

FROM the Kansas Territorial magazine

SHERIDAN – LAWLESS CITY OF THE PLAINS

By Clyde W. Blackburn

Western Kansas is covered with sites of ghost towns. In their heyday some were cities with one or two thousand residents, while others were villages catering to the needs of the early settlers. Those who founded those towns all had high hopes that theirs was to be the city of the future.

There was one ghost town, however, which had none of these dreams. It was built for a purpose, perhaps the most famous ghost town on the plains the city of Sheridan.

Sheridan was an "end-of-track" town on the old Kansas Pacific Railroad (now the Union Pacific) between Kansas City and Denver. In existence for 15 months in 1868-69, it harbored a couple of thousand people. This spot is where the government land grant to the railroad ended. Until more land was made available all railroad building stopped and the city was founded. And what a city! This was a railroad town, and everything was built so it could be put on a flatcar and moved to the next stopping place. Mud huts, dugouts, tents, and tin sheds were its makeup, according to the newspapers of the day.

There was no law in Sheridan and it drew the riff-raff of society into its confines. Thirty-one men were hung on the railroad trestle east the east edge of town, all without benefit of trial. One hundred graves in the graveyard – and not one of them died a natural death. South of the railroad track lived the Irishmen and their families, the laborers who built the railroad. Rat Row was the title given to this cluster of tin shacks and dugouts. The most numerous businesses in town were the saloons, the Dew Drop Inn being the most popular. Many of them were the sites of hastily called kangaroo courts, which often resulted in another hapless knave swinging to and fro from the hanging trestle.

The town was named after General Phil Sheridan, of Civil War and Indian War fame. When he visited his namesake, he likened it to the battle of the Shenandoah during the Civil War because of the reckless way many used their weapons. Vice, of course, was the way of life in this lawless city, and back of every saloon could be seen the little shacks inhabited by "Sheridan's Girls," the name given to the town's numerous ladies of easy virtue.

Notwithstanding its lawless nature, Sheridan was a city of business. Along the tracks stood warehouses housing large outfitting and merchandising firms. Since the city was the end of the railroad, all supplies to the forts of the Southwest were freighted by wagon trains from this point. As many as a thousand bull trains camped at the foot of a nearby hill, waiting to load their wagons.

"Situated on the side of a desolate ravine, the everlasting plain embraced it. Two solitary buttes, named Lawrence and Hurlburt, had been placed on guard over the region by nature,

and looked as wretched and dismal as sentinels in a penal settlement." Such was the description given of Sheridan's location by W. E. Webb in 1872, when he wrote of the wild town he was mostly responsible for founding. The two buttes are still standing guard, but the explorer beware! The fang of the lethal rattlesnake awaits those who would disturb the tranquility of these sentinels guarding the graves at their bases.

At the pinnacle of Sheridan's existence, these two buttes resounded from the activity below them. Their bases were the bivouac for the wagon trains, which freighted to the southwestern forts. Many are the conchos and spent bullets that had been found where Mexican drivers camped and many died.

Webb wrote a great deal about Sheridan in the years following the town's demise, with his description of its location anything but flattering. At one time he described it as "being situated in a barren plain presided over by two lonely buttes named Lawrence and Hurlburt." Why the buttes acquired these names is not known, but they soon gained a more fitting one . . . With Indians roaming at will over the region, they soon became known as Consolation Points. With a clear view in all directions, it was the one locale near Sheridan where the inhabitants could go for an outing and be assured an Indian wouldn't sneak up and lift their scalps.

At the foot of the buttes was a large, water-filled depression with the novel name of Lake Como. One of Sheridan's citizens later wrote: "I went there swimming once, and stepped upon the face of a dead man, an experience which will stay with you through a lifetime." Upon dragging the body from the water, it was found to be that of a local gambler. His pockets were stuffed full of rocks and the nave of hearts was pinned to his hand. Investigation disclosed he had been taking liberties with a favorably inclined married colleen of the town. Her husband, with typical Sheridan justice, permanently made sure the gambler would no longer practice his nefarious ways. Of course, a finding of this nature created excitement for only a short time in Sheridan, as a similar discovery or a shooting would soon take its place.

The "end-of-track" town of Sheridan was unique for a number of scoundrels and malfeasants it sheltered during its 15-month existence in 1868-69. An average of over four violent deaths per month occurred during that period. But then, Sheridan's lawless nature was evident from the moment the town was founded. Before the surveyor could lay out a single street, it became necessary for him to locate a graveyard, which he did on a low hill overlooking the town. By the end of the first week, it had three permanent residents, all departing this earth "with their boots on." The end of the first winter found 23 more joining the hilltop invisible choir, all going the same way.

Their burial, and those following, were devoid of any pious funeral ceremony; churches and religion were never a part of Sheridan. There was a coroner of sorts, who was responsible for returning any valuables to relatives of the deceased, but there never seemed to be any. As a consequence, the coroner became one of the more moneyed men in town. On occasion, not even the departed's clothing was sacred, and many of them went to their final resting place wrapped in nothing more than a blanket.

One would expect such callous behavior from a town that was home to such men as Gunshot Frank, and Sour Bill, a couple of Sheridan's notorious bullies. Having quarreled, they decided to settle it the hard way. Each armed himself with a revolver, threw a shovel over his shoulder, and with a group of friends, walked to a point at the base of the buttes overlooking the city. They had agreed each would dig a grave for the other; then, swapping places, fight a duel to the death on the edge of the holes. The digging had barely started when Gunshot made an insulting remark and Sour Bill shot him in the stomach, killing him. The dead man's friends then seized the murdered and one of them bashed in his skull with a shovel. That night, the two would-be antagonists were taking their last sleep in the graves each had helped dig.

The decent people of Sheridan (and there were many) looked upon the death of the hoodlums such as Gunshot Frank and Sour Bill as a benefit to society. The criminal class only killed among their own species, and never invited justice by spilling of better blood. But, justice however blind, was served and the kangaroo court in one of the saloons was a monthly – and often a weekly – occurrence. At one such "trial," a man in custody on nothing more than suspicion uttered a few irreverent remarks about the court, which brought him this calamitous sentence: "This yere court feels herself insulted without due cause, and ordered the prisoner strung up for contempt." Within moments, the hapless wretch was swinging from his perch on the hanging trestle and once again, Judge Lynch had presided over his Sheridan Court.

Saloons, gamblers, libertines, and sudden death all were a part of life in the wild town of Sheridan. No where else on the vastness of the plains was the uniqueness of the town equaled. None other had the population, transacted as much business, or abounded with such violence for a short period of time, then disappeared off the face of the earth. It was the railhead reaching Kit Carson, Colorado 80 miles to the West, which caused Sheridan's eclipse. End-of-track towns were where money flowed freely and excitement were found, so as the railroad went West, so did Sheridan, loaded on flatcars. Kit Carson never achieved the lawless reputation of Sheridan, for most of those who caused it were left in their eternal resting places on Cemetery Hill.

SHERIDAN

End-of-the tracks town on the Union Pacific:
Eastern Division Railroad (Kansas Pacific)
And the Eastern Terminus of the Santa Fe Trail
1868-1869

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