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## An English Settlement in Sheridan County, Kansas: The Cottonwood Ranch

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by Don D. Rowlison

FOLLOWING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR, leaflets promoting land in the western United States, and especially Kansas, were distributed throughout Great Britain. Articles in newspapers and other periodicals contained letters from correspondents, emigrants, and travelers who were "prospecting" for lands and investments in the Great Plains. The opportunity to obtain 160 acres, or more, of land in America by homesteading or purchasing at a comparatively minimal cost was appealing to many Europeans who were, in many cases, crowded upon small tracts or compelled to pay rent by working or share-cropping to the "landed gentry." The vast plains of the West were promoted as having a rich potential for agrarian pursuits whether it be horticultural or pastoral, and the potential for profit, although often exaggerated, caused many Europeans to be lured away from their homelands.<sup>1</sup>

Abraham Pratt of Ripon, Yorkshire County, England, was one of the many who sought a "new life" in America. At age fifty-one, he was a widower with four grown children.<sup>2</sup> He sold his liquor and mercantile business as well as his aerated bottling works and immigrated to America in 1878. Many of his acquaintances considered this a drastic move, but Pratt had been to America before. He had spent at least one year in California during the late 1840s while stranded with a British ship that had originally been assigned to a search party to rescue Sir John Franklin and his group in the Arctic. By this, it

may be surmised that Abraham Pratt was somewhat familiar with hardship and adventure. According to the descendants of Abraham Pratt,<sup>3</sup> after leaving Ripon in 1878, he traveled to central and south-central Nebraska in search of a suitable locale to establish a homestead. After being there for a short but undefined time he heard of promising land on the eastern High Plains of northwestern Kansas along the south fork of the Solomon River. Pratt arrived in eastern Sheridan County, Kansas, in 1878 and filed for a homestead along the south or right bank of the South Solomon. Here he built a dugout overlooking a bend in the river's valley, approximately one hundred miles east of the Colorado state line and forty-five miles south of the Nebraska line.

In late 1879 or early 1880, Abraham Pratt returned to England to visit his family and friends. While there he convinced his eldest son, John Fenton Pratt, to return with him to America, file for a homestead, and go into a ranching and farming partnership with him. Arriving in Kansas sometime in 1880, Fent, as John Fenton was called, obtained a homestead adjoining his father's on the north and on the north side of the South Solomon. During his early years in Sheridan County he mostly dwelled with his father in the dugout.<sup>4</sup>

In 1882, Abraham's second son, Tom, arrived in Kansas to join his father and older brother. The next year the Pratts shared their home with Charles Foster, an old acquaintance from England, and two years later, James Foster, a brother, joined them. In 1885 a one-room stone house was constructed on Fent's homestead in which the five bachelors lived during the severe winter of 1885-1886. Also, a bachelor half brother to

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1. Brian P. Birch, "Popularizing the Plains: News of Kansas in England, 1860-1880," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 10 (Winter 1988):262-74.

2. Abraham Pratt was born in 1827, married in 1855, had four children (two sons and two daughters), became a widower in 1866, and never remarried. He died at Studley, Kansas, in 1901.

3. Personal communications, Abram Pratt, James F. Pratt, and Frank M. Pratt (grandsons of Abraham Pratt), with author, 1986.

4. *Ibid.*; Norman Twell, "The British Settlement at Studley," (typed manuscript, 1953), 3-4, Manuscripts Department, Kansas State Historical Society [hereafter cited as KSHS].



*The Pratts adapted what they knew of farming to the environment of western Kansas. Familiar with sheep raising in their home of Yorkshire County, England, they made merino sheep a part of their Kansas farm operation. The outbuildings shown in this 1893 photograph, also reflected a Yorkshire influence with the buildings aligned and connected by a stone wall.*



Abraham Pratt, James Kirk, who had previously homesteaded in Nebraska joined his relatives in Sheridan County.<sup>5</sup>

Another family of Pratts from Kirkstall, England, moved to the area in 1882 but were not related to the Abraham Pratt family. As might be imagined, the names cause some confusion to today's historians. The second Pratt family purchased a ranch from Samuel Morgan, an Englishman and one of the first permanent homesteaders in the county. Thus, the George Pratt family of nine, began ranching approximately four miles west of Abraham Pratt's claim. Interestingly, although both Pratt families were from the same county in England, they were not acquainted until settling in Kansas.<sup>6</sup>

The western part of Sheridan County is classified as Central High Tablelands, whereas the eastern part is Rolling Plains and Breaks. The elevation above sea level is approximately 2,250 feet along the South Solomon River in the eastern part and about 2,900 feet in the western part of the county. A rise of 650 feet in western Kansas elevation in thirty miles is rather dramatic. Currently, the main enterprises are farming and ranching with the principal crops being winter wheat, grain sorghum, and corn; much of the latter two are irrigated.

Sheridan County has a typical continental climate characterized by a wide variation in daily and seasonal temperatures. Winters, especially from December through February, are generally cold whereas warm summer temperatures are often enjoyed for six months of the year with variable spring and fall temperatures. Officially recorded temperatures have ranged from minus 30° Fahrenheit in 1899 to 114° Fahrenheit in 1940.

The annual average of precipitation for Sheridan County is 21.35 inches of which seventy-eight percent usually falls during the growing season from April through September. In two out of ten years the seasonal rainfall is approximately twelve inches. The average seasonal snowfall is twenty-nine inches; the greatest

snow depth of 56.8 inches on the ground was recorded during the winter of 1923-1924. With the fluctuations of seasonal temperatures, snow seldom covers the ground for more than ten continuous days. The sun shines seventy-seven percent of the time possible in summer, and in the winter, sixty-nine percent. The prevailing winds are southerly with an average speed of thirteen miles per hour. The windiest months are usually March and April.

With these variations in the climate the precipitation is often marginal for growing successful farm crops. A deficiency of two inches of rainfall during the growing season may cause a crop to fail. The rainfall can be extremely heavy on occasion and is often accompanied by thunderstorms and high velocity winds which may be localized as are hailstorms and tornadoes. Agriculture on the High Plains has always been accomplished at a great risk.<sup>7</sup>

In 1879 a large influx of potential settlers arrived in Sheridan County to file for homesteads. The settlement pattern was primarily east to west with most of the people filing for claims along the various streams and areas with live springs. A severe drought during the summer of 1880, combined with an invasion of grasshoppers in northwestern Kansas, prompted many of the would-be settlers to seek other areas for homesteading or to totally abandon their idea of farming on the High Plains. Many returned to the East, as the expression went, to "the wife's folks."

After 1880 landseekers began to trickle back into the area with a so-called "boom" year coming in 1884-1885. The newer settlers soon learned that the High Plains could wreak havoc in the winter as they experienced the severe blizzard of 1885-1886, known to local stockmen as the "Great Die-Up."

The *Third Biennial Report* of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture for 1881-1882 gave this description of the county:

[Sheridan] is the second county from the Nebraska State line on the north, and the third from the Colorado border on the west. . . . It was organized in 1880, and contains an area of 900 square miles [30 miles by 30 miles]. Of the eighty-one organized counties, it ranks last in population, and has but .86 inhabitants to each square mile, or less than one person to each 640 acres. The town of Kenneth, situated a little north of the center, is the county seat.

There are no railroads in the county. The nearest railroad point to Kenneth is Grainfield, Gove county, a

5. Twell, "The British Settlement at Studley," 4-5. Abraham Pratt's sons married after settling in Kansas. John Fenton Pratt (1856-1937) married Jennie Elizabeth Place (1861-1959), his sweetheart from England, in 1888. In late 1888, Jennie left England, sailed to New York, and then traveled by train to Lenora, Kansas. Fent met Jennie at Lenora on December 30, 1888, married her on December 31, and brought her to Cottonwood Ranch on January 1, 1889. Two daughters were born to the couple: Hilda (1889-1980) never married and lived at Cottonwood Ranch until 1978; Elsie (1894-1975) married Clarence Johnson in 1929.

Abraham's other son, Tom (1861-1940), married Elizabeth Rebecca Mosier (1875-1944) in 1897. Eight children were born to them: Abram, John, Robert, Jesse, Catherine, Frank, David, and James Fenton; of these, John, Robert, and Jesse are deceased.

6. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

7. Raymond C. Angell, et al, *Soil Survey of Sheridan County, Kansas* (U. S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service with Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station, n.d.), 1-2.

station on the Union Pacific Railway (Kansas Division), distant about fifteen miles. Lenora, Norton county, the terminus of the Atchison, Colorado & Pacific Railroad, is distant from Kenneth about thirty miles....

The varieties of timber found are: Elm, cottonwood, oak and cedar. They are confined to mere fringes along the streams, and in the aggregate do not make one per cent of the county area.

Springs are plentiful, and good well water is reached at an average depth of thirty feet.<sup>8</sup>

The report also noted that besides the South Solomon River in the county there were the north fork of the Solomon, the Saline River, Sand Creek, Prairie Dog Creek, and many spring-fed tributaries. In addition, the report observed that "there is no coal in the county. A limited amount of building stone is found in several localities, but not in quantities to be of much utility. There are no manufactories or banks."<sup>9</sup>

According to this report, Sheridan County was divided into five organized townships in 1881 and had a population of 1,077, but that number dropped in 1882 to 776 people. In 1882 the county had eight post offices, most of which were in people's homes. Only eleven percent of the county's 576,000 acres had been claimed, and as the human population decreased in 1882 so did most of the livestock population. The only increase in livestock numbers were those for milch cows and for sheep; milch cows increased thirty-six percent in one year, but sheep had the most dramatic increase—from 177 in 1881 to 2,418 in 1882.<sup>10</sup>

Additional miscellaneous statistics from this biennial report indicate that the herd law was being enforced, that farm laborers' wages were eighteen dollars per month, with board, and that crops were planted. In 1882, 14,500 acres of government land were available for homesteading, preemption, and timber culture claims. The Union Pacific Railway had 173,565 acres for sale at an average price of \$2.50 per acre.<sup>11</sup>

8. Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Third Biennial Report, 1881-82* (Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1883), 458-61. Although the report cited only "fringes" of timber, it noted a number of acres in "artificial forest" with planted trees one year old or older. In 1881 there were 76 acres of these plantings; in 1882 there were 314 acres. This suggests the establishment of timber claims. There was, according to the report, an increase in board, rail, and wire fencing; the 1882 decrease in hedge fences may have been a result of drought, prairie fire, or the hedge being counted in some way with the timber claims or as "artificial forest."

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.* Most acreage in 1881 and 1882 was in corn, 5,030 and 7,095 acres, respectively. Corn was followed by millet, then winter wheat, and, in 1881, six acres were in tobacco.

In light of these statistics, the sparsity of population in the county and the availability of public lands are more easily comprehended. The Pratts recognized the potential of the rich native grasses and the abundance of water in the vicinity of their claims. Within the immediate region where Abraham, Fent, and Tom eventually built separate houses, within a one-half mile radius, there were at least twenty live springs with enough water to support many head of livestock and also deep pools of water in the South Solomon which provided water for many more.

Although Abraham Pratt and his sons were considered urban immigrants enjoying middle-class status, they came from an area in England that was recognized for its many fine flocks of sheep. The Pratts knew of the conditions necessary for profitably raising sheep and saw the advantage of their well-watered claims along the South Solomon as well as the adjacent public lands for grazing.

During the 1880s investments in sheep and cattle on the Great Plains provided good, if not excellent, potential for making a profit. Livestock could be grazed on open public lands at no cost except for such items as salt, medicine, and herders' wages. Few horses were needed, and no fences were required. Therefore, with only the initial outlay of capital to obtain livestock, one could engage in the business of ranching easily. Consequently, the Abraham Pratt family and the Foster brothers invested in sheep.<sup>12</sup>

This venture proved to be quite successful. The flock could easily be herded by one man, no fences except holding pens at the farmstead needed to be constructed, and the sheep produced a double crop—spring lambs and summer wool—each year. Since many of the ewes often produced twins, the lamb crop could excel one hundred percent and a ewe was productive for five or more years.

Western Kansas is usually considered to be "cattle country" which, in fact, it has been for most of the past century. But, during approximately fifteen years in the late nineteenth century, the region supported a comparatively vast number of sheep. Many local flocks, as well as transient ones, grazed the foliage of northwestern Kansas from the early 1880s to the mid-1890s. Various factors contributed to the sheep industry in the region: many cannot be directly attributed to the local area but were created by problems associated with open range cattle ranching.

12. Twell, "The British Settlement at Studley," 3-4.



*Taken in 1894, this photograph captures the images of family and friends, as well as John Fenton Pratt's stone home which had been enlarged from its one room constructed in 1885. Posed for the camera are: seated, Mrs. George Pratt and Abraham Pratt; in buggy, Frank Brandram and Jim Walsh; standing, left to right, Charles Taylor, Anne Taylor, unidentified man, Hannah Pratt, Charles Foster, Mabel Pratt, "Big Tom" Pratt, Jimmy Foster, James A. Kirk, George H. Pratt, Pat Walsh, and Gertrude Pratt.*

With the settlement of western Kansas, the state's quarantine law against "through" Texas cattle was strongly enforced by local lawmen and grazing associations. This greatly diminished the numbers of range-bred cattle coming into the area for grazing or being driven through to stock northern ranges. A depression in the cattle market, a worldwide economic depression, and the severe blizzard or "Great Die-Up" of 1885-1886 opened much of the old cattle ranges for grazing sheep.

Many open range cattlemen had to condense their operations or liquidate their holdings. With the lack of Texas cattle herds coming into the area, Kansas sheepmen had an opportunity to increase their flocks and to take advantage of the free range, even during periods of drought. Since approximately five sheep are the equivalent of one cow in consuming vegetation, will eat a much wider variety of forage, and can graze the grass much shorter than cattle and horses, the sheep industry boomed until the mid-1890s in northwestern Kansas.

The Pratt family had an advantage over most of the incoming settlers because family members had their own capital to invest in a sheep ranch. They had enough funds to hire local labor, at a minimum of cost, and they were able to obtain fair profits from their flock. The former John Fenton Pratt ranch, now the state-owned Cottonwood Ranch near Studley, was the base for the Pratts' sheep operation. Beginning in 1885, and for about three years, the family lived in a one-room, native stone house at Cottonwood Ranch. Originally the outbuildings and corrals at the ranch were made of sod, but later, in the early 1890s, these were replaced by stone structures and a stone corral. In the mid-1880s a large sod corral was constructed approximately one and

one-half miles northwest of Fent's homestead to better utilize the range north of the South Solomon.

The complex of stone outbuildings at the ranch was constructed in a pattern similar to farms in the Yorkshire, England, area. That is, the southern faces of the buildings were aligned and then connected with a stone wall. This placement was used so that the walls of the buildings also served as walls for the corral, making convenient accessibility to the livestock. The location of the outbuildings was far enough away from the house so as to not interfere with household activities. The stone used in the construction of the house and outbuildings at Cottonwood Ranch, as well as at many of the other English homes in the area, was procured from land controlled by the Pratt family partnership. The stone was quarried and hauled one and one-half miles to the ranch headquarters by hired laborers for four to five dollars per cord.<sup>13</sup>

Fent Pratt kept detailed records of his business transactions in a set of ledgers still retained by his grandchildren. Those ledgers, which have been micro-filmed by the Kansas State Historical Society, contain a vast amount of information regarding his personal expenditures and those of the family's combined agricultural operation. For example, on September 20, 1892, the total number of sheep owned by the family was 1,581 head: Abraham Pratt owned 100; Tom Pratt, 526; and Fent owned 955. Costs for maintaining the flock were

13. "Pratt Financial Records, 1890-1973," John Fenton Pratt Ledgers, microfilm rolls nos. 19028-19029, Manuscripts Department, KSHS; J. F. Pratt photograph prints, KSHS.



*Just a few years after the 1894 photograph was taken, the physical scene had changed dramatically around the John Fenton Pratt home. Trees had grown to some height and a sturdy fence separated the house lot from flocks of sheep.*

prorated so that each individual paid his proportionate share and received his appropriate profit. The size of the flock was not large when compared with those of other sheep ranches but was an important factor in the family's overall business operations.<sup>14</sup>

The Pratts' sheep operation was too complex for all of its details to be presented here. The business records include buying corn from local farmers for feed; payments to the hired herders at forty cents per day; shearing expenses; pounds of wool clipped and shipments made to dealers in Philadelphia and St. Louis; dates as to when the rams were turned out with the ewes; the trading of mutton for beef with neighboring Englishmen; and many other items.<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned, sheep were important to the ranching operation of the Pratts, but other businesses also were indulged in by family members. For instance, Abraham Pratt owned the lumberyard in Skelton, now Studley, and Fent was a successful financier and investor. Tom had his own ranching and farming operation.<sup>16</sup>

Abraham Pratt and his sons continued with their flock of sheep until Abraham's death in 1901. Shortly thereafter, Fent and Tom divided their father's estate with their two sisters in England and pursued their individual business interests in Sheridan and Graham counties. Fent sold most of his land, except for his

original homestead, and all of his sheep in 1902. The money from the proceeds of those sales was placed into various investments and was used to finance local settlers who mortgaged their land or livestock at an annual rate of ten to fifteen percent. Tom continued farming and ranching. Fent died in 1937 at the age of eighty-one, and Tom died in 1940 at the age of seventy-nine.<sup>17</sup>

In 1983 the State of Kansas purchased twenty-three acres of the John Fenton Pratt ranch which included the remaining ranch buildings. The ranch, located just north of U. S. Highway 24 near the Sheridan-Graham County line, is managed as a state historic site by the Kansas State Historical Society. It is the society's intention to restore all of the structures and to interpret the contributions of English settlers in the area, sheep ranching, and the range cattle business. This will be done through static exhibits and a variety of "living history" programs. All will be based upon the extensive records that gentleman rancher Fenton Pratt left, as well as the outstanding collection of some six hundred glass plates that amateur photographer Fenton Pratt made of the ranch and area settlers from about 1885 through the 1930s.

The preservation of this ranch provides a reminder of the English settlers, the Pratt family in particular, who came to western Kansas, faced the environment, and established farming and ranching operations in the late nineteenth century. KH

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*