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# Florence and Cottonwood River Valley

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MOSES SHANE PARK, FLORENCE

## *Florence and Cottonwood River Valley*

The Symphony in the Flint Hills 2009 concert site is situated in the uplands, south of the Cottonwood River on the Doyle Creek Ranch. We are guests of local ranchers Judy and Randy Mills. Our hosts have arranged for us to experience another unique Flint Hills Tallgrass Prairie landscape. This year we are near the headwaters of Turkey Creek, a spring-fed stream

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that flows north to the Cottonwood. The Cottonwood flows into the Neosho near Emporia, and the Neosho joins the Arkansas in northern Oklahoma. As with previous concert sites, we are spending the day in a landscape that has included humans for at least the last 10,000 years.

### FLORENCE

This year's gateway town is Florence, about nine miles to the west, just over

the Chase County border in southeastern Marion County. Marion County has been called the cultural border between the cowboy and the plowboy.

Florence is located at the junction of Doyle Creek and the Cottonwood River. At one time it was part of Chase County. This is an area of abundant springs including Crystal Springs, said to be the largest in Marion County. In a park-like setting shaded by old burr oak trees, the springs are a delightful place to visit.



FLORENCE HIGH SCHOOL 1880-2009

Also called City Springs, they are the source of Florence's water supply.

My grandparents lived in Florence for fifty years. My grandmother ran the Rath Variety Store in the 1950's, and my grandfather worked for the Santa Fe Railway. He's third from the right, in the top row in the roundhouse group photo that accompanies this article.

I was born at the old Salem Hospital in nearby Hillsboro. I have the bill: an eight day stay cost my parents \$16.75. Family lore says they faced a snowstorm getting to the hospital and a dust storm coming home.

Although I've never lived here for any length of time, I have a lifetime of memories tied to this place. This is where my grandfather introduced me to the wonders of the Tallgrass Prairie.

I have vivid visual memories of this landscape; moments on the prairie or river that play in my mind



MAIN STREET, CEDAR POINT 1915



like Haiku poetry. Researching and writing this article has given me an opportunity to reconnect with old friends and favorite places.

The 1887 limestone and steel water tower on the bluff above Florence was recently listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Reading the claim on the side of the tower proclaiming that the water is “99.96% pure” always makes me smile, reminding me of the time my grandmother ran a bath for me and the water in the tub was brown.

I was a city boy and was scolded for not wanting to get into it. My grandfather said this happened when rainwater runoff overflowed the spring.



CEDAR POINT BRIDGE & MILL, 1908



FLORENCE CRAWFORD CAPPER  
*Kansas State Historical Society*

## EARLY SETTLEMENT

The first Anglo to settle on what became the Florence Townsite was Moses Shane. He built a log house in 1858, broke several acres of ground, planted his crops, and died a year later.

In 1859 Patrick Doyle and his wife Mary staked a claim just to the south, on a creek that now bears their name. The limestone house they built in 1871 was rescued from ruin and is now the home of our concert hosts, Judy and Randy Mills.







BASTILLE DAY CELEBRATION 1884  
*Kansas State Historical Society*

## FRENCH COLONY

Settlers from France, Belgium, and Switzerland had begun settling in the Cottonwood Valley to the north of the concert site in 1857. In the 1870's several of them returned to France as official "immigration agents," appointed by the governor to promote immigration to Kansas.

By 1885 over sixty French-speaking families had arrived and the area was known as the "French Colony." These settlers played an important role in the religious, business, and cultural life of the Cottonwood River Valley. Their community included members of the aristocracy and former military officers. It's said that Florence "developed from a conglomeration of the rich, the poor,

those interested in the arts, and those interested in the land."

The French were known for their joy for life, which they exhibited at their annual Bastille Day Celebration on July 14th.

Just to the west of Cedar Point is the farm settled by Claude Francis Bichet and his wife Sophia in 1858. The family moved from a "dug-out" in the riverbank into a log cabin in 1862. A two-story stone addition was built in 1875.

A descendant of Claude Francis and Sophia has preserved the farm's buildings. Recently I stood in front of the cabin's 1862 fireplace looking out at the valley through windows that the Bichet's son Alphonse carried on his back from Council Grove. To the north of the farm, visible from Highway 50 on Bluestem Road, is the native limestone "Bichet School" built in 1896 for the children of the French colony.

One of the Cottonwood Valley's surviving architectural treasures is the 1884 Florence Opera House at the

corner of Main and 5th. Emile Firmin, Gustave Gaze and Francis Aryal, all Frenchmen of considerable means, financed its construction. The main gallery could seat eight hundred, and some of the most reputable traveling shows of the time performed there.

Descendants of these French pioneers continue to live in the valley, but through the generations their French identity has faded. The Cedar Point Cemetery is the final resting place for many of these pioneers. A number of impressive monuments in the cemetery honor their memory. Reposez en paix.

## THE SANTA FE RAILROAD

“When town speculators learned of the route of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, they assessed various locations which they believed would be successful town sites. The place where the railroad would cross the Cottonwood River in Marion County appeared to be a fine location for a town.”

In December of 1870, speculators formed the Florence Town Company. Samuel Crawford, the third governor of Kansas, was its president. Governor Crawford named the town after his daughter Florence. In time, she married Arthur Capper, who also became governor, and then served as U.S. senator for thirty years. Arthur and Florence accomplished many good works. They were leaders in the movement that started the 4-H youth organization and they established the Capper Foundation for Crippled Children.

When the railroad reached Florence in 1871, the town boomed. By 1875



FLORENCE SANTA FE RR EMPLOYEES CA. 1930  
*Florence Historical Society*

over sixty businesses were operating. One of them, a millinery store owned by Madame Victoria Gost, “featured the latest Paris fashions.” Madame made yearly trips to New York to purchase her merchandise.

In its first years Florence was the end of the railroad’s main line, which made it an important shipping point for wagon and stage traffic to the south and west. By 1876 Florence had more stage lines than any other town along the railroad.

Florence was even a “cow-town” for a short time. Texas cattle were driven to the railhead at Florence and shipped east. By 1877 the railroad had extended north and south, and Florence had become an important division point on the Santa Fe system. Its activities eventually included repair shops, a roundhouse, coaling station, fuel oil facilities, and a passenger station.

Over five hundred people were employed by the railroad in Florence.

Florence has always been a “railroad town” with its identity shaped by the Santa Fe and its activities. Whenever I hear a train whistle blow I think of Florence and warm summer nights when all the windows were open to the sound of the Super Chief passing through the dark.

## MEXICAN COMMUNITY

At the turn of the 20th century, the Santa Fe aggressively recruited labor in Mexico, where they found workers anxious to escape the Mexican Civil War and make a better life for themselves.



EL RANCHITO LADRILLO, SANTA FE RR EMPLOYEE HOUSING  
*Florence Public Library*



By 1904 about seventy-five Mexican families were living in Florence. Altogether, throughout their history here, it is estimated that four hundred and sixty-nine such families lived in Florence at one time or another. "They were honest, humble, sincere Catholics who were noted as hard-working people. When some were laid off, they took turns working, so that all would have some income." They formed their own mutual assistance society and took care of each other in difficult times.

In 1923 a housing unit called Ranchito De Ladrillo was built for them on Santa Fe property south of the tracks in Florence. It housed about twenty families until its demolition in 1948. A similar structure that locals call the "Mexican bunk-house" has been preserved north of Matfield Green.

"Every fall, when Mexico's Independence Day arrived on September 16th, they had a celebration. The event grew to become an area-wide social occasion attended by

large crowds. It attracted people from all around the area." The entire community joined together to make Florence Fiesta the best in the state.

A legacy of the town's Mexican heritage can be seen today at the grotto of the Virgin Mary, built under the supervision of Gabino Modesto at the northwest corner of the Catholic church.

When all of the operations of the Santa Fe division point were moved to Newton in 1937, Florence began a decline that continues to this day. Like the Bastille Day celebrations of the earlier French settlers, by 1940 the annual fiestas had become a memory. Today Florence continues the tradition of a summer celebration with a colorful Labor Day parade and concert.

## HARVEY HOUSE HOTEL

Florence is probably most famous for being the location of the first Harvey House Hotel, established by the "father" of restaurant chains and "fast food", Fred Harvey. Known as the Clifton



JUDY GARLAND AND JOHN HODIAK, IN A SCENE FROM THE MOTION PICTURE, "THE HARVEY GIRLS"

JUDY GARLAND IN MGM'S *The Harvey Girls*

Hotel and Restaurant, it operated from 1878 to 1900. "Sumptuous dinner parties were served here. The hotel, with its refined hospitality, beautiful table service, and gracious hostesses was once the pride of Florence."

The founder of the restaurant chain was born in London, arrived in New York in 1850, and began working in a New York restaurant. Later, while working on a railroad in Missouri, he

took particular note of the "notoriously bad, filthy, and hurried" meal stops along the line. He became interested in improving the situation by establishing a chain of eating houses and hotels along the Santa Fe railroad line. Harvey contracted with the Santa Fe's management and opened his first restaurant in the Topeka depot. After its success he then bought and remodeled what became the Clifton Hotel at Florence.

Coal oil lamps and candles lit the interior of the hotel. On each side of the main entrance, there was a huge fountain. Mrs. Harvey journeyed to England and Ireland to purchase linens, china, silverware, and furniture. The master chef and manager of the Palmer House in Chicago was enticed by a salary of \$5,000 per year to come to Florence.

In 1879-1880 three trains passed through Florence daily carrying an average of fifty passengers, all of whom dined at the restaurant. Meals for train passengers cost seventy-five cents each,

and the train crews paid only twenty-five cents. Meals were served family style at tables set for ten; sixty persons could be seated in the dining room. Dining while traveling on the Santa Fe through Florence followed this routine: several miles from the station orders for meals were taken, and this information wired ahead; a mile from the station the train engineer blew a signal and the waitresses in the restaurant were notified to place the first course on the table; when the train stopped, the people rushed inside to seat themselves and began dining within the allotted time of thirty minutes. All were expected to be dressed properly, and if any men were coatless, Mr. Harvey had spare alpaca jackets they could borrow.

Harvey was particular in the selection of waitresses. To be a "Harvey Girl" was considered a privilege. He wanted only respectable, attractive, and intelligent young women between the ages of 18 and 30. The women worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week

for the salary of \$17.50 per month, plus board and room. They were expected to be courteous, attentive, cheerful, and quick. They also were required to sign a pledge saying they would not marry for one year after beginning work. They lived in the upper rooms of the hotel and were carefully supervised by a hotel matron. Curfew was at ten. One night a week a very proper dance was held, and men from the community were permitted to attend. Will Rogers said he figured Fred Harvey and his girls "kept the West in food and wives." One legend has it that 20,000 of the comely waitresses wound up as brides of western ranchers, cowboys, and railroad men.

At the chain's peak, there were some eighty-four Harvey Houses throughout seven states located every 100 miles along the Santa Fe line.

The refined, fashionable era of the Harvey Girls and Clifton Hotel in Florence came to an end in 1900. When the railroad passenger trains began to have dining and Pullman sleeping cars,



THE FLORENCE OIL FIELD *Around 1920*  
*The Florence Historical Society*

the Florence Harvey House declined in importance as a travel stop. The last trainload was served at the Clifton Hotel on March 31, 1900, when Harvey moved his facilities to Newton.

The 'Harvey girl' became an icon of popular American culture with the release of the 1946 MGM film, *The Harvey Girls*, starring Judy Garland and Angela Lansbury. Harry Warren and Johnny Mercer's, "On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe" won an Oscar for best song.

Today, this fascinating story is being preserved at the Harvey House Museum

at Third and Marion Streets in a portion of the original hotel.

## OIL

The Eldorado oilfields, in Butler County south of Florence, were discovered in 1915. They soon proved to be the richest in Kansas. As discoveries were made closer and closer to Florence, the town began to experience the frenzy of an oil boom. In 1920 Florence had a population of about 1,300. When oil was finally discovered nearby, the population jumped to over 3,000 with the arrival

of oil field workers and their families. The growing population increased the need for more public services. A new school, bank, theatre, city building, two large garages, and other buildings were built. The town's streets were paved with the brick still in use today. The present water system using water from the Crystal Spring was devised. It was at this point that Florence reached her zenith in population and production. "Oil made millionaires of many of Florence's citizens and landowners...and fools of others." The frantic pace connected with the oil boom only lasted three years. Production diminished and many wells were capped. Today wells near Florence produce only about 8,000 barrels of oil a year.

### STONE QUARRYING

The quarrying of limestone has been an important economic activity

in the life of Florence and other Flint Hills communities. As early as 1872, the railroad was carrying carloads of building stone to Kansas City. By 1910, 40 railroad cars filled with stone were being shipped in all directions each day.

Florence limestone "was cream colored, it hardened on exposure, was



STONE QUARRY AT FLORENCE  
WITH RAILCARS IN THE BACKGROUND  
*The Florence Historical Society*

extremely durable, and could be easily sawed into any shape." The surviving limestone buildings and bridges in the area are a testament to these qualities and the skilled labor force that created them. One such structure, the Clements Stone Arch Bridge,



has been called one of the “grand old landmarks of Kansas.” With its one hundred twenty-seven foot length and twenty-one foot five-inch span rise, it is the largest stone arched bridge still standing in Kansas.

Today modern rock crushers still operate at the Florence quarry, producing products ranging in size from powdered agricultural lime to five-foot riprap used for erosion control. Cut stone is no longer quarried here.

## THE PRESENT

The story of Florence and Cedar Point is unfortunately a footnote in the larger story of the decline of rural America. The mechanization of agriculture, school consolidation, improvements in transportation, the advent of big-box stores are all forces contributing to this decline.

While revisiting the area researching this article, I have been confronted with the sad fact that much of the cultural and architectural heritage



DRINKWATER AND SCHRIVER MILL ca. 1900  
*Kansas State Historical Society*

of the Cottonwood River Valley and the Flint Hills is disappearing in our lifetime. As I write these words, the 1880 Hill School is being demolished. The 1921 craftsman style high school will also be razed soon unless someone comes forward to save it.

When you crossed the bridge at Cedar Point on your way to the concert site, you no doubt noticed the picturesque Drinkwater and Shriver

Mill. Did you notice that it will soon be “too far gone to save”?

Even though it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the magnificent Clements Camelback Stone Arch Bridge has not been maintained for many years. It’s a testament to its construction that it does not yet have serious structural issues. If it is not refurbished soon, its demise is inevitable.

It’s my hope that the appreciation of the Flint Hills fostered by today’s event will inspire us to make a greater effort to preserve our unique and valuable heritage. Perhaps we can create a new economy based on showing visitors all that we love about these hills, an economy that has at its heart a respect for the agricultural and ranching culture that has maintained this cherished Flint Hills landscape.

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*Michael Stubbs is a historian of Kansas and the Flint Hills. He lives in Wabaunsee County near Eskridge.*

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