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Chapter IX

THE ARGENTINE COMMUNITY TODAY

Today, Argentine is a growing prosperous community. No traces remain of the devastating 1951 flood. The suburb is well represented by industries, retail and discount stores, schools, churches, and other community groups. Urban renewal has made a major impact, but has not drastically altered the landscape. Several old timers with whom the author talked said that Argentine had not changed much over the last forty years. Streets have been widened, there is a new shopping center, new retail stores have been established, and government housing projects have been completed. But basically Argentine, especially the east end, has not changed.

One enterprise of the community that is always progressing, always modernizing its facilities, is the Santa Fe Railroad. The railroad came to the bottomlands of Argentine and Turner in 1875. Today the Santa Fe Railroad's giant freight handling facility at Argentine is the hub of the 13,000 mile transcontinental freight service. Even as early as 1920, at least 6,000 freight cars and more than 500 passenger cars on 144 trains passed through Argentine each day. Approximately 3,100 employees received average monthly payroll of \$240,000. The 6,500,000 bushel capacity grain elevator in the Argentine yards was at that time the largest west of Chicago and the second largest in the country.¹

The Pennsylvania Car Company of Sharon, Pennsylvania, maintained a plant here. Freight cars were built, rebuilt, and repaired. There was a construction capacity of ten to twelve new cars daily.²

Today, on the average, 6,200 cars are handled through the Argentine yards. The total working trackage at Argentine can now accommodate nearly 15,000 cars. At Argentine, the Santa Fe makes direct connections with twelve other railroads. These railroads branch out and connect almost every place in the country.³

In an average year, it has been estimated that enough oranges pass through Argentine by rail to provide each resident of the country with about six each. Enough potatoes pass through to provide 100 pounds for every citizen of the metropolitan Chicago area. Enough piggyback trailers and containers pass through the yards that, if placed bumper to bumper, they would extend over more than 1,200 miles of highway.⁴

The Santa Fe arrived in Argentine in 1875. In 1888 through service was initiated to Chicago over its own tracks. All switching was done in the flat yards until the Santa Fe opened its first gravity classification yard in 1949. This yard incorporated the latest technology. Fifty-six classification tracks and retarders were operated manually from three towers at the humpyards.

The need for greater speed and reliability coupled with the strategic importance of Argentine led to the decision in July, 1967 to construct a \$2,000,000 eastbound freight classification yard.⁵

Major construction was completed by the fall of 1969. By the spring of 1970, the new yard was in full operation. The key to the new east bound yard is the terminal data control center. Data is fed into the computer control center yards which in turn feeds this data into the railway's computer center in Topeka, Kansas. From the time a train bound for the Argentine yard leaves its place of origin, constantly updated information on destination, customer, weight loads, and other facts are transmitted. The computer, at Argentine, on the basis of the data received, decides where the car is to go in the Argentine yard and on what train.⁶

Larry Cena, Vice-President of Operations at the Santa Fe Yards, had this to say about the confusion that existed under the old system:

¹ "Argentine Has Second Largest U.S. Elevator," Kansas City Journal Post, Feb, 1926, pp. 34-40. (This is a reprint of the unsigned magazine article from this journal. The reprint can be found in the Argentine file of the Kansas Room Collection of the Kansas City, Kansas Public Library at 625 Minnesota, Kansas City, Kansas.)

² Ibid, p. 41

³ Santa Fe Railway, Argentine Yard (Kansas City, Kansas: Santa Fe Press, 1973), p. 2

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid, p. 3

⁶ Kansas City Star, May 14, 1970, p. 27

There is just a heck of a lot of confusion around here with so many cars going in and out and being exchanged with twelve other railways. This place is a big mixing vat and we don't want anything to stay here longer than absolutely necessary. With something like this (referring to the new system) you have a fast, constant flow with no manpower troubles.

Too often, a car has gotten lost somewhere in the yard. You'd spend hours walking around the thousands of miles of track looking for it.⁷

The entire Argentine yard, including the new east-bound yard, extends for over nine miles along the Kansas River. The yards vary in length from 180 feet to 6,440 feet.⁸ Physically, the new facilities include a forty-eight-track classification yard holding 7,736 cars; a 10-track receiving yard holding 1,208 cars; a 9-track departure yard holding 804 cars; and an 11-track transfer yard capable of holding 762 cars.⁹

The Argentine Yard is one of only three terminal points on the Santa Fe Railroad that is equipped for the major servicing of diesel locomotives. These repair yards were constructed in 1954. In 1960, improvements were made on these facilities. A further enlargement was made in 1967 and 1968. Additional expansion of the diesel maintenance facilities is planned to meet the growing needs of the railroad.¹⁰

In 1961, a modern terminal office building and freight office was constructed on the north side of the yards. This structure consolidated into one unit offices for the local agent, the division superintendent, communications and the freight house facilities. This three-story terminal office building also houses the offices of the Santa Fe Trail Transportation Company. This is a trucking facility whose freight handling operations are coordinated with the Santa Fe's rail freight facilities.

Like the Kansas City Structural Steel Company, the Santa Fe Railroad has employed generations of Argentians. The railroad has played a vital role in the growth of the Argentine and the Kansas City, Kansas area. It is one of the largest employers in the city. As of February, 1974, the payroll of the Argentine yard was comprised of approximately 2,000 people.¹¹

In 1907, the Santa Fe built a depot in Argentine. This depot was located north of Strong Avenue on 26th Street. This two-story building was used for both passenger and freight trains. At one time, eleven employees worked at this depot. However, this station became obsolete after the construction of the new freight house at 42nd and Kansas Avenue in 1961. After the retirement of Luther C. Prather, the station master who had spent his entire career in Argentine, the depot was closed.

Many happy memories are associated with this depot. President Franklin Roosevelt briefly stopped at the Argentine depot during one of his election campaigns. Mr. Prather described his visit:

The people were bunched in the thousands in front of the station for Roosevelt's visit and also packed the neighboring streets. Troops were stationed to prevent people from getting too close. When they put a ramp from the railroad car to the ground and the President shuffled down the incline, the people let out a roar that could be heard for miles.¹²

In July of 1952, a future President passed through the Argentine depot. Dwight D. Eisenhower stayed overnight in Kansas City, Kansas. He then boarded the train at Argentine on the way home to Abilene to announce his candidacy for the Republican nomination. Thousands of people also came to watch him.¹³

For many years, a plant of the Sinclair Refining Company was located in Argentine. At its peak, this plant employed 400 people. Only the steel plant and the railroad employed more of the community's workers. This local branch of the Sinclair Refining Company encountered grave financial difficulties during the depression. Also, for many years Kansas City, Kansas, had been trying to annex the property on which the refinery stood to relieve tax problems of the city. Rather than accept annexation, Sinclair closed its facilities in

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Santa Fe Railroad, Argentine Yard, p. 3

⁹ Ibid, p. 4

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 13

¹¹ Bob Zane Chief Clerk to the Superintendent, Santa Fe Railroad, interview in his office at 4515 Kansas Avenue, Kansas City, Kansas on March 5, 1974. The author is indebted to Mr. Zane for the booklet with valuable information that he gave to him on the Argentine yard.

¹² "Argentine File" of the Wyandotte County Historical Society.

¹³ Ibid

Argentine in 1931. Sinclair rebuilt the refinery in 1949. It was converted into a pipe-line terminal. Sinclair still maintains a distributing plant in Argentine but the actual refining of raw materials has halted.¹⁴

The National Zinc Company at one time had a large plant in the Argentine vicinity. This factory worked 24 hours a day every day of the year. Brimstones were shipped from Louisiana and Texas sulphur mines to the plant and were made into sulfuric acid. The Kansas salt fields were tapped and salt materials were used in the making of muriatic acid. Nitrate of salt was imported from Chile for use in the manufacture of nitric acid.¹⁵

Salts were sold by the company for use in the manufacturing of cattle and hog remedies. Salt was also sold for use in the dye, glass and paper industry. The company had many storage tanks on its 40-acre site. Muriatic acid was stored in wooden tanks, sulfuric acid in steel tanks, and the nitric acid in glass or earthenware.¹⁶

The author does not know when the National Zinc Company ended operations. While in Argentine, however, the company was a thriving enterprise. A business of about \$1,500,000 was done annually. In the 1920's the company had a force of 150 men. The company also had zinc smelters in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, and Sprink, Illinois.¹⁷

Many years ago, there was also a battery plant in Argentine. This was a manufacturing plant that supplied much of the southwest part of our country with the acids needed for cars, radios, and telephones.¹⁸

For over 90 years, a lumber yard has been located in Argentine. Originally called the Badger Lumber Company, it was founded around 1880. In 1882, the Mack Brothers gained ownership of the yard. It has since been known as the Mack Lumber Company. The lumber yard is located at 26th and Metropolitan. In the past, the Company has owned its own lumber mills and several hardware stores.

Besides Kansas City Structural Steel Company, the community can boast of another steel fabricator. John Russell, Sr. founded the Russell Steel Company in Rosedale and operated there for a year or two. In 1922, the business was moved to Argentine. The location was near the corner of 22nd and Metropolitan on the old site of the McDonald's Hardware Store. In 1966, the company moved into a new building about ½ block down the street.¹⁹

Russell Steel has always been a small organization. Presently, the company employs twelve people. The peak employment was about 30 men and was reached in the late 1920's. The company produces a fabrication of steel, aluminum and magnesium. Window sashes are a specialty of the company. John "Jack" Russell, Jr., is the president of the company. He has held this position since the death of his father in 1953.²⁰

Only one bank is located in the Argentine community. This is the Industrial State Bank. The bank was chartered on February 2, 1917. For some time during the 1920's, the community had as many as four banks operating at the same time. Besides the Industrial State Bank at 3115 Strong Avenue, there was the Argentine State Bank at 27th and Strong Avenue, the Mutual State Bank at 35th and Strong Avenue, and the First National Bank of Argentine. The First National Bank moved to Armourdale around 1930. The other three banks merged in 1928 and became known as the Industrial State Bank.²¹

The bank's new location was 3119 Strong Avenue. In 1940, the bank moved across the street into the 3200 block of Strong Avenue. During the 1951 flood, the bank was covered with over 20 feet of water. Temporary headquarters were established in a small building at 21st and Silver. Shortly, the bank was able to move to its former location. In 1952, the bank was heavily damaged by a fire. In 1967, the bank celebrated its 50th anniversary and moved to a new \$400,000 building on the southwest corner of 32nd Street and Strong Avenue, just opposite the old site.²²

The community also has a savings and loan association. The Argentine Savings and Loan Association is located at 3004 Strong Avenue. Formerly called the Argentine Building and Loan Association, it was founded in 1906. W. W. Mack, a son of the founder of the Mack Lumber Company, has been the president

¹⁴ Gloria A. Servos, Argentine "The Silver City," p. 21

¹⁵ "Argentine Has Second Largest US Elevator," Kansas City Journal Post, Feb, 1926, p. 40

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 39

¹⁹ John Russell, Jr., interview in his office at the Russell Steel Company, 2221 Metropolitan, Kansas City, Kansas on April 14, 1974.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ruth Schlatter, Vice-President of Industrial State Bank, interview in her office at 32nd and Strong Avenue, Kansas City, Kansas on April 14, 1974.

²² Ibid

since 1956. Former presidents include: J. O. Gaskill, 1906-1911; Charles W. Green, 1911-1941; Hugh J. Smith, 1941-1947; and Frank S. Powell, 1947-1956.²³

Many stores and businesses have existed in the community for many years. The following is a list of some of these:

²³ Charles H. Steffens, Vice-President of the Argentine Savings and Loan Association, interview in his office at 3004 Strong Avenue, Kansas City, Kansas, on April 14, 1974

Mack Lumber Company
Laswell Drugs
Fleming Drug Store
Arnold's Drug Store
Sears
Mickey's Surplus Store
Argentine Building & Loan Assc
Argentine Auto Supply
Jay's Barber Shop
Horner's Grocery Store
Park Theatre
Safeway Grocery Store
Simmons Funeral Home

Russell Steel
Shallinsky's Drug Store
Western Auto
Sterling Auto Supply
Vegas Filling Station
Hook Realty and Insurance
The Silver City Record
T G & Y
Finkemeier Bakery
Schlatter Insurance
Industrial State Bank

These establishments have faithfully served the community. The urban renewal projects have added another dimension. The Argentine Heights and Silver City projects are considered text projects of how urban renewal can change an old neighborhood yet preserve its original character.

The Argentine Heights program was the first residential rehabilitation program in the state of Kansas. The program was completed in 1972. The cost of the project was \$2,200,000. The Urban Renewal Agency estimated that it returned about \$6,500,000 in redevelopment. The 320-unit Berkshire Village townhouse complex is a large portion of this project.²⁴

The Silver City Project was the largest of the Kansas City, Kansas Urban Renewal Projects in terms of acreage and cost. This project comprises 346 acres and cost \$9,700,000.²⁵

Plans were made for a third project, Villa Argentine. It was to have been started in 1973. This project has been temporarily shelved, however, due to a shortage of funds.

From small beginnings, Argentine has grown into a prosperous community. In the early days, the railroad and the silver smelter played a vital role in the growth of the town. The Argentine smelter was reputed to be the largest in the world, and over ½ of the town's population consisted of the smelter colony. The smelter closed its doors in 1901. Several factors resulted from the closing. With the loss of its largest employer, the town of Argentine went into an economic depression. Many workers left the town to seek other employment. To complicate the situation, the community was devastated by floods in 1903, 1904, and 1908.

Fortunately, the small town was in a close proximity to prosperous Kansas City, Kansas. Argentine fought for, and, after a struggle, gained annexation into this city. Argentine's continued growth and development is a reflection of the prosperity of the entire city.

In 1907, the Kansas City Structural Steel Company began operating in Argentine. The company grew into a nationally-known organization. Other businesses such as the Mack Lumber Company, the Santa Fe Railroad, Russell Steel and the Industrial State Bank, and many others have also made valuable contributions to the community's development.

Argentine suffered through another great flood in 1951. The great Kaw River basin floods of that year are considered the greatest natural disaster in our nation's history. Parts of Argentine were under 20-30 feet of water. No scars remain today of that flood.

Argentine can look back with great pride upon over ninety years of their history. The Prophet's grave site and Sauer Castle are two reminders of an eventful past. The Urban Renewal Projects and the new J. C. Harmon High School are examples of how a community can change without losing its original identity. Argentine will continue to grow and prosper while maintaining the heritage of the past.

²⁴ Urban Renewal Agency of Kansas City, Kansas, "1972 Annual Report," (Kansas City, Kansas City Government Press, 1972), p. 13

²⁵ Ibid