Big Pigeon Area Overview

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. This overview touches on only a few aspects of the early history of this area.

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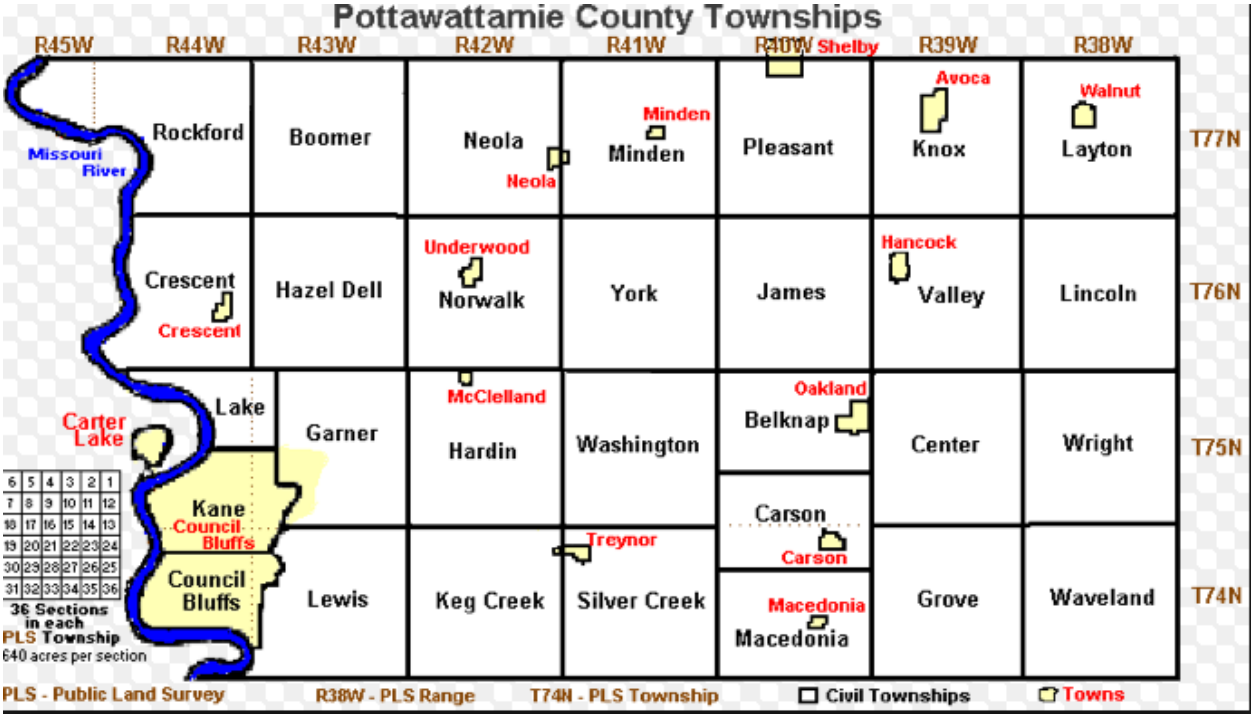


Townships and Towns in Pottawattamie County, Iowa

Courtesy of iagenweb.org/pottawattamie

About My Big Pigeon Area Overview Report

Much of the material I have written about early northwestern Pottawattamie County and especially the Danish settlers in the Boomer and Hazel Dell Township area is now on-line at my website, bigpigeon.us.

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

- Access the website ***bigpigeon.us***.
- Under the ***Local History*** item in the main menu, select ***Big Pigeon Area***.
- Click on the ***Danes in the Big Pigeon Area*** hotspot.

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

If you're interested in more about Big Pigeon area history, you can find some related items in my *Big Pigeon Area Notes* 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.

Early Days in the Boomer - Hazel Dell Area

Geographically Boomer and Hazel Dell Townships are just east of the loess hills, the bluffs that line the eastern end of the Missouri River valley in much of western Iowa. The western portions of these townships were hillier and more-wooded than the eastern portions, and thus the western portions were more conducive to early settlement.

The southwest and west portions of Boomer and Hazel Dell Townships were settled first, starting with Mormons who established what were called "camps" in the Council Bluffs area. The word "camp" is misleading, since dwellings in a camp might be a couple miles distant from each other.

Historians know of one camp, Bybee's Camp, within today's Boomer Township boundaries. Bybee's Camp was established in 1847 along North Pigeon Creek in southwestern Boomer Township.

There appear to have been several Mormon camps near the western boundary of today's Hazel Dell Township. The most-studied camp, Allred's Camp, was established in 1847 in southwestern Hazel Dell Township.

For many years, a water-powered mill operated on the south side of Pigeon Creek in the northwest corner of Section 7. Benson's Mill, owned by Jerome M. Benson, was one of the grist mills that serviced the early Mormon settlers. In January 1851 Benson sold his mill to A. K. Williams and B. K. Bullock. I assume that this became the Reels Mill in 1852, operated by members of the Reel, Wager and Paris families. There may have been a second nearby mill on Pigeon Creek.

Most Mormons in the camps had left for Utah by the end of 1852, with a residue following in 1853. However, a few remained in Pottawattamie County or returned later.

- William McKeown, eventually the father of 21 children, remained in the Bybee's Camp area.
- Samuel Wood, living in the Allred's Camp area, moved to what became Union Township in Harrison County.

In 1853 Pottawattamie County was divided into three townships, namely:

- Kane, the southwestern part of the county, including Council Bluffs
- Rockford, sometimes written as Rock Ford or Rocky Ford, in the northwest. Nathaniel McCoid, who enumerated Rockford Township in 1854, found households containing 590 individuals.
- Macedonia in the east.

With the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the coming of the first railroad to Council Bluffs in 1867, the pace of settlement in Boomer and Hazel Dell Townships accelerated. Immigrants from Germany, Denmark and other countries began arriving in large numbers.

Boomer and Hazel Dell Townships consisted almost entirely of farmers until after World War II when a gradual transition to a rural residential area began. The farmer's crops of corn, oats, hay and pasture were fed to hogs, cattle and chickens. Farm income

came primarily from selling cattle and hogs and to a lesser extent the sale of dairy products and eggs.

Boomer Township never had a railroad or a town. In 1869, the southeast corner of Hazel Dell Township was blessed with a corner of the Rock Island Railroad, alongside which the village of Weston was built.

Nearby Pottawattamie County towns that were incorporated (Neola, Underwood and Crescent) appear in the Pottawattamie County Townships map on page 1. Unincorporated villages near the area include:

- Honey Creek and Loveland in Rockford Township west of Boomer Township and north of Crescent.
- Weston in Hazel Dell Township between Council Bluffs and Underwood.
- Beebeetown in Lagrange Township, Harrison County, just north of Boomer Township.

As farms were opened in Pottawattamie County between the 1850s and 1880s, rural schools were built, generally about two miles apart, to provide an 8th grade education for farm children. The old maps on the following pages show the early schools in Boomer and Hazel Dell Townships as of 1875.

Early Boomer Township History

Following closely upon the departure of most Mormons from Pottawattamie and surrounding counties in the early 1850s, a large group of emigrants from central Indiana, mostly from Putnam County, arrived in the area. These immigrants tended to settle in Rockford Township and to the north in Harrison County.

Several hundred apostate Mormons, many of whom were immigrants from England, settled in northwestern Pottawattamie County.

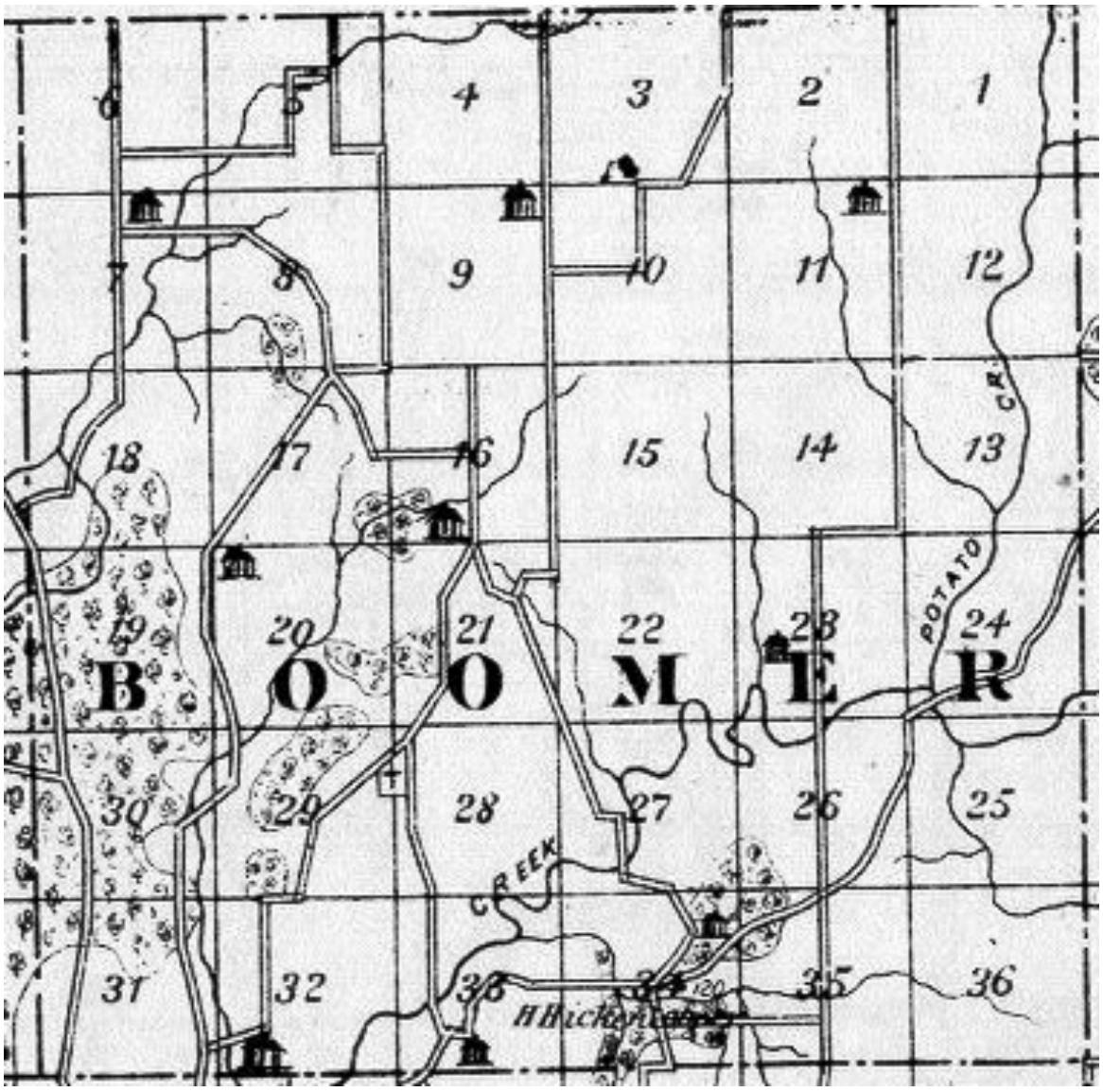
After the Civil War many immigrants from north Germany, including Schleswig and Hanover, and from Denmark established farms in Boomer Township and portions of the surrounding area.

Actually, Boomer Township as a political entity dates only from 1859. Before 1859, what is now Boomer Township was part of Rockford Township. From 1859 to 1872 Boomer Township included what in 1872 was split off into Neola Township.

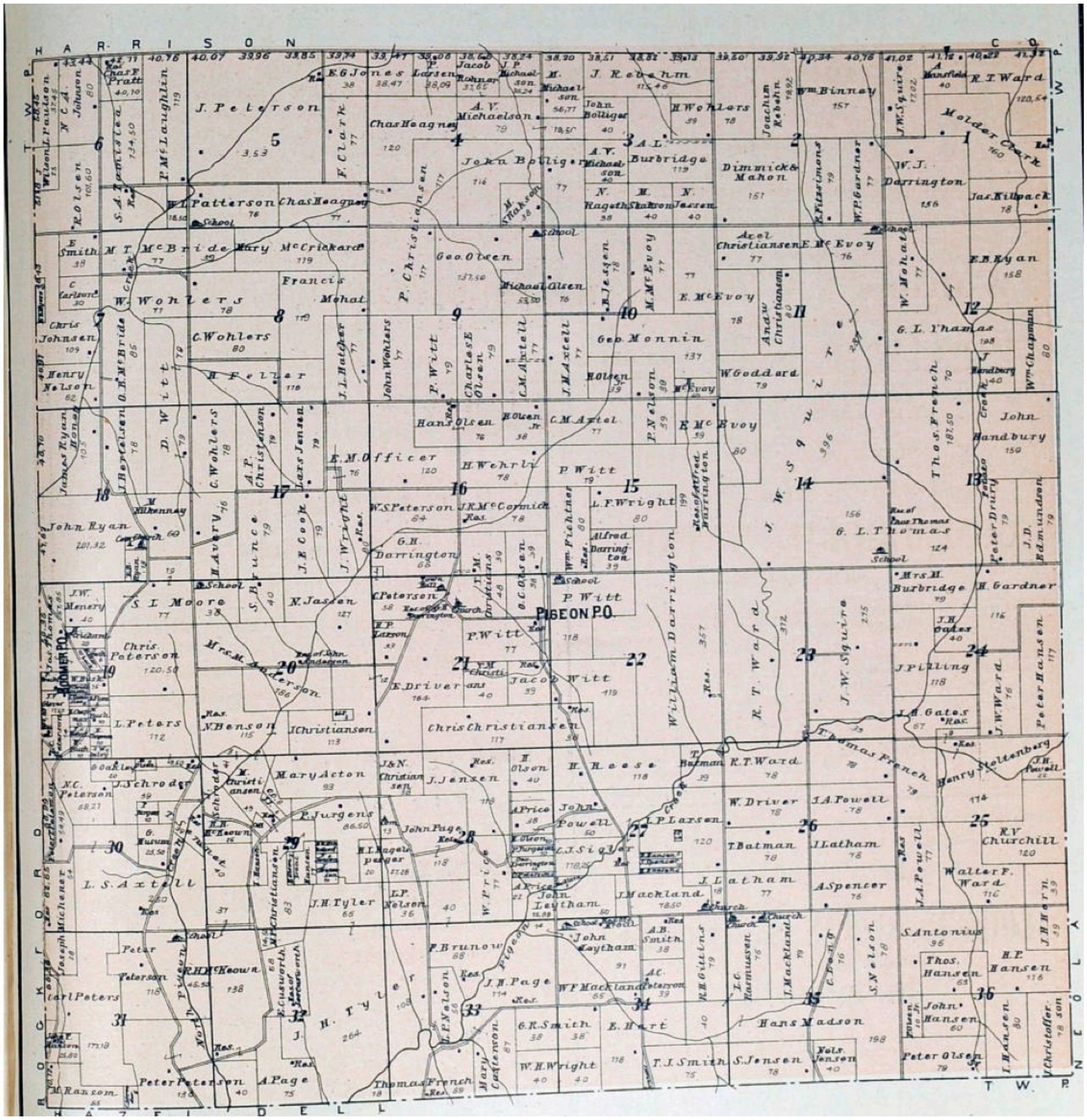
Boomer Township – Then and Now

The following is the oldest map I have seen that depicts Boomer Township. It is part of the Pottawattamie County map on page 76 of the 1875 ***Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*** by A. T. Andreas.

This map shows the schools as of 1875, but not all in the locations they later occupied. Pigeon Creek runs through the southeastern part of the township, and Honey Creek through the northwest part. This map shows two major branches of Pigeon Creek, namely North Pigeon Creek and Potato Creek. Note the Grange Cemetery in Section 28.



Boomer Township in 1875
(courtesy of AlexanderMcCord.weebly.com)

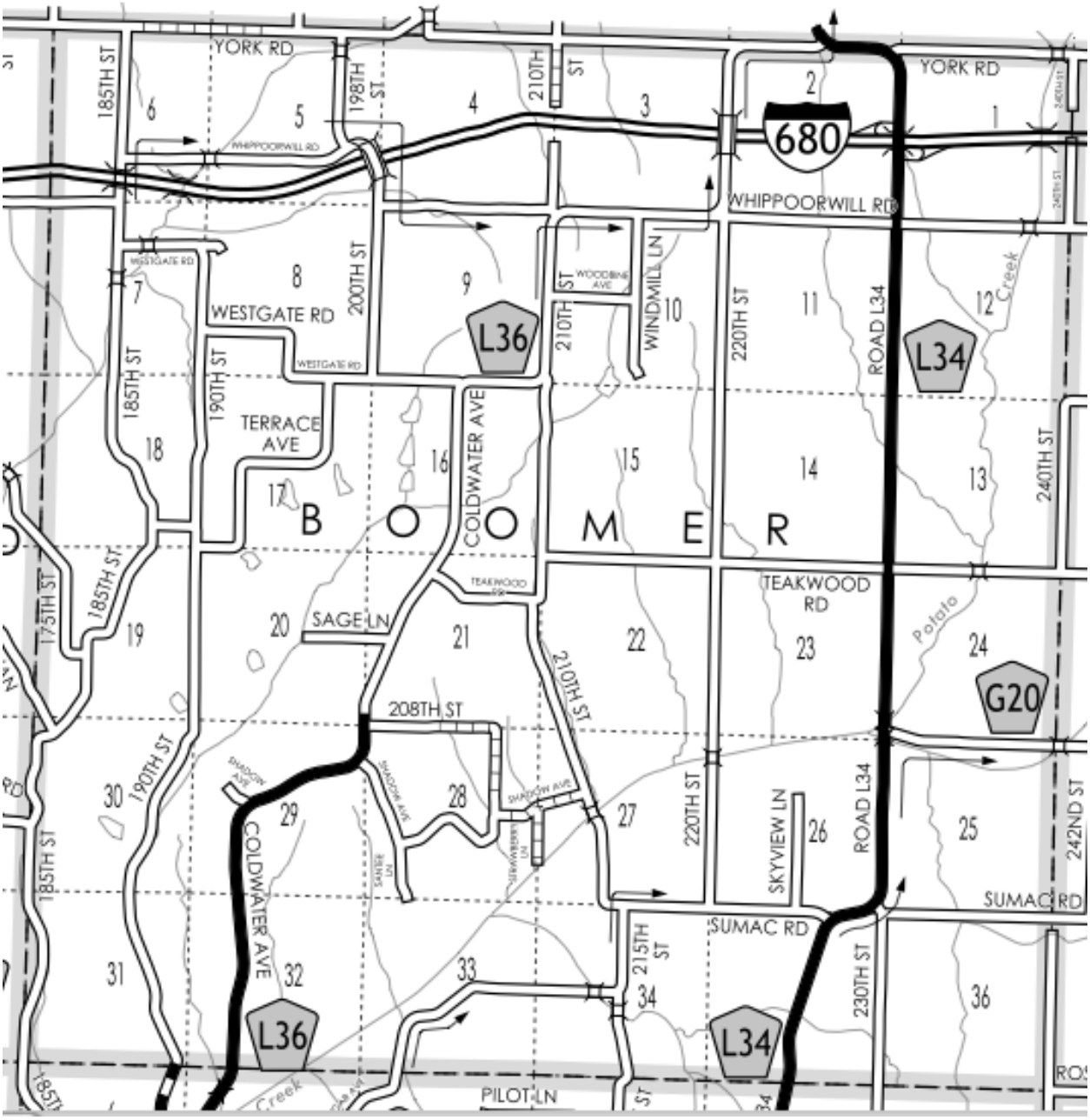


Boomer Township in 1900

From the 1900 R. V. Innes Atlas of Pottawattamie County

Courtesy of the Iowa Digital Library at the University of Iowa Libraries

(see the Notes section for information on finding a better image)



Boomer Township in 2014
(courtesy of IowaDOT.gov)

Historic Sites in Boomer Township

Boomer Township has four cemeteries and has had a number of churches over the years:

- The ***Grange Cemetery***, established in the 1870s, is about seven miles northeast of Crescent and is the largest and most active cemetery in Boomer Township. The Grange Cemetery is located in Section 28, on a side road south of county road L36, also known as Clearwater Avenue. The cemetery once included a chapel where children received nondenominational religious training.
- ***St. Paul's Lutheran Church*** and Cemetery was founded in 1881 and was a Danish Lutheran church that has tended to follow Inner Mission theology. St. Paul's is located in Section 35 in southeastern Boomer, several miles east of the Grange Cemetery.
- ***St. John's Lutheran Church*** in Section 21 in central Boomer Township was established in 1894 to meet the religious needs of the German immigrants from Schleswig-Holstein and north Germany who settled in the Boomer Township area in the latter third of the 19th century. St. John's still flourishes today. St. Johns has no cemetery and many from St. John's are buried in the Grange Cemetery.
- Some of the early settlers in northern Boomer were Roman Catholic. They were served by ***St. Bridget's*** chapel and cemetery in Section 18 in west central Boomer. The chapel burned some years ago.
- The first Boomer Township cemetery was the ***Reels Cemetery***, in Section 31 in southwest Boomer. Public-spirited citizens have tried to maintain the cemetery, although it is no longer used and is not on a public road, and in recent years was the victim of vicious vandalism. Beware of poison ivy!
- Both the Reorganized Church of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), now known as the Community of Christ, and the Seventh Day Adventists at one time had chapels west of St. Paul's Lutheran Church. The Adventist chapel is long gone. Around 1930 the RLDS chapel was moved into Hazel Dell Township several miles to the southeast, where it later became the Hazel Dell Township Hall and now is privately owned.

Other Boomer Township Historic Sites:

- In Sec. 21 on Coldwater Ave.: west side: brick township hall built in the 1870s; east side: St. John's Lutheran Church (originally north German immigrants).
- In Sec. 34 on south side of Sumac Road before 215th St.: old Boomer Store.

Boomer Township Country Stores and Post Offices:

Before the advent of free mail delivery to Boomer Township residents around 1902 country stores and post offices were important to farmers. The following are of note:

- The Harrison post office, in Section 31 was in operation only from 1879 to 1884. It was located on the farm of Peter Peterson, probably the first Danish immigrant to settle in Boomer Township. It was replaced by the Reels post office in northwestern Hazel Dell Township.

- The Pigeon post office and store, in central Boomer Township, operated from 1889 to 1902.
- The Boomer Store, in Section 34, was established in 1896 and closed in 1926. There was never an associated post office. The Boomer Store building still stands as of 2016, having been preserved over the years by Rudolph Jensen and then by Jeanette Generaux.

Once rural free delivery was established, Boomer Township residents received their mail by horse-drawn wagon and later by automobile from post offices in the following towns:

- Northwest Boomer from Missouri Valley, a town about five miles northwest of the northwest corner of Boomer Township.
- Southwest Boomer from Honey Creek to the west.
- Southeast Boomer from Weston or Underwood, which are south and southeast of Boomer.
- East Boomer from Neola, which is about six miles east of the eastern edge of Boomer Township.

Boomer Township Schools:

At one time Boomer Township, like other rural six mile by six-mile townships, had nine one-room schools. (The above 1900 township plat mistakenly omits Boomer #7, which served the northeast corner of Boomer.) There were several features of Boomer schools worthy of note:

- In 1874 before the system of nine schools located two miles apart was fully established, a two-story brick school was build near the Boomer Township center. The St. John's Lutheran Church congregation used this building before their church was constructed across the road. The second floor was removed around 1900 and the brick building used as a township hall. The building, sometimes called High Brick, is no longer in use but still stands as of 2016.
- Around 1916 the Beebeetown Consolidated School District was created and around 1918 a brick two-story school building, which incorporated a high school, was built in Beebeetown, a mile north of northeast Boomer Township. The Boomer #1 school subdistrict became part of the Beebeetown school district. Thus the Boomer #1 school does not appear on the 1919 Boomer Township plat.
- Over the years many of the one-room schools were replaced. The new schools might have had central heating but still lacked running water, electricity and telephones. The old Boomer #3 school was retained, and given the name of the Farmers Union Hall. Here in the 1920s a band of teen-aged male musicians led by Willie Witt rehearsed, and here my mother had her 19th birthday party in January 1928.

Some of the rural schools closed in the 1940s due to declining enrolments and lack of teachers. Almost all the others closed in the 1950s as improved roads made it possible to transport children longer distances.

Early Hazel Dell Township History

Hazel Dell Township as a political entity dates only from 1872. Before 1872, what is now Hazel Dell Township was part of Crescent Township and still earlier Crescent Township was part of Rockford Township.

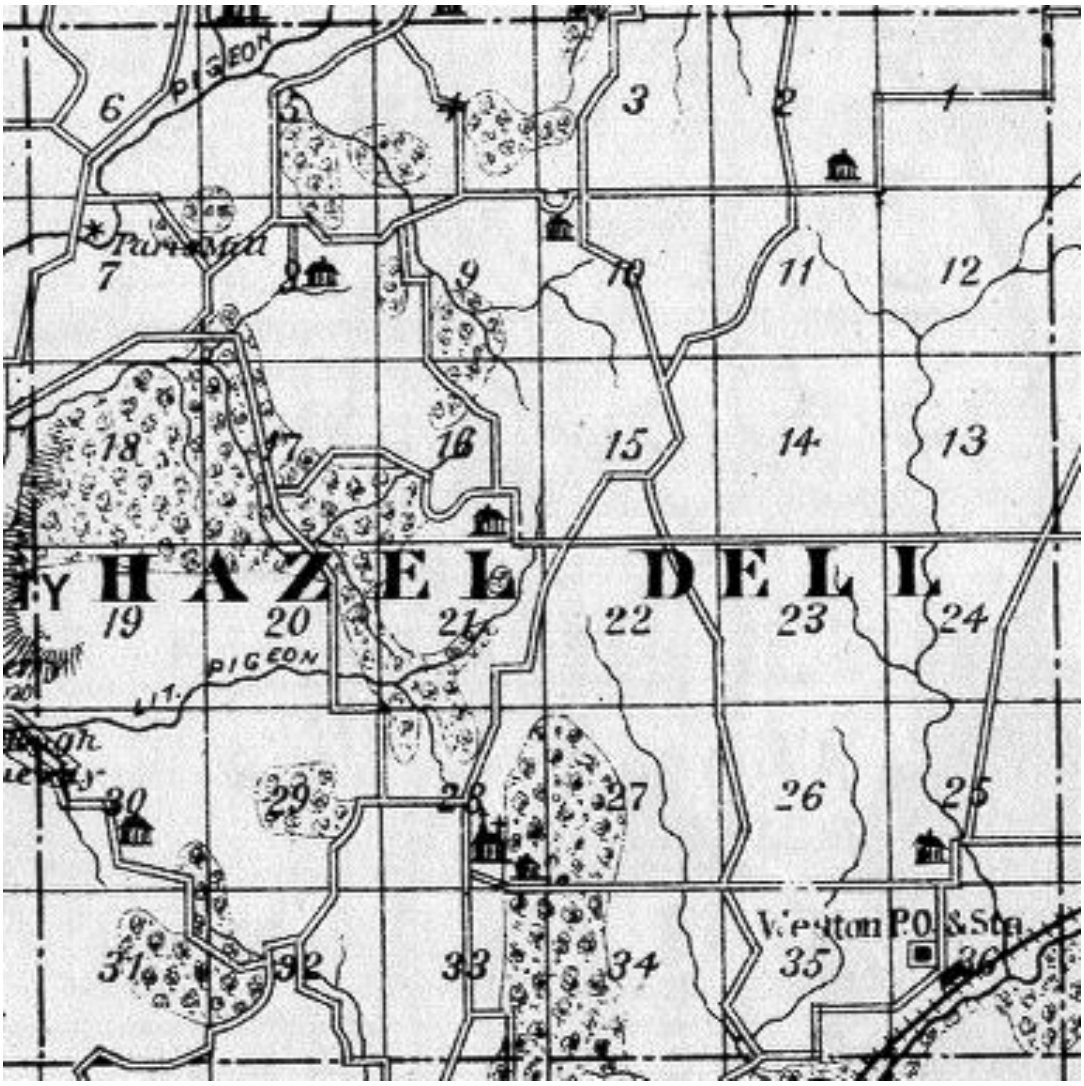
In the extreme northwestern corner of Hazel Dell Township, William Reel from Putnam County, Indiana ran a water-powered mill in the mid 1850s. However, there were one or more Mormon mills along Pigeon Creek earlier. The Reels mill continued in operation for many years, later being run by the Paris and the Wager families, and by William Reel's grandson. Later Sievert Rief, an immigrant from Schleswig-Holstein, built a two-story structure called Rief's Hall at a nearby corner. Thus for some years the Reels area boosted a store, post office and social hall.

At the extreme southeastern corner of Hazel Dell Township, the village of Weston was established in 1869 as a station along the newly-laid Rock Island railroad tracks.

Hazel Dell Township had a goodly number of immigrants from Demark. Partly this was due to a Danish-speaking Reorganized Latter Day Saints (RLDS) congregation established in the early 1880s by Hans N. Hansen. In the 1930s the congregation united with the English-speaking RLDS congregation from Boomer Township, meeting until around 1940 at what was until a few years ago the Hazel Dell Township Hall in Section 15.

Hazel Dell Township – Then and Now

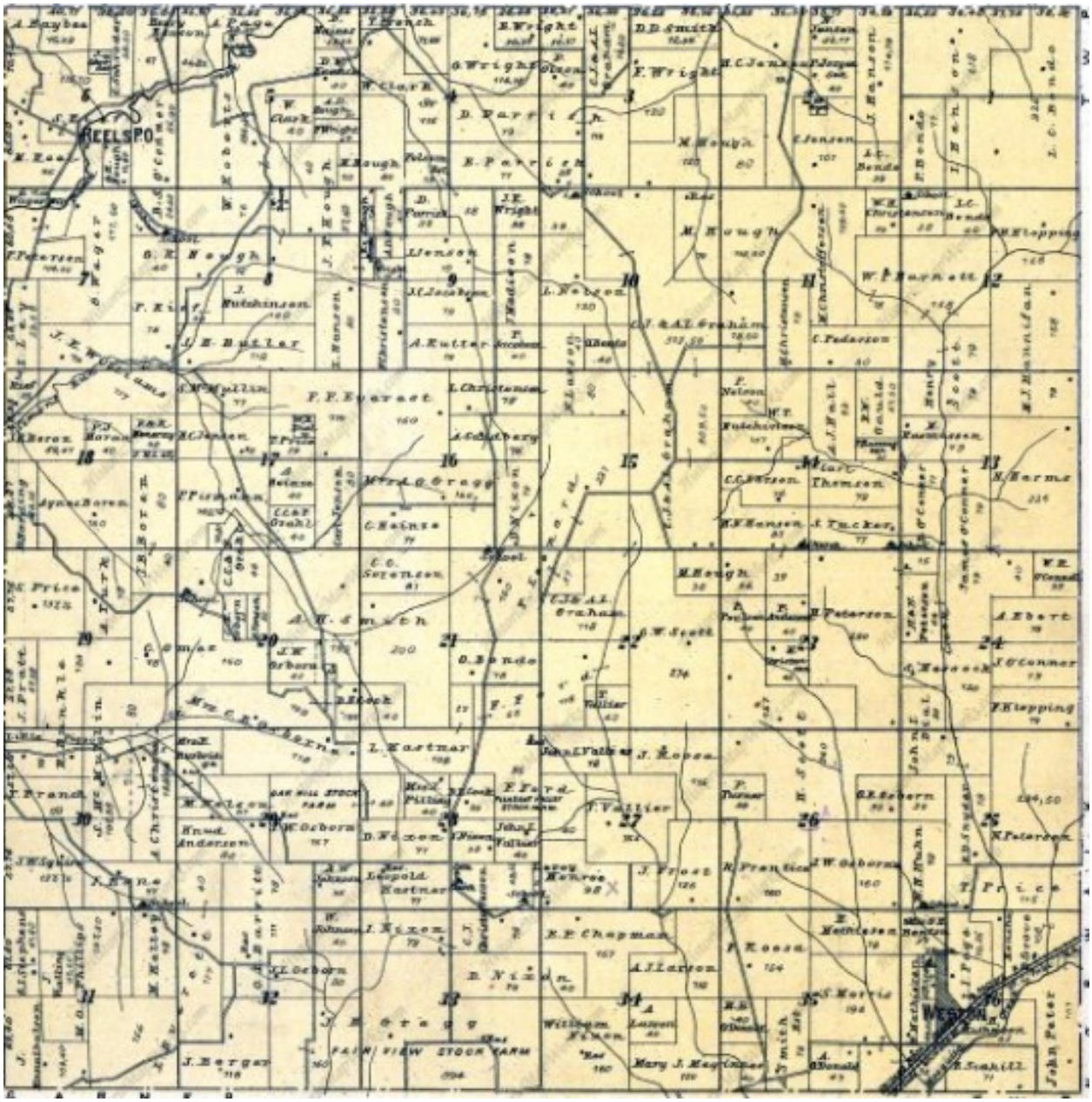
Here is the oldest map I have seen that depicts Hazel Dell Township. It is taken from the Pottawattamie County map on page 76 of the 1875 ***Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*** by A. T. Andreas. Mosquito Creek runs through the extreme southeastern part of the township, and Pigeon Creek through the extreme northwest part. Today's Crescent Creek was called Little Pigeon Creek at the time.



Hazel Dell Township in 1875
(courtesy of AlexanderMcCord.weebly.com)

1875 Sites:

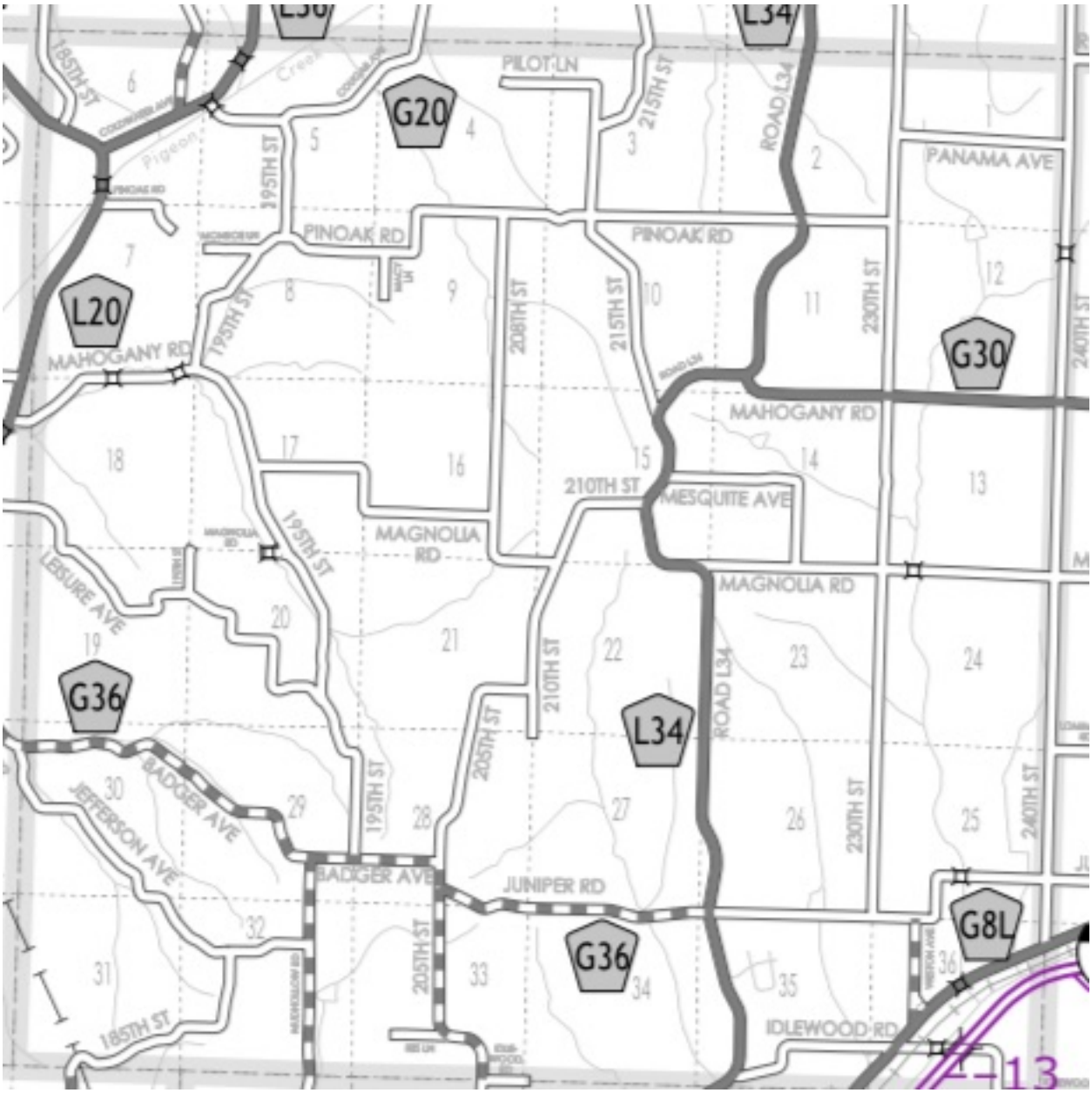
- Upper left: The Paris Mill along Pigeon Creek. This mill was established in the 1850s by William Reel and was later run by the Paris and Wager families.
- Lower right: The village of Weston, which was established in 1869 when the Rock Island Railroad was built into Council Bluffs along Mosquito Creek.
- In Section 28, a church, on the site of the today's Hazel Dell Methodist Church.
- About seven schools are shown.



Hazel Dell Township in 1900

From the 1900 R. V. Innes Atlas of Pottawattamie County
Courtesy of Digital Map Works
(see the Notes section for information on finding a better image)

Hazel Dell Township today



Hazel Dell Township in 2014
(courtesy of IowaDOT.gov)

Historic Sites in Hazel Dell Township

- Lower right in Section 36: Village of Weston founded in 1869 when the Rock Island Railroad tracks were laid into Council Bluffs. Portions of Weston burned c. 1906 and were rebuilt.
- north edge of Weston: St. Columbanus chapel and cemetery.
- at Juniper Road & 205th St.: Hazel Dell Methodist Church & Hazel Dell Township Cemetery. The church was founded around 1885 and replaced an earlier Presbyterian congregation.
- south of L34 & 215th St. in Section 19 on East side of road: erected c. 1890 in Boomer Township as RLDS chapel; moved to Hazel Dell Township c. 1930; became the Hazel Dell Township Hall c. 1940; now owned privately by Rick and Cheryl Larson.

Notes

I have not included a Sources section in this document. For more information about on-line resources for the study of northwestern Pottawattamie County, see the Sources section of my report *Pottawattamie County, Iowa, an Historical Overview*.

The 1900 plats of Boomer and Hazel Dell Townships earlier in this report are not readable. To find versions that you can enlarge, go to the webpage
http://128.255.22.135/cdm/ref/collection/atlases/id/7087
and select the township of interest to you from the pull-down menu on the right-hand side.

Contacting Me

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