

# Clinton

Stories of Life in Missouri's Golden Valley

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# Where the Ozarks meet the prairie

The town of Clinton lies in the Golden Valley. Ask residents where the name comes from, and you'll hear a few different versions. Some say it was named after the golden crops in the field, and others say it was named after a gold strike that no one can remember. What most people believe, however, is an old Indian legend that says Clinton, located in a wide valley, will never get hit by a tornado. So far, it hasn't.

Clinton is blessed in more ways than this. The people are generous and close-knit and, like most small towns, everyone knows everybody else. Although Clinton may be protected from tornados, it still weathers the same economic troubles facing all small towns. But still Clinton prospers, spurred on by the generosity of the community and the desire of outsiders to live in this quiet town in the Golden Valley.

## *Humble Beginnings*

Clinton was established in November

1836 and was named after DeWitt Clinton, the governor of New York and a major supporter of the Erie Canal. By 1837, the first building, a double log cabin that served as a tavern and hotel, was built on the town square. Also in 1837, the first child was born in Clinton: Ermie Nave, son of the owner of the tavern/hotel. More buildings (and children) would follow and the iconic town square of Clinton — the largest in Missouri and the fourth largest in the United States — would soon be established.

Later in 1837, the town raised enough money to build a brick courthouse. Dug from clay in Clinton, the bricks were fired on the square, and the courthouse was completed in 1839. As the county seat of Rives County (later to be renamed Henry), Clinton experienced more growth than neighboring towns. Clinton's role as the county seat ensured it would have a lively political scene, one that continues to this day. The town square remains a focal point for the community today and serves as a venue for political and social events, as well as a

hangout spot for teens. In 2000, 164 years after its founding, Clinton received one of 10 All-America City awards, recognizing the town's civic excellence.

## *Clinton during the Civil War*

In 1860, the Civil War divided the nation. As a border state, residents of Missouri were deeply conflicted. Neighbors fought one another and often formed militias to support their cause. Many churches were closed during this period because of the distrust in communities and suspicion that churches were being used as meeting places for sympathizers of either side. Clinton, now home to 500 residents, was no stranger to the troubles and was just as deeply conflicted as the rest of the state.

Clinton wasn't the home of a major battle, but minor skirmishes occasionally broke out in and around the town. Alta Dulaban, former director of the Henry County Museum, says the Dormans, a prosperous Clinton



▶ RIGHT: Amos Baehr leads his daycare charges on an outing on a fall day in 1982. | PHOTOGRAPH BY SUZANNE MURPHY

The Missouri Photo Workshop made its second visit to Clinton in September 2011. The first visit was made for the 34th annual workshop held in 1982. The images included in this introduction are a glimpse into the stories told by workshop photographers three decades earlier.



family and Southern sympathizers, would hang a white sheet from an upstairs window to let rebel militia know when it was safe to come out of the woods after the skirmishes. “They always say there was one shot fired [in Clinton], and it was fired into their house,” Dulaban said. It’s said that at one point, Judge Jerubial Gideon Dorman packed up important county documents and took them to Sedalia for safekeeping when pro-Confederate fighter Bloody Bill Anderson was rumored to be on the way. Many men died during the war, and the population of Clinton was reduced to 250 by 1866.

### *Making progress*

By 1870, the population had reached 840 residents. This increase in population was no doubt spurred by the arrival of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas railway, also in 1870. Eventually three different rail lines would service Clinton, including the Frisco and KCC&S line, otherwise known as the “Leaky Roof.” Over 33 trains arrived in the town daily. The MKT line is no longer in service today but has been transformed into the Katy Trail State Park and still brings crowds like the railroad before.

The arrival of new rail lines encouraged economic development and helped the town to

grow bigger and faster than before. Many new businesses and factories opened and flourished. In 1884, Anheuser-Busch built a warehouse near the MKT depot that could handle around six carloads of beer each month. Lawrence Brown made and shipped Chinker-chek, an early version of Chinese checkers, straight from Clinton. He also ordered marbles in 100,000 lots every 10 days. He later developed the Buzz Bomb flying firework, and was killed in a subsequent factory explosion. With the railroad, the sleepy agricultural-oriented town became more and more industrialized. Factories produced washboards, shoes, bricks, brooms, ice, caskets, flour and cigars — and shipped them all out of Clinton using the railroads. The cigar factory shipped 400,000 cigars yearly, and White Swan Mills, one of three flour companies in town, produced 1,200 barrels of flour per day. Strip mining of coal was also an important industry in Clinton and would last for many years, finally ending in 1982.

The 1919 book *History of Henry County Missouri* by Uel W. Lamkin notes that Clinton and Henry County were lively during the turn of the century, and that “the spirit of progress had a strong hold on the people.” From 1885 to the early 1900s, Clinton made much progress.

▶ LEFT: Workers pour metal at the Gold Foundry. Contrary to what some may say, the “golden valley” nickname isn’t named for any gold in the area. | 1982 PHOTOGRAPH BY ANN GRIMES



▶ ABOVE: Children participate in Elizabeth Hutcherson's music class at an elementary school in Clinton. | 1982 PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF AMBERG

Water and sewer lines were laid in town, the fire department began, electricity illuminated the town square, and improved educational opportunities produced “ministers, lawyers, teachers and business men of prominence.” *The Clinton Daily Democrat* began publishing in 1886 and no doubt encouraged the spirit of progress felt in the town. In 1887, as *History of Henry County Missouri* says, a “religious spirit pervaded the entire country,” and Clinton

as well. Churches held revivals and bigger churches were built. The occasional visitor advocated temperance but “drew a fusillade of ridicule.” Clintonians weren’t interested in prohibition yet. Historical accounts detail a lively town, brimming with social events ranging from plays and band performances to sleigh party outings and celebrations honoring Confederate soldiers.

### *The Baby Chick Capitol of the World*

In 1912, high school student Royal Booth started a hatchery business. In those days, people would order chickens to start their own brood. Baby chicks, which can live for 48 hours without food or water, were sent through the mail after changes in Post Office regulations. Soon after, Clinton was put on the map as the “baby chick capitol of the world.” Business boomed, and Booth’s hatchery was



▶ RIGHT: Mayor Dan Miles Sr., center, attends a community meeting. Miles also ran *The Clinton Daily Democrat*. Founded in 1868, the newspaper has been in the Miles family since 1949. On pages 22-25 photographer Kevin Downs revisited the newspaper now run by Dan Miles, Jr. | 1982 PHOTOGRAPH BY FLOYD BENSON



▶ OPPOSITE: Peabody Coal Co. was a major employer in Clinton, until it closed down in 1982. | 1982 PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID FARRIS

▶ ABOVE: Judge David Bailey Jr. holds court in the town square. | 1982 PHOTOGRAPH BY KAREN KEENEY

▶ LEFT: As the county seat, Clinton has had an active political scene from the very beginning. | 1982 PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNA MOORE BUTZNER

one of many calling Clinton home. By the 1920s, the Booth Hatchery was the largest in the U.S. By 1929, the hatchery business was going so well, the U.S. Post Office opened a new building in Clinton, just to handle the number of chicks being shipped. “Everybody’s family was connected to a hatchery,” Dulaban says. Dulaban remembers picking a dyed baby chick from a shoe store to match her dress every Easter. The hatcheries employed most of Clinton and, during World War II, provided many jobs for women in the community.

Bill Clark, a native of Clinton and former professional baseball scout, started working for a hatchery in 1944, when he was 12 years old. His father, a radio repairman, was barely able to provide for the family during the war. He was eventually forced to sell the family car and take a job as a janitor when radio parts became scarce. Young Bill Clark helped the family by bringing home \$17 a week. He walked 1.5 miles to the hatchery before school each morning and worked after school as well. During the summer, he worked 10-hour days, seven days a week, dumping hatching trays. He was paid 25 cents an hour.

Clark worked in the hatcheries because he was too young to work in the coal mine. The open pit mine was man’s work, mostly because you had to be able to drive. That’s not to say the hatchery jobs were without danger.

The hatcheries were kept at 98 degrees and 95 percent humidity all day long, and fuzz from the hatching chicks was everywhere. Floors were cleaned once a month with a strong mixture of lye and water. To fumigate the incubators, they mixed a tin cup with formaldehyde and potash to create a toxic gas. “Life wasn’t easy, but you didn’t pay much attention,” Clark says. “Life was life; that’s how it was.”

In 1951, Clark left Clinton to join the Army. When he returned in 1954, the chicken business had reached its peak. Although the hatcheries were annually shipping a combined total of 110 million baby chicks in the 1950s, changes in business practices and technology began to reduce the need for baby chicks. By the late 1960s, there were no more hatcheries in Clinton.

### *Before and After Truman Lake*

The closing of the hatcheries threatened to leave Clinton a ghost town. There was still agricultural and coal mining work to be had, but those industries were changing, too. By this point in time, many of the smaller coal companies had closed, and Peabody had emerged as the last coal company in town. Clark still isn’t sure how Clinton continued, but attributes its survival to the creation of the Harry S. Truman Reservoir. “Had Truman Lake not come in, Clinton was pretty well doomed,”

he says.

Construction began in 1964, and many in Clinton found employment working on the dam. While Clinton benefited from the reservoir, many residents were forced to sell property that would be needed for construction or submerged. Clark remembers “a lot of resentment for government folk,” but acknowledges that the dam brought much needed economic stability to the community. “Most of what was flooded was sandy, swampy, useless, mostly private land,” he says. “But it revitalized the town. I just saw a total transformation ... after the dam was built.”

In fact, the lake remains a popular draw for tourists and is one of the main reasons people keep moving to or visiting Clinton. The lake is not as developed as the Lake of the Ozarks, another U.S. Army Corp of Engineers project, and many go to Truman Lake to fish, swim and hunt. Mike Telford, a former resident of Kansas City, moved to the Clinton area in 1999. He sees a lot of lake traffic in the summer at his pizza and ice cream shops on the square. His own family used to drive down from Kansas City and stop in Clinton on their way to other lakes.

Now, many visitors to Clinton arrive by bicycle on the former MKT rail. When the MKT Railroad merged with the Missouri Pacific Railroad in 1989, many of the remaining rails



▶ ABOVE: Judge David Bailey Jr. goes boating with his family. Truman Lake Reservoir provides many recreational opportunities for Clinton residents. | 1982 PHOTOGRAPH BY KAREN KEENEY

▶ RIGHT: Priscilla Lipsis takes a break at the Diamond Drug Company on the town square. The Diamond Drug soda fountain had been in the building since the early 1900s. It was in service for the most recent tenant of the space, Breanna's Old Fashioned Soda Fountain & Grill until the establishment closed. | 1982 PHOTOGRAPH BY RACHEL RITCHIE



▶ OPPOSITE: The town is a lively agricultural center for area farms. Here, a resident sells produce on the square. | 1982 PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNA MOORE BUTZNER





were abandoned or sold. In Missouri, most of the former MKT tracks have been converted to the Katy Trail State Park. Running for 264 miles and almost the entire state, the trail begins in Clinton and attracts many bikers starting (or ending) their Katy Trail adventure.

### *Small town, big heart*

Today, what draws people to Clinton is the small-town atmosphere and slower-paced lifestyle. The community remains as close-knit as ever, with many returning to Clinton to retire, take care of aging parents or to raise families of their own. Christa Atchison, director of the Clinton Chamber of Commerce, moved away from Clinton after high school and had no intention to move back. “I was too good for this place,” she says. Yet, here she is, back home at Clinton years later and happy to be back. Atchison enjoys the atmosphere but recognizes the difficulties assimilation might pose to outsiders.

Sam Gibbons, the mayor of Clinton, used to be an outsider. A retired federal agent originally from Rolla, Mo., Gibbons says the town can be cliquish at times and has been in the past, but it is still open to change for the better. “I’m an ordinary person,” he says.

“People are surprised I went from knowing no one to being mayor in 13 years.”

Gibbons moved to Clinton looking for a place to raise his youngest son. Besides the quality public-school education, he also enjoyed the big-hearted residents of such a small town.

“It’s the most giving community I’ve ever lived in,” he says. The community rallies to help one other at benefits, charity events and many charitable organizations. During a major fire in an old industrial building, members of the community showed up with food and water for the firefighters.

Clark compares Clinton to other small towns in America. Outsiders still have to earn acceptance. But he remains impressed by how Clinton has changed from the time he was a boy to now. “I used to tell people ‘one of the greatest places in the world to be from but never to return,’” he says. “But I wouldn’t say that now. You cannot believe the difference, the forward-thinking people of that town.”

### *Life around the Square*

The Clinton town square remains a major focus of daily life. Diane Hannah, the director of Clinton Main Street, Inc.,

works with the community to maintain and promote the square and downtown area. The organization continues to fund murals depicting important historical events and members of the community. A mural dedicated to Brown’s Chinker-chek and Buzz Bomb was recently completed, and another mural depicting the Dormans and their white sheet during the Civil War is in the works.

Hannah and Main Street, Inc. also work to preserve the many 1940s-era buildings that surround the square. In 2006, due to unforeseen structural issues, six buildings on the square collapsed, including the Elks Lodge and Kreisler Drug Store. The Elks immediately began rebuilding because “they did not want to leave a big hole in the square,” Hannah says.

Downtown Clinton and the square may change their appearance through the years, but they remain the heart and face of the community. Most adults in Clinton grew up spending their free time driving around the square, and many have fond memories of youth spent on the square. “The square has always been a gathering place,” Hannah says. “Kids hang out here on Friday night, Saturday night, over the summer. That’s how you grow up in Clinton.”

- SARAH TUCKER



▶ OPPOSITE: An aerial shot of the town square. | 1982 PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNA MOORE BUTZNER