

EWING FAMILY NEWS

Descendants of William Alexander Ewing

100 Years of history

Irving tried to compete in the Blue Valley

When William Alexander Ewing put down our family roots in Marshall County, Kansas, he chose a homestead site just three miles northeast of the town of Irving. That was 1870, and at that time, the town was barely ten years old.

The Ewing family's household goods and belongings had been shipped from Illinois by rail, to be delivered to a depot at Elizabeth Station. But the tiny rail-stop near Barrett had no space for storage, so the goods were deposited at

Irving. Because the wagon bridge wasn't built until the following year, the Ewings had to ford the Big Blue river to retrieve their belongings.

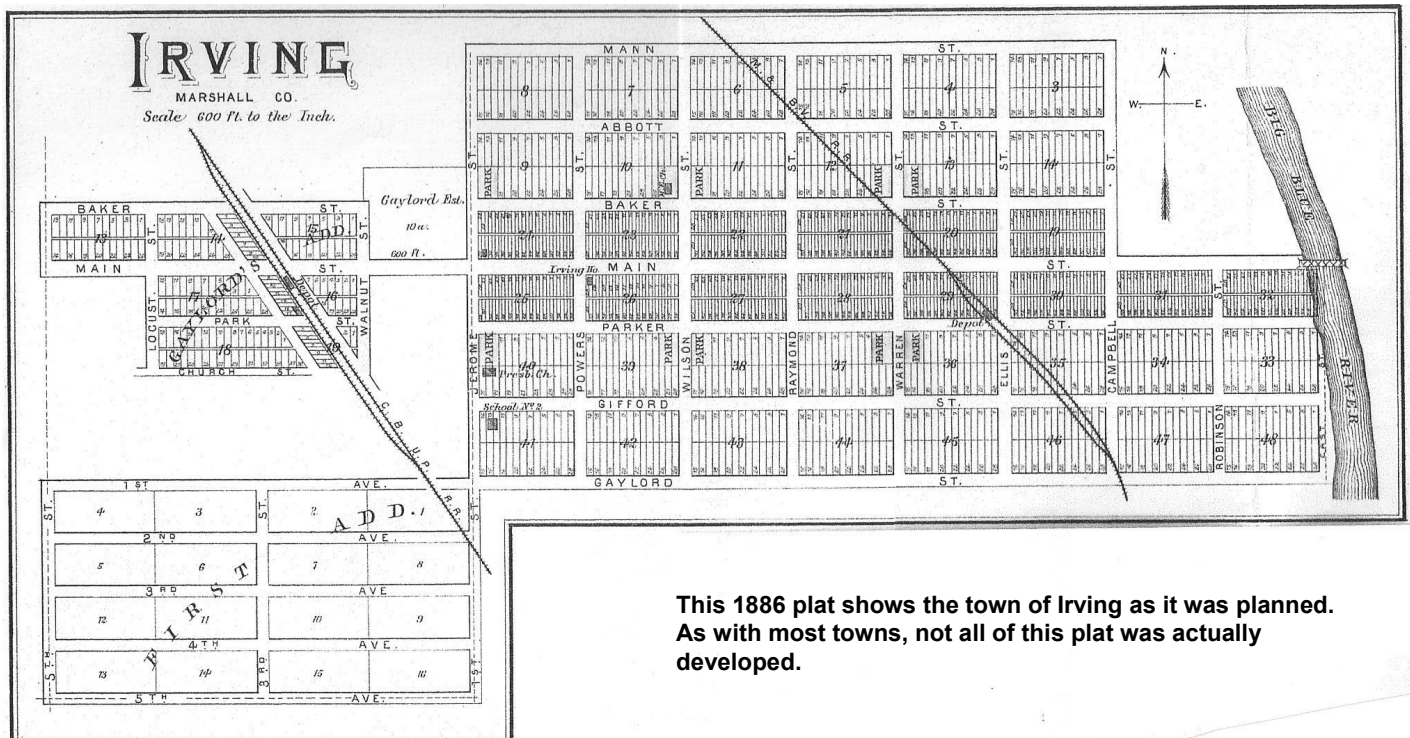
Irving History

Just five years after Kansas officially became a territory, a group of men in Lyons, Iowa, decided to organize and establish a town somewhere in the new frontier and to name it in honor of Washington Irving. They chose one of their members, W.W. Jerome, to

travel into the territory and choose a site. With the aid of an agent from the New England Emigrant Aid Society, Jerome selected a tract of land on the west bank of the Big Blue river, north of Game Fork creek for their new settlement.

In December, 1859, ten members of the founding group made their way to Irving in a winter storm and began building the first structures. By February,

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This 1886 plat shows the town of Irving as it was planned. As with most towns, not all of this plat was actually developed.

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1860, the fledgling village was recognized by the Territorial Legislature. Early that spring, families from Iowa and Illinois joined the settlement and progress seemed imminent. But a long drought began that spring, lasting until the end of July, sending many of the families back to Iowa. When rain finally returned, it came with a strong storm that damaged buildings and convinced more people to leave. In spite of the rough start, the town continued to build, with hopes of being the primary commercial center in the area. And they thought they had made it when the railroad chose Irving as the best location to cross the Big Blue in 1867.

But, just two years later, a group from New York decided to start another town only five miles upstream. Blue Rapids would become the commercial center that Irving had aspired to be.

Incorporated as a third class city in 1871, the officers elected at Irving's first (and only) election failed to qualify and the charter was surrendered, leaving the town to live out its existence as an

unincorporated village.

New hope was breathed into the town in 1875, when they obtained permission to build a dam on the Big Blue. The dam and a mill were completed, attracting an assortment of businesses to the town. Their success would be fleeting.

The Tornado

May 30, 1879, would become a major turning point in Irving's history. As can happen on a Kansas spring day, a major super-cell developed, sweeping through southern Marshall County and spawning numerous funnels. One inflicted damage on Blue Rapids while another bore down on Irving, ripping through the town. Scarcely had the tornado passed, when a second major storm swept in, compounding the destruction. Thirty-four homes and businesses were destroyed, thirteen lives lost and many dozens were injured. The



Two tornados ravaged Irving on May 30, 1879.

wagon bridge was lifted from its piers, mangled and dropped in the river.

Irving's story would spread across the country, from newspaper to newspaper over the weeks that followed the storm. The town and the state received so much publicity that Kansas became known as "the cyclone state". And it is said that Irving's tornado was later inspiration for the writing of "The Wizard of Oz".

More Calamity

Determined to prosper, the citizens of Irving rebuilt after the



First built in 1870-71, the Irving bridge over the Big Blue was destroyed no less than four times. The 1879 tornado and floods in 1903, 1908 and 1974 all claimed the structure.



storm. After all, the mill was still operational, even if it did have to compete with mills in Blue Rapids. But, just two years later, an 1881 flood took out the dam. So it was rebuilt, only to be washed out again in 1883. By now, the operators of the mill could no longer afford to rebuild, so the mill closed. It sat empty until 1901 when it was demolished.

Floods in 1903 and 1908 washed out the bridge over the Big Blue, but it was always rebuilt. And when weather wasn't wreaking

havoc in the town, fire would take a turn.

Businesses were lost to fire in 1905, 1907 and 1913. And again, in 1916 a blaze started in the drug store and quickly spread to other businesses. Before it was contained, many of the buildings on the north side of Main street were destroyed.

Between the spates of mayhem, the people of Irving would rebuild, always managing to restore the town to some level of comfort. And while they were never able

to achieve the level of success that was envisioned by the town's founders, they did provide some commercial support for residents of the village and the surrounding area.

A list of businesses in Irving as of 1957 included: two railroads, the elevator, Pioneer Museum-Library, Castle hall (K of P hall), Denton's service, Graham's blacksmith, Thomson's store, Hilton's barber and beauty, Blaney's hard-

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Some identified, others not, this group of Irving business photos were taken by Ellen Stiles in the early 1900's. The "house" below was the telephone office.



*Merry Christmas
and a
Happy New Year
to all!*

Butch Ewing
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ware, Austin's restaurant, the lumber yard, Oswalt foundry, Ensley service station, Irving State Bank, Midland parts and bearings, Southside recreation hall, Hannon grocery and locker, Sheaffer saw mill, Swoboda mechanics, Holgerson repair shop and Irving Telephone Company (operated by the Vallier family). In addition, there was a post office, elementary and high

schools, and three churches (there had been five churches).

The Final Blow

Over the years, Irving had dealt with adversity of all kinds... weather, fire, commercial competition and human failings... and, while stunted at times, it managed to survive for nearly a century. But, at the end of the 1950's, it was governmental action that led to the town's demise.

After years of flooding all along

the watershed area that feeds into the Missouri river, the federal government devised a plan to build reservoirs on the major waterways in the system, including the Big Blue. Many years of discussion, argument and negotiation ended with the construction of Tuttle Creek Dam at Manhattan. The dam's pool area would reach up the Big Blue valley nearly 50 miles, at times flooding as much as 55,000 acres of bottom land and causing the removal of nine small towns, including Irving.

After 1960, all that remained of Irving was the bridge that spanned the Big Blue. And the river claimed that with flood waters in 1974.



Irving today (above), looking to the southeast from the west end of what was Main Street. A memorial marker (right) stands as a reminder of the town that had endured hardship for nearly a century.

