

Magic: The Ultimate Vanishing Act

Magic, Riley County, Kansas, 1882-1955

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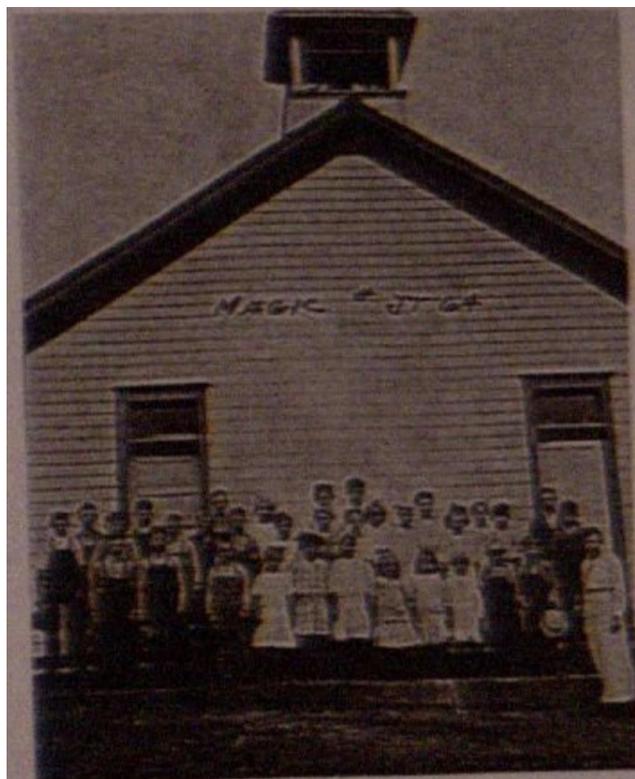


Figure 1. A historic photograph of school district 64, Magic schoolhouse, located 15 miles west of Manhattan, Kansas in what is now the Fort Riley Military Reservation. The enrollment size suggests that this picture was taken circa 1930. SOURCE: *Rural Schools of Riley County Kansas* p. 84.

The lost community of Magic, located in Riley County, Kansas, was settled by immigrants from Germany in a process of chain migration. The community's population steadily began to decline in the 1930s and was eventually consumed by the expansion of Fort Riley Military Reservation during the Cold War. This study provides a history of Magic using newspapers, maps, photographs, various book segments, and an interview of a longtime resident of the area.

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In the state of Kansas, there are over 9,000 townships, communities, and settlements that were established but due to many diverse circumstances, have since faded into obscurity. Each town is rich with culture and has a story to tell; Magic in Riley County, Kansas, established January 24th, 1882, is no exception to this. If one were to visit the location of Magic today, there would be little evidence that a community once existed. The flat prairie-land of the Milford-Riley vicinity, once occupied by Magic homesteaders, is now an expanse of scattered tree clusters and graveled military roads on Fort Riley. Travelling straight south from the Nebraska line to Junction City, Geary County, would once have also led you by Magic Schoolhouse, directly on the way. This is no longer the case as Highway 77 was relocated after the Fort Riley expansion. Although Magic never had a mercantile district of its own, the community was fortunate in that there were multiple towns nearby to obtain supplies from. From 1885 to the 1920s Magic saw a steady increase in population, regularly expanding the school facility to accommodate.

One of the most prevalent migrating groups to Kansas were the impoverished farmers of Germany. This is significant because these newly arriving Germans developed a community's characteristics around their homeland. In other words, German farmers and stockholders stamped their culture into their settlement. This "hearth-culture" persists into the future allowing interested parties the ability to trace the origins of a settlement to its roots. The relatively rapid construction of the Magic schoolhouse and Methodist church reveals that these German immigrants placed great value on their religion and education. After the Second World War the population of Magic gradually began to disperse to neighboring communities. The town eventually just disappeared after Fort Riley Military Reservation expanded a second time and required the residents to relocate. Magic no longer appears on current maps and seems to have

been forgotten by many, a tragedy considering its history and legacy. Yet despite its disappearing act, some people in Riley County – and other places in Kansas -- can still recall a time when Magic was more than just a memory. Many consider Magic their home to this day, even going as far as establishing it as such in their obituaries.¹

Humble Beginnings

For settlers the world over, the appeal of cheap and fertile land brought about by the Kansas-Nebraska act of 1854 was too enticing to resist. The perceived opportunities to start life anew in the budding expanse of the Midwestern territories drew settlers not only from various states across the country but also from countries across Europe. One such family was the Sylvesters of Stagentien, Germany. After arriving to Indiana, a cousin of the family praised his new home for its wealth of opportunity and cheap land, eventually sending money for the eldest Sylvester son, Louis, to come as well. Upon his arrival to America, Louis quickly made



Figure 2. Platt map of Riley County, Kansas 1887. Magic can be seen on the border of Madison and Ogden Townships. The Fort Riley Military Reservation had yet to expand. Courtesy of the Kansas Historical Society. <http://www.kshs.org/p/riley-county-schools-bibliography/13678>.

¹ See for instance the obituary of Ronald Eugene Williams, January 18, 2016, in the *Topeka Capitol-Journal*.

use of the stonemasonry skills he had developed in Germany to assist in the rebuilding of Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871. The money Louis earned afforded him the ability to send for two more his brothers, Henry and Charles, who arrived in 1877.

For three years the brothers settled in Indiana, becoming well acquainted with their neighbors the Rudolphs. In 1880 Henry and Louis purchased a half section of land in Riley County, Kansas for \$3 an acre. The two brothers lived in their covered wagon until they completed construction of their house, after which they sent for the rest of their family in Germany and began the arduous process of “breaking” the land for cultivation. Shortly afterwards in November of 1882, the Rudolphs joined the Sylvesters and purchased land nearby, just as they had in Indiana.² Five short years after arriving in the area, a post office was established on January 24, 1882 with William Beard as the first post-master. Section 13 provided post offices to numerous communities; Magic was a benefactor of this legislation.³ A post office is vital in the growth of a settlement as it serves as federal recognition of an expanding populace. This post office is also significant as it acted as one of the few non-residential establishments in Magic. In addition, in an isolated early settlement such as Magic, the post office acts as hub of communication providing one of the only means of correspondence between other centers of populations. The growth of Magic continued despite a measles epidemic in the late 1890s that resulted in the death of three children and Ernest Sylvester, the oldest of the original brothers.⁴ Undeterred by this tragedy, the Sylvester family endured and to this day, continues to farm and cultivate land in the Milford-Riley vicinity.⁵ The success of the Magic Stock Farm, owned by so called “Cattle King of the County,” Frank Oscar Clark, illustrates the abundance of fertile

² Riley County Genealogical Society, *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie*, 467.

³ “Magic”, *Topeka Daily Capital*, Feb 21, 1882.

⁴ Riley County Genealogical Society, *Pioneers of the Bluestem Prairie*, 468.

⁵ Charlotte Shawver. Interview by author. November 11, 2015. Manhattan, Kansas.

grassland on which livestock could feed.⁶ Magic's proximity to Wildcat Creek and other Republican and Kansas River tributaries gave potential settlers further incentive to settle the area.

Magic Schoolhouse

In the early 1870s homesteaders in the Magic area decided that the distance to neighboring schools was too far and a meeting was called to organize a new school district. This new Magic school board actually visited nearby schools in hopes of fundraising, an endeavor resulting in donations totaling \$168.⁷ On October 31, 1885, grantors ceded one and one half acres to husband and wife Marion and Helena Barne of Madison, Kansas, R.S. Lock, William Beard, and Horton Washburn, the trustees of the new school district 64.⁸

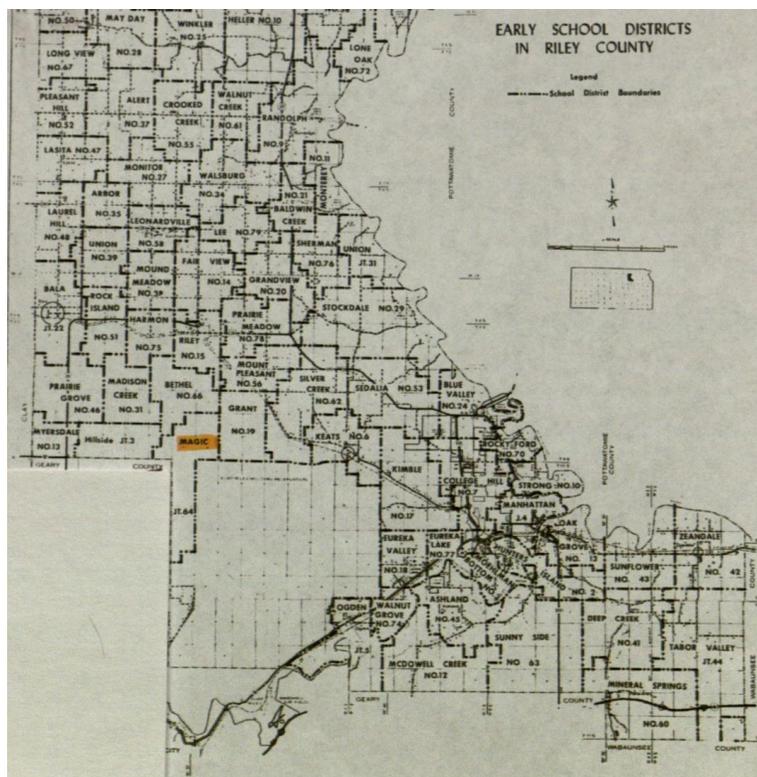


Figure 3. Highlighted is the Magic school district while the white portion beneath it represents the first expansion of the Fort Riley Military Reservation. Circa 1920. Courtesy of the Riley County Genealogical Society.

The land was bought for \$75 dollars and divided among the trustees. This suggests a pooling of resources to purchase the land, a common practice when a single individual did not have the funds. After securing the acreage, the one room schoolhouse of Magic was constructed and in the first year, fourteen students were enrolled.⁹ Numerous additions to the school were added as were deemed necessary. In 1892 a well was constructed, and in 1898 came new hedge

⁶ Kleio Historical Society, Northern Riley County Quiz Bowl Study Booklet, pg 1

⁷ Jim Bogart, et al., *Rural Schools of Riley County Kansas*, 84.

⁸ *Riley County Deed Book 56*, 490; copy in family collection of Charlotte Shawver.

⁹ Bogart, et al., *Rural Schools*, 84.

posts and an iron chain fence, and an additional seven and a half feet were added to the schoolhouse.¹⁰ By 1908 the enrollment size grew to 50 students, necessitating the conversion from a single to a two-room school house; this expansion took place in 1915.¹¹ Things were not easy for rural teachers as they had to accommodate for their students due to a lack of space, a small library, no hot lunch programs, and no electricity or running water. Students assisted by maintaining the cleanliness of the room and chalkboard, pumping water, and undertaking the unique responsibility of older students in assisting and mentoring the younger students. Before the second expansion of Fort Riley Military Reservation, Magic was located in such close proximity that children could regularly watch the horse cavalry from just outside the school.¹² As in most small frontier communities, the schoolhouse of Magic functioned as more than just a place of education. Through programs, socials, and a place of worship for the local Methodists, Magic schoolhouse thoroughly connected the community.¹³ Although there was never a shortage of work to be done, it was not all work and no play in Magic; there were many extracurricular activities. Three-act plays, softball, the game of fox and geese, last day of school events, baseball, musicals, PTA, track events, and field days were all a part of the Magic experience.¹⁴

Religion in Magic

One of the greatest mysteries of this community is the correlation between its strong religious ties and its seemingly contradictory name. The role of religion in the Magic Community was prominent to say the least -- making it all the more curious that a community would name itself after something that is typically associated with pagan practices. The church

¹⁰ Jim Bogart, et al., *Rural Schools of Riley County Kansas*, 84-5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 85

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84

was German because the settlement was mostly German families, meaning it was no coincidence that the revivalist movement in the late 1880s significantly increased the Methodist population in Magic.¹⁵ Newspaper accounts of religious conversion regularly appeared as the revivalist movement boasted sixty conversions and mass river baptisms.¹⁶ The congregation originally met at High Point, a schoolhouse church in southwestern Geary County, but they started their own services at the schoolhouse of Magic in 1903 when the congregation agreed the distance was too far to regularly travel.¹⁷ As a member of the German Conference, various ministers from Junction City served churches in the Magic and Zoar communities as well.¹⁸ Jacob Rudolph, friend of the Sylvesters from Indiana, served as one of the first ministers of the church.¹⁹ Ministers of the Magic Church through the years included the following: Wm. Pommerenke (1906-1910), H.W. Paustain (1910-1916 and 1920-22), H.F. Ahrens (1916), Adam Wurst (1919-1920), W.L. Meyers (1922-1927), W.E. Flemming (1928), Rev. Baecher (1933), I.C. James (1945), Willis McGuire, and Wright Horton. Ministers sent by the West German Conference from Wichita included G.J. Mueller (1886), Daniel Walter (1886), Charles Ott (1887), W.G. Babb (1889), J.A. Reitz (1890), C. Hermman (1891), T. Kraeffle (1892), A Jungemeyer (1893), J.J. Hammel (1898), H. Pastain (1899), G.J. Jaiser (1903), and F. Kaltenbaah (1905).²⁰ Services were typically offered in the afternoon but after 1925, the congregation of Magic began to meet in the morning.²¹ By 1926 the German Conference was eliminated, transferring to English

¹⁵ Marjorie Sand, "Magic Church." In *Yea, We Have a Goodly Heritage: The Founding of Methodist Churches And Families in Riley County Northwest of Fort Riley*

¹⁶ "Magic," *Junction City Weekly Union*, Jan 1 1887. The river referred to is probably the Republican River.

¹⁷ Marjorie Sand, "Magic Church." In *Yea, We Have a Goodly Heritage: The Founding of Methodist Churches And Families in Riley County Northwest of Fort Riley*.

¹⁸ "Magic," *Junction City Weekly Union*, May 22, 1919.

¹⁹ Sand, "Magic Church." In *Yea, We Have a Goodly Heritage*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*,

²¹ *Ibid.*,

instead.²² This move most likely occurred to better include members of the church without a German background (it may also reflect the anti-German sentiments arising during WWI).

Around this time as well, Riley and Magic began to regularly conduct services in tandem with one another.

Curtain Call

A community that seemingly had so much going for it begs the question, what went wrong? To answer this, it's important to understand that there is always more than one factor working in (or out) of favor of any particular community. While Magic grew organically in size as homesteaders continued to settle the surrounding area, the growth of neighboring towns helped to stunt its potential, especially Riley, Ogden, and Junction City. Although Magic had a post office, it was discontinued in June of 1892. Residents then had to travel to Junction City post office to receive their mail.²³ A major drought in the 1890s also contributed to a decline in Magic as illustrated by the relocation of the Schoonover family to Riley in 1897.²⁴ Rival towns are always a factor when observing the decline of a community. The same towns that provided the Magic residents with supplies became the same towns that progressively attracted its citizens. Correspondence between the trustees of the Magic and Riley churches revealed a plan to consolidate churches.²⁵ A 23-7 straw vote to combine churches resulted in the two permanently meeting together in 1952,²⁶ effectively reducing costs for both congregations.²⁷ This consolidation further reduced incentive to travel to Magic as most of the congregation gradually

²² Ibid.,

²³ Kansas Historical Society, *Kansas Post Office, 1828-1961*.

²⁴ "Magic," *The Junction City Weekly Union*, Dec 10, 1897.

²⁵ Riley Church, *Trustees of the Riley Church to Magic Methodist Church*, letter. In Sand, *Yea, We Have a Goodly Heritage: The Founding of Methodist Churches And Families in Riley County Northwest of Fort Riley*. May 8, 1952.

²⁶ Ibid., *Willis McGuire to Dr. Gordon*, letter. May 22, 1952.

²⁷ Ibid., "Magic Church"

received membership into the Riley Church. While the community was definitely on a decline as illustrated by the decreasing enrollment size, the vanishing act of Magic happened in one fell swoop. The entire community redefined overnight.



Figure 4. A map depicting current day Riley County. The Fort Riley Military Reservation has completely overtaken what was once Magic and there is now no trace of Magic's existence. Courtesy of the personal collection of Charlotte Shawver.

Perhaps by the very virtue of its location, Magic's fate was sealed. Fort Riley, in response to the tensions of the Cold War, expanded into and relocated roads, farmers, and businesses across what is now southwestern Ogden Township, much to the dismay of the residents.²⁸ The expansion of Fort Riley Military Reservation and the construction of Tuttle Creek Reservoir, both occurring at about the same time, were the nails in the coffin for Magic. Most of the graves in the old Schenk Cemetery near Magic, the interred family members of the original German

²⁸ Charlotte Shawver. Interview by author. November 11, 2015.

settlers, were moved to Milford Cemetery in Geary County. Finally in 1959, the old Magic schoolhouse was struck by lightning and burned to the ground.²⁹

Magic Lives On

A lasting mystery of this study is the origin of the community's name. While in traditional magic learning the secret behind the act takes the fun from the performance, in the case of the Magic community, it leaves one yearning for an explanation. Magic simply sticks out as a name that feels more like an endearing nickname than that an official location. Even more mysterious is Magic's almost complete lack of persistence in Kansas history and collective memory. Inquiring about Magic typically yields a look of confusion followed by a line of questioning regarding whether or not it's a real place. How can a town be so thoroughly obliterated from maps and memory? A community with fertile farmland, strong ties to neighboring towns through farming culture and religion, and even boasting residency to the fifth governor of Kansas, James M. Harvey, seems an unlikely location to be forgotten by time.³⁰ Nevertheless, Magic is a prime example of the influence a location can have on its residents long after they've relocated...proof that home isn't necessarily where you are physically, but where your mind wanders when you think of happier times. Despite its near total omission from county or state memory, a little bit of Magic will live forever in the hearts and minds of those who once lived on, worshipped in, and continue to call those magical Kansas prairies home.

²⁹ Jim Bogart, et al., *Rural Schools of Riley County Kansas*, 85.

³⁰ Winifred N. Slagg, *Riley County Kansas: A Story of Early settlements, Rich Valleys, Azure Skies, and Sunflowers*, 253.

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