

# SPRING HILL KANSAS

## Our Town

*They blazed the trails, planted trees, and broke the prairie sod.*

*As for failure or success, they placed their faith in God.*

*Life was a hardship at its best; they didn't have much to give,*

*But just because they were around, we have a better place to live.*



*It's not how big that you have grown, or how very small;*

*Quality is the password, and history grades us all.*

*As time passes quickly by, it spans the generation gaps,*

*When history tells what went before, we have to tip our hats.*

—Francis R. Morrison—

# Perseverance on the Prairie

The early Kansas settler left familiarity and security for rumors of lawlessness, unsettled conditions, unpleasant surroundings and pioneer hardships. The territory promised prosperity to Opportunists and Idealists, Zealots and Innocents—but all were naïve to the bitter realities.

Three years after Spring Hill was founded, a two-year drought set in. The population of Kansas dropped by one-third and the sun became everyone's greatest opponent—whether free-state, pro-slave or entrepreneur. Those who weren't starved out or scared off set about the work of building community.

*"I can't sleep at night  
for dreaming of Bull Creek."* ~Spring Hill New Era

A few stubborn souls remained on Bull Creek, 10 miles south of Olathe, where water and timber could support a settlement. They saw opportunity between the Frontier Military Road and the Santa Fe Trail, but the rewards were often thin and costly.

Although frayed by the Sectionalism of the 1850's, Insect Plagues, Railroad Extortionists, Economic Depression, Bandits, and the most fearsome of Kansas afflictions—a twister—Spring Hill has persevered on the prairie.

For every "Spring Hill" there is a ghost of another town blowing on the Kansas wind. Others had more auspicious beginnings, loftier expectations, infamous personalities, more notable events or battles . . . but in Spring Hill, ordinary people devoted themselves to the daily task of building consistency, consensus and community—and through this exercise achieved their own version of grandeur—the survival of "small town."

## SPRING HILL CITY

Spring Hill still remains a "front porch" community. School and church events crowd the schedule. Baseball continues to be a family event on warm summer evenings. The downtown district shows it's age, but is not abandoned. The buildings are being renovated, with the promise of new commerce.



In the distance the city lights shine, but the warm glow of community will call you back to Spring Hill. Through this most typical example of a Kansas town, we see how the uniquely American experience has persevered.

There is much to celebrate in Spring Hill. This town still stands . . .



HON. A. DAVIS  
FIRST MAYOR OF SPRING HILL CITY, JOHNSON COUNTY, KANSAS

*"I've always said that I  
hope they drag me out of  
the cattle lot out there  
face down. And I really  
mean that."*

—sentiments of Cleve DeVault,  
referring to his Spring Hill  
family farm, passed down  
since 1893.

# Spring Hill ~ the First 50 years

## **“GEORGE WASHINGTON” SLEPT HERE. . .**

In a stretch of rolling slough grass, skirted by a rambling creek south of ‘Olathee’, James B. Hovey laid his claim in 1857. On his arrival to the area, Hovey first lodged with a “voting” Shawnee Indian by the name of George Washington and his family.

*“Being somewhat enthusiastic in my estimation of its future, it having all advantages of timber and water, and on a line that must be traveled between Olathe and Paola, I concluded to myself, (as there was no one else to conclude with) that this was a good place for a town.”*

- J.B.Hovey, 1857

## **UN ‘BRIDE’ LED ENTHUSIASM**

During the first lonesome winter, Hovey and three friends “enlivened things” by advertising for wives in the “Boston Journal.” After sorting through women wanting a “pa” for their youngin’s and the fragrant offer of a “Southern Lily,” one proved promising. Hovey headed east to meet his bride, a Latin Scholar.

## **THE REST IS HISTORY**

The first building in town was the Spring Hill Hotel, also known as the “Old Traveler’s Rest.” The two-story structure was built in 1857 on the highest elevation in town, just north of the city park. Although the structure no longer exists, the lot is used for parking by the Baptist Church. It is rumored that the hotel was used as a hiding place for runaway slaves.

## **A GARDEN OF EATIN’**

In 1859, Journalist Horace Greeley passed through Spring Hill, offering laud on the landscape.

*“If the Garden of Eden exceeded this land in beauty or fertility, I pity Adam for having to leave it.” -Horace Greeley*

Greeley, who was given to hyperbole and land speculation, was less enthusiastic about the fare. He noted that Spring Hill did not have a tavern, and that he was forced to dine on crackers and herring purchased at a local store.

## **‘MOWER’ OF THE GOOD SEED**

Sam Mower of Spring Hill, planted the first alfalfa grown in Kansas and found fertile ground.

## **TALE OF TWO TOWNS...**

In the early 1870’s, Spring Hill experienced an expansion in population and commerce. The coming of the railroad was a greatly anticipated opportunity, but the Missouri River, Fort Scott and Gulf Railroad threatened to bypass Spring Hill if the town didn’t cough up \$15,000 to grade the land.



When railroad speculators became more persuasive than a cow-catcher, other towns typically stoked the “engine” with cash to ensure the future of their communities. Not Spring Hill. Stubborn residents and businessmen wouldn’t succumb to extortion, and proceeded to move the downtown district one-half mile east to meet the new rail line.

## **FEEDING THE SOUL**

Methodist-Episcopals were the first to save souls in Spring Hill. They established a meeting in 1858, and by the 1870’s, there were two “altar” natives—Methodist Protestant and Presbyterian. The churches played an important role in the social aspect of the community with ice cream socials and box dinners.

## **NO GREEN PIECE**

In 1874, the country was plagued by economic depression and Spring Hill was swarmed by grasshoppers, who devoured everything green . . . and then moved on to blankets and coats, shoes, leather harnesses, pitch fork handles, fence posts . . . All water sources were polluted. Vegetable gardens and cash crops were devastated. Cattle and chickens were inedible.

## **OLD NEWS IS GOOD NEWS**

Johnson County’s oldest, continuous newspaper, “The Spring Hill New Era,” began operations in 1883. In 1884, an editorial commented that what the town needed most was a “good” dentist. The editor proudly announced that he had taken his business out-of-town, and offered his pearly whites as evidence of a job well done if anyone cared to stop by the newspaper office and check them out.

# Celia Ann and the Civil War

## DOCTOR AND DIVORCEE

Perhaps the first woman doctor in Kansas was Celia Ann Dayton, a native of Vermont. She arrived in Spring Hill in 1859, with her adopted son, Hiram Eugene, who was also a doctor. Her husband, Amon, arrived several months later. Celia Ann's life speaks of a strikingly independent nature, and radical departures from societal convention.



In addition to being a female doctor, Celia Ann offered aid and comfort to black refugees. There are good indications that she was involved in Underground Railroad activity.

Further parting with conventions of the times, in 1862 Celia Ann divorced Amon, who had taken a fancy to a Swedish settler. Celia Ann continues to be researched as an important figure in Kansas history.

## “OF A MORE DARING NATURE . . .”

In May of 1861, Celia Ann's son, Hiram Eugene, signed up with the 2nd Kansas Volunteer Infantry, Company C, just in time to see action at Wilson's Creek in Missouri. But with a keen mind and an adventuresome spirit, he envisioned a more daring role and was soon riding with the infamous 7th Kansas Cavalry under Charles “Doc” Jennison. The red-legged sociopath used Hiram Eugene as a spy against Missouri Secesh sympathizers.

On January 27, 1862, in a cabin near Blue Springs, Missouri, he gathered information about Quantrill's movements. A touch of peach cordial was followed by a blizzard of hot lead. Hiram Eugene was found out as a double agent, and ambushed. His frozen body was lying outside the cabin door the following morning. Hiram Eugene is buried beside his mother in the Spring Hill Cemetery.



## IN THE LINE OF FIRE

In the fall of 1862, William Quantrill's gang raided Olathe. One of the casualties was a Spring Hill merchant, Hiram Blanchard, who was shot as he exited an Olathe saloon.



After rounding up a large number of prisoners, Quantrill then began marching towards Spring Hill. Just outside town, Farmer McKoin used his calm manner and a convincing prevarication to save the day. He reported that a company of soldiers had just arrived in Spring Hill, thereby deterring any aggression.

## MORE THAN A WARM COVER

The next year, however, Quantrill's gang did descend upon Spring Hill, looting and stealing goods from local businesses, and horses from a local farmer.

One fortunate soul found cover between the flaps of a quilt hanging on the line when Quantrill's Raiders descended. Another man, hidden under the mattress, was less fortunate when his boots were discovered at the back door.

## SETTING OURSELVES RIGHT

Spring Hill reflected the divisions within the nation, but city leaders put more stock in community than in conflict. The following resolution was passed by city officials on Oct. 28, 1861:

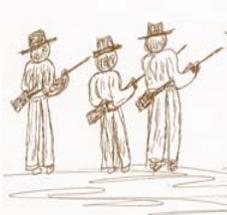
“A state of hostilities exists between the loyal and disloyal leaders of our country. We plainly see the policy of civilized nations is being grossly disregarded by citizens professing to be non-partisans in the common strife in regard to respecting individuals property, and believing as we do, that property has been unlawfully and unjustly taken from individuals brought and kept in our community. We therefore as citizens of Spring Hill . . . take this method of setting ourselves right, hereby exhibiting to the country at large our position,

1. That we deny the right of one people of our common county to confiscate the property of another of the same county for individual use . . . Except by such legal authority as is recognized by individual nations...
2. Because our armies are at war, it is no excuse for citizens not connected with the armies not to continue their friendship between themselves and neighboring communities.

# 1900 to the Present

## UP AND DRESSED, IN ONE MINUTE FLAT. . .

In the early 1900's, bandits and petty thieves, coming out of the city and Missouri, found easy pickin's in the small town of Spring Hill. The frequency of these uninvited visits began to alarm Spring Hill residents, who formed the "Minute Men." Two local banks supplied guns and ammunition to any able-bodied man . . . "able, under a stop watch, to put on a shirt, trousers, shoes and a hat and get from their bedroom to the front porch in one minute flat."



*"Some are required to go to the bandstand in the centre (sic) of town, from which every roadway to the business center can be swept with rifle fire. Others are to go to the cross roads leading out of town and instructed not to let any one pass."*

On June 9, 1920, Alfred Gantert entered a local bank, asking for directions. The young man, dressed in greasy old clothes (under which he wore a brown suit, a silk shirt, British shoes and a Stetson hat) locked bank employees in a vault. The alarm was sounded. With over \$1,000 stuffed into his shirt, he took out across a wheat field, followed by a posse of "Minute Men." Gantert was shot through the heart near a cedar tree in which he'd played as a child. His mother refused to claim the body so Gantert was buried in the Paupers' Field of the Spring Hill Cemetery.

*"This minute man business may sound awfully funny to high salaried hawkshaws and plain clothes men of the cities, and may even make an ordinary cop smile. But it has produced some results..."*—Spring Hill New Era, 1920

## WISH THEY'D FLEA

For eight years, Spring Hill hosted some unwelcome guests. Beginning in the summer of 1934, a plague of brown fleas descended on Spring Hill and took up residence in dirt and barn dust. Spring Hill residents and animals looked like they had the measles. Neither winter freeze nor pesticides fazed these pests.

## VICTORIAN SECRET

The Spiritualist Movement in Spring Hill can't be swept "under the table." Mediums and clairvoyants became Victorian pastimes. Jabez Hunt Nixon, a Justice of the Peace in Spring Hill, was a spiritual practitioner. He believed that the essence of reality was spiritual or ideal, and wrote three books about séances and "Spirit Rappers."



## POETRY AND PAINTING ON THE PRAIRIE

Spring Hill claims both Ed Blair and his son Streeter as home-grown celebrities. Ed, who wrote a version of Kansas history, was known as the "Spring Hill Poet." His son, Streeter, gained a substantial reputation as a folk artist. Locals claimed that Streeter was better suited to paintbrushes than to plows, but his "Grandma Moses-style" art often depicted the small town scenes of his early childhood.

## AN INTERESTING TWIST...

Just before nightfall on May 20, 1957, twin funnels wrestled into one just before slamming into Spring Hill and jumping the state line like a Kansas Redleg.

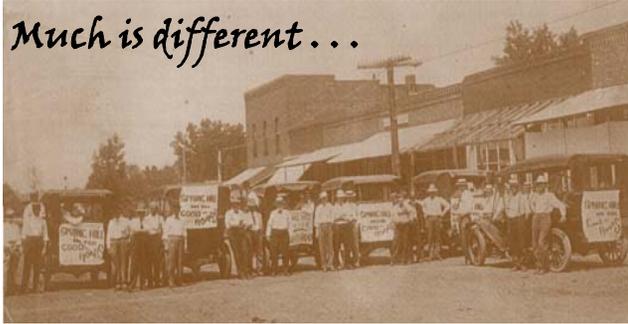
Neighbors tried to warn neighbors. Jim Shields drove through town alerting residents with his car horn. It wasn't enough for the Davis family of four. . .



The twister touched down just before 7 p.m. and within minutes much of Spring Hill was in splinters. The cyclone then crossed into Missouri, striking Ruskin Heights and Hickman Mills. By nightfall, after 1 1/2 hours of destruction, 44 people were dead and over 200 injured.

# Historic Downtown

*Much is different . . .*



## PAVING THE WAY TO THE FUTURE

In 1915, change accelerated. Spring Hill merchants took to the streets, protesting for progress. The issue wasn't muddied for car owners who wanted paved roads, and blocked off Main Street. Old timers showed their horses' flanks and attempted to "stall" progress. The day went to the Model T.

## UNDER THE BOARDWALK

*"I remember when they tore out the wooden boardwalks, and put concrete in there; kids around . . . screening the dirt; money that had dropped down between the boards."* -Cecil Starbuck



## BRIGHT FUTURE

In 1898, Spring Hill began installing gas lights on Main Street. Daniel Bingham was responsible for lighting street lights with a 36-inch metal wand. Children delighted in following Bingham on his rounds until the dark side of technology extinguished his career. Electric lighting came into fashion in Spring Hill in 1911.

## TIN PAN ALLEY

The Spring Hill Grange Store was the largest store the town ever had. The Spring Hill Oil Company now occupies this corner on Main Street. The store carried groceries, dry goods, hardware and farm machinery. Upstairs was a large hall, used for meetings, vaudeville shows and dances. And when those floors got to rockin', those tin goods got to hoppin'.

*But much is the same . . .*



## NO "LYE"?

*"An old building down from the old hotel used to be a store, and an old guy lived in there and he was so dirty and he'd come down to the store every once in awhile and one of us girls would slip a bar of soap in his sack and I said I thought he ate it cause he sure didn't wash with it."* -Mary Belle Findley

## SPICE OF LIFE

The silent movie house was located at 106 S. Main. For a dime, locals watched Tom Mix or Hoot Gibson ride across the screen with accompaniment by local musicians.

During the heat of the summer, a blower motor was used to help cool things down— until the day young pranksters dumped a can of pepper into the fan. Interest in the show stopped abruptly and the building was emptied in seconds.

None of the liberties taken at the drive-in movie were allowed here. If a young couple were caught sitting too close together, the sparks of their innocent passion were doused when their names were flashed across the screen. Quite a show-stopper. . .

## BAILY'S DRUG STORE

*"If we could scare up a nickel once a week, we could go down to Charlie Baily's and get an ice cream cone. The cones were about twice as big as an ice cream cone is now and Mr. Baily would pack the ice cream clear to the bottom of that cone and then two dypson top for a nickel."*  
-Mary Belle Findley

# Historic Homes of Spring Hill

206 E. Hale— This one-story wood frame home, built ca. 1875, was once home to Dr. Celia Ann Dayton. Originally a two-story farmhouse with separate entrances, presumably for use with her medical practice, the home was remodeled in the 1940's. The adjacent barn is of wooden-peg construction.



317 E. Nichols— The owners of this home, built in 1872, have taken care to preserve the historical integrity of the house. It remains one of the most stately and well-cared for homes in Spring Hill.



18045 W. 199th Street— Frank and Susan Morrison, grandparents of local historian Francis Morrison, constructed this house in 1884. The adjacent barn was featured in a drawing in the 1874 Johnson County Atlas, and was built in 1865.



310 E. Nichols— Visitors of this home report that they have urges to write on blackboards. The current owners say the home was originally a one-room schoolhouse, and later moved into town.

19897 N. Webster— From a perch on the roof, 11-year old Ethel Mae Healy watched the “new” highway being constructed in the late 1920's. The “new” highway passed through Spring Hill on what is now Webster.



201 W. Nichols— The pastor of the Presbyterian Church lived in this wood-frame home, built ca. 1900. The old Presbyterian church was located just to the west of this structure.



414 E. Hale— This one-story home, built ca 1900, was converted to the offices of the MiJo Telephone Company in 1909. Up to 20 homes shared a phone line, or “party line.” Rumors really made the circuit!

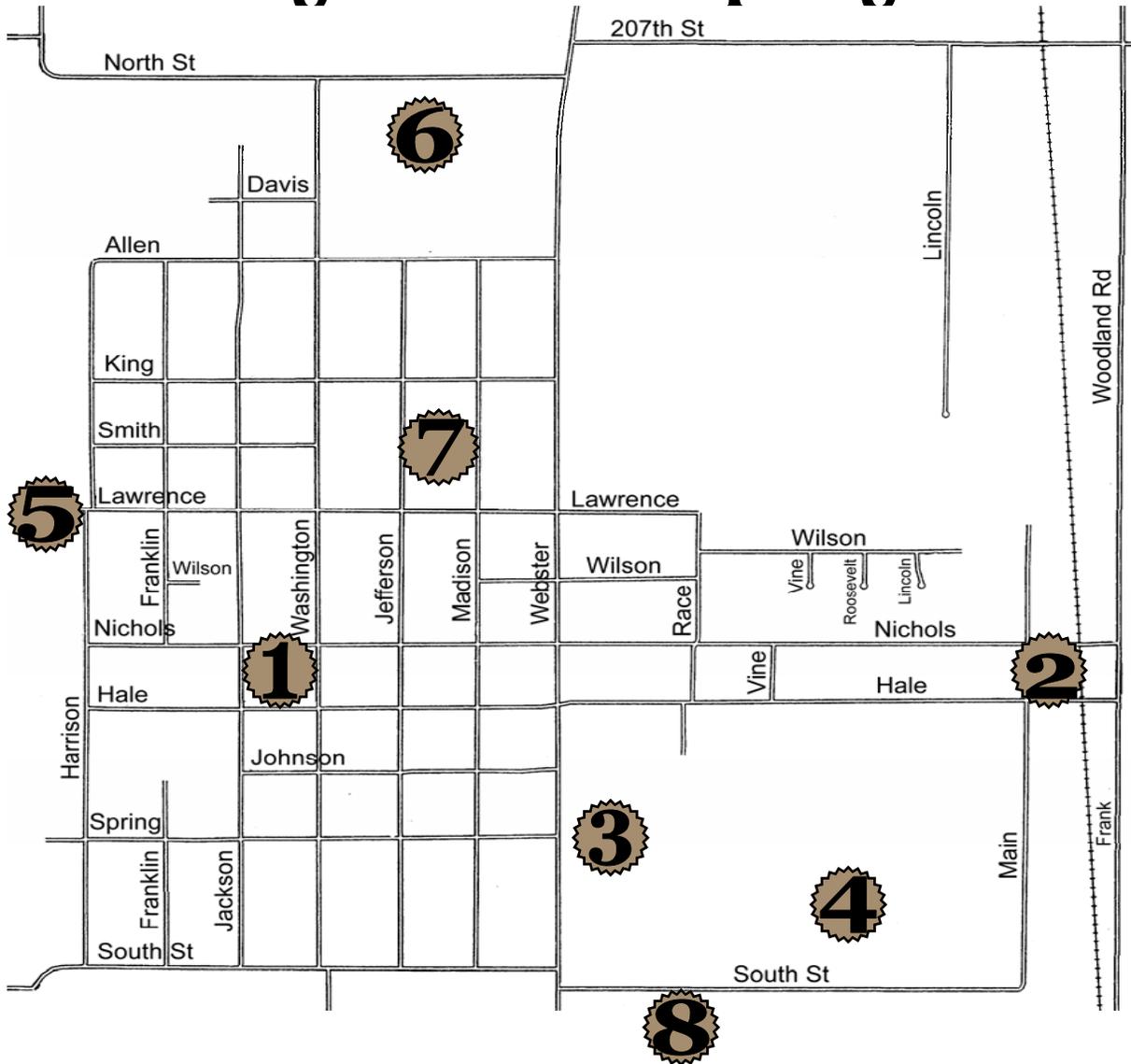


The city jail, constructed by A. H. Starbuck in 1926, served as temporary housing for the lawless. Fabricated of strap iron, the jail was housed in the city building on North Main Street, but is now on display in the City Park.

20135 Webster— This house looks virtually the same as it did in the 1874 Johnson County Atlas. The current owner's family rescued the house around the turn of the century, from use as a hay barn.



# Getting Around in Spring Hill



- #1— Spring Hill City Park, and site of the original Spring Hill Downtown
- #2—“New” Spring Hill Downtown, established in 1870
- #3— Current Spring Hill Elementary School
- #4—Current Spring Hill Middle School
- #5—Spring Hill City Cemetery
- #6—Spring Hill Swimming Pool and Baseball Fields
- #7—Spring Hill City Hall Offices and Civic Center
- #8— Spring Hill Chamber of Commerce and Community Center

## Downtown Historic Registry

Spring Hill residents value the history of their downtown, and are working towards nomination of the district to the Kansas State Register of Historic Places. As a result of this process, the downtown buildings, including **original** names and construction dates, have been researched and documented.

*“Spring Hill will soon be the hottest little town in Eastern Kansas that will be second only to Iola.”*  
 -Spring Hill New Era, 1898

### West Side

- 107 S. Main— Rudy Building, 1897
- 109 S. Main— Flanders Building, 1896
- 111 S. Main— Null Restaurant Building, 1896
- 113 S. Main— Wiley Building, 1896
- 115 S. Main— Wiley Building, 1896
- 117 S. Main— Newton Building, 1896
- 119 S. Main— Sowers Building, 1896
- 121 S. Main— McCanse Building, 1896
- 123 S. Main— Second Spring Hill Banking Company and Masonic Building, 1903

*“Come to our town, the metropolis of the county, and we’ll show you a model town— one look will make any other town of its size look like 40 cents in Chinese money.”*—Spring Hill New Era, 1910

### East Side

- 102 S. Main— Hogue Building, 1886
- 104 S. Main— First Spring Hill Banking Company Building, 1887
- 106 S. Main— Riffle Building, 1888
- 108 S. Main— Riffle Building, 1888
- 110 S. Main— Pratt Building, 1905
- 112 S. Main— Rutter Building, 1905
- 116 S. Main— Sowers Building, 1905
- 118 S. Main— IOOF Hall, 1934

**PATRONIZE HOME MERCHANTS:**  
 Transients, peddlers, and street fakere are interested only in the dollars they take from the community.

-Spring Hill New Era, 1902

# A Sense of Community



## The Young Ladies Walking Club of Spring Hill

On June 5, 1879, the “Social Six,” outfitted with straw hats, parasols and corsets, started out on a walking tour. The impetuous parlor-pedestrians, however, lacked the vigor of their pioneer parents. Three hours of mid-day Kansas heat had melted their enthusiasm. The Olathe newspaper reported that six “limping, way-worn looking travelers” were taken in by an Olathe woman, who administered water, a whisk broom and a little motherly kindness. The paper also noted that none of the young women wished to make the 10-mile return trip by foot. All rode the evening train back home to Spring Hill.



## **BEATING THE DEPRESSION BLUES**

It was the “bottom” of the Depression. For two years, people had struck out. Hope was not in scoring position. But Spring Hill, a town of 400, had a baseball team, and they were up to bat against the “big boys”— the Kansas City Blues.

Two locals, Pitcher Roy Brown and Catcher Walter Coffia, had experience in the big leagues and led the local team to victory! Not only were the bases loaded, but the stands as well. Celebration went on for days as the small town boys beat the big city pros, proving once again that “it ain’t over till it’s over.”



*“Upon my first visit to the place,  
and beholding a scene of such surpassing loveliness,  
and all nature in the charm of its original beauty.  
... (a case of love at first sight) ...  
I at once determined upon making that my home and  
of building up a settlement right there.” -J.B. Hovey*

**This brochure, created in the Fall of 2000,  
is dedicated to the memories of  
Francis Morrison and Ethel Mae Healy,  
who shared their love of Spring Hill history  
in generous and knowledgeable ways.**

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**Spring Hill**  
KANSAS

**Spring Hill Chamber of Commerce**

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