

# **WILLIAM HOLMES, AN OLD SETTLER OF FINNEY COUNTY, KANSAS**

(William "Will" Ellsworth Holmes)

Written by Delora Black

*Consultants: Mr. William Holmes, Mrs. Mary (Holmes) Owens,  
Mr. George Dillon, and Mrs. Sadie Dillon*

*\* Additional information added about William Holmes*

Will Holmes, as he is known to his large host of friends, is still living in Garden City, Finney County, Kansas (1936). He is one of the few early settlers of Garden City still living to tell about its growth.

In the minds of some people, we might venture to say the majority think of the old days in Western Kansas as shooting and cattle rustling days. This idea has been dramatically played upon by the motion picture industry in their thrilling and exciting overplayed, greatly exaggerated westerns. Mr. Holmes, as well as the other old settlers, say Garden City was not that type of town even though there were saloons here in those days.

Mr. Holmes came to Garden City at the age of thirteen years in 1884. The family lived in Virginia and came to Kansas after hearing their relatives tell about a great new part of the country. They came to Garden City by train, bringing all of their household goods by boxcar. Garden City was just a small growing town at that time. The up-town district consisted of the Inge Brothers, Frederick Finnup, John Robinson, and the Charles Dietz general merchandise stores, four in number. There was also a delivery stable, owned by the Fulton Brothers, blacksmith shops owned by John Ersman and Charles Shultz, and two drug stores owned by Dr. Walton and George DeWaters. There was the Metropolitan Hotel owned by O. N. Tyson, two saloons, and the Congregational Church, now known as the Community Church. Practically every other person here was homesteading land in what was almost a desert country.

In the fall of 1884, Mr. Holmes became acquainted with C. J. (Buffalo) Jones, well known in history as the first man to start preserving the buffalo. Mr. Jones was in the downtown area of Garden City one day, and his horses had just run away, leaving him stranded in town. Will Holmes, who was thirteen at the time, just happened to be riding by, and Mr. Jones asked him if he had seen the horses. Mr. Holmes had not but stopped to converse with Buffalo Jones in the typically broad, friendly, Western manner of the early days. From that time on, he was considered a friend of Buffalo Jones. He still remembers many friendly conversations with that great "western man".

Mr. Holmes remembers when Buffalo Jones started catching buffalo calves in 1885. His first catch brought into his possession 11 calves that he brought to his ranch and

weaned them into domesticated cows. There were other trips made with his cowboys and some were successful; others were not. The area knew Buffalo Jones as a man with brains, who knew how to use them, and he was a real “go-getter.” While the idea was not original to him, his experiments with the cross breeding of the Galloway black domesticated cattle and the pure breed buffalo commanded attention. The image in mind was to produce better quality meat, as the buffalo were known for excellent tasty meat. The first white man to start this experiment before Buffalo Jones did was Charles Goodnight. (*Charles Goodnight started a domestic buffalo herd that he crossed with Angus cattle. They were titled “cattalo.”*) Goodnight is considered the first white man ever to try this, but he did not originate the idea entirely. It was first conceived by a tribe of Blackfoot Indians in South Dakota.

The Holmes family purchased the C. J. “Buffalo” Jones ranch after the Jones family left the area with their buffalo. However, it was still the “buffalo ranch as long as any of the buildings continued standing.” Some still remember the spot, but since the buildings are now gone, nothing is left to identify the location.

The land boom of 1885 brought people by the thousands flocking to Garden City due to the irrigation project, which came here at that time. There was so much publicity that the people expected something big of this desert county. The boom was going big in 1886 and 1887, but it began to break in 1888. In the meantime, while the boom was going on, Garden City’s population was approximately 10,000 people. At this present time (1936), it has about 6,000 inhabitants. Main Street extended from the banks of the Arkansas River to the cemetery. While at present, it only extends about six blocks, it spreads out more in other directions. Garden City was prosperous, and it had streetcars drawn by horses and mules.

In 1888, as a three-year drought began, people left, and the boom started to take a landslide. Families packed their possessions and left the area. Small wonder, for without water, the area became like a desert again. All of the man-made fertility and cultivation were of no avail against the hot, dry sun. A few families stayed; however, Garden City became almost desolate and deserted. Large buildings went to waste, and the streetcar tracks became wrecked from nonuse.

Then, after 1890, there began two years of crop raising and finally relief from the dry spell. People returned, but not as eagerly as they did before. Those who held to the ‘freedom of the wide-open spaces’ came to live in the area.

In 1893, there was another three-year drought. Some of the people who had come back after the drought of 1890 left again. After this drought, however, conditions became better.

In the early years, Garden City used the Methodist Church as its school. Between 1886 and 1887, the town built its first schoolhouse, but it burned down in 1901. Then came the Garfield school, just in time for classes that fall. It is still standing

today, but a new school building is being built directly in front of it. They began building it in October 1936. This building will soon hide the old Garfield School from view on the south side.

The former Elk home, called Wildwood, was built in 1886 and was the finest residence in Western Kansas at one time. I. R. Holmes, an uncle of Will Holmes, was inspired by his wife, Mrs. Holmes, to build "Wildwood." It was a beautiful three-story house of brick, and the woodwork was Black Walnut and Eucalyptus. It burned down in the spring of 1929, and the Girl Scout cabin now stands on the site where this beautiful old home once stood. L. R. Holmes was an agent for the Santa Fe Railroad lands. The government had given the railroad a certain amount of Western Kansas land to build the railway through Garden City. The government then sold this land at a low price. L. R. Holmes had a lot to do with the early settlement of Western Kansas, but mostly the settlement of Finney County.

Because of their early historical association and being naturally fascinated with historical things, the Holmes family has one of the finest historical collections in Western Kansas. Among some of the items in their collection are four buffalo horns that Mr. Holmes has saved and are about 50 to 60 years old, six guns dating back to 1789, an ancient battle picture, and a collection of about 700 arrowheads that range in size from three-eighth of an inch to 6 ½ inches in length. The largest one in their collection is a 'black obsidian' that is 6 ½ by 4 ½ inches in size. The battle picture is a lithograph, presented to the Grand Army. After a number of years went by, the picture became "lightly damaged". The Holmes family then owned the photograph. It is dated 1863 and is a picture of the "Battle of Gettysburg." Also in their possession, they have a set of crude-looking government Civil War tools. One was used to make ammunition and one to load the shells.

Other instruments are a bullet mold on a screw base lever, a ten-pound cannonball picked up on the Massachusetts site in Colorado by the Holmes family, and an old cartridge box used during the Civil War.

Mr. Holmes has a personal collection of rifles, a pride to any collector of old guns. These included one old crown and powder musket manufactured in England in 1861, initially owned by Andrew Sabine. Dr. Sabine gave it to Carl Holmes. Carl then gave it to his brother, Mr. Will Holmes. Dr. Sabine himself had taken it off a dead Confederate Soldier in Virginia after a battle. He was a hospital surgeon during the Civil War. Another gun in Mr. Holmes' collection is a flintlock musket made in France in 1789. There are other muskets, such as one ancient muzzleloader altered from a flintlock and made into a caplock and one 1869 U. S. Springfield Rifle. It is a fifty caliber and fires an ordinary Springfield shell. There are also two more U.S. Springfield rifles, one made in 1872 and the other in 1884.

From their collection of 700 Arrowheads comes history by itself. Mrs. Mary (Holmes) Owens, daughter of Mr. Holmes, has made a study of the ones they have. She has

collected many of the arrowheads. Included in their collection is a 'buffalo stunner,' 14 inches long. An Indian riding on a horse would strike a buffalo behind the ear, and this would stun the animal until the rider could get off his horse and cut the buffalo's throat. This instrument is estimated to be the only one in Garden City.

Among other types of arrowheads in their collection, one finds the hunting arrows, made with a shank and head and constructed so that the arrow would not slip off the shaft. The small arrows were for hunting birds, the medium size for antelope, and the larger ones for buffalo. The stunning arrow was made with a blunt point and used to stun the game and then kill afterward. It has a twisted point to give it a greater velocity as it goes through the air. There were different arrow war points, such as the bleeder point, made with a serrated edge to leave the wound open, and the victim, man or beast would bleed to death. The real war point had a shaft added to it. The arrow would go into the body and remain, but the shaft came off. The torture point, made with a long slender body and no head, was very sharp and designed to work further into the wound. In a class by themselves, there were arrows with massive points and used only for ceremonial purposes. They were never for hunting, and always showed exquisite workmanship.

The Indians used implements and tools, and these are also important in the "Holmes Collection." Included in these are scrapers, designed for the right or left-handed person. They were used to scrape flesh and hair from the hides preparatory to tanning. They were also used to scrape bark from shafts when making arrows. The scrapers are very thick and chipped on one side only. They vary in size and shape; the smallest in the collection is  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch, on up to 6 inches.

Other items in their collections are; Awls (*long, pointed spike*) used to drill holes in leather, hand axes that were sharp-edged and used for different cutting operations, and Celts (*chisels*) used as cutting tools with one sharp edge at one end and dull at the other end to hold in hand. There are also corn grinders with huge round stone bowls used to grind grain and mash nuts and berries. There were small bowl-shaped rocks made into paint pots. There, they would mix water with various colored clays, to make different colored paints. There are medicine pots similar to paint pots, used to mash various herbs and berries in making medicines. There are tomahawks that look like old-fashioned English battle-axes. There are two knives, one with a straight edge, and the other is sharp and made of flint or stone.

There are still arrowheads and other Indian relics that a person could find on the plains of Western Kansas. This country was an Indian country and a place where the buffalo roamed. Always behind the buffalo, the Indians came, and it was their chief means of livelihood. The dust storms covered a large number of Indian relics. The best place to look for them today is in blown fields that have been made bare by the severe winds. Various areas have been judged as Indian battlefields due to the number of arrowheads found there.

Changing the subject of arrowheads, the Holmes family has in their possession a large century plant. It is a member of the cactus family and is supposed to bloom only once every century. A schoolgirl brought it to them in 1911, and from its size, the plant is probably about thirty years old. It is now about six feet tall and about five feet across. The family keeps the plant in a large sized washtub, and when moved, it takes three or four men to move it.

### Additional Information WILLIAM HOLMES

**WILLIAM ELLSWORTH HOLMES**, son of Gilbert Lafayette Holmes (1839-1919) and Eliza Jane Connelly (1846-1930), was born on 9 Oct 1870 in West Virginia. He married **LENA JANE CONNELLY**, daughter of Martin Luther Connelly (1842-1928) and Mary E. Giffin (1843-1885), on 25 Dec 1892. Lena was born on 20 Jan 1871 in Brooke County, West Virginia.

William and Lena had two children: **MARTIN LUTHER HOLMES** (1903-1905) and **MARY EVELYN (HOLMES) OWENS** (1906-1988).

William Holmes worked for the Garden City Sugar Company. He retired in 1945 due to poor health.

William died on 8 June 1946 in Garden City, Finney County, Kansas. Lena Holmes died there in May of 1952. Burial for both was at the Valley View Cemetery in Garden City, Kansas.

### HEADSTONE PHOTOGRAPH



VALLEY VIEW CEMETERY  
Garden City, Finney County, Kansas  
*Photograph provided by Lisa Towns*