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MALCOLM CONN: MERCHANT ON THE TRAIL

by Mark L. Gardner

On October 17, 1859, *The Kansas Press* of Council Grove reported that “one firm in this place took in over \$1,600 in gold and silver one day last week for goods, another took in over \$1,400. We are selling over one hundred thousand dollars worth of goods per annum, and our trade is increasing. . . . Council Grove has a future that no other town off the Missouri River can ever hope to have in Kansas.”¹ At the time, there were only two major business houses to accommodate the hundreds of traders and Pike’s Peakers who were following the Santa Fe Trail.

One of those businesses was trading out of an impressive, two-story, stone structure situated right on the Trail. Known simply as the “Stone Store,” it was owned and operated by one of Council Grove’s most prominent and nearly forgotten early-day merchants, Malcolm Conn.

Conn was born to James Clay and Mary Conn of Baltimore County, MD, December 12, 1831. A farmer of means, James C. Conn was listed in the 1850 Maryland census as having real estate worth \$6,000. In that census, Malcolm was listed as living at home and his occupation was that of clerk.²

Where he was clerking is not known. However, five years later, he left Maryland to seek business opportunities in Westport, one of the largest outfitting points on the Missouri border, having superseded Independence just a few years before.³ Conn may have been employed by merchant Silas P. Keller.⁴ Keller, a native Virginian, was located on Westport’s Main Street where he competed for the “western trade” with the likes of Kearney & Bernard, A. G. Boone, Baker & Street, J. G. Hamilton, and Edward Price.⁵

Conn remained in Westport only a year, though. Sometime in 1856 he moved to Council Grove, Kansas Territory, in the middle of the Kansa or Kaw Indian lands.⁶ Conn was probably drawn to the area by the trade opportunities with the Kaw tribe and the Santa Fe traders who needed “last chance” supplies. Conn may have been sent there by Keller, who was a stockholder in the Council Grove Town Company when it was organized in 1857.⁷

Little information exists on Conn’s business dealings prior to 1859. At one point he was a partner of Thomas C. Hill, builder of the structure known today as the “Last Chance Store.” In 1858 Conn’s “Stone Store” was built. According to one community history, it was built by the firm of Conn, Hill & Munkres.⁸ Conn apparently resolved all partnerships by 1859, for, in the first of many advertisements he placed in *The Kansas Press*, Conn stated that he had “again resumed the mercantile business of the Stone Store. Formerly occupied by Conn, Hill & Co. Thankful for past favors, he hopes for a continuance of public patronage.”⁹

The next few years were good ones for Conn and S. M. Hays & Co., Conn’s major competition. By 1860 Conn was one of the wealthiest citizens of Council Grove. In the census of that year, Conn was listed as having a personal estate of \$10,000. Seth Hays and his partner, G. M. Simcock, were valued at \$8,250 apiece.¹⁰

The Civil War increased opportunities for profits. In 1863 Simcock, who had recently bought out Hays, reported that there were “3,000 wagons, 618 horses, 20,218 oxen, 8,046 mules, 98 carriages and 3,072 men engaged in the freighting business along the Santa Fe route, transporting 15,000 tons of freight, the estimated value of which was \$40,000,000.”¹¹ The next year a clerk at Conn’s store, George Biglin, declared that the firm had sales of \$24,000 during the previous month.¹²

The best account of the atmosphere at Conn’s store in the early 1860s was found in the reminiscences of William Shamleffer:

“The merchant had to hustle with business customers all day, and then entertain them royally at night; for some of them came hundreds of miles to trade, and the business house had to furnish many of them with sleeping quarters, place to cook their meals, corrals in which to keep their stock, and open access to the corn cribs. . . . Plainsmen, hunters, trappers, wagon bosses, soldiers, bullwhackers, broncho [*sic*] busters,

long lines of prairie schooners, and heads of horses, mules and cattle, w3ere the attractions of the passing day. . . . In his stock were found every known variety of goods for use on the frontier, from ox yokes and repairs to cambric needles, from small boxes of pills to barrels of whisky.”¹³

Along with prosperity, the war years brought troubles. On May 4, 1863, Dick Yeager and his band of Missouri guerrillas camped near Council Grove, intent on destroying the town. Conn, who had known Yeager as a Santa Fe freighter before the war, went to the camp and persuaded him to spare the town. Conn’s friendship and the strong southern sentiment in the community saved Council Grove, but Yeager and his ruffians raided Howell’s stage station and store at Diamond Springs the next night. Howell was killed and his wife was badly wounded.¹⁴ Several months later, in September, Con’s wife, Sarah, died, leaving him with his two-year-old son, James Clay.

In August 1864 Conn advertised that he would close his mercantile business by December of that year, and he requested that all accounts be settled. Conn apparently sold interests in his business to C. N. James and William Shamleffer.¹⁵ Sometime between 1866 and 1870, Conn sold his remaining interests to Shamleffer and James, who continued to operate a dry goods and grocery.

It was probably a good time to leave the mercantile business. The Union Pacific Railway, Eastern Division, later known as the Kansas Pacific, reached Junction City in 1866. The Santa Fe Coach line moved from Council Grove to that place the same year, and the freighters on the Trail soon followed. Prairie schooners were seldom seen on Council Grove’s wide streets.¹⁶

By 1870 Conn had married again and entered a new line of business. He was a cattle dealer, indicative of the future prosperity of the community.¹⁷ Unlike previous years, however, the 1870s brought hard times for Conn.

In 1873 Conn’s second wife, Matilda, gave birth to a son, Malcolm II. Matilda’s second and last child, Oliver, died after living only three months in 1875. In that year Conn was listed in the Kansas census as having a personal estate worth only \$300.¹⁸ The cause of his financial decline was not found. Conn and his family left Council Grove that same year.

Conn’s activities or whereabouts are not known until 1880, when he moved to Kansas City and became proprietor of the Barnum Hotel, reportedly “one of the leading hotels in the city.” Conn eventually owned hotels in Webb City, MO; Little Rock, AR; and Lawrence, KS; apparently becoming a wealthy business man again.

Conn died in Lawrence of stomach cancer on February 28, 1898, at his most famous hotel, the Eldridge House. He was survived by Matilda and Malcolm II. James, his son by his first wife, was killed in a shootout in Durango, CO, in 1882. Malcolm Conn is buried in Council Grove’s Greenwood Cemetery.¹⁹

Today, at the southeast corner of Council Grove’s Main and Neosho streets, Conn’s “Stone Store” still stands. It has been altered many times since it was built in 1858. It is now Eldon Solt’s Home Design Center. Unlike the famous “Last Chance Store,” which may have played only a small role in the early business community, Conn’s “Stone Store” is still open to customers and travelers on the old Santa Fe Trail. Conn probably would have liked that.

NOTES

1. “Trade of Council Grove,” *The Kansas Press*, Oct. 17, 1859, 2.
2. Seventh Census (1850), Baltimore County, MD, 1st District, 225.
3. “Death of a Kansas Hotel Man,” undated clipping in Conn family scrapbook, Colorado Springs, CO.
4. Account Book, Vol. I: Aug. 16, 1851-Jan. 9, 1858, p. 81, James W. Parker Papers, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri—Kansas City.
5. William R. Bernard, “Westport and the Santa Fe Trade,” *Kansas Historical Collections*, 9 (1905-1906): 564; and Louis O. Honig, *Westport: Gateway to the Early West* (It Happened in America Series, 1950), 34-35.
6. “Death of a Kansas Hotel Man.”
7. John Maloy, *History of Morris County: 1820-1890* (Council Grove: Morris County Historical Society, 1981), 15.

8. Mamie Stine Sharp, "Home-coming Centennial Celebration at Council Grove, June 27 to July 23, 1921," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 16 (1923-1925): 562.
9. *The Kansas Press*, Sept. 26, 1859.
10. Eighth Census (1860), Morris County, KS.
11. Maloy, 46.
12. *Ibid.*, 48.
13. Sharp, 568.
14. David Hubbard, "Reminiscences of the Yeager Raid, on the Santa Fe Trail, in 1863," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 8 (1903-1904): 169; and Thomas F. Doran, "Kansas Sixty Years Ago," *ibid.*, 15 (1919-1922), 488.
15. *Council Grove Press*, Aug. 20, 1864; and *Council Grove Democrat*, Mar. 2, 1866.
16. Maloy, 54.
17. Ninth Census (1870), Morris County, KS, 4.
18. Kansas State Census (1875), Morris County, KS, 14.
19. "Death of M. Conn," *The Lawrence Gazette*, Mar. 3, 1898; and "Death of a Kansas Hotel Man."