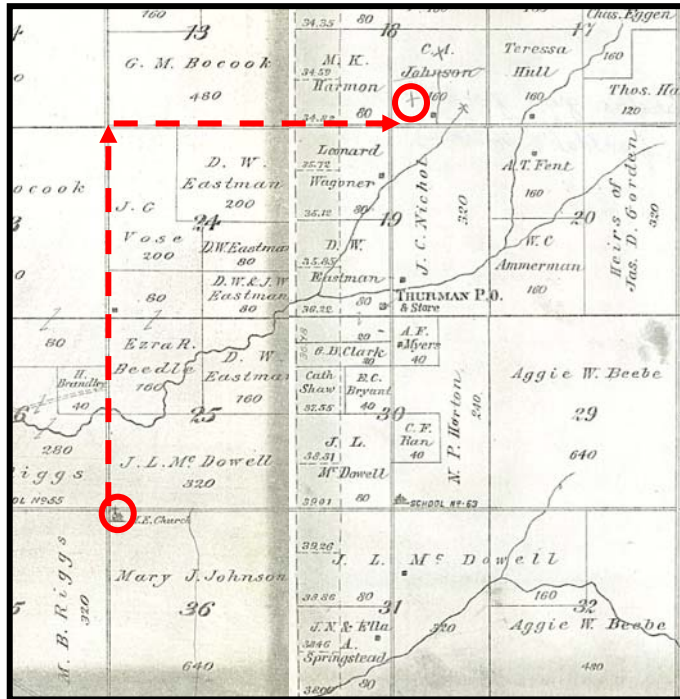


A Moveable Church

by Marva L. Weigelt, Homestead Ranch

This is very likely the route taken by a group of concerned and half-crazy citizens as they clandestinely executed a most unlikely task: they moved the High Prairie Methodist-Episcopal Church building from one location to another under cover of darkness, or so local legend has it.



The roads they followed that night, pushing and pulling a church, have since been abandoned and gone back to grass, but we know where the building was originally erected in 1887, high atop a ridge next to a tiny pioneer cemetery that still exists, and we know the location to which it was so unorthodoxly moved in 1909. The distance between the two points is three-and-a-half miles.

High Prairie Church in the early years was a bustling hub of religious and social activity. The most prominent members of the small Thurman settlement could be depended upon to make an appearance on Sundays and most anytime there was a special event.

One particular Christmas, I remember our High Prairie Church decorated a large tree, and a still larger crowd of neighbors rode from North, South, East and West across our pastures and hills on horses, in wagons and surreys, to celebrate.ⁱ

Just 20 years after its founding, the church had very few attendees and had fallen into disrepair. Why? Certainly not because of ungodliness! The informal *three-mile rule* appears to be the primary culprit for the church's decline; as more of the area was settled, additional rural schools were built so that no student would have to walk more than three miles to school. The new Thurman School replaced the High Prairie Church as the social heart of the settlement, with *concerts, basket socials, and literaries and preaching every other Sunday.*ⁱⁱ Many of High Prairie's most active supporters gradually transferred their loyalties to the more conveniently located school.

Who moved the church that night? No one alive knows the answer, or at least, no one is saying. The church-movers would almost certainly have gone right past the Beedle place. Ezra and Emma were among the founding families of the church and it's a fifty-fifty wager as to whether they were in on the scheme or slept right through it. Imagine getting up for a glass of water in the night and glancing out the window to see your church go by! Charles and Sarah Johnson, it seems certain, were party to the shenanigans, since the church's new home was on their land.

Why was the church moved? Some people evidently felt that a long debate and chronic inaction would doom the church to closure. The nameless masterminds behind the plot to save the church picked a new location that was roughly halfway between the two nearest schools, Thurman and Lone Star, hoping to bring everyone back together, a noble mission.

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Is it possible to measure the success of such a venture? Well, the church stayed open in its new location for another 20 years, with many thanks to the efforts of the Thurman Ladies Aid Society. Theoretically, the length of the church's life was doubled by the derring-do. On the other hand, some residents of the High Prairie district didn't take too kindly to having the weighty decision of the church's future snatched from their hands without consensus or even warning, in the middle of the night, no less. Some of them, *incensed by this treacherous act*, never darkened the door of that little church ever again.

The times they were a-changing during the next decade. The post office closed in 1909 and the general store in 1912. Thurman lost 20 of its 50 or so families to outmigration between 1905 and 1915. The church closed for good in 1931, after which, without a cause for which to fight, the Ladies Aid Society disbanded as well. So did the Thurman Rook Club, the Sewing Circle, the Thurman Community Club, and the Thurman Players. This is exactly the recipe for making a ghost town.

The last community institution to succumb was the church's challenger, Thurman School, which finally closed in 1944. Of the four rural schools in the Thurman vicinity - Thurman, Lone Star, High Prairie, and Little Cedar Creek - Thurman endured the longest, 57 years all told. Ironically, the Thurman School building was also moved later in its life, but less than a mile, perhaps to be closer to the Eastman family, whose children made up the bulk of the school's population.

There is little left to see of the High Prairie Church, but much to hear. In the church's first location, the stones in the cemetery still speak. At night, along the abandoned section line roads, you can hear hushed and urgent voices, the creak of wagon wheels, and the huffing of horses as they strain under the unusual load, a moveable church. In both the new and the old location of the High Prairie Methodist-Episcopal Church, you can hear *How Firm a Foundation* and *Blessed Assurance*, sung sweetly and hopefully, even if only by a handful of voices.

ⁱ Marks, Sarah McDowell. *Blue Stem* (unpublished memoir by early resident). 1951

ⁱⁱ Hickey, Joseph V. *Ghost Settlement on the Prairie: A Biography of Thurman, Kansas*. University Press of Kansas, 1995