



## ***REDISCOVERING SOD-HOUSE DAYS***

# **OSBORNE COUNTY HISTORICAL MARKER**

### **A STOP ON THE BULL CITY-RUSSELL FREIGHT TRAIL THE KILL CREEK STORE & POST OFFICE**

In early 1871 Hiram Bull established the Bull City-Russell Freight Trail to supply the needs of both his general store in Bull City (present-day Alton) and the rapidly-developing region surrounding it. The trail extended roughly 40 miles from Bull City southeast to Russell, then the nearest railroad shipping point. In its heyday this trail saw heavy commercial traffic on a daily basis. The large freight wagon trains, each consisting of 15 to 20 wagons and pulled by either horses or oxen, could be heard approaching for miles—"like thunder in the hills," as one settler later recalled. Buffalo robes, grain and other goods were sent to Russell with lumber, groceries, and manufactured goods being delivered to the eager settlers of Bull City. Local mail carriers and other settlers entering the area also used the trail extensively. After the railroad reached Osborne in 1879 the trail was largely abandoned. The last known use of the trail was in 1908, when Milton Near organized a wagon train to carry his hogs from two miles south of this site into Alton, eight miles away.

By late 1871 the community of Kill Creek had formed and became an important stop on the trail. The Kill Creek Post Office was established on February 6, 1872 with J. Jacob Guyer as the first postmaster. Over the next few years the post office operated from the homes of Franklin Thompson, William Blair, Fred Graybill, Herman Ruede, and Orren Rice, who was appointed in 1880.

The first general store in Kill Creek was built at this site in 1879 and operated by Fred Graybill. That same year he sold it to Amos Winey, and on September 10, 1881, Orren Rice became the proprietor, moving the post office into his store. In the early 1880s a second general store was built just to the west of the first store by Messrs. Hunt and Farrier. In 1888 Henry Hoot became this store's new owner and proprietor. He was appointed postmaster in 1887 and moved the post office into his store.

In the fall of 1876 the Richard Benwell family loaded a wagon and moved their children and goods to Kansas. Richard E. Benwell was born in Birmingham, England, August 12, 1840. As a boy of 14 years old he emigrated to America and settled in Lake County, Illinois. Benwell enlisted in the Union Army and served in the Civil War for its entire duration. On March 30, 1863, he married his childhood sweetheart Elizabeth Smith. For a number of years Benwell clerked in a small store in Volo, Illinois, until the move to Kansas. After living near Kirwin, Kansas for a few years the Benwells homesteaded a farm in Kill Creek Township, until 1888 when they bought Henry Hoot's general store. On August 1, 1888, Mr. Benwell was appointed postmaster and operated the post office inside the store. They operated it until 1896, when Gus Bant purchased the building and went into the blacksmith business. In the meantime the Benwells had built a house, so they moved the post office and a small stock of merchandise to their home. In 1900 Benwell bought the store at this location from Orren Rice and the post office was permanently located in the Benwell store. Four years later the Kill Creek Post Office was formally closed on February 13, 1904.

Over the years the Benwells raised eight children (two died in infancy) and served as the center of Kill Creek community society, exchanging local news items with their customers and entertaining them whenever Mr. Benwell felt like telling old war stories. But with the advent of Rural Free Postal Delivery the growing popularity of the automobile, the Benwells decided to quit the store business in 1921. The store building and home was razed and Jim Gilmore, son-in-law of the Benwells, used the best lumber build for them a nice comfortable dwelling house on the site of the old.

On November 23, 1926 and December 6, 1926 Elizabeth and Richard Benwell passed away and were laid to rest in the nearby Kill Creek Presbyterian Cemetery. Eleven years later their old store became nationally famous with the publication of Howard Ruede's book *Sod-House Days*.



*A photograph of the Kill Creek Store and Post Office. The right half of the building served as the home of the Benwell family.*

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**IN MEMORY OF THE PEOPLE AND PLACES DEPICTED**

**IN THE CLASSIC AMERICAN BOOK**

***SOD-HOUSE DAYS: LETTERS OF A KANSAS HOMESTEADER 1877-1878***

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