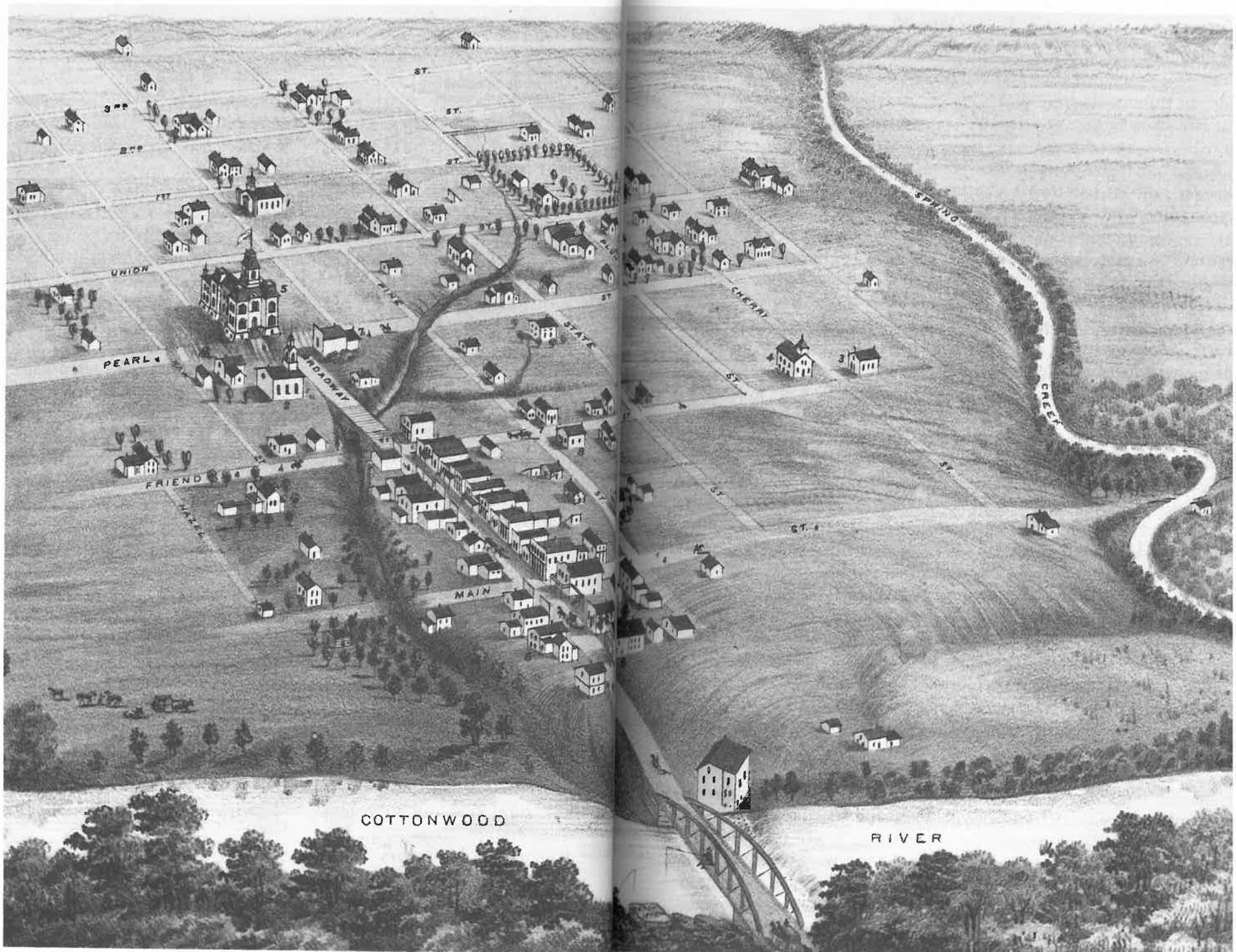
On the Town: Cottonwood Falls

The name sounds like something from a 1939 *Saturday Evening Post* story or a name on a depot in a Norman Rockwell illustration: Cottonwood Falls. Cottonwood Falls, Chase County, Kansas. Last year a New Yorker asked me: *Is the cottonwood a real tree?* A real tree, yes, but its white, fluffy seeds have only a poetic relation to cotton. As for the river, it's real too, but the falls these days have to be dreamed, buried as they are under a small milldam; before the gristmill, Cottonwood *Rapids* would have been more accurate, or *Ford*, or *Crossing*, or *Shallows*. The dam, at the foot of the wide main street, makes a nice pool and a pleasant falling of water that you can hear, if the wind is from the north and the town quiet, along Broadway, the commercial street of red brick that runs from the falls due south three blocks to a slight rise where stands the red-roofed (the color of blood), Second Empire–style, 1873 courthouse, the oldest edifice in the state still serving the ends of county justice. It — like the milldam and the three biggest commercial buildings and a half-dozen houses — is built of local cut rock, a thing so important that the only drama ever written about the county is titled *Native Stone*.

In my last three years visiting here as an inspector of the ordinary, the courthouse clock has told two times: one-thirty and four-forty. There is something to be said for aging only three hours and ten minutes in thirty-six months. Until I climbed up in the courthouse cupola last week and saw the stilled works of the timepiece,



COTTONWOOD FALLS, KANSAS

Drawn by D. D. Morse, 1878

I'd thought that workmen merely painted a different hour on a false clock face whenever they spruced up the building. The other three sides of the cupola were also apparently designed to carry clocks, but instead each bears a painted black star, as if to remind people of time in its longer dimension.

A clock that lightning strikes every few months is bound to run slow, and the big bell under it hasn't been used for years, except last week when I gave it a good whack and managed to bring three merchants and one lawyer out onto Broadway to see if the cupola was on fire again. For writers hunting symbols of this and that, the courthouse clock serves well, suggesting as it does the herky-jerky passage of time here. A few days ago, at the crossing of Broadway and Friend Street, I stood with an 1878 bird's-eye-view engraving of the town in my hands and compared it to what I saw, and it was plain that history in Cottonwood proceeds at about the rate of an hour a year.

From its founding in 1856 through the following generation, changes were radical, but the old print shows a postbellum village quite recognizable today, although the gristmill is gone but for a piece of foundation and part of the turbine that appears at low water. McWilliams Creek, which once split open Broadway, has disappeared in a long, stone-arched conduit; the iron bridge is also gone, but the second and third ones still stand. Because the nineteenth century shows up so plainly, more than one reporter passing through has described the town as sleepy, and perhaps also this sense of drowsing comes from time stretched out, from a clock that moves even slower than the official state reptile, the ornate box turtle, which the county is properly full of.

A century ago there were 550 people in the Falls, as it was popularly known then (residents have progressed to calling it Cottonwood), and a half-century later there were 880; the town added one person every couple of years until this last decade when it lost seven percent of its people. Citizens and visitors alike take pleasure in a place that remains recognizable not just from generation to generation but from century to century, and, in this way, it is like a good English village. But I wouldn't claim, except in my more cynical moments, that the main progress since the last world war has been the disappearance of merchants, even if it is evident that there used to be at least two of many kinds of businesses and now there's only one of a few and none of most. Cottonwood Falls is probably not dying, but without the courthouse that issue would be moot: of the

thirty enterprises along Broadway, the lone commercial street, half are federal, state, or county offices.

In my time here, I've seldom heard anyone speak of the town and in the same sentence use the word "energy" positively. After all, it's a rare county seat that can't keep at least one eatery open, but the Emma Chase Café has just closed, reopened, and closed again, and the only place on Broadway now for a cup of coffee is at the Senior Citizens' Center. One Saturday night a couple of years ago, the Emma put on a Mexican Nite Special: a hungry countian in pressed overalls and shined shoes came in, sat down at the next table, read the blackboard menu, said for more than his wife to hear, *This goddamn place,* and got up and left.

While Broadway has generally shifted from shopkeepers to workers in bureaucracies, Judy and Ken Mackey have tried to help revive commercial life by opening in the old jewelry store an art gallery, a nice little shop of the kind you'll find in Taos, New Mexico, and someone else told me he might buy the decrepit Cottonwood Falls Hotel a block south and renovate the two-story brick building (it later sold for forty dollars) and, maybe, make it a bed-and-breakfast for tourists who cruise the Flint Hills and drive through town to photograph the courthouse, an event happening so often that Whitt Laughridge, whose realty business faces Broadway, wants to paint an X in the middle of the street to show photographers the nearest spot where the whole building will fit into a point-and-shoot camera frame. (I digress here to speak of Whitt, because you will meet him again: although the pronunciation of his last name belies the spelling and his nature, say the "Laugh-" as "lock." From the eyebrows up to his burnished pate, he looks like a small and jolly Buddhist monk, and from the brows down to the thrust jaw he's Gilbert Stuart's George Washington.)

I've heard a few citizens say about the Mackeys' gallery, *What's it good for?* but that doesn't mean that negativism, conservatism, and unimaginativeness are any more prevalent here than elsewhere in village America (although the title of a 1957 *Saturday Evening Post* article on the county was "They Don't Need Progress"). In fact, the Exchange National Bank enlarged its old, native-stone place in a pleasing — if not historic — way, the county historical society moved into and preserved the best cut-rock building, after the courthouse, in town, and on highway 177 a plastic-roofed convenience store recently opened, the first franchise here. In a display of civic

vigor unseen in half a century, Cottonwood not long ago linked with Strong City and joined the Kansas Main Street Program to revitalize the twin towns and the county.

One of the fortunate things for Cottonwood Falls, something that has aided its inadvertent preservation, is that the disfiguring enterprises of our time — drive-thrus, motels, truck stops, mobile-home sales lots — have descended upon Strong City, two miles north on highway 50, and the absence of strip-development in the Falls leaves it with a rare thing today — neatly circumscribed limits. Visitors know when they have arrived in Cottonwood and when they have left it, and they can clearly distinguish town from country: should residents want, they could wall the village at its perimeter streets and not leave out more than a dozen houses. On the west, just beyond Spring Street, the prairie grows right up to the backyards and stops clean, and, if I lived here, my sunset porch would have prairie, prairie, prairie to the horizon.

A Kansas City reporter once called Cottonwood Falls *a dusty jewel,* but it has more fundamental substance, more usefulness than that. Rather, it's a chiseled block of native stone, burnt by the sun, otherwise plain, practical, humble, and ordinary except for the tarrying past that each year makes Cottonwood stand out a little more from other Flint Hills towns either dying or embracing some prostitute of progress that eats away their history as syphilis does a nose.

At one time, it looked as if the Falls might see a significant improvement in its economy: in the late 1970s some people thought the town would soon stand just ten miles from the edge of the first national park in Kansas, the only federal one anywhere devoted entirely to the tall prairie. Several groups, all of them out-of-county, wanted to buy sixty thousand acres in southeastern Chase and adjoining counties to establish the Tallgrass Prairie Park, and there was logic to the idea: absentee landlords owned much of the proposed area, rangeland had declined in value, the population density was quite low, and, preeminently, Chase County holds the largest and least corrupted stand of tallgrass left in America. Many citizens realized that much pasture (they rarely call it prairie) was being overgrazed and suffering the consequences: erosion, loss of species, lowered productivity. What's more, the residents admire the beauty of the land in a way not always common among people so closely linked with agriculture. But most of them disliked the park proposal. Indeed, it would have changed some lives and maybe not for the better in every instance, but the plan did not merit certain stories that got concocted: *Farmhouses robbed by niggers from Chicago. Watermelon rind all over the streets. Daughters assaulted by New Yorkers. Buildings burned by drug dealers.* For a while it was difficult to tell whether a countian was speaking of an American tourist or a Mongolian horse soldier.

A couple of groups organized meetings, leaned on legislators, printed bumper-sticker threats, and finally drove the park proponents toward a site ninety miles south in Oklahoma, a state as much associated with the tallgrass prairie as Georgia is with the Appalachian Mountains. It seemed to me then, were I to line up all three thousand countians along Broadway and ask every environmentalist to step forward, even the closet ones, I could take them all into the Emma Chase and buy them a Mexican Nite Special on a single twenty-dollar bill. Of the several reasons for killing off the prairie park, this sentence I heard a few days ago in the Wagon Wheel Café in Strong City is the fundamental one: *I don't say that the prairie park was all that bad an idea — I just say I don't want some government telling me what to do.* Those words, better than any others I know, situate Chase County in the American West.

Cottonwood Falls sits only seven miles northeast of county center, about a mile south of the Santa Fe line and U.S. 50. The main north-south road of both the county and the Flint Hills, Kansas 177, forms the eastern boundary of the town, so that a traveler must turn off to get into Cottonwood, and many residents like living in a place that an outsider can hardly help passing by, cannot readily enter even by accident. Although its length is only a mile and its width half that, it began as two towns, and the evidence of its dual birth lies today along historically and ironically named Union Street, once the divider between the hamlets: the north-south streets don't align, so a driver must jog left or right at Union, a reminder of how poorly during the first days of the Falls the nation itself conjoined.

Of the fifteen longitudinal streets, ten have the names of trees and none of a prairie grass or native forb or legume. These names are fossil history of attitudes that town promoters employed to attract settlers from the eastern woodlands, people who had experienced little to prepare them for this big grassland, even the pioneers from the smaller and wetter prairies of Illinois and Indiana. The homesteaders brought with them a notion corroborated by their Christianity that this hugely open spread was a kind of failed forest that needed only the hand of civilized man to redeem it from its

appalling waste, and they reversed here their usual practice of axing wilderness: they planted trees to remove it. Rather than learning what the prairie could provide and then changing their ways to harmonize with a land new to them, the settlers began trying to remake it into the East. Early photographs of the Falls reveal it wonderfully nude, but a snapshot I took from a light plane last month shows it a woody knot in the grasses.

The first waves of settlement passed over the Flint Hills for destinations much farther west, but, as those lands filled, people began looking again at the eastern portion of what an 1823 map based on Stephen Long's exploration four years earlier called the Great American Desert. They discovered not aridity and sand but something closer to the earlier meaning of the word: deserted — at least empty of white farmers. The land was not at all barren, and, when the immigrants of Cottonwood Falls and Council Grove and a hundred other Hills places saw their apple trees bloom and their corn and oats grow, all that remained was to get clear title and evict the inhabitants of the last ten thousand years. Anglo society accomplished that deed in only ten years by odious methods governments and churches condoned, by an ethic that taints every Pioneer Mother statue put up by the Daughters of the American Revolution.

The nineteenth-century dumping ground, a kind of huge ghetto that Kansas had become for eastern tribes forced in with the native Kansa and Osage, had to be emptied so that Indian Territory (I.T.) could become Kansas Territory (K.T.), could become Kanzas (Kan.), could become Kansas (KS). And so, a decade after its founding, the Falls and its county were free of tribal Americans except for occasional wanderers from the new Indian Territory, a place the next wave of Anglo usurpers, the Boomers and Sooners of Oklahoma, would soon take. Today there is not even a half-blood Indian living in the county, although the aboriginal presence was once so great that anybody who will walk the plowed bottoms can still find stone points. The Roniger Museum behind the courthouse has thousands of them, a collection once coveted by the Smithsonian Institution.

A few weeks ago I sat in the last row of the Chase County High School auditorium, and before me was an assembly of blond heads with last names from Kent and Antrim and Bavaria by way of New York, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and I remembered what a New Jersey visitor once said to me: *The people here look so American.*