

March 4, 2018

The story of Rhubarb, Kansas

The other day I was at home searching the Internet for a good mincemeat espresso recipe (more popular during the holidays), when I stumbled across an article detailing the historic town of Rhubarb, Kansas.

I should warn you: the story of the founding of this little town in southwest Kansas is not for the faint of heart. You should be robust and in good health before reading the following. No one will think the worse of you if you turn away now. Except that you're a little wimpy.

Our story begins with Walter Moundridge (pronounced Mound-ridge, but I guess that goes without saying), a 1901 immigrant to the United States from Antribar, a minor republic in what was then the Kingdom of Antarctica.

Soon after the fall of the royal family following a coup-d'etat by an army of four nomadic seal fishermen (history later tells us that they were just looking for a sandwich), Moundridge fled to the United States. There he met Donna Brice, a cook for a wealthy and incredibly lazy steel magnate. In addition to preparing her boss's meals, she also pre-chewed his food. It should be noted that the chewing wasn't done in any official capacity, and she received no financial compensation.

Brice and Moundridge fell in love and were married. Brice quit her job.

After several weeks of not saying goodbye to Walter each morning as he left for work, she eventually realized that this was due to his not leaving the house each morning to go to work, due to his not having a job to go to every morning. Brice got her old job back.

The two relocated to a small apartment in New York's upper east side, which at the time was located in Iowa thanks to a really bad mistake by a young Rand McNally.

After reading that Oklahoma was having a land rush, the pair, tired of the daily Iowa-to-New York commute, decided to head south. Once in Oklahoma, they learned that, being 1905, they were approximately 15 years late for the land rush and no amount of rushing would allow them to catch up. The couple went ahead and rushed across some land just so they could say they did.

They headed north to Kansas and settled into the border town of Rhubarb, where they were able to take out an FHA loan with 3.806 percent APR to buy a house, which they were able to purchase for \$1.57 based on a 17-year loan.

According to Byran March's "Rhubarb: A History," the town of Rhubarb, Kansas had in 1905 one mercantile, a bank, a school, and four coffee shops, which were all the rage back then.

March writes: "The town boasted only one residence, that of Walter and Donna Moundridge. The community did not have a church."

And that is where our story begins. Sorry it took so long.

"Rhubarb, Kansas needed a Catholic Church to serve the blossoming Catholic community," March writes, referring to the couple. "Blossoming" might be overstating it a bit.

Eventually, more people would move to Rhubarb, thanks in no small part to its reputation for having multiple coffee shops, each with short lines due to there being nobody in town who drank coffee.

"Over the next year, five more Catholic families joined Rhubarb, resulting in 137 children registering in the one-room school house. Donna became the school teacher, and each child spent long hours learning the skills and techniques of cooking, with the optional class, 'Chewing Food for Fun and Profit.'"

According to the author March, "The town was such named because it was built on an old Indian rhubarb burial ground, resulting in acres of rhubarb jutting from the land each spring like long, red facial hair — facial hair that tasted good in pie or dipped in sugar. Many mistakenly believe the town was named after town founder Jebediah Rhubarb, but that was just a coincidence."

Soon, the town attracted rhubarb farmers from far and wide. Walter became manager of the rhubarb elevator at the edge of town, where rhubarb would be collected and stored in large rhubarb bins.

Life was good.

Then, as every Kansas child knows from history class, in 1912 came the great rhubarb famine. Crops dried up. Cattle starved without their rhubarb to eat. Farmers packed up and headed west, many moving to Kumquat, Colorado, just over the border.

The Moundridges chose to stay, and in doing so, realized with renewed zeal the importance of having their own church, a place where the community could come to worship, their voices raised together in unity as one voice unified together as one.

On April 23, 1914, the Moundridges approached their bishop. According to church records, the conversation went as thus:

Bishop: "I understand you'd like a new church."

Walter: "You hit the nail on the head."

Donna: "*Is that a real ficus plant?*"

Bishop: "The answer is *yes*."

Walter: "Wonderful! Thank you, Bishop!"

Bishop: "No, I mean about the ficus. But yes to the other, too."

With the construction of the church, the community was, on June 8, 1915, able to celebrate Mass together for the first time.

Sadly, the rhubarb industry never regained its earlier success, and within 10 years the town had disappeared from the map. It was later put back on the map after Rand McNally finally got his act together.

Editor's Note: *I had a beautiful moral message to finish off this column, but due to the inclusion of this Editor's Note, there is no longer space available.*