

## **Big Pigeon Area Notes**

Version 1 © 2017 by Robert A. "Bob" Christiansen, updated by RAC 11 Aug '17.

Pigeon Creek, formerly known as Big Pigeon Creek, flows through Boomer and a corner of Hazel Dell Township in rural northwestern Pottawattamie County, Iowa, north of the county seat of Council Bluffs.

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## About My *Big Pigeon Area Notes* Report

This is a collection of short historical notes about the Boomer - Hazel Dell Township area that don't fit in well into my other reports, especially in the parent report *Big Pigeon Area Overview*.

Much of the material I have written about early northwestern Pottawattamie County is now on-line at my website, [bigpigeon.us](http://bigpigeon.us).

**To view this report and related material on-line as of August '17:**

- Access the website *[bigpigeon.us](http://bigpigeon.us)*.
- Under the *Local History* item in the main menu, select *Big Pigeon Area*.
- Click on the *Big Pigeon Area Notes* hotspot.

The **Resources** area of *Big Pigeon* contains links to many of the on-line sources I used in preparing this report.

My old family church, St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Boomer Township west of Neola, was founded by Danish immigrants in 1881. The **St. Paul's History** area of *Big Pigeon* provides historical information about this church and its congregants.

## Contacting Me

My initial version of this report is bound to contain errors - Please report them to me at your first convenience. Also I would appreciate hearing from others who could help with the early history of rural northwestern Pottawattamie County.



**Letter Excerpted from the May 23, 1873 Council Bluffs Nonpareil**  
Part of *Big Pigeon Area Notes* by Robert A. "Bob" Christiansen, last update Aug 2014

The following letter was found in the May 23, 1873 Council Bluffs, Iowa Nonpareil and reprinted by the Historical Society of Pottawattamie County in their May 1998 issue.

To the Editor of the Nonpareil:

I have read the columns of your weekly for many years, and have seen therein notices of the transactions and improvements in many of our neighboring counties and townships, but not one iota concerning such a place as Boomer township. While contemplating this it occurred to me to write to you a few lines to let our friends know that such a place exists, and that a good portion of it is inhabited by industrious and thoroughly progressive people.

I moved here in the year 1861, when this neighborhood contained but few families. Now this portion of the county is quite thickly settled. Then the grass on Pigeon Creek Bottom grew higher than my head with no stock of any kind whatever to be seen for miles around; now one cannot go out half a mile on the prairie without seeing herds in every direction. When I first came here I could see but one frame house in all this neighborhood, and that one not itself finished. Now I can see a large number of good houses, well finished, and numerous barns for stock and granaries for grain, and fine orchards, vineyards and floral and vegetable gardens in connection with almost every house.

At that time, there were only two small school houses in the township; one on Honey Creek, a poor, low log cabin better for little else than a pigpen and a small cottonwood frame one on Pigeon Creek. Now there are nine or ten small school houses in the township, three of them brick, one two stories high, and eighteen by thirty feet in size.

The township is divided into six districts. Have six months school every year in each house. Our children are well advanced in the common branches.

The general occupation here is farming. Have a few blacksmiths and carpenters. A good library is established in 'District No. 5'. Mr. French is our librarian. A fine casement in one of the rooms on the second floor of his large brick house is full of good books, and every respectable settler outside the district can have a good book to read for five cents per week.

Our principal farmers have joined the Patrons of Husbandry. A large Grange meets in the Center School House of this township regularly.

Respectfully, A. Settler

**Bob Christiansen's commentary on the above 1873 letter:**

(1) I suspected that the letter writer was Loveridge S. Axtell. (A propane explosion destroyed the historic Axtell house in Section 30 a few years ago.) However, Loveridge S. Axtell's biography says he moved to Boomer Township in 1865, not 1861 as the letter writer asserts. Incidentally Loveridge S. Axtell was Pottawattamie County's member of the Iowa House of Representatives from 1873 to 1875.

(2) "Mr. French is our librarian" is a reference to Thomas French, who lived in Section 33. He was a freighter in the American west from 1853 to 1857, when he moved to Boomer Township. Thomas French also loaned money to neighborhood farmers. An early owner of my cousin Gary Larson's home place in Hazel Dell Township had a mortgage with Thomas French.

(3) In 1873 the school system in Boomer Township had not yet evolved to the standard model. Eventually there were nine school subdistricts, with one school per subdistrict and schools placed about two miles apart. A reward certificate for William Price Jr., also perhaps dated 1873, says that he is attending school in district 6, but the William Price Sr. farm was in what later became subdistrict 8. The reference to the two-story brick school is to the building that eventually became the Boomer Township Hall.

## **Guide to the Post Offices of the Boomer Township Area**

Part of *Big Pigeon Area Notes* by Robert A. "Bob" Christiansen, last update Aug 2014

Background: In the Library of Congress in March 2004, I found a typescript listing the historic post offices of Iowa. Those for Pottawattamie County are on pages 372-377. Most current post offices were not listed, and many of the post offices listed were in operation for only a few years.

Rural Free Delivery was adopted starting around 1902, thus explaining the demise of many of these post offices.

- 1 – ASCOT Crescent Twp., Sec. 3, 1900-1908. (William Rodman)  
(RAC: On the Illinois Central Railroad southwest of Honey Creek.)
- 2 - BOOMER Boomer Twp., Sec. 19, 1900-1902. (Thomas W. Glover)
- 3 - BOOMER GROVE Boomer Twp., Sec. 16, 1863-1864. (Joseph I. Hall)  
(RAC: Joseph Hall is the brother-in-law of William McKeown. I'm not convinced of this location.)
- 4 - BOYER Rockford Twp., Sec. 35 or 27, 1855-1856. (Hiram Bostwick)
- 5 - CRESCENT CITY Crescent Twp., Sec. 24 1857-1883. (Lewis G. (sic) Goddard)  
5 – CRESCENT, Crescent Twp., Sec. 24 1883 - \_\_\_\_\_ (Nelson Swanson)
- 6 – DESERET Rockford Twp., Sec. 2, 1854-1855. (Samuel Kirkland)
- 7 – ELLISDALE Hazel Dell Twp., Sec. 19 1856-1857. (Louis J. (sic) Goddard)  
(RAC: Presumably was moved to CRESCENT CITY when Crescent City was platted.)
- 8 – FRENCH, Boomer Twp., Sec. 12, 1896-1900. (William H. Mohatt)  
(RAC: May have been called "French" because Thomas French of Sec. 33? Owned land nearby.)
- 9 -- GRABLE, Rockford Twp., Sec. 16, 1900-1911. (Hattie F. Steckel)  
(RAC: On the Illinois Central Railroad between Honey Creek and Loveland.)
- 10 – HARRISON, Boomer Twp., Sec. 31, 1879-1884. (Peter Peterson)  
(RAC: Peter and Rachel Peterson lived at a T in the road from Reels. One could continue north along the west bank of North Pigeon Creek or one could go east across North Pigeon Creek, past the William McKeown residence and up the hill to the ridge and then continue northward along the ridge.)
- 11 – HONEYCREEK, Rockford Twp., Sec. 35, 1868 -?. (Alfred Frazier)  
(RAC: Alfred Frazier is an ancestor of Wentworth Aronson.)
- 12 - HOWSIER (sic), Harrison County, 1856. (James G. Davis)  
Moved to Pottawattamie County, 1858. (Louis Butterfield)

Returned to Harrison County, St. Johns Twp., Sec. 26 and 27 and renamed SAINT JOHN 1858-1873. (William M. Fouts) (RAC: This area is now called Old Town.)

13 – LOVELAND, Rockford Twp., Sec. 3, 1867-1972. (David R. Lake)

14 – MISSOURI VALLEY, Harrison County, St. Johns Twp., Sec. 35.

15 – NEOLA, The Neola post office is not included.

16 – PIGEON, Boomer Twp., Sec. 21, 9 Dec 1889- 31 Mar 1902. (William Reese) nine miles west of Neola and 10 to 11 miles northeast of Crescent City (NE ¼ of Sec. 21, Boomer Twp., township 77N, range 43W)

17 – REELS, Hazel Dell Twp., Sec. 6, 1884-1904. (Perry Reel)

18 - WALNUT GROVE MILLS, location unknown, 1854-1857, (William A. Reel). May have been the predecessor of the Reels Post Office.

19 – UNDERWOOD, The Underwood post office is not included.

20 –WESTON, Hazel Dell Twp., Sec. 36, 1875-1937. (Charles F. Chapin)

21 -WILLOW, Rockford Twp., border of Sec. 14 and 15, 1860-1866 (Hardin Jones)

22 -BEEBEETOWN, Harrison County, LaGrange Twp., Sec. 35.

In a Council Bluffs or Pottawattamie County directory from 1880, I found a list containing the mailing addresses of 115 Boomer Township residents. They were broken down thusly:

Missouri Valley	32
Crescent	32
Harrison	18
Council Bluffs	15
Neola	14
Beebeetown	3
Weston	1
Honey Creek	1

Because of the erratic placement and the short lifetime of rural post offices, it was easier for most farmers to get their mail in a town in which they traded. Thus in 1880 15 Boomer Township residents picked up their mail in Council Bluffs, even though the Harrison post office was closer to home. I imagine a farmer going to town would often pick up the mail for his neighbors.

The Ascot and Grable post offices were along railroad tracks and the Crescent post office was near a railroad. The following post offices were in towns that owed their existence to a railroad: Honey Creek, Loveland, Missouri Valley, Neola, Underwood and Weston.

## **The Boomer Township Hall**

Part of *Big Pigeon Area Notes* by Robert A. "Bob" Christiansen, last update Aug 2014

The Boomer Township Hall is a brick building on the west side of highway L36 near the center of the township, in Section 21 across from St. Johns Lutheran Church. Although one of the oldest buildings in the township, I have never read anything about its history.

The 1875 Pottawattamie County map, taken from the 1875 Andreas Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa, shows a public building in roughly the location of the Township Hall. One can buy copies of this map at the Pottawattamie County Genealogical Society, but is also on-line. By 1875, Boomer Township appears to have its full complement of nine schools (the Township Hall being school #5), although some of the schools are in unusual locations.

Derald Blois told me in December 2002 that Louise (Christiansen) Ward has a brief history of the hall written by her mother Nannie Christians. Nannie, who was born in 1882, received all her education in the Township Hall building. According to Nannie, the hall was built in 1874 (originally two stories) and converted to one story in 1900. However, an 1873 letter to the Nonpareil reprinted earlier within apparently references the building. At one time a German school was held in the building.

Robert Christiansen recalls that his grandfather, James Christiansen, born in 1868, received all of his formal education at the Boomer Township hall. James Driver, who lived in Section 21, was a teacher. The Christiansens called the building "High Brick", because of its location on one of the higher elevations in the township and its brick construction.

Louise (Christiansen) Ward has stated that the last year her mother Nannie Christians attended school was 1896-1897 and that the subdistrict #5 school was still held at the Township Hall.

The 1902 Pottawattamie County atlas shows the frame Boomer #5 school that some of us remember. It was located in the very center of the township near Pigeon Post Office about 3/4 miles east of the Township Hall.

Thus, from our current fragmentary evidence, I think its accurate to assume that the Township Hall was used as a school from its construction around 1873 to the construction of the frame school sometime between 1897 and 1902.

The Township Hall has served a number of other functions over the years. Louise Ward mentioned the German School. The Boomer chapter of the Danish Brotherhood held its meetings in the hall. The Boomer-Hazel Dell Mutual Protective Association alternated meeting at the Boomer Township Hall and the Hazel Dell #2 school for many years. Robert Christiansen remembers going to an AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Act) meeting at the hall with his father in the early 1940s. Until recent years the hall was used as a voting place for Boomer Township for as long as anyone can remember.

William Clark, who married Sarah Cusworth from southwest Boomer Township and was listed on the 1870 census as a bricklayer, might have done the Township Hall masonry. (He was a brother of Molder Clark of northeast Boomer Township.)

## **The Hazel Dell Township Hall (updated Dec 2013)**

Part of *Big Pigeon Area Notes* by Robert A. "Bob" Christiansen, last update Aug 2014

The former Hazel Dell Township Hall, which in 2013 sits on the east side of Pottawattamie County road L34, on Corn Cob Corner between the homes of Rick and Gary Larson, had previously served as the church for both the Boomer and Hazel Dell branches of the Reorganized Latter Day Saints (RLDS) Church, now known as the Community of Christ.

The Boomer RLDS Branch:

The Boomer branch of the RLDS Church was organized in 1860. Most of the older members were immigrants from England and Wales who lived near Pigeon Creek. At a later date, between 1885 and 1902, the current church building was constructed on land owned by the Mackland family. The church sat on the north side of the road a quarter mile to the west of St. Paul's Lutheran Church and appears in the 1902, 1913 and 1919 plat books. (At one time, there was also an Adventist church on the Rasmussen farm across the road and a bit to the east of the RLDS church.)

The Hazel Dell RLDS Branch:

The Hazel Dell branch of the RLDS Church was probably organized in 1882. Its original members were Danish immigrants who lived in or near eastern Hazel Dell Township. In the 1885, 1902, 1913 and 1919 Pottawattamie County plat books, the chapel was located on the Hans N. Hansen farm about a mile south and east of the township hall. Hans N. Hansen, and later his son, John A. Hansen, were mainstays of the Hazel Dell RLDS congregation. The Hansens may have moved to Hazel Dell Township from Crescent Township in 1872. Hans N. Hansen was thought to have been the first RLDS missionary to Denmark, in 1875. Hans N. Hansen was the great-great-uncle of Bill Darrington. Some older residents will remember his granddaughters, Leona who married Lynn Handlen and Ruth who married Harl Hough.

Around 1930, the RLDS church building was moved from Boomer Township to its current location in section 15 of Hazel Dell Township, on a lot of about half an acre that may have been purchased from the Graham estate.

According to Marge Olsen's article in the Underwood Centennial book, the Hazel Dell branch was dissolved in October 1941. Funds used from sale of the property were donated to the North Star RLDS branch in Underwood.

After dissolution of the Hazel Dell RLDS branch, the church building became the Hazel Dell Township Hall.

The township hall and lot were sold at auction on November 1, 2008. The purchasers were Rick and Sheryl Larson, who live in Rick's grandparents' house just behind the township hall. Rick Larson is my cousin Gary Larson's son.



## **The Boomer Store and its Operators**

Part of *Big Pigeon Area Notes* by Robert A. "Bob" Christiansen, last update Aug 2014  
based on information from Isobel (Smith) Taylor

The Boomer Mercantile Store and Blacksmith Shop lay in the countryside about nine miles west of Neola, Iowa. The Boomer store first opened for business in 1896 and closed for the final time in 1926. Eighty years later, the store is in a good state of repair thanks to the late owner, Rudolph Jensen, and the current owner, Jeanette Generaux.

Isabel (Smith) Taylor is the granddaughter of David Dexter Smith, the builder of the Boomer store. Isabel provided the information for an article on the Boomer store in the October-December 1997 issue of "The Frontier Chronicle", published by the Pottawattamie County Genealogical Society. According to this article, from 1896 to 1926 four individuals operated the store. These four individuals were all connected with the Smith and Gittins families who were early settlers in south central Boomer Township.

Albert Benjamin Smith came to Boomer Township with his parents in the 1850s. In 1862 he married Emma Wright, who lived nearby with her family. Albert and Emma settled in Boomer Township somewhere near where the Boomer store was later located. Albert and Emma were the parents of David Dexter Smith, the builder of the Boomer store.

Henry Gittins settled with his young family in Boomer Township Section 34 about 1855. (In the 1885 plat book, Henry Gittins owns two farms, one in the northeast quarter of Section 34 and one in the southwest quarter. I don't know which was the original home place.) Henry Gittin's son, Richard, married Albert Benjamin Smith's daughter Lizzie in 1888. Richard and Lizzie settled on the Gittins farm in the northeast quarter.

David Dexter Smith married Minnie Parish from northern Hazel Dell Township in 1893. David and Minnie ran the Boomer store from its opening in 1896 until 1914 when they moved to Council Bluffs and operated a wholesale produce, flour and feed store, and later a grocery, on North Broadway.

Richard Gittins died at age 44 in 1902. His only son, Frederick Leroy, died in 1907. Richard's widow, Emma Smith, continued to live on the farm for some years after Richard's death.

After David and Minnie Smith moved to Council Bluffs, Sydney Butler ran the store for a time. Sydney Butler's wife, Emma, was the daughter of Richard Gittins

Before 1919 Sydney Butler moved his family, including his widowed mother-in-law, Lizzie (Smith) Gittins, to central Hazel Dell Township. Benjamin Smith, the younger brother of David Dexter Smith, was the next operator of the store, but may have operated it only briefly. Benjamin was married to Carrie Parish, a first cousin of his brother David Dexter's wife Minnie.

The next store operator was Reel Hough, from Hazel Dell Township, who was married to Richard Gittin's daughter, Mabel. In the 1919 plat book, the plot of land containing the Boomer store is under contract to Reel Hough.

Before its closing in 1925, Reel Hough had turned the Boomer store back to Benjamin Smith and had left Boomer Township, probably for Council Bluffs where he is living in 1930. Benjamin Smith is still in Boomer Township in 1930.

TO INVESTIGATE:

- Where was the original Henry Gittins home place?
- Where was the original Albert Benjamin Smith home place?
- Who was Henry Gittin's second wife?
- Where is Henry Gittins buried?
- Was the blacksmith shop in a separate building? (In the 1910 census, Robert Lee McKeown, grandson of William McKeown and of Isaac Sigler, is a blacksmith living near the Boomer store.)

## **The Boomer Township Telephone Exchange**

Part of *Big Pigeon Area Notes* by Robert A. "Bob" Christiansen, last update Aug 2014

Telephone service first came to rural northwestern Pottawattamie County, Iowa before 1910. In particular, the Boomer central telephone exchange was in operation before the April 1910 census, and continued into the 1930s.

The Boomer central local exchange was located in a residence in the southern part of Boomer Township, on an acre and half of land in Section 33 owned by Mary (Roberts) French, the widow of Thomas French. It was on the south side of the road, just east of the road north across Pigeon Creek.

A number of circuits were connected to the local exchange. A single circuit might provide service to as many as a dozen farm homes. Such a circuit was called a "party line". Each subscriber on a party line had a crank-operated telephone, and was assigned a distinctive sequence of several short and long rings. The local exchange was connected to the outside world by a line running from the local to a more-central exchange, which at one time was in Crescent. Within the local exchange building was a switchboard. A call from one party line to another party line or to the outside world had to be manually patched through by the switchboard operator.

I have learned of four families who lived at and operated the Boomer central telephone exchange. All four families came to Boomer Township specifically to run the exchange, and did not remain in Boomer Township later.

- ◆ In the April 1910 census, Samuel W. and Pearl R. Brown ran the exchange. He is listed as manager and she as operator. They shared their home with their two small children, with Pearl's widowed mother, with a teenaged servant, and with Aurelia Johnson, a teenager who was also enumerated as a telephone operator. Aurelia was the daughter of Nels P. and Elsie (Thomsen) Johnson of Hazel Dell Township and later married Edward Guill.
- ◆ John L. and Maggie (McClelland) Buckingham operated the exchange from before the 1915 census to 1919. They had four daughters, three of whom were old enough to assist as switchboard operators. By January 1920, the Buckinghams are living in Council Bluffs, where John is still working in telephony.
- ◆ By January 1920 when my father took the 1920 census, John and Lula Nagel were managing the exchange, assisted by telephone operator Laura Jenson. Laura was the daughter of Hans C. and Olive (Scott) Jenson of Hazel Dell Township, and married Louis Seifert Hansen.
- ◆ By the 1925 census, Edwin and Myrtle (Hardesty) Honig were running the Boomer exchange. Edwin died or left the family before 1930, leaving Myrtle with six children. Myrtle continued to operate the Boomer exchange into the 1930s. After leaving the Boomer exchange, Myrtle lived in Glenwood where she was the night telephone operator in the 1940s.

Of interest: All four of Myrtle Honig's sons served in World War II.

The school-aged children of the families mentioned walked over a mile east and north to attend the one-room Boomer #8 school.

**Peter C. and Petrus Petersen** (RAC Jan 2013)

Part of *Big Pigeon Area Notes* by Robert A. "Bob" Christiansen, last update Aug 2014

Kathy Torneten collects memorabilia from the John G. Woodward Candy factory, which was a large employer in Council Bluffs in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (The candy factory was located on the east side of Broadway in downtown Council Bluffs. The Hinky Dinky store later occupied what remained of the Woodward factory.)

In January 2013 Kathy acquired a John G. Woodward crate on which was stamped "P. Peterson, Weston, Iowa." Kathy asked me if I had any idea who P. Peterson was.

I believe the "P. Peterson" refers to either Peter C. Peterson or his brother, Petrus Peterson. The Petersons had a general store in Weston from shortly after 1900 to 1915, when Petrus moved to Kimball County, Nebraska and Peter C. to North Dakota. (From census records I suspect that both brothers were not continuously involved with the store throughout this period.)

Incidentally, Peter C. and Petrus had an older sister, Anna, who married Peter Olsen Jr. Kathy's mother-in-law, Ethel (Larson) Torneten, boarded with Peter and Anna Olsen when Ethel taught at Hazel Dell #4 school for four years from 1930 to 1935.

While doing research on this topic, I learned of the Weston fire of 1902. The parties affected had insurance so could rebuild:

-- New York Times 3 Jan 1902 ([query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free) Jan 2013),  
"Losses By Fire":

Weston, Iowa, Jan. 2 - Fire, which started in Petrus Peterson's general store at midnight, destroyed a greater part of the business portion of town and a number of residences. The loss is estimated at \$50,000.

-- Bob Christiansen, Jan 2013

## **Miscellaneous Notes**

Part of *Big Pigeon Area Notes* by Robert A. "Bob" Christiansen, last update Apr 2016

### **The Danish Brotherhood Lodge**

Boomer Township had a Danish Brotherhood Lodge, evidently #137 from scraps of paper found in the township hall in 2001. The transcripts of Danish Brotherhood membership records at the museum in Elk Horn perhaps don't include records from the Boomer lodge. Perhaps the Elk Horn index is defective and thinks the Boomer chapter was #317 or #371. The original records are hopefully in the archives in Blair, Nebraska.

For the record, other nearby chapters are:

Council Bluffs: #10

Neola: #80

Missouri Valley: #101

### **The Woodlots of Section 29**

Several early Danish settlers in the Boomer Township area went through an orientation period while living in southwest Boomer Township, then later moved further east into prairie land. E.g., Isaac Hansen is a hired man for David Haines in Section 33 in the 1870 census. L. C. Bondo is in partnership with Jens Sanderson in Section 29 in the 1870 census. By virtue of this early residence in southwest Boomer Township, these families acquired woodlots in Section 29.

Thus in the Council Bluffs Nonpareil for 28 May 1941 under Pottawattamie County Real Estate Transfers I found:

Alfred and Victoria Nelson to Donald L. Page, et. al., S 1/2 of W 1/2 of NW 1/4 of SE 1/4, Sec. 29, Twp. 77, R 43, \$150.

Isaac Hansen, Victoria Nelson's father, owned this ten-acre parcel in the 1885 plat book.

Presumably the settling of Peter Petersen in Boomer Township Section 31 in 1863 led to a number of subsequent Danish settlers entering the area through southwest Boomer Township. A number of these farmers then acquired woodlots in Section 29.

### **Brief Notes**

There was a gas station on county road K in Hazel Dell Township. This station was operated by Carl Jensen and later briefly by NCA Johnson. The location was given by Alvina (Larsen) Hjortsvang in 2000: It was in Sec. 23 on the east side of the road. It was 1/4 miles south of Irvin Jensen's lane and 1/4 north of Art Larsen's lane. (Hans Andersen lived on the south side of Art's lane.) Later Raymond and Doris Jensen lived in the house associated with the gas station. The station was gone by the time she was in high school in the early 1940s. She thinks the county road wasn't graveled until 1944.

Olga (Clausen) Schroder remembers these teachers at Hazel Dell #2 (the Parish school):  
Leona Hansen

Pearl Darrington Boarded with Marvin Parish and Fred Welbourn. Married Hans Pedersen and lived on the Hans Jensen place. Had a son Donald b. 1944.