to build social trust. Social trust means that one trusts others because he or she believes that familiarity,

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<sup>43</sup> Tolbert, “Civic Community in Small Towns,” ??; “A Case Study of Mennonite Business,” Stucky, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 6.

shared space, and mutual need will ensure that their trustworthiness will be reciprocated. Just like in any situation, this trust translates into higher quality of life. Communities with high social trust have shown to have higher rates of altruism; volunteerism, cooperation, philanthropy, aid for the afflicted and so on. This social trust is most easily achieved in small towns where connectivity nurtures this reciprocal reliance.<sup>45</sup>

Alta was also a prime example of this social trust. The Alta Milling Company was one of the largest and most successful operations in the region. Logically it would be one of the most vulnerable to trespassing and theft. Regardless, the Stuckys never once placed a lock on any of the buildings.<sup>46</sup> If one were to examine the site he or she would find no evidence of a fence or gate that would have separated the mill complex from the road. Nor were any of the other businesses fenced off from the public transportation route. The Stuckys extended trust and, whether consciously or not, they expected trust. The Alta social hub was a special place because of the benefits that were possible because of this trust. The high quality of life in the Alta township was further evidence of social cohesion. As mentioned earlier in this paper Amanda Nightingale had no bad memories of living on the site for the full extent of her childhood. A woman in her nineties may well have a cloudy memory, but bad memories about Alta are rarely shared nor negative attitudes expressed about the community. Nightengale's recollections of the happy inhabitants of her home community can most surely be trusted. Members' physical needs were met even in the hard times, and their social needs were met throughout its existence as well.

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<sup>45</sup> Putnam, *Bowling alone*, 138.

<sup>46</sup> Brian Stucky interview

<sup>47</sup> Nightengale interview

These characteristics of social trust and connectivity displayed in Alta are key ingredients to the sociological concept of social capital.

By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital-tools and training that enhance individual productivity-the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups.

Social capital is built up when neighbors interact with each other, make connections, and then make connections with different neighbors. This cooperation will benefit the community as a whole and the socially helpless individual who will discover “advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors.”<sup>48</sup>

Succinctly put, social connectivity is a valuable asset to society. “Community connectedness is not just about warm fuzzy tales of civic triumph...In measurable and well-documented ways, social capital makes an enormous difference in our lives.”<sup>49</sup> Sociological studies have found this to be true. Linkages have been found between communities rich in social capital with positive child development and young people experiencing success in educational contexts. There is also evidence that it increased democratic participation and altruism. Perhaps most interesting is that social capital, the kind with which Alta was rich, has been shown to have significant physical and mental health benefits. “The more integrated we are with our community, the less likely we are to experience colds, heart attacks, strokes, cancer, depression, and premature death of all sorts...sadness, loneliness, low self-esteem, and problems with eating and sleeping”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 19, 137.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 290, 297,

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, 332.

Despite these amazing benefits and all that the Alta community could offer its members the loss of Alta did little to stop progress. Towns surrounding Alta such as Moundridge, Burrton, Halstead, Newton, and Hesston are still full of life and have grown since the 1950s. They absorbed the business leftover from the closure of the mill and became the new meeting spot for the members of the Alta community. These towns also have the same social structures of civic engagement that made Alta such an important place to so many. It would be inaccurate to say that the decline of Alta caused serious damage to the inhabitants of the Alta Township or the other rural communities nearby. It is safe to say though, that when the little town disappeared a valuable piece of civic community was lost as well.

The world will keep moving forward without small towns like Alta, but should the loss of both the economic and more importantly the social structures that these communities offer be nonchalantly or unconsciously accepted? Or should members of society work to preserve communities that can offer these important social structures of connectivity?

Some experts on small towns acknowledge their value, but see it as simply sentimental. Fitzgerald, Kansas historian and dead town expert mentioned above has dedicated his time to researching hundreds of dead towns in Kansas. In fact he has written multiple volumes on the subject. As evidenced by his career aspirations, he clearly believed that the stories of these towns should be recorded, preserved in writing, and shared with society. Despite his knowledge and expertise on the subject Fitzgerald does not believe that it is wise to interfere with history. He wrote,

Much attention has focused in the last ten years on saving the small town, perhaps even spending millions of federal dollars to do so. However cold and callous I may sound, such an expenditure would be a waste of money and an anti historical gesture. Towns that

can keep up with our changing world deserve to retain an identity and usefulness—they are true survivors. Towns that can't will just naturally disappear...<sup>51</sup>

This attitude savors strongly of Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. Darwin believed that nature would weed out the species that were too weak to survive and in turn evolution would only strengthen the species that were able to survive. In the same way some believe that perhaps we should let the markets decide which small towns are too weak to survive and which ones are strong enough, close enough to transportation routes, technologically advanced enough, to continue to pour resources into. This would certainly save time, money, and energy.

As much as we might save in economic capital, it seems that would lose something more significant in social capital. Large cities cannot duplicate the structures of social trust and civic engagement the same in which a small town would be capable. Social connectivity generates social capital and social capital is the highest in some of America's least populated states. South Dakota and North Dakota as well as Nebraska and Kansas are consistently high on the list for social capital. These rural states are socially defined by their small towns and their rural culture. Social capital, that magic medicine that keeps our democracy, bodies, and communities healthy, is richest in small towns like Hopewell, King City, and Alta.<sup>52</sup>

If then, small communities are worth preserving or nurturing how can we do so in an ever advancing technological age that threatens their economic relevance? Like Alta, these small towns and their local businesses struggle to keep up with industrial growth, job availability, and convenience of the big cities. These cities however cannot keep up with levels of quality of life, low crime rates, health, or happiness of small communities. It does not make much sense to let

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<sup>51</sup> Daniel C. Fitzgerald, *Faded Dreams: More Ghost Towns of Kansas* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994), xvi.

<sup>52</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 300, 309, 311.

these social structures continue to dissolve. As a result there are many attempts being made to save small communities and the social capital which they provide.

There are varied approaches to reviving or preserving small communities across the United States. Some national organizations, such as The National Trust Main Street Centre work to revitalize towns by preserving historical sites creating an attractive and historically relevant place for tourists to explore. Tourism draws of other types have also been successful in bringing in revenue for struggling small towns. Investment in culture and the arts have also proven successful for some small communities. Artists setting up shop, theatre companies being established, and niche music festivals can also help small towns make a name for themselves and bring in the much needed funds to preserve their social capital. Alternative energy is not just for powering cars, houses, or industrial plants, its production is also energizing small towns. Small towns are eagerly investing in popular alternative energy sources like biodiesel fuel and wind energy. Building biodiesel plants and wind farms are helping to stabilize and empower small economies. If none of these economic strategies work small towns once again have been able to turn to their social resources to help. Economic struggles can also be relieved with a generous donation from a wealthy individual.<sup>53</sup>

None of these strategies however were implemented in Alta's story. Once Alta began to fall behind technologically it could only adapt for so long. Its decline was inevitable; with no railroad or other access to main transportation routes the business could not keep up with other mills and after the Second World War the world was changing so rapidly that the small town could not keep up. After the mill and the gas station closed there the social draw diminished as

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<sup>53</sup> "America the Creative," *Economist.com*, December 19, 2006, under "Reviving Small Towns," <http://www.economist.com/node/8450132> (accessed March 17, 2016).

well. Alta was not completely dead though. It lived on in the memories of those who had frequented its shops, dams, park, and river banks. Those who did business at the mill remember the hospitality and fair business practices of the Stuckys as well as the social events in which they participated at Alta's park. Those who spent their time at Alta as children have nothing but pleasant memories. Young Daniel Friesen, a future poet, was also touched deeply by his memories of the community and has honored it in his writings. They remember how special, their relationships were, they remember how connected the Alta residents were.<sup>54</sup>

These memories are special because they represent significant parts of an individual's life experiences. And these lasting imprints do not consist of excitement over prices, new grinding techniques, or gasoline prices. Rather the lasting significance of Alta is its social capital. The connectivity of these small town community members has lasted even into a new century. Something like this is worth taking the time to acknowledge as important to the understanding of the past, analyzing the nuances of the present, and planning for the future.

So it must be acknowledged that social connectivity like that found in Kansas' small towns in this study is a valuable piece of the social landscape of the state that can and will affect its future social health. Humans might function in a society without it but will they feel happy or fulfilled? Will they build interdependency in their communities? Will they take care of each other in hard times? Will they be as healthy physically and mentally as they could be? Small towns cultivate these characteristics of a healthy humanity and the loss of these communities certainly disadvantages the national landscape in a significant way.

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<sup>54</sup> Friesen, *Harvey County*, 63.



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