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# LIFE AND LANDSCAPES IN THE POST-OFFICE COMMUNITIES OF HOLT COUNTY, NEBRASKA

REBECCA A. BULLER

Thumb through the pages of a DeLorme gazetteer of any Great Plains state and you will find small black diamonds, each with its own place-name, scattered throughout the large-scale maps. For those who are familiar with the area, the existence of some of the diamonds, supposedly marking the location of a community, can be confusing since these markers do not represent contemporary towns. Additionally, when you travel country roads in rural areas of the Great Plains you will stumble

Key Words: cultural landscape, European American settlement, historical geography, Nebraska, post offices

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upon markers that identify a nearby post office, which, also no longer exists. What do these diamonds on the map represent? How does the occasional countryside post-office sign relate? Some studies, such as that of Geary County, Kansas, often mention “names on the map like Wreford, Olson, and Moss Springs, which developed from slight concentrations of farms to include a post office and school, [that] never grew further,”<sup>1</sup> but fail to go into more detail describing what such “concentrations” of people were like. My goal is to reveal the past communities that the cartographic diamonds in a gazetteer represent. More importantly, I hope to contribute to Great Plains scholarship, particularly that of European American settlement, by providing a window into the personalities of boom-and-bust communities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What would a day-in-the-life consist of for a resident of north-central Nebraska in the late 1880s? If they had gone to get their mail, settlers near the community of Dustin in Holt County might have felt as if they had stepped into a small version of a metropolis. On the main street, running north-south, the stores

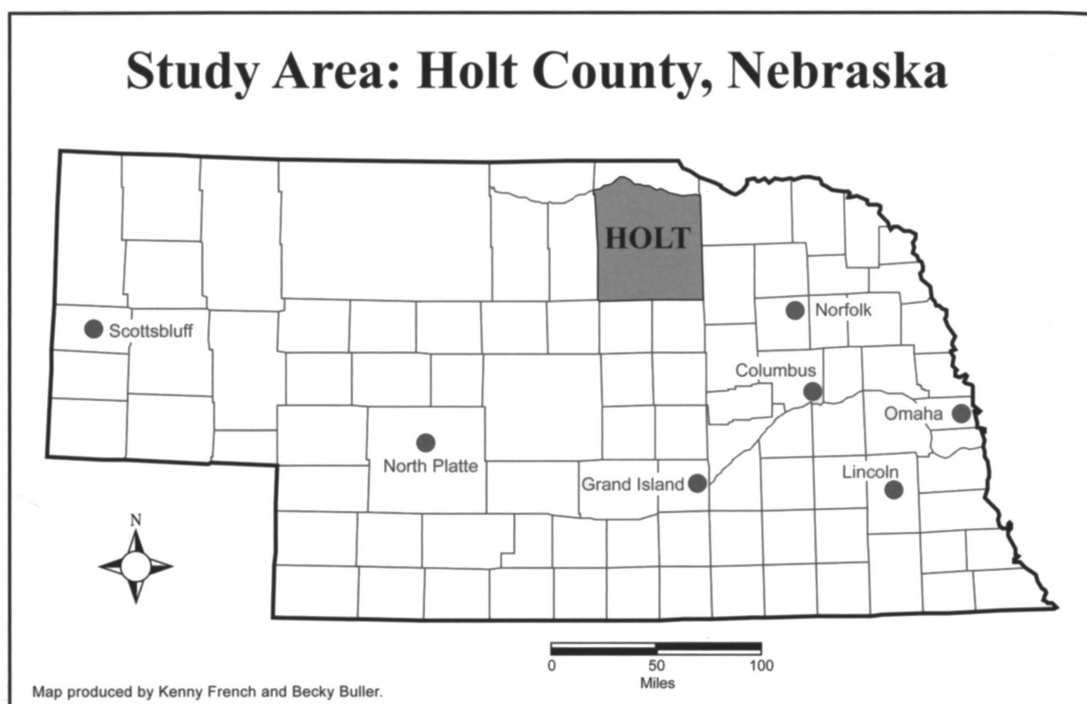


FIG. 1. Study area: Holt County, Nebraska.

and the print shop were on the west side, while the manse—the home of a Presbyterian pastor—and community hall were located on the east side. The north end of the street was bounded by the blacksmith shop while the church was close to the southern end.<sup>2</sup> After gathering the mail at William Dustin's general store, and possibly purchasing items such as wash wringers and an umbrella, settlers might stop by the hardware store to buy supplies to build a new frame for a house or barn. If a family member had been sick, the settler could purchase remedies from the drug store. They might read the latest copy of the *Dustin Dispatch* while waiting for a horse to be shod at the blacksmith. Settlers might choose to stop by the school or visit with the minister at the manse or in the church. If the mood and the price were right, a fine hat could be purchased at the millinery shop. There might be a meeting going on at the community hall, or it was the time of the year for the annual

oyster feed held on the second floor of the hall, known to locals as “the lodge.” During the winter, residents might participate in literary meetings complete with animated debates.<sup>3</sup>

Since no extant photographs of the community of Dustin have survived for public consumption, the town's historical landscape exists today only in memory and in subtle physical evidence left on the contemporary landscape. However, as will be shown, enough does remain to give us a glimpse into this past life.

Along the riparian woodlands of northern Holt County, Nebraska (Fig. 1), and the open, grassy sandhills of the southern half of the county, small nodes of settlement like Dustin once dotted the maps. The newly formed Holt County, located along the Niobrara and Elkhorn rivers in north-central Nebraska, seemed to be a prosperous area in 1887, capable of supporting a large population of agriculturalists and accompanying service providers. The increasing European and American immigration into

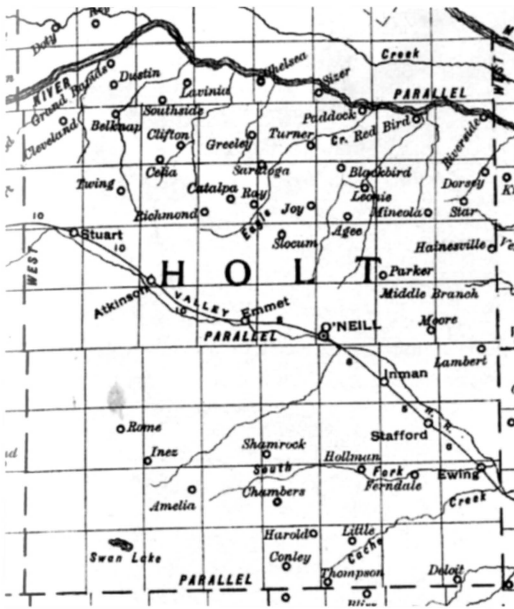


FIG. 2. Railway map of Nebraska issued by the State Board of Transportation, 1889. Courtesy of Library of Congress State Map Collections.

the area in the 1870s and 1880s created the need for postal services. Post offices were eventually established in ninety-two communities, but only nine of those ninety-two communities remain today. Of the eighty-three that failed, seventy-seven were what might be called “post-office communities,” their function being to serve a surrounding area with mail. The remaining six communities that once existed within the county might be considered to be platted failed towns. The seventy-seven unplatted settlements that never grew beyond the infant stage of a post-office community are the subject of this paper. A post office was frequently not enough to ensure a community’s survival. Within Holt County, the communities with the longest life spans were those places that conducted other commercial functions in addition to the post office. Thus, this article adds to the body of Plains scholarship by providing us with a deeper understanding of what life and landscapes might have been

like in many of the short-lived boom-and-bust communities.

The first two post-office communities in Holt County were founded to serve the settlers in 1875, with the establishment of the Redbird and Troy offices along the Niobrara River. By 1912 seventy-seven such post offices had been established, scattered throughout the county’s 2,413 square miles. Small communities grew around some of these smaller post offices. County maps from this era could be difficult to read due to the high density of dots and place-names (Fig. 2). However, within eighty-two years after the first post office’s establishment, the boom was over. All seventy-seven had been discontinued and today are absent from the map. In fact, because of their varying life spans, no one historical map shows the locations of all of the seventy-seven communities (Fig. 3). What happened? What were the post-office communities like? What remains of them on the landscape?

In order to better understand the life of Holt County’s post-office communities, their rapid establishment and almost as rapid discontinuance, it is necessary to explore the circumstances of their founding and the nature of their functions. As a whole, post-office communities were a small part of the larger equation of European American settlement and the town building boom in the late-nineteenth-century Great Plains. These communities were simply a part of the initial overly enthusiastic, let’s-start-a-community-whenever-we-can settlement mentality that was later forced by numerous economic demands to go through a reorganization process. Such a focus of academic study on the region’s European American settlement is certainly not new. John C. Hudson’s *Plains Country Towns* (1985) serves as an academic milestone in the study of the boom of town building and the causes of widespread town failure in the Great Plains in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet *Plains Country Towns*, though rich in theoretical insight, is a case study focusing only on the region of eastern North Dakota. Therefore, it could be argued—as Hudson does—that his conclusions could pertain only



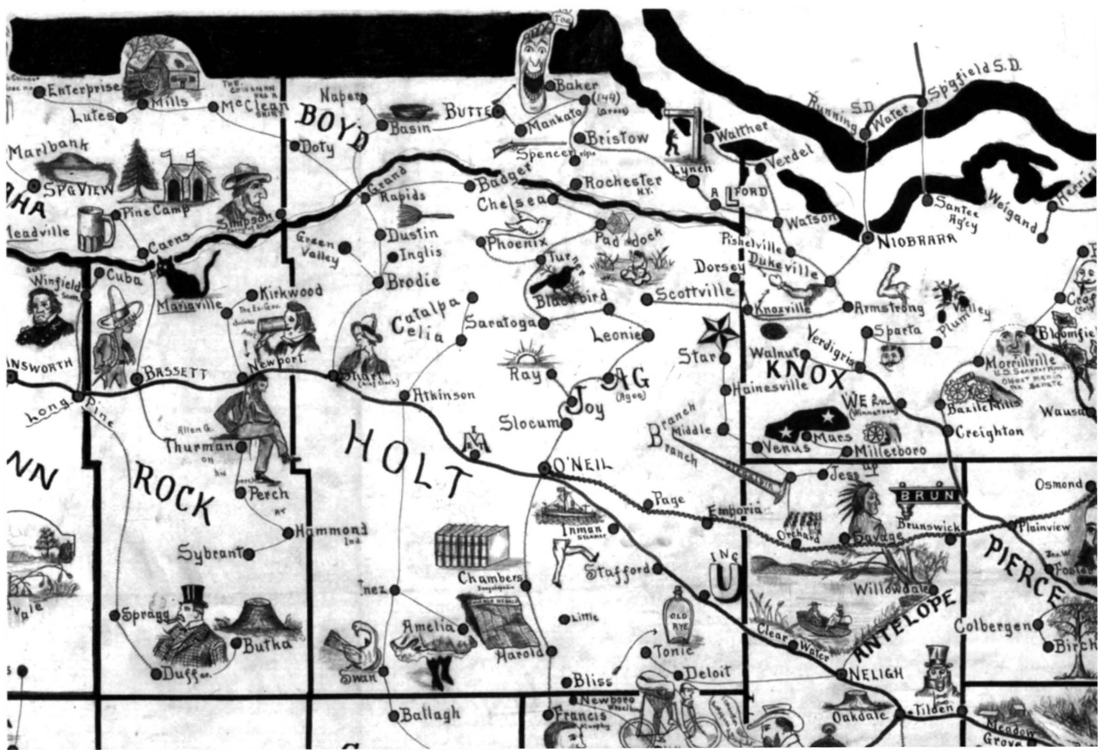


FIG. 3. Galbraith's railway mail service map, Nebraska, 1897. Courtesy of Library of Congress State Map Collections.

to the specific case-study region and might not accurately represent the biographies of all country towns in the Great Plains. Aware of the limits of the generalizations, Hudson noted that he “respectfully lay[s] these questions aside . . . with the hope that they will be addressed meaningfully after comparably detailed studies have been done elsewhere.”<sup>4</sup> Hence, twenty-three years later, this work respectfully answers Hudson’s call for such a comparably detailed study of what the scholar terms “inland towns,” those regional communities never directly serviced by a railroad.

Because the communities often continue to exist in one shape or another, the past is not the only focus of this work. I also examine the landscapes of the post-office communities. In his 1979 work, *Axioms for Reading the Landscape*, Peirce Lewis wrote that “our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations,

and even our fears, in tangible, visible form.”<sup>5</sup> Contrary to Lewis, however, sometimes historical landscapes do not remain in “tangible, visible form”; though they may not be seen by the naked eye, they often still endure as memories. By reading the texts of the surviving landscapes of the past and seeing how they merge into those of the present, we can more clearly appreciate the geographies of both yesterday and today. A combination of plat maps, newspaper articles, post-office records, census and historical society documents, as well as mailed surveys and personal interviews, aided in the recognition of the settlements and their landscapes.

This examination of the life and landscapes of Holt County’s post-office communities will follow in a generally chronological vein, uncovering their biographies through an exploration of post-office establishment, naming, historical landscapes, post-office discontinuance, and

contemporary landscapes. Regardless of the fact that post offices sometimes were established before a community grew around them or vice versa, establishment of the offices boomed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The process of post-office establishment was often an intricate one, frequently illuminating ways in which newcomers went about establishing modes of communication and networking with the federal government, for instance, and with their environments and among themselves. When officially filing for the granting of a post office to the federal government, applicants were required to give a name for said post office. Sometimes applicants thought long and hard about a suitable name; other times the choice of a name for the office was easy. An examination of the names chosen for the post offices is significant in that the toponyms are telling, often revealing settlers' dreams, priorities, and perceptions of local landscapes. A segment on historical landscapes allows us to see through the window to the past, so that we can glimpse what these places looked like. By focusing less on the biographies of place and more on the biographies of people, the following section on popular modes of entertainment serves to highlight social histories, bringing to life the people of the communities and their everyday activities. Though most offices were discontinued by the 1930s, their communities often continue to endure in contemporary landscapes in both tangible and intangible forms.

#### POST-OFFICE ESTABLISHMENT

A comparison of maps from the late 1880s to those of the early 1890s illustrates distinctly that post-office communities were located along streams, they occasionally changed locations, and they were usually short-lived. When established, the offices individually served anywhere from ten people (Holt Creek, for example) to as many as three hundred people (Ray, for example). After coming off the train, mail was delivered to the remote offices by way of horseback or a formal star route. These post offices

were very important to, and even treasured by, some settlers because letters were often the only connection to loved ones back east. In a way, letter writing fostered what Andrea Radke refers to as an "epistolary community" in which people spatially separated from one another by far distances could share and "transfer ideas, cultural attitudes, and personal relations."<sup>6</sup>

Similarly significant, as Radke has noted, by connecting settlers to mail-order catalog businesses, post offices gave women the ability to actively separate themselves from the wildness of the primitive frontier and to begin to refine their rural spaces. They were able to purchase goods such as curtains, dishes, china, and other markers of social refinement through the mail-order catalogs and have the goods transported to the nearest post office. Those in isolated areas sought to have pieces of middle-class American culture and to achieve refinement through the material culture that was conveyed to them by way of post offices.<sup>7</sup> So important were these connections that frequently "a Montgomery Ward or Sears Roebuck catalogue [got] read more than the Bible or Shakespeare." It was not until 1913, when the rural free delivery (RFD) system included parcel-post delivery that some settlers were able to have their packages sent to their homes.<sup>8</sup>

Following the initial post offices in Holt County at Redbird and Troy, Lavinia was founded to the west in 1877 (Fig. 4). The boom phase of post-office establishment occurred from 1878 to 1886, with fifty-three offices created, and in 1879 alone, twelve offices were formed, including Brewer, Leonie, and Sunnyside. The period from 1887 to 1901 saw the rate of growth slow to one or two developments every few years. Another small peak occurred in 1904—possibly because of a slight increase in settlement due to the Kinkaid Act—with the founding of the four offices of Disney, Martha, Thorn, and Tonawanda. Six more were created before 1912, when Cedar marked the conclusion of the era of post-office establishment.

Sometimes a post office came before the development of a community, and in other

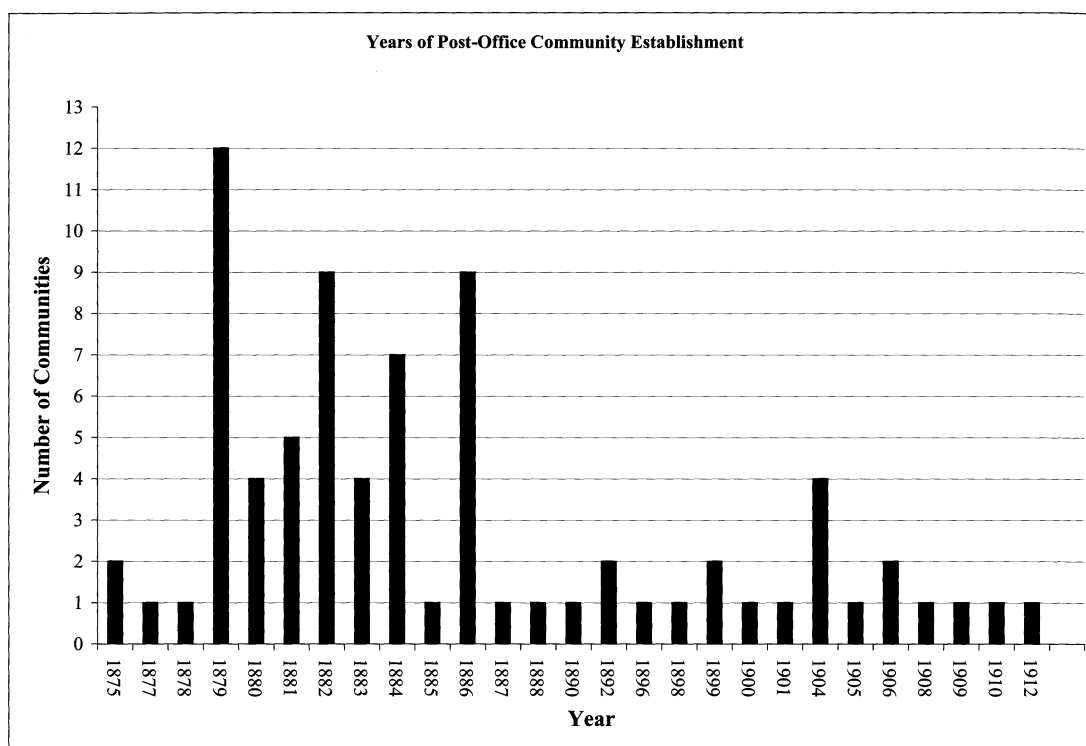


FIG. 4. Years of post-office community establishment.

cases the development of a community caused the need for a post office. When an individual or group of settlers decided that a post office was needed in the area, the application process was fairly simple. The man interested in being the first postmaster would submit a notification of the desire to create a new post office to the Office of the First Assistant Postmaster General at the United States Post Office Department in Washington, DC. The Office of the First Assistant would then send the nearby post office an application to be forwarded to the potential postmaster.<sup>9</sup> The application consisted of a brief questionnaire that included inquiries into the physical location of the office as well as a blank diagram that was to be filled in with drawings of the proposed site. If the application was granted by the Post Office Department, a new post office was established.

The post offices, with few exceptions, sprang up along or within two miles of creeks

or streams that were frequently too small to be shown on a basic small-scale map of the county. Veregge's case study of Geary County, Kansas, notes that this was the norm, with initial European American settlement of the Plains west of the Mississippi being "primarily confined to valley bottoms of the main drainages and their tributaries."<sup>10</sup> Close proximity to a running water source was attractive to settlers in that it not only provided a source of fresh drinking water but also offered the opportunity of harnessing its energy into powering a gristmill. Furthermore, the Holt County post-office communities that eventually failed were generally located at least one township away from the nearest railroad, the Fremont, Elkhorn, and Missouri Valley Railroad Line, later the Chicago and Northwestern, which was oriented in a southeast to northwest fashion through the county following the Elkhorn River. It was because of this distance from the

railroad that post-office communities were not platted and that they served more as small-scale community centers than economic central places for the agricultural hinterland. Most of the “offices” consisted of mailboxes, usually of the pigeonhole variety, located inside a settler’s home, with the settler taking the responsibility of being postmaster. When the duties of postmaster were changed from one person to another, so did the location of the post office.

Accordingly, the location of a named post office was very dynamic, switching from one homesteader’s house to the next, possibly within only a few years. Clifton Grove, Little, and Richmond were typical post offices that switched locations. Because the exact site had the potential to change frequently, the U.S. Post Office Department’s Division of Topography would require that the offices regularly report and describe their absolute location in order “that they may be correctly delineated on its maps.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to providing the exact township, range, section, and quarter information and filling in a series of blanks after brief statements such as “the name of the most prominent *river* near it is . . .,” the local postmaster was required to draw in the office’s location using specified diagrams (a circle for unsectioned land and a square for sectioned land).<sup>12</sup>

The second most common location for a “post office” and its mailboxes was inside a community’s store, as occurred at Joy, Phoenix, and Southside. On occasion, as at Inez, the post office could switch location from a home to a store, or vice versa. Over the years, as postmaster applications expired, for various reasons residents might find it necessary to change the precise location of the office and move its functions to a nearby site. For instance, the office might also relocate between the community’s stores, as at Middle Branch.<sup>13</sup>

Very few post offices had their own specially designated building. Because locals would come to an individual’s home to pick up their mail, much public interaction took place in an otherwise normally designated private sphere. As such, it was common for people picking up

their mail to regularly visit with the postmaster and his or her family. Such a “blurring” of private and public lives still exists today in many smaller communities. As Charlotte Hogg has noted, living in a small town such as Paxton, Nebraska, often obligates a person in some regards to become more open with the details of his or her personal life, with “none of the anonymity found in suburban and urban areas.” As Hogg relates, when living in a small community, her “life felt available and public to everyone; walking downtown to get the mail at the post office meant becoming involved in conversation.”<sup>14</sup>

In sparsely settled Holt County during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, some post-office homeowners probably welcomed the opportunity to become involved in conversation with others. No matter how friendly and patient the postmaster and his or her family, the constant traffic of mail customers through one’s private residence could become bothersome. Martha was a case in point. Named after the mother-in-law of the homesteader Lewis G. Lambert, the Martha post office was established in 1904. The first office was at the top of the stairs in Lewis G. and Evaline Lambert’s home. After a few years Mrs. Lambert grew tired of people constantly coming into her home to get their mail, and the family ordered a post-office building kit.<sup>15</sup> The result was a twelve-by-twelve-foot frame building that served as the second Martha post office until its discontinuance in 1934.<sup>16</sup>

#### POST-OFFICE NAMES

Until the 1890s, choosing a name for a federal post office was generally unrestricted. For example, on the October 15, 1883, application for a “Dustin” post office, the only naming stipulation on the form was that the potential postmaster “select a short name for the proposed office, which, when written, will not resemble the name of any other post office in the United States.”<sup>17</sup> After choosing a name, the proposed postmaster would simply write it in the blank after the phrase “the proposed office to be



TABLE 1  
ORIGINS OF POST-OFFICE COMMUNITY NAMES

Local natural feature	Political official	Local woman	Initial settler	Initial settler or first postmaster	Thoughts and feelings of area settlers	Immigrant's previous home	Native American names	Precinct	Other	Unknown
Badger	Agee	Anncar	Bliss	Belknap	Joy	Chelsea	Kola	Saratoga	Star	Biscuit
Blackbird	Dewey	Celia	Brodie	Cleveland	Opportunity	Deloit	Tonowanda			Brewer
Cache Creek	Dorsey	Inez	Hainesville	Conley	Phoenix	Lucerne				Burton Creek
Catalpa	Greeley	Laura	Harold	Dustin		Minneola				Clifton Grove
Cedar	Paddock	Lavinia	Little	Gillespie		Shamrock				Disney
Eagle Mills/Turner		Leonie	Meek	Hart/Harte						Harriet
Ferndale		Martha	Ray	Inglis						Hollman
Green Valley				McCaffery						Josie
Holt Creek				Moore						Lambert
Maple Grove				Ross						Matthews
Middle Branch				Scottville						Norwood
Red Bird				Sizer						Parker
Riverside				Twing						Richmond
Southside										Rome
Sunnyside										Slocum
Swan										Thompson
										Thorn
										Tonic
										Winfield

called . . ." on the top half of the application form to the Post Office Department. If locals or the proposed postmaster could not decide on a name, several names might be submitted. The post office that became known as Anncar, for example, was also submitted with the names of Carrolton, Neillsville, and Tyrone.<sup>18</sup>

The origin of names varied greatly (Table 1). Most often the selected name was based upon the presence of a local natural feature, as in the cases of Badger, Catalpa, and Swan. Located near Big Sandy Creek's entrance into the Niobrara River, "Badger" was coined in honor of the numerous ferocious animals in the area.<sup>19</sup> A grove of catalpa trees along Brush Creek inspired Catalpa's name, while Swan was named for nearby Swan Lake, which to some had the elegant outline of the bird.<sup>20</sup> Some railroad companies even published maps showing rail routes and post-office locations. Often the communities were denoted by a hand-drawing of symbols and/or pictures of what the map's artist believed helped to characterize the community's place-name.

Many post offices were named after an initial settler of the area who also became the first postmaster. Belknap was named after

Lafayette Belknap, who was appointed postmaster on October 10, 1883. John W. Connelly was postmaster at the Conley post office from its establishment on April 25, 1884, until its discontinuance May 11, 1888. Frederick Moore served as the Moore postmaster from the office's founding on July 17, 1884, until James Marker took over the position on November 10, 1885.<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes an office would be named after an area settler who was not necessarily the first postmaster but was a significant member of the community or early homesteader. Hainesville, on the north branch of the Verdigris River, was named after S. S. Haines, one of the first two settlers in the area.<sup>22</sup> Ray, near the southern tributaries of the northeasterly flowing Eagle Creek, was named after the oldest son of N. T. Hoxie.<sup>23</sup> Little, opening in June of 1881, was named after the early southern Holt County settler L. B. Little.<sup>24</sup>

The selection of the place-name was sometimes sentimental in nature. A proposed postmaster might honor a female relative or another local woman. Along Big Sandy Creek, Postmaster J. A. Estep named his office after his wife, Laura. Anncar, originally spelled "Ann-car," was named in honor of Anna Carroll, the

mother of Postmaster Hugh O'Neill. In 1904 Lewis G. Lambert named a new post office after his mother-in-law, Martha Rollin Porter, a pioneer of the region.<sup>25</sup> Lavinia and Inez were also named after local women. Lavinia was named in honor of Mary Lavinia (Colyer) Smith, the first woman in the settlement.<sup>26</sup> Nine years later, in the southwestern part of the county, Postmaster Roarck named the Inez post office after the family's little neighbor girl, Inez Adams.<sup>27</sup>

Immigrants often named post offices after some characteristic that reminded them of their original homelands. Chelsea and Deloit, both established in 1879, were two such offices. English immigrants named their post office in honor of Chelsea, Middlesex, England. Deloit was most probably named by settlers from Iowa after Deloit in Crawford County in the western part of the state.<sup>28</sup> The short-lived Lucerne post office, lasting only two years, was named by a Swiss immigrant for the city of Lucerne, Switzerland.<sup>29</sup>

In general toponymic fashion, some of the new post offices were named after contemporary political officials. The post office of Agee, established in 1882, was named after Nebraskan politician A. W. Agee, who served as lieutenant governor from 1883 to 1884.<sup>30</sup> The famous Admiral Dewey of the Spanish-American War was the inspiration of the name of the 1898 Dewey post office.<sup>31</sup> The post office names of Greeley, Dorsey, and Paddock were also named in honor of politicians.

The emotions and aspirations of prospective mail patrons occasionally inspired the name of an office. Along the lower reaches of the Blackbird Creek, the post office of Joy was so named to represent the exuberance that the local residents experienced after learning that they had been granted a federal post office. A few miles to the southeast, settlers felt that the area near the Redbird Creek, on the star mail route from O'Neill to Dorsey, would be a good opportunity for successful businesses and a post office. Hence, the office was named Opportunity in 1910. The settlers' premonitions proved partially correct when a cheese

factory flourished in the community for a few years,<sup>32</sup> and the post office served the area for thirty-three years, thirteen more than the county's average post-office life span of twenty years.

Other communities received unique and creative names for various reasons. Saratoga, for example, was named after the Saratoga Precinct in which it was located. Uniquely, the name of the post office of Star in northeastern Holt County, near the Knox County communities of Mars and Venus, was created in order to complete a triangular constellation of heavenly names. The origin of Tonawanda's name, like many others, is disputed. Some claim that the name was in honor of a Native American girl by the name of "Tonawando" or "Tonawanta" who lived in the area. Other sources point to the name coming from the Seneca settlement of "Tonawanda," meaning "swift water" or "confluent stream" in Iroquois, on the Tonawanda Creek in Niagara County, New York.<sup>33</sup> The name "Kola" also supposedly came from Native American roots, but sources are unsure of the specific details. Though one may speculate the origin, many of the post-office names, such as Biscuit, Disney, Rome and Tonic, remain a mystery to contemporary generations.

Over time the spelling of a post-office name might change, as well as the name for the post office itself. The following were misspellings or inconsistencies in spelling: Ann-car for the correct *Ann-car*; Hart for *Harte*; Ingelis, Ingells, and Ingles for *Ingles*; Middlebranch for *Middle Branch*; Minneola for *Mineola*; and Omarel and O'Marel for *Omeral*.

For various reasons, some communities changed their names. The post office of Troy, known to locals as Nebraska Falls for the numerous area natural springs and small waterfalls, changed its name to Paddock in 1875 to honor A. S. Paddock, a U.S. senator from Nebraska.<sup>34</sup>

Established in 1880 and named after its first postmaster, the Greeley post office had to change its name in 1881. To the south in Greeley County, a community had long existed

with the name of Greeley Center. Later Greeley Center shortened its name to Greeley, causing problems for the Holt County community of the same name. Due to the federal rule that no two post offices could have the same name, Greeley of Greeley County claimed dominance over the name, and so Greeley, Holt County, was compelled to change its name to Phoenix. Supposedly, Phoenix's new name was to symbolize the Egyptian mythology of a new community being born out of the old, "burned down" Greeley.

The post office and community that eventually became known as Dorsey changed names the most of any community. The post office, established in the northeastern corner of the county in 1879, was given the name of Apple Creek after the nearby stream whose riparian woodlands were filled with wild crab-apple trees. Later the creek became known as Steel Creek, and so did the community. Then, after temporarily being called Omeral, the name was changed to Dorsey, after George Dorsey, a U.S. congressman.<sup>35</sup> Finally the community had found its name. Such a dynamic flexibility of name changing is itself indicative of the morphologic nature of Great Plains communities and settlement.

#### HISTORICAL LANDSCAPES

Modes of entertainment often indicated the dominant contemporary culture as well as the local human and physical geographies. Celebration of national and Christian holidays, especially the Fourth of July and Christmas, for instance, was a common entertainment in post-office communities. School functions like plays and programs often acted as the social event of the day. Church functions such as bazaars, teas, board meetings, and weddings gave residents an opportunity to socialize with others. Baseball was a popular way to pass leisure time; Ballagh, Bliss, and Mineola, among others, had teams.<sup>36</sup> In the winter, bobsled and skating parties were popular, as they were in other areas of the Great Plains.<sup>37</sup> Some towns, such as Martha, had local bands

to provide entertainment both to the audience and the instrumentalists. The Martha Cornet Band practiced in the community's post-office building. Town halls might sponsor feeds and literary meetings. Early residents of Paddock even attempted to use the area's physical features to promote an early type of "rurality," marketing the unique characteristics of a place to potential "buyers" (i.e., tourists).<sup>38</sup> With abundant natural springs flowing over shale outcroppings, Paddock promoters coined the name Nebraska Falls in a failed effort to attract health-seekers to the "healing" powers of fresh running water.

Common establishments in a post-office community were a school, a church, and various businesses. In the very first years of a community in Holt County, as well as in other Plains settlements, settlers who had not yet constructed a special building might hold school, as well as church, in their homes. Soon, after a few buildings were constructed, the school and church functions might intermix, with church services being held and school lessons being taught in the same building, such as at Inez. Eventually, some of the first substantial structures completed in a settlement were those of separate church and school buildings. Cathy Ambler has similarly found that churches and schools were the most common structures at historic sites in Kansas since they were "agents of social order, centers of community life and ritual, and symbols of vital community functions." As Ambler notes, schools and churches were some of the first establishments constructed in a community, as schools were meant "to transform [settlers'] rough children into refined citizens" and churches served many purposes such as "acting as agents of moral improvement, provid[ing] women with socially approved outlets away from the home and serv[ing] as a gathering place for watchdogs of social conduct."<sup>39</sup>

Since the mail service caused people from the hinterland to travel into one location, merchants and other entrepreneurs saw their chance for profit and would locate near a post-office site, hence encouraging the settlement's

population growth.<sup>40</sup> The population of the post-office communities in general did not exceed one hundred people. In 1890 the three communities of Dorsey, Mineola, and Swan each claimed one hundred area residents. The majority of the other post-office communities had populations of fifty or less.

The most common business services provided at communities with populations of ten or less were a justice of the peace, blacksmith, and general merchandise store. With a population of fifty to seventy-five, a community had the potential to support a drug store and/or a physician, such as in Middle Branch and Paddock, respectively. Although some smaller communities could also have specialized businesses, such as Harold's dressmaker, only one or two specialized services could exist in such communities. In contrast, communities with populations as high as one hundred, with a larger potential customer base, could provide both basic business services and numerous specialized services, such as a harnessmaker, dressmaker, and agricultural implement sales.<sup>41</sup> Thus was the life and landscapes of post-office communities, which once boomed with their inhabitants' aspirations but soon fell prey to the realities of economic forces.

#### POST-OFFICE DISCONTINUANCE

Some locations that attempted to grow by establishing businesses, without having a large enough customer base, failed and did so quickly. In 1884 settlers attempted to establish a community four and one-half miles north and one-half mile west of the present town of Chambers by building a blacksmith shop, store, hotel, livery barn, and hardware store. The settlement seemed promising. Thus, a post office was applied for, with an estimated one hundred families to be served, and granted in 1886, giving the location the name of Shamrock. Soon a newspaper, the *Shamrock Pickings*, was established. However, two years later the post office was discontinued, the newspaper moved to Chambers, and the community eventually dispersed.<sup>42</sup>

Scholars have proposed various reasons for the death of numerous Plains towns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, Nancy Burns cited agricultural innovations, railroads, and rural mail delivery as factors leading to the disappearance of Plains towns prior to 1900.<sup>43</sup> Railroads were often the lifeblood that helped to establish and keep communities going, whereas the lack of a settlement's connectedness to the railroad was detrimental. Hudson has noted that railroad construction was vital to a town's survival. If for any reason an inland town—a settlement located ahead of the railroad serving as a general store and/or post-office—was not attractive to a town-founding corporation, a rail line would not be constructed through the town, sometimes to the benefit of another town only a few miles away. The result was a death sentence for the inland settlement.<sup>44</sup>

John Fraser Hart, among numerous other scholars, has cited the general public's increased ownership of automobiles after World War I as a cause of the decline of small towns. However, Hart also notes that while the automobile allowed people to bypass their former central place for larger centers with more goods and variety, it also had the potential to increase small towns' populations in that an individual could choose where to live and work depending upon commuting distance preferences.<sup>45</sup> Roy Christman cites the interstate highway system and regional shopping malls as adding to the contemporary decline of small towns.<sup>46</sup>

Most post offices in Holt County operated on average for twenty years; a few survived for long periods of time. Within Holt County, the communities with the longest life spans were those places that conducted other commercial functions in addition to the post office. Thus, the oldest post-office communities were also among the most well established of settlements: Dorsey, Dustin, and Middle Branch were the only three communities whose post-office function exceeded seventy years. Dorsey, with the longest postal service of seventy-eight years, at its height claimed a blacksmith shop, school, church, residences, livery, bank, two

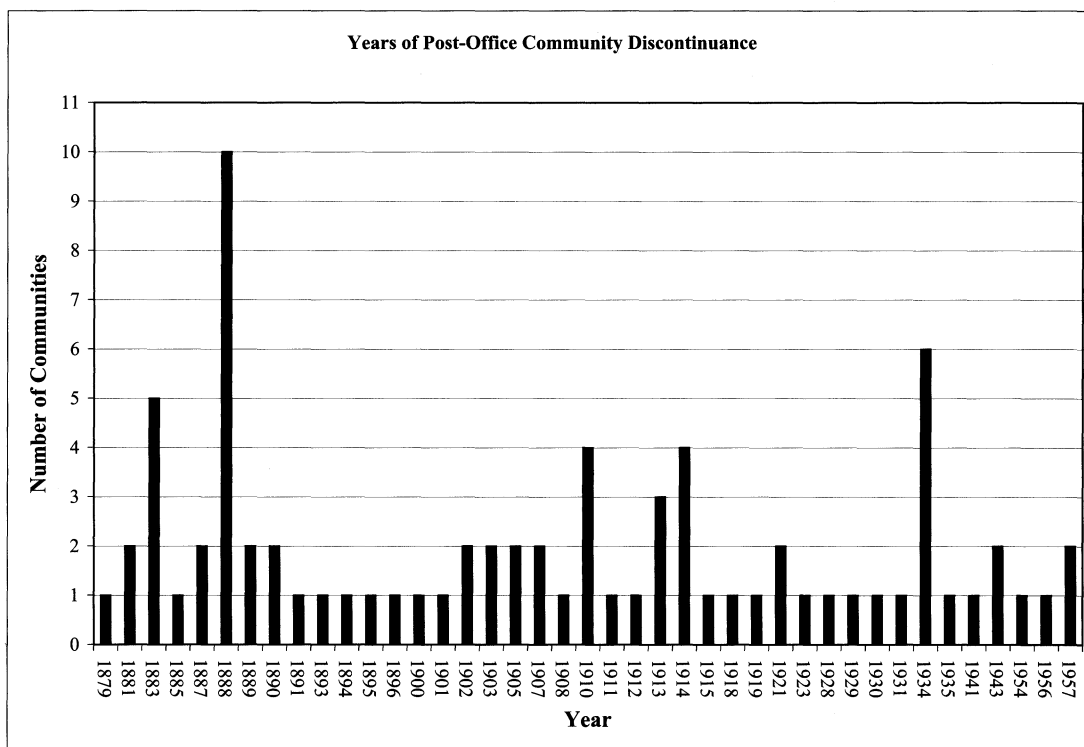


FIG. 5. Years of post-office community discontinuance.

hotels, four stores, wooden sidewalks, and a newspaper, the *Dorsey News*.<sup>47</sup> Residences, including a manse, a blacksmith shop, school, church, general store, hardware store, drug store, millinery shop, community lodge/hall, filling station, garage, and a print shop, where the community's newspaper, the *Dustin Dispatch*, was produced, were all once part of Dustin.<sup>48</sup> Straddling the Holt and Knox county lines along the middle branch of the Verdigris Creek, Middle Branch was once a bustling little community with a blacksmith shop, school, church, residences, general store, drug store, and burr mill as well as a post office.<sup>49</sup>

Whatever the reasons, with the dwindling of a community's population to support it, a post office closed. All of the seventy-seven post offices, none of which was located along the county's main commercial artery of the Chicago and Northwestern, eventually closed. When one post office was discontinued (Fig.

5), the mail was transferred to the next-closest post office, such as in the transfer from Gillespie to Clifton Grove in 1883. Some post offices, like Harold and Saratoga, were reestablished, though they were destined to eventually fail. Holt Creek and Burton Creek were the shortest-lived post offices, serving four months or less. The year 1888 saw a peak in discontinuance, most likely due to out-migration caused by the Blizzard of 1888. The blizzard was so severe that more than twenty Holt County residents died and more than half of the county's livestock perished. Despite efforts to channel irrigation to crops to combat increasingly prolonged drought, other challenges, like high interest rates, tight money supplies, and competition from international farmers and cattle producers, surmounted against the farmers. Consequently, many frustrated agriculturalists left during the 1890s.<sup>50</sup> Slowly, out-migration continued. Another pronounced



peak of discontinuance was seen in 1934 due to rural out-migration caused by agricultural hardships of the Dust Bowl and economic challenges of the Great Depression. Gradually, the post offices continued to close: the discontinuance of Dorsey and Dustin in 1957 marked the official end of the Holt County post-office community.

#### CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPES

Few buildings remain marking the presence of the early post-office communities. If a building does exist, it is most likely in the form of an abandoned schoolhouse. As in other similar places on the Great Plains,<sup>51</sup> decrepit houses, deteriorating outbuildings, churches, and cemeteries can also mark the past existence of a settlement. Until the mid-twentieth century, area rural residents traveled to the Meek Community Hall to cast their ballots in elections. The presence of the community of Meek is also illustrated by a grove of trees and a country schoolhouse, used until 2004, that shared its name with the nearby locality, Midway. With time unfurling between the existence of the communities and the present, it is increasingly unlikely for more removed generations to respect the cemeteries that hold the founders and residents of the communities. In many cases, in once-grand cemeteries weeds grow tall and gravestones crumble, making their script barely legible. Despite the fact that some locals regularly maintain a cemetery, more out of respect for its residents than the paycheck, others ignore the significance and sacredness of the burial sites, for example, by allowing their cattle to graze among the gravestones. The animals occasionally knock over and break the precious markers.

In many cases, because of a building's usefulness and/or personal importance, structures have been saved from deterioration and have been either converted or restored. For instance, the schoolhouse building that served Badger, and also bears its name, currently operates as a farmer's storage building for irrigation equipment. Many other buildings have been kept

up and slowly restored through the years, still serving their original purposes. With worship at 9:00 a.m. Sunday mornings, a congregation still attends Dorsey Community Church, while descendents of the Star postmasters live in the house that served as the post office.

In the vicinity of Cleveland is a summer Presbyterian Bible Camp, the Cleveland Cemetery, a fire-scarred residence with a few abandoned buildings, and the remains of the Cleveland Church's basement. For years, the Cleveland Church stayed open, serving the rural residents, with pastors from nearby existing communities traveling to fill the pulpit. The community's spirit lived on through this little white structure, an enduring witness to Cleveland's existence. The church finally closed its doors in 2002 after attendance had dwindled. Realizing the significance of the building's history, the Presbyterian Church Committee asked the White Horse Museum at Stuart if the organization would be interested in taking the building. The White Horse Museum Board agreed and spent two years raising funds to transport the building. On June 25, 2004, the church was lifted from its foundations, transported fifteen miles south and west to the nearby town of Stuart, and placed on the museum's grounds.<sup>52</sup>

Unlike most in the county, the original Martha "post office" was not abandoned and has not crumbled to the ground (Fig. 6). In 2000 the great-granddaughter of the first postmaster saved the farmhouse. Moving the structure nearly forty miles, Linda Lambert slowly restored the building and now resides in her family's 107-year-old home. Though hanging quilts have replaced mailboxes at the top of the wooden-spindled stairs, the memories, along with the structure, remain intact.<sup>53</sup>

After the discontinuance of mail in 1934, the second Martha post office served many purposes for the Lambert family. For the first three decades, the twelve-by-twelve-foot frame building was a milkhouse used for cream separating. After World War II the building was moved one hundred feet east of the Lambert farmhouse to provide more convenient access to a new barn and corrals. Ida Dailey Lambert,



FIG. 6. Linda Lambert and the original Martha post-office house today. Photo by author.

daughter-in-law to the first Martha postmaster and wife of the second postmaster, almost in her one hundredth year of life in the late 1990s, still referred to the milkhouse as the "post office."<sup>54</sup> Later the structure was used for honeybee habitation. The structure became scarred by pry and hammer marks on its east siding due to the removal of boards to get to the honey and beeswax. Beginning in the 1960s and lasting for three more decades, it was used as a storage room, meat-processing house, and even housed a couple of brothers.<sup>55</sup>

In 1996 a great-grandson of the first Martha postmaster, seeing a fitting use for the former post-office building, bought the structure for his company. Jonathan Lambert, owner of the ACTON Printing Company in Lincoln, Nebraska, purchased the building from his uncle and sent a crew to the southern Holt County farmstead to dismantle it. After transport, the structure was carefully rebuilt in the

mail distribution warehouse of the company and restored, with ceiling and other replacement boards specially milled to match the originals. Modern conveniences such as an air conditioner and computers were added. By the placement of a sign in the structure's front window, the building was rechristened the "Martha, Nebraska, Post Office."<sup>56</sup>

From 1997 to 2002, the Martha post-office building was known as ACTON's "Detached Mail Unit Office." The structure was used by postal employees to verify ACTON's produced mail that was to be distributed worldwide.<sup>57</sup> Thus, in March of 1997 the Martha Post Office, a post office that had been separated from its original purpose for sixty-three years, became the third-largest Nebraska post office in terms of revenue. Furthermore, it was one of the top 150 post offices for revenue in the United States, sometimes processing millions of pieces of mail in one morning.<sup>58</sup> More

recently, the structure has again been dismantled, transported, and returned to its original home on the Lamberts' land in southern Holt County. Now, another grandchild of the original postmasters is living in and remodeling a former Martha post office, complete with cedar paneling and a deck.

It is common for all of a community's structural landmarks to have disappeared. The site of Mineola is now the empty corner of a cornfield that is not even reached by the pivot irrigation system. At the edge of a field, a landowner's outbuildings stand over what was once Opportunity. Yet if one looks closer, several clues to the historical presence of a community often exist. For example, an east-west depression in the land running from the middle branch of the Verdigris Creek across a field through the road and then to a small structure in the trees represents the former mill race of the community of Middle Branch. Clusters of large trees in an otherwise treeless section, especially if the trees are evergreens, might mark the presence of a dead post office, as at Meek and one of the Blackbird sites. Large overgrown lilacs can also be a clue, as in the case of the second Blackbird site.

Although the physical landmarks of the post-office communities are fast disappearing, if they have not done so already, landmarks of a different kind still remain—in memories. Local knowledge, personal recollections, and family stories of the communities linger as strong symbolic landmarks that denote the presence and importance of the communities. Despite a lack of structures to mark where Mineola once was, locals know that "Mineola Corner" still exists along the gravel roads. Many locals revealed their memories to the author in returned mailed surveys. A retired couple who live in Stuart today often visit the former townsite of Dustin, where they can see the foundation of the general store as well as depressions where the school and some homes used to be. They visit because the community was the place of the wife's birth, where her mother was the postmistress, and where both her parents ran one of the community's general stores. Another Stuart resident, a

rancher, can remember the pigeonholes in the ranch-house post office of Hammond where mail was delivered from Stuart "once or twice a week." Furthermore, the grown children and grandchildren of former postmasters frequently can remember the family stories of the trials, tribulations, and joys of running the post offices. One such grandchild can remember his grandparents' story of an incident when the diaper of their baby girl, his aunt, happened to have accidental "leakage" on the mail!

The post-office house that served the first site of Paddock still stands. An old piano sits in the room where the mailboxes used to be, and wallpaper hangs in pieces. Raccoons and opossums are free to run up and down the halls. While the average person might see a simple dilapidated house nestled in the woods and overgrown with vegetation, Pam Tikalsky sees something very different. Mrs. Tikalsky, a great-granddaughter of one of the founders of Paddock, T. W. Crawford, grew up on, and still lives with her family on, land between the two Paddock sites. To her, the structure is not simply an old house. In this house a young pony express rider met the postmaster's daughter. Now marked by the glistening of broken windowpanes, this is the house where Mrs. Tikalsky's grandparents first met and fell in love.<sup>59</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Among the wooded streams of the plains and sandhills of Holt County, Nebraska, once existed seventy-seven post offices, some with unplatted communities. Within eighty-two years of the establishment of the first post office, all seventy-seven had been discontinued. Without numerous establishments serving other commercial functions, many communities were not developed enough to ensure their survival; having a post office was simply not enough to ensure a community's vitality and longevity.

In *Plains Country Towns*, Hudson suggests that the historical developmental characteristics of his case study of eastern North Dakotan towns may not fit other towns in the region.

Although my approach takes less of an economic and structural slant, in part it is a comparable look into the region's history to assess if communities roughly four hundred miles to the south had their own distinctive biographies. After examination, I conclude that overall, Holt County's post-office communities were nearly the equivalent of Hudson's inland towns. Change the names of the people and the places and you have very similar stories. As many inland towns, post-office communities were unplatted, remote, and spatially scattered settlements frequently originally established as post-office locales. The first post offices in an area were usually in farm homes, ranch homes, or general stores. No larger than one hundred residents, a community's population was a mixture of individuals and nuclear families primarily of European American ancestry. In eastern North Dakota, the population of the rural hinterland was mainly of northern European origins; in Holt County, the hinterland's population was largely European Americans of German and Irish ancestries. The main purpose of the inland town was economic, serving an agricultural hinterland of general farming and stock raising. Transportation of goods and people occurred by way of freight and stage lines. Social entertainment was similar. Because several factors coalesced to generate a decrease in population of the surrounding hinterlands, post-office communities were frequently short-lived. Thus, in the end, more similarities than differences exist between the characteristics of eastern North Dakota's inland towns and north-central Nebraska's Holt County post-office communities, suggesting that Hudson's case study quite possibly is a valid representation of the majority of Great Plains country towns. In this case at least, truly "the history of one town is practically the history of another."<sup>60</sup>

Today, what remains of the Holt County post-office communities takes on a variety of shapes and forms. Though altered, landscapes are being reused. In some landscapes, a careful observer might recognize traces of evidence of past times, such as evergreens and overgrown lilac bushes, whereas another person might

see only a blank slate, an empty field with the occasional cottonwood. Even though most of the communities have vanished from the landscape, the internal landscapes of memory still hold them. Whether in the form of buildings, topographies, or in memories, in one style of landmark or another, the landscape of the Holt County post-office community remains. Thus, a description of communities' surviving landscapes not only serves as testimony to the resiliency of some but also gives the untrained eye examples of what to look for on the Plains landscape in order to recognize such settlements. Finally, if nothing else, this article hopes to educate the average person—thumbing through a DeLorme gazetteer or traveling the countryside happening upon a remote "post office" sign—by giving meaning to the black diamonds on the map.

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