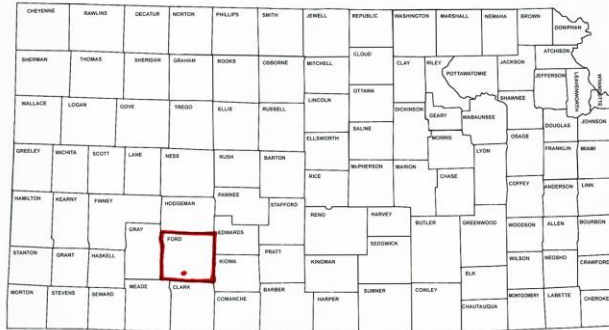


Bloomsburg Goes West: The Vanderslice Brothers in Kansas

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The inspiration for this article comes from a story I ran across two years ago by a writer for the Dodge City (Kansas) *Daily Globe*. It concerned a small unincorporated community called Bloom in the southern part of Ford County, in western Kansas where Dodge City is located. It was originally Bloomsburg, named after the hometown of Thomas Jefferson Vanderslice and his four brothers, who came to Kansas in the 1880s.



Ford County in the southwestern corner of Kansas, with the dot representing Bloom.

This intrigued me so I began to do research. What follows is not the complete story, but a good summary of the lasting legacy Bloomsburg natives created more than 130 years ago and more than 1,400 miles to the west.

When Bloomsburg and what is now Columbia County were first settled in the late 1700s and early 1800s, the area was wilderness (at least for Europeans) and the settlers were pioneers. As the 1800s progressed communities were founded and land cleared for farming. The population grew, but eventually there was not enough opportunity for all inhabitants. Farmers had large families with many sons looking to raise families of their own, but only the oldest inherited the family farm.

While the growth of industry in the area after 1890 provided alternative employment opportunities, most notably with the Magee Carpet Company and later the American Car and Foundry plants, before then the best option was often to move. The 25 years following the end of the Civil War was a time of great movement as new frontiers opened up and that sage advice was often taken, “Go West, young man.”

But before we get to that part of the story, first the move of the Vanderslices to Columbia County. Thomas Jefferson Vanderslice, Sr. was born in Montgomery County and came here in 1821 when his father Joseph moved the family to Mount Pleasant Township. According to Thomas’ 1881 obituary, at the time Bloomsburg “contained but three houses and it was necessary to go to Danville to cross the river.”

About 1837 Thomas married Helen Maus and they moved to Bloomsburg where he worked in a tannery. Then in 1839 he bought his own farm in Hemlock Township along Fishing Creek. His family began growing and within a decade they had five sons. Helen passed away in 1849, he

married Martha Parker, and they had two more boys who lived into adulthood. Son number three with Helen, Thomas' namesake, was born February 17, 1845.

All the boys worked on the family farm while growing up, but that did not mean they were not looking for other opportunities. The second son, Charles, founded the *Democratic Sentinel* newspaper, while the sixth, Franklin, worked as a newspaper typesetter. Thomas Jefferson Vanderslice, Jr., who shall henceforth be referred to as T. J., took yet another route, being admitted to the bar in February 1876. He had an office at the corner of Main and Center streets and at the same time was looking for something more.

T. J. found it two years later when, as a Democrat he was elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives for the first of what would be three terms. One of his accomplishments was securing funding for the Bloomsburg State Normal School at a time when it was in financial difficulties. This stabilized the school and launched it on a period of unprecedented growth.

When not in Harrisburg, T. J. continued his law practice and served as Bloomsburg's town treasurer. With this success, in 1882 he purchased what was called an elegant home from local druggist Christopher Kleim. Located on Main Street, it was most likely what is now 145 West Main, current home of the Covered Bridge Smoke Shop. By this time T. J. had been married to Loretta Sharpless for 14 years and they had three children: Robert, Helen, and George.

While everything seemed stable, there must have been some underlying restlessness for new frontiers and new opportunities. This was not unknown in the family. A cousin from the Philadelphia area, Daniel Vanderslice, many years before had moved first to Kentucky and then by the 1850s to Doniphan County, Kansas, north of Kansas City. In a coincidence, one of his sons who had moved west with him was also named Thomas Jefferson.

Closer to home, T. J.'s brother Charles had briefly lived in Michigan before returning to Bloomsburg, and another brother, Henry, lived for many years in Illinois and remained out west. The Columbia County newspapers had constant reminders of natives who traveled west to make their fortunes, first to the Midwest (Ohio, Indiana, Michigan) and then farther to Missouri, Kansas, and other states and territories. They would write letters back home or make visits to Pennsylvania to see relatives and friends.

The stories told must have made an impression on T. J. which finally moved him to action to see for himself what all the hype was about. In the late spring 1884 he traveled out west and returned in June, very pleased by what he had seen. Then, on November 7 of that year, right after voting in the election, he and a former worker on the family farm left Bloomsburg and headed first to Missouri and then Kansas. T. J. wrote to a Bloomsburg paper, commenting in particular on the low cost of food. He came back on December 22 and waxed rhapsodic on the great west and its people, providing vivid descriptions of what he found there. This second trip was enough to convince him it was time to move.

It all came about fairly quickly. On February 27, 1885, T. J. and Loretta held a sale of their home furnishings and on March 2 the house was sold to Amos Buckalew. The next day T. J. and his two half-brothers, Franklin Pierce (F. P.) and Adolphus Buchanan (A. B.), the youngest males in the family, headed for Kansas. Also looking for more opportunities out west was one of Loretta's

brothers, Harry Sharpless. At the end of April the three Vanderslice wives departed for Kansas, accompanied by their children and another Sharpless sibling, 48-year-old Harriett, noted for her service during the Civil War as a nurse. It was definitely a family affair!

While others from Columbia County settled more in the eastern part of the state, including that same year, the Vanderslices instead chose Ford County in the southwestern corner. In June, all three brothers plus Harry Sharpless bought land in the southern part of the county and founded a new Bloomsburg, quickly shortened to Bloom. The 2018 article had mentioned five Vanderslice brothers, so they must have included Harry and T. J.'s elder son Robert to get five.

The county seat was Dodge City, famous in tales of the Old West. The families lived there for a time until their farms were developed and houses built, establishing themselves in the Bloom area, 22 miles away, by early the next year. The settlers were quickly involved in their new home, with Harry Sharpless the local Notary Public as early as November 1885 and T. J. the postmaster of the newly established Bloom post office in February 1886. Yet the primary occupation for all the new settlers was as farmers—growing crops, raising livestock, and eventually cultivating fruit trees.

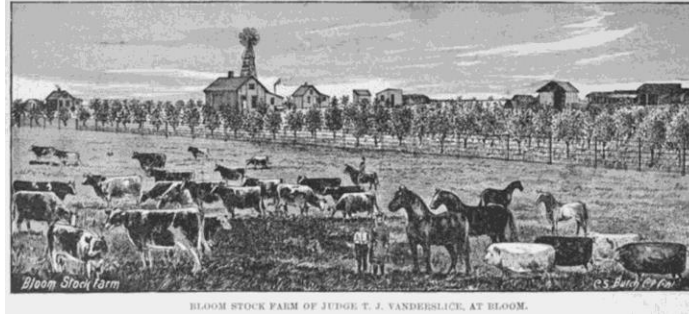
Even so T. J., having been elected to state government in Pennsylvania, knew he wanted to keep his hand in politics and soon became active with the local Democratic Party. In July he announced his candidacy for Probate Judge, became a delegate to the county convention, and in late September was nominated to represent the party in the November election. Although a newspaper referred to him as a nice, capable gentleman, politics can be ruthless and this campaign was no different.

Rumors began to circulate in October that he had committed the cardinal sin among landowners in the west where water was precious—selling it for 25 cents a barrel. This attempt to defame him was met with resistance as 13 of his neighbors wrote a letter stating they had never been charged a cent whenever hauling water from his well.

The controversy blew over and in November T. J. was elected by a margin of 90 votes, 790 to 700, and in January 1887, F. P. became the new postmaster in Bloom as well as a director on the local school board. By the end of the year F. P. would be named a delegate to the Democratic County Convention and add Justice of the Peace to his growing list of offices.

T. J. was called one of the busiest men in Dodge City early in 1887, where he spent most of his time now as judge. The preceding month he had joined with two others in a real estate development firm, which in April laid out a 160-acre addition to the city. In September, T. J.'s Bloom farm received recognition when it was written up in the county handbook.

It has the fortune of a fine location in the midst of an extensive level plain of exceptional beauty and fertility ... The 640-acre Bloom Stock Farm of Judge Vanderslice adjoining the town is one of the most valuable farms in the county. ... it is improved with a comfortable frame house, quite extensive sheds, stables, cribs, and corrals; has a fine well and windmill, thrifty young orchards and groves; is well fenced and stocked with a good herd of cattle and horses.



An 1887 engraving of the impressive stock farm outside of Bloom owned by T. J. Vanderslice.

At the same time, Bloom's location actually shifted. When the Rock Island Railway (part of the Chicago, Kansas, and Nebraska) graded a line through the county nearby, homes and businesses were built south along the route and the "new" Bloom sprang up. By early 1888 the area was taking off. The railroad had reached the small town, a station was being built (which still survives), and the first issue of a newspaper, the *Weekly Telegram*, was published on April 5.

Right on the front page of that first issue was a story of A. B. and his five-legged calf, born the preceding month. That, combined with a chicken which laid an egg ten inches in circumference, gave him a start on potentially opening a museum of oddities. Both A. B. and F. P. were busy on their farms throughout 1888—plowing, planting, threshing, and harvesting grains, including hay, millet, and rye. F. P. also tried his hand at setting type for the *Telegram* after having worked as a printer for 12 years before coming west.

Columns in the local papers occasionally mentioned the activities of T. J.'s younger children. Helen and George were just seven and five, respectively, at the time of the move to Kansas, so their main activity was going to school except when they both caught measles. As a mother-daughter event, Mrs. Vanderslice took Helen to meetings of the Dodge City chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. While at one meeting in April 1888 Loretta sang "I am Dreaming a Dream," her daughter contributed with a dramatic reading entitled, "Father would not have done it if he had not been Drinking."

Although life on the prairie was not easy, the wives and children were able to get away for an extended trip back east. After two years of separation, members of the Vanderslice families again took the trip between Kansas and Pennsylvania. In June 1887, Loretta, along with Helen and George, made the 1,400-mile journey which, thanks to train travel, took only three and a half days. It was the way Columbia County natives, although living far from family and friends, could still stay connected.

Since travel worked both ways, the older parents of the Kansas settlers went west on trips. In July 1888 Martha Vanderslice, mother to F. P. and A. B., came for an extended visit into September, along with the mother of F. P.'s wife Laura. The following month Loretta's parents, Joseph and Mary Sharpless, along with her brother Harry, came to Bloom for a visit. Harry had left Ford County the previous year for other opportunities farther west, moving less than 300 miles away to Pueblo, Colorado. Joseph, though just shy of 80, enjoyed his trip immensely and said the area was the nicest country he had ever seen.

The one member of T. J.'s family searching for a means to make his way in Kansas was his elder son Robert Foster, or R. F. There is no real mention of him until the spring of 1888, right after he had turned 19. He attended what was called both a college and a normal school in Dodge City, although it seems to have really been neither. His attention to his studies appears to have been sporadic and after August he moved on in other directions. These included contributing to operations on the family farm (although that does not seem to have been his goal in life), working in the newspaper office, and joining his uncle F. P. plowing fire guards along the railroad tracks.

This year T. J. was aided in his bid for reelection as probate judge when he was endorsed by the Union Labor Party, in addition to the Ford County Democratic Party. But there was opposition to his nomination and this time the election did not go well as he lost by 254 votes, 947 to 693. At the same time R. F. received one vote, probably a write-in, for constable in Bloom.

Following his election defeat, T. J. looked for other opportunities for himself beyond the stock farm. While Loretta and the children moved from Dodge City to Bloom, T. J. took a trip west to Colorado, including a visit to Pueblo. It was in April 1889, however, that he was poised to become involved in one of the most dramatic mass settlements in the history of the west. Dodge was less than 60 miles from the border with the Oklahoma territory and on the 22nd of that month, the territory's lands not assigned to Indian tribes were being opened up.



Although taken during a later land rush in 1893, this photograph depicts exactly what it was like when T. J. took off four years before.

This was the famous "Oklahoma Land Rush" and T. J. was on the front line. One week beforehand he was joined by nine other men who brought saddle horses, two covered wagons, and a buggy. Just in case of trouble they were also armed to the teeth. That same day, prospective settlers were allowed to begin entering the territory and by noon of April 22 approximately 50,000 encircled the unassigned lands located in central Oklahoma. Precisely at 12:00 a signal gun was fired and T. J., along with three other men at the front of the line on fast horses, took off like a shot, followed by a wagon.

Each settler could choose 160 acres and then go to a local land office to register a claim. The Dodge City men were lined up at the northwest corner of the open lands and claimed territory in

what is now Kingfisher County, approximately 225 miles from Dodge. For the rest of the year T. J. traveled back and forth several times from Bloom to Kingfisher, at least once bringing along his family, although they would spend most of 1889 in Kansas.

During the year A. B. and F. P. continued working their farms, while R. F. was once more keeping busy in multiple ways. During the winter he teamed up with a neighbor to buy a large stockpile of coal, which they then resold for \$6.50 a ton. In May he harvested fruit and “whirled a bicycle around Bloom,” and in August embarked on a short-lived venture to draw crayon enlargements of photographs, even advertising in the Bloom paper (no cost listed). R. F. then made a final trip to Oklahoma, returning with his father in mid-December when he took up one more interest, learning telegraphy.

Members of the Vanderslice family ended the year in fine fashion, visiting a nearby home on Christmas night along with about 50 of their neighbors. The guests were treated to a wonderful dinner of turkey, chicken, vegetables, pie, cake, fruit, and nuts, followed by dancing, recitations, singing, and games. A trio of fiddlers performed as part of the entertainment, one of them a Vanderslice.

Yet even before this night, Mrs. T. J. and F. P. (Loretta and Laura), together with their young children, had departed Kansas for Pennsylvania. Over the winter was an odd time to travel and this was because they were not coming back. Less than two months later, on February 17, 1890, F. P. and his nephew R. F. left Bloom for Columbia County. They arrived after a trip of two weeks, F. P. bringing five horses along with what must have been other household goods. He announced he was giving up farming, even though just two months before he had planted three acres of peach trees. Instead, he was going back into the printing business, having secured a job as foreman in a large establishment.

It took T. J. longer to disentangle himself from his various ventures, but on July 2 he returned to Bloomsburg on the evening train. Youngest brother A. B. stuck it out longer on his farm, but in the end he also moved back to Pennsylvania, arriving in September 1892 with a carload of horses and his prize five-legged cow. The Vanderslice farms, which were advertised in the Bloomsburg newspapers, were eventually sold, even though for 20 years T. J. and F. P. continued to owe money due to settling mortgages and in particular taxes.

This was the end of the Vanderslice experiment on the Great Plains of Kansas. An interesting and exciting time, but the pull of family and familiar places in Pennsylvania was too much. The one member of the extended family who remained in the west was Harry Sharpless. He lived in Pueblo for a number of years, returned to marry his wife Carrie Brown in Lock Haven, and then by 1907 had moved to Seattle. They had a fine life in the northwest, where Harry worked in banking and real estate. The couple was involved in local society, traveled often to Pasadena in southern California for the winters, until passing away within months of each other in 1944.

The Vanderslice brothers, meanwhile, led diverse lives back in Pennsylvania. One who did not leave, newspaper publisher Charles M., passed away in February 1890. His son, Charles T., cofounded the *Morning Press* with Paul Eyerly in 1902. F. P. died in March 1931, having spent many years working for first the Bloomsburg *Daily*, then Wilkes-Barre newspapers, printers

there and in Scranton, and finally as a printer in Philadelphia. A. B. passed away six months later, having farmed in Hemlock Township his entire life except for his time in Kansas.

The leader who took the family out west, T. J., quickly resumed a career as a lawyer upon his return to Bloomsburg. While he no longer had an elegant house on Main Street, it did not take long for the family to find a new home. They moved into a house on West Third Street at the end of Jefferson, which at the time was little more than an alley which stopped at Third.

In February 1893, T. J. asked for Jefferson to be opened up and extended from Second Street to the D. L. & W. Railroad tracks past Sixth. It was a proposal that had been brought before Town Council as early as 1883 and was finally completed by the end of 1895. Because the properties along Third and Fourth had been continuous, a section had to be taken from a number of lots to account for the new street, with varying amounts of compensation. T. J. lost the western third of his property and received the most of anyone, \$780.

The house, 164 West Third, remained in the Vanderslice family for 50 years until sold in 1944. In 1954 it was purchased by Joseph Dunkelberger, a worker at the Magee Carpet Company and a fifth cousin twice removed of the author. T. J. passed away on December 20, 1913, at age 68 and Loretta nine years later. R. F., upon his return to Bloomsburg, had a varied career and worked as a railroad station agent, clerk to the county commissioners, official at the First National Bank, and an advertising company representative. He died in 1941 at age 72 and is buried next to his parents in Old Rosemont Cemetery.



The final resting place for T. J. and Loretta in Old Rosemont Cemetery.

The Vanderslice brothers were born, lived, and died in Pennsylvania, with long careers in a number of positions. This is where they made an impact in their native state. But it was the brief

stay in Kansas, where they had so many memorable experiences, that they made a lasting contribution. Now 128 years since the last Vanderslice left the prairie, in Ford County there is still the little community of Bloom, which exists solely because Bloomsburg went west.