



## COMMUNITY:

*"Never Has This Town Been Outside My Heart and Memory"*

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*In the days of the independent farm and the horse and buggy, where each family was almost self sustaining, certainly the community was self sustaining. We grew our corn and we grew our meat, we grew our vegetables, and the local mills ground the flour and we didn't have much connection with the outside world.*

*--Dwight D. Eisenhower*

**T**he town-building boom in the American Midwest in the last half of the nineteenth century can be traced directly to events thirty-five years earlier. At the end of the Civil War, a great migration was set in motion that would continue unabated for the next quarter century. It would not subside until 1890, when the United States government declared the frontier officially closed.

The furious pace of settlement was spurred on by a variety of factors. Farmland in the East was increasingly scarce and very expensive. In 1862, the Homestead Act, which granted 160 acres to anyone who would settle it for at least five years, was a powerful lure to settlement. The railroads, earlier granted public lands by the government as an incentive to lay track, now cashed in on their windfall. In highly-inflated language, pamphlets touting a frontier paradise that was ". . . healthy, fertile, well-watered, well-wooded, and rapidly growing"<sup>1</sup> flooded the East and Europe. Wealthy land speculators waged a fierce competition to populate their freshly platted towns. Their offers to subsidize new businesses and donate lots attracted necessary goods and services. Each town waged a vigorous campaign to become the county seat or state capital in an effort to survive. In response, the people of the Midwestern plains existed in a state of

<sup>1</sup>Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1954), p. 5.

upheaval—pulling up stakes, moving on, and starting over, ever optimistic about the future.

Along rail lines all across the Midwest, new towns were constructed on the same model. The business district emerged beside the railroad tracks, and building lots were priced based on their proximity to the train station. As the population grew, the downtown's shabby one-story wooden buildings were replaced by more substantial two- or three-story, red-brick structures. Still, downtown lacked pavement and curbs, traffic lights, and street signs. Ricketty wooden sidewalks reflected a height convenient for customers stepping out of a horse-drawn wagon. At either end of the block were steps that led down to street level. Heavy spring rains transformed dusty streets into a muddy morass, but by late summer, sprinkler wagons were necessary to bring temporary relief to a dust-choked downtown.

This was the age of the horse. Horses and evidence of horses were everywhere: hitching posts, watering troughs, livery stables, wagon ruts, and, of course, the inevitable droppings in the streets. Each town hired a man whose job it was to patrol the streets, armed with a shovel, broom, and wheel barrow, in a nearly futile effort to keep the streets clean. It would be 1910 or so before streets were paved and curbing installed, street signs and house numbers appeared, and the automobile eventually replaced the horse.

The Midwestern towns founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were populated by middle-class Americans with a fervent faith in the values of democracy, equality, and the American dream for the common man. Small-town inhabitants felt a shared sense of belonging to the community and experienced the benefits of togetherness. People spoke to one another in passing, and news of a stranger in town spread



quickly. Whenever there was hardship or tragedy, the community responded swiftly and generously. Over time, the collective memory of places, stories, and unique characters became the town's beloved folklore.

*Dicki[n]son County is something deep within me. If I ever lose it, I shall be someone completely different from what I am or want to be.*

--Dwight D. Eisenhower

There was another side to small-town life, however. These were communities that were predominately Protestant, middle class, and white. Consequently, their customs and values became the norm. Obedience to community standards was expected, and deviations were punished. A fine sense of togetherness could deteriorate rapidly into "nosiness" and neighborly concern into the aggravation of unwelcomed scrutiny. Gossip of "uppity" behavior, poor judgment, and scandal spread as quickly as other community news. In most instances, the public's disapproval or, worse, ostracism served as a swift and certain justice.

The Midwestern small town was, at least in theory, based on the American ideal of the classless society. The reality was that class lines did exist; however, they were flexible barriers that could be penetrated by ambition and hard work. The equality of Midwestern culture was based far more on an equality of opportunity than on equality of condition. Regardless of class, the town's citizens tended to mingle freely. Ambitious and capable families moved up quickly. To cross class lines in a generation or less was not unusual; however, anyone who then "put on airs" was the object of criticism. The expression "living across the tracks" was a common reference to explaining social class distinctions in Midwestern towns. Doctors, bankers, lawyers, and businessmen did well financially and socially and lived on the "right" side of the railroad tracks. Teachers, ministers,

and laborers made less money and didn't enjoy the same social status as the town's professional and moneyed elite.

Named "David Dwight" at the time of his birth, Eisenhower was born in Denison, Texas on October 14, 1890. He was the third of seven sons and the only one born outside of Kansas. When Dwight, as he was called, was a year and a half old, the family returned to Abilene.

The Abilene Dwight knew had a population of less than 4000. Founded in 1857, it boomed a decade later as a cattle town at the terminus of the Chisholm Trail. Abilene was but one generation removed from its rough and tumble frontier days as Dwight grew up. Tales of Tom Smith's bravery and the flamboyant style of Wild Bill Hickok captivated him, and any reference to "the war" was understood to mean the Civil War.

Abilene was a typical Midwestern town. Her citizenry considered themselves progressive, boasting six newspapers, a creamery, a telephone company, two business colleges, cigar, organ, and carriage factories, and, most exciting to a young Dwight, the C.W. Parker Amusement Company which made merry-go-rounds and had a circus and skating rink. In 1902, a sanitary sewer system was constructed, and Abilene's streets were paved in 1910. A flood and fire in 1903 damaged much of the town.

Dwight D. Eisenhower's formative years in Abilene shaped and guided him. Throughout his life, he would retain a deep affection for his hometown and the people, events, and scenes of his boyhood. Dwight and most of his childhood friends lived south of the Union Pacific tracks, the "wrong" side. Although aware of the social and economic shortcomings of his south-side status, Dwight embraced life with an engaging grin, optimism, and great ambition for his future.

After World War II, Dwight D. Eisenhower would return home, the most admired and loved man in the world, to declare: ". . . the proudest thing I can claim is that I am from Abilene."

ABILENE WEEKLY REFLECTOR  
June 22, 1899, page 1  
"Abilene Residences"

In the Matter of Real Estate,

**ABBE & ELLISON**

**ARE THE LEADERS.**

Look over the following list of town properties and farms we have for sale. Call or write for further information.

**ABILENE RESIDENCES.**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>\$6,000—Finest residence in Abilene. Modern improvements. Beautifully located.</p> <p>\$2,500—Seven room house on Buckeye avenue. Handsome lawn, good barn, large garden spot, very desirable.</p> <p>\$1,750—Eight room house, with good barn, on East Sixth street. Location the best.</p> <p>\$50—Very desirable building lot on Buckeye avenue. Northwest corner. Barn on rear of lot. 120 feet front, 200 feet deep.</p> <p>\$1,525—Six room, two story house. Good barn, good location.</p> <p>\$1,200—Nine room house in good condition. Good put buildings and fruit. East Sixth street. A bargain.</p> <p>\$500—Four room house; good brick barn. Three blocks from the business center of the town.</p> <p>\$500—Six room house on West Seventh St. Good speculation.</p> <p>\$500—Good five room house on Olive St. Another bargain.</p> <p>\$500—Good five room house on West Fourth, good barn.</p> <p>\$1,700—Good seven room house with barn, apples and small fruit, and three acres of ground. A desirable property for person wanting large garden.</p> <p>\$500—Five room house, one block to</p> | <p>business center.</p> <p>\$800—Good four room house, three blocks from business center.</p> <p>\$1,800—Good corner residence with barn and other out-buildings.</p> <p>\$400—Four room house, two blocks to business center. Good speculation.</p> <p>\$600—Nice four room house, some fruit, good barn, neat property.</p> <p>\$850—Good eight room house in first class repair, close to business center.</p> <p>—Offer wanted for the Carpenter property on the South side.</p> <p>\$900—Good nine room house, rooms large and pleasant, A good investment. South side.</p> <p>\$500—Neat cottage of five rooms, freshly painted, fruit, barn, good location.</p> <p>\$1,100—Seven room house, West side, shade trees and some fruit.</p> <p>\$1,250—Eight room house, good barn, West side, recent improvements.</p> <p>\$1,000—A very nice six room house, West side, no other buildings.</p> <p>\$3,200—Modern nine room house with fine barn, beautifully located, one of the most desirable residences in Abilene.</p> <p>\$200—Seven acres of ground within the city limits, no buildings.</p> <p>\$1,000—Ten acres of ground on the out-skirts of town. Investigate.</p> |
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## IVAN M. FITZWATER ORAL HISTORY, 1970

Pages 4-5:

WICKMAN: When you first went to Abilene, since you were thirteen years old, you may have some memories of first arriving in town, what kind of town was it?

FITZWATER: Abilene, well just one of the nicest places that I ever lived in; it was then. I can tell you, it was just, just a nice place to live.

WICKMAN: Busy town?

FITZWATER: Oh, yes—

WICKMAN: With commercial activities?

FITZWATER: Yes, and so many nice people, oh, we didn't have any slum area. There were several colored families in town, but we never had any trouble with them, as I remember.

WICKMAN: Which side of town did they live in?

FITZWATER: Well, sir, can't tell for sure, maybe if I would drive around I could tell; it was kind of the northwest part of town; it wasn't in the south side, no, no. It seemed to me it was the northwest part of town where most of them lived. And they seemed to like to be among their own kind, and I never heard of one of them ever being in jail. And, by the way, I don't know if Abilene had a jail or not, they must have had. Oh, they must have had one but I can't remember for sure.

Pages 44-45:

WICKMAN: I was wondering, do you remember, surely on your way down to the Smokey Hill or somewhere you must have had a general area around Lincoln School. What was that area like besides—I mean, the Eisenhower home was behind the school, the school was on the school grounds—but what was the general area like down there? Was it homes, or stores, or—

FITZWATER: Oh, most homes.

WICKMAN: Homes along there.

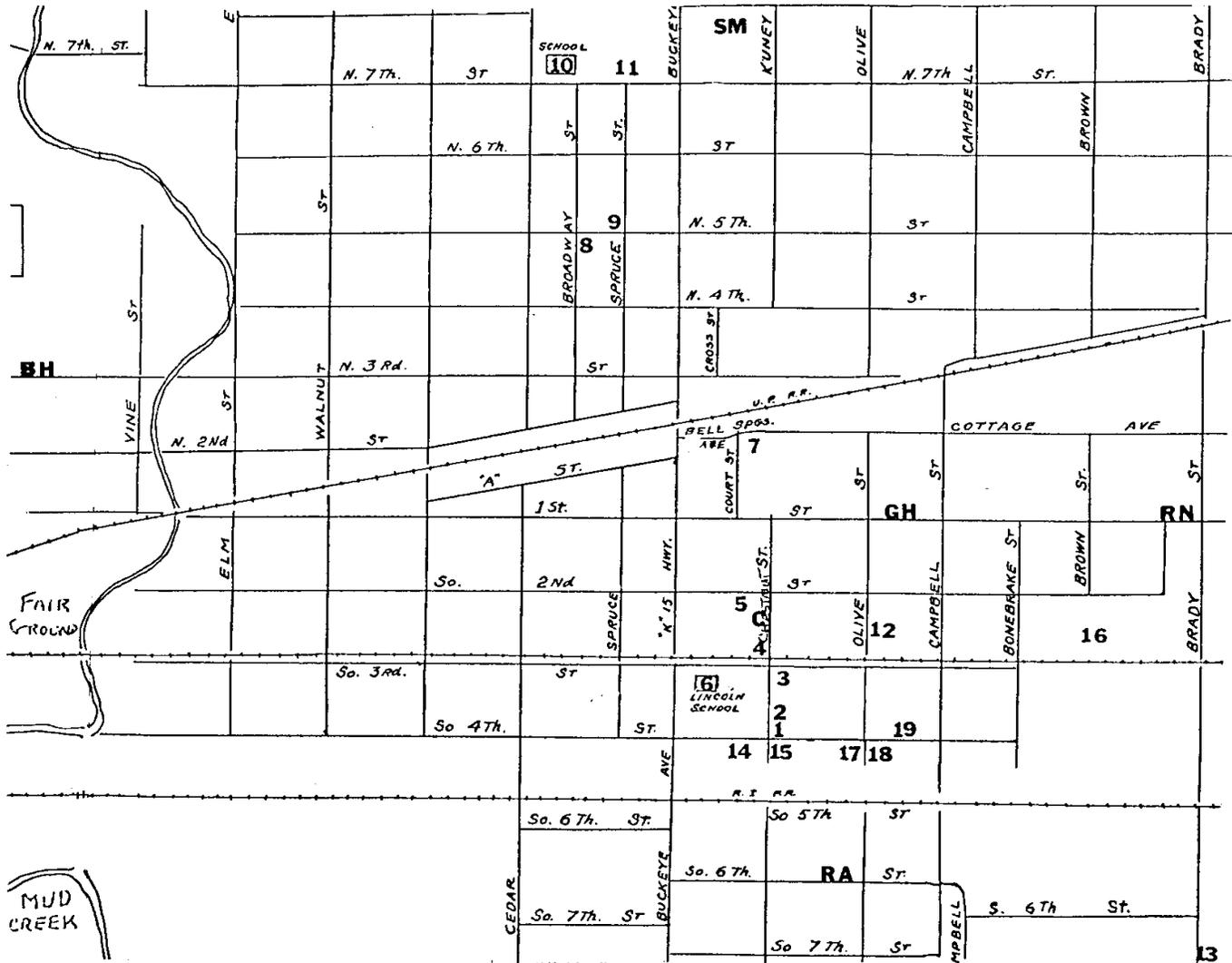
FITZWATER: Yes, I think that must have been some of the older part of Abilene, maybe not necessarily so. But they were not shacks, no, it wasn't that way at all, no. In fact Abilene didn't have any real, you know, shantytown or area; we didn't have it. There were some poor families here and there, but respectable. No, Abilene south of the tracks, well, just as nice people lived down, as the ones who lived

on the north side it seemed to me, as I remember.

# MAP, BOYHOOD ENVI 37 ENTAL AREA HOME, 1900

## BOYHOOD ENVIRONMENTAL AREA HOME

1900



- |                                |                             |                    |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Eisenhower Home             | 10. Garfield School         | Red Asper-----RA   |
| 2. Eisenhower Barn             | 11. New High School         | Curry's-----C      |
| 3. Romberger House             | 12. Parker Winter Quarters  | Bud Huffman ---BH  |
| 4. Jacob Eisenhower Home       | 13. Orin Snider House       | Gladys Harding GH  |
| 5. First Home David            | 14. Miermaster House *      | Ruby Norman-----RN |
| 6. Lincoln School              | 15. Hiram Higgins Home*     | Six McDonnell--SM  |
| 7. Belle Springs Creamery      | 16. Carnival grounds        |                    |
| 8. City Hall-First High School | 17. A. A. Baxter Home *     |                    |
| 9. Dwight-Merrifield Fight     | 18. Brigetta Carnegie Home* |                    |
|                                | 19. D. C. Davis *           |                    |

\* Dickinson County Title Company

THIRD STREET LOOKING WEST, ABILENE, KS, circa 1905  
Photograph # 70-2559



