



Lady Shirley's SOCIETY PAPERS

Season II: Second Edition, February 2026

EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE,
EXTRAORDINARY STORIES

Dear Reader,

It is a curious truth that the things we behold each day may, in time, slip quietly into the realm of the familiar, so much so that we scarcely perceive them at all - until some small alteration bids us look anew. A modest house, long unchanged, receives a fresh coat of paint and appears newly awakened. A storefront upon our venerable main street, now undergoes a most dramatic renovation, commanding our notice as though making its debut upon society's stage. A beloved restaurant, refreshed with thoughtful repairs and a touch of modern elegance, reminds us that even cherished institutions must adapt. And our viaduct - that grand bridge we cross without a second thought - now finds itself in major construction, insuring its stability and longevity.

Such changes, whether subtle or sweeping, are more than mere improvements. They are the quiet heralds of progress. Our fair Ton, in its 155 years, has known many such transformations. Time marches ever forward, and we, its loyal companions, must march with it.

Yet change can unsettle even

the bravest among us. Progress demands resources, patience, and no small measure of courage. Too often it is uncertainty - the whispered what if - that stays our hand. Our Ton has weathered its share of hesitations and moments when the future seemed content to wait.

Without donning a political hat, allow this author to observe simply this: without change, progress cannot flourish; and without progress, a community risks fading into the vast tapestry of our Union, its people drifting away, its services diminishing, its spirit dimming.

When the first editions of these Society Papers were penned, it was done so in hope - a belief that even a county with a "silly" name, a paper town without residents or commerce, might yet blossom like a wildflower upon the rolling prairie.

And so, dear reader, I invite you to stroll back through our shared history - to revisit the moments when progress shaped us, strengthened us, and set us upon the road to who we are today.

*Yours truly,
Lady Shirley*

U.S. Highway 81 did not always pass straight through town. Before 1936, the highway came into Concordia from the south on Lincoln Street, turned left four blocks, left town on Cedar Street, and went north another three-quarter mile to cross a bridge over the Republican River. That bridge was about a half-mile from the present one, according to Mr. Paulsen's article.

Proposals to replace the old Republican River bridge had begun in the 1930s. Along with the proposals came an idea to shorten U.S. Highway 81 by routing it straight through town. A desire to bypass the rail lines sparked discussion of a viaduct that would carry traffic over the rails from Sixth Street to First Street. The project was approved in 1933. The Kansas State Highway Commission gave its approval, and in February 1934 the first piling was set for the new river bridge. Shortly thereafter, work began on the viaduct.

The project progressed on both the new Republican River bridge and the viaduct, though some of the residents along Lincoln Street were suing the city for damages due to construction. Aside from that issue, things were taking shape.

Clarence Paulsen wrote, *"The building of the new (river) bridge at that particular time was indeed fortuitous, because on the first of June, 1935, came a disastrous flood which washed away the old bridge. The flood cut a new channel around the end of the almost-completed new bridge, necessitating the construction of an additional span, making the bridge 1,039 feet long. The flood washed out sections of the road grade between Concordia and the new bridge."*

The Republican River flood delayed completion of the project somewhat, but by July 1936 it was finished.

July 16th was the big day. Bunting was placed on a platform at the south end of the new viaduct. The Clyde S. Miller Rodeo and Horse Show was on its last day, and a local "trade day" was underway. The rodeo delayed its opening that evening for the dedication of the new viaduct and river bridge.

Quoting Mr. Paulsen once more: *"The dedicatory program began with music by the Concordia Municipal Band under the direction of the late Oscar Allen. D.D. Spurrier ... then president of the Concordia Chamber of Commerce, presided and introduced the dignitaries present, including Chairman Harry Darby of the State Highway Commission, Congressman Frank Carlson, Congressional District Commissioner Ed Burge, Resident Highway Engineer Harrison Austin, and many other highway officials as well as delegations from Salina, Minneapolis and Belleville. ... Miss Joanne Clithero christened the project by breaking a bottle of "Kansas champagne" (diluted peach juice) on the pavement after which Miss Mary J. Beland cut a ribbon, opening the project to traffic which streamed over the new and brightly-lighted viaduct, pavement and bridge in great numbers and until far into the night."*

In 1994, work began to widen the viaduct to 4 lanes as part of the broader effort to widen U.S. Highway 81 from Nebraska to Minneapolis. --- An interesting tidbit from that construction project is that the original guardrails were removed and are now placed as parking barriers at the Concordia Sports Complex.

FULL STEAM AHEAD

When the first settlers arrived in Cloud County, there were no rails. They traversed the open plains in covered wagons across rough and ragged terrain. Exposure to the natural elements and the length of the journey westward were grueling, and many did not survive the trip. Dangers presented themselves at every turn - landscape, weather, food scarcity, and encounters with Natives defending their lands were only a few of the many challenges.

While our town was still in its infancy, talk began of railways. Our founders understood that if we were to survive and prosper, rails were necessary. In an article by Marion Ellet, she fondly recalls her grandfather, Judge Frederick Wilmot Sturges, who came to Concordia in 1871, hosting many of the townspeople in his home for conversation. One such meeting was about bringing the railroads.

"We were told that if we wanted a railroad through here," Judge Sturges said, "that we would have to organize a company. We organized a company called the Republican Valley Railway company, but we never did anything except meet and talk. One day Pomeroy, head of the Missouri Pacific Railroad, showed up here unexpectedly to consider the extension of the Central Branch to Concordia. He asked to see our books, because we had never done anything but have a bunch of letter-heads printed and buy a bushel of apples. But we had to have some books, so I went home and took the ledger in which Mrs. Sturges kept the household expenses, tore out her work, and started to compile the necessary records. The first thing I did was copy the charter. Then I made up the list of officers and directors we had elected. After that I had to fill in with something,

so I started in with the meetings and wrote up one a month to cover the two years.

'In the morning, I handed the books to Pomeroy, and he and his officials examined them carefully. Finally he asked me if he might have them. 'Well,' said I, 'I can't very well allow you to take our record of proceedings, unless we are to get the railroad, and then, of course, the two companies will be one and the same.' 'I guess you are going to get the road,' Mr. Pomeroy said, 'and I want these books as a model for other local companies. They don't seem to know how to record their proceedings properly.'

The first rail companies to arrive in were the Missouri Pacific, Union Pacific, Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe, and CB&Q - commonly referred to as MoPac, UP, Santa Fe, and Burlington respectively. These rail lines made Concordia one of the most flourishing railroad centers in North Central Kansas.

Freight trains, mail, passenger trains, and even a sleeper car, stopped through Concordia for many years. It is often said that if you didn't have a railroad in the 1800s you weren't likely to have a town. As time passed, many of the towns where rail lines closed are no longer. The rails were most definitely a sign of progress and ultimately stability and longevity for towns they passed through. The last passenger cars through Concordia ended in the 1960s, but freight trains are still much utilized and thriving in our community to-day. Only two lines remain at present: BNSF on the original MoPac line and Kyle on the Santa Fe.

Rails were only the beginning of progress bringing expansion, commerce, and culture.

THE MERIDIAN HIGHWAY

In 1911, the National Highways Association was established. That year a group from Kansas and Nebraska organized and began planning a Meridian Road named for the proposed automobile route running north-south along the Sixth Principal Meridian. Their vision was ambitious: a roadway stretching from Mexico to Canada, following an old Indigenous trade route that would later become known as the Chisholm Trail.

In 1912, the International Meridian Road Association made a stop in Concordia as a prospective town along the route. Their touring car was festooned with pennants from towns and states they had passed through and a photograph - one of this author's favorites - was taken in front of the old Baron's House Hotel.

The highway officially opened in 1924 as the only primary north-south highway in America. It spanned 2,400 miles from Laredo, Texas, to Jollette, North Dakota. To-day that same route is known as U.S. Highway 81. It carries the nickname "North America's Main Street." It has a nice ring to it, wouldn't you agree?

U.S. 81 went through many changes over the years. In 1936, it reached from Winnipeg,

Manitoba, all the way to the southern tip of South America as part of the Pan-American Highway system stretching approximately 17,000 miles in total. To-day it looks much different. In 1979, the majority of the route was absorbed into the Interstate system, with portions abandoned or realigned.

Placing a stamp on Concordia's placement along U.S. 81, in 1988 a portion of the highway was named "Frank Carlson Memorial Highway" in honor of the Concordia native. It spans from the I-70 junction to the Nebraska state line.

While much of U.S. 81 remains a freeway with limited stops, Concordia has four stoplights slowing traffic. Those four stoplights may test a traveler's patience, but they also mark a town still on the map, still moving, a part of the story of progress that began with the Meridian Road.

The early promoters of the Meridian Highway imagined a road that would link communities and open new possibilities. A century later, the traffic that hums through Concordia - approximately 7,000 each day, according to KDOT - shows that their vision of progress, in all its forms, continues to travel this way.

THE VIADUCT

"No, Virginia, the 1,304-foot concrete and steel structure on Lincoln Street in Concordia, Kansas, which we know as the viaduct or overpass, didn't always span the railroad tracks. Forty-six years ago Lincoln Street was just another north-south street ending at the north city limits."

While this author knows not

who "Virginia" is that Clarence Paulsen addressed in his 1980 article, "The Viaduct," it did feel as if he were speaking directly to Yours Truly. The question had crossed this author's mind as to when it was built, and uncovering this particular article answered that question. The short answer is that it was completed in 1936.