Leonard and Theresa Weigand were helpless. Leonard, weakened by malaria, couldn't stand. His wife Theresa, pregnant and concerned for their three young children, tried to resist, but the claim jumpers invading their land began pulling the roof above their heads from their humble dwelling. They had to leave.

Emigrating from Germany just two years earlier in 1858, the Weigands laid out a fine claim in northern Cedar County not far from St. James, filing at the land office in Dakota City. But these men who stormed into their home knew the Weigands spoke little English, making them an easy target.

They loaded ailing Leonard onto their wagon on a cot and dumped him off at the supposed boundary of the claim, leaving the family at the mercy of the hot prairie sun.

With no money, they spent a cold winter in the breezy granary of their generous neighbors, the Wisemen family and brought a fourth child into the world. By Spring they were ready to start anew. This time they would go far enough away that – in Leonard's words – "No damn scoundrel could put him off his claim again."

They hitched up steers, Buck and Bright, to a homemade wagon and loaded all their worldly possessions including a rusty stove, bedding, cooking utensils and twenty-five cents cash, and headed West.

Days later they came to an inland valley five miles from the Missouri River in Leau Qui Court County, today Knox County, where bubbling streams flowed through the peaceful lowland and there was timber for building a farmstead.

Now an area at Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area along Lewis and Clark Lake bears the family name as does the stream that empties into the lake there. Little remains of memory of the Weigand family and the tiny settlement they established over 140 years ago.

I'd only heard about Weigand village. The idea that anything remained was intriguing. There are sites like that across the state, places where families lived, raised families and were laid to rest. A foundation, if anything, might be the only physical evidence left of what once had been a thriving trade center.

So I set out to find what I could of a few lost townsites with especially harrowing stories. These were the very early white settlements in this part of the Missouri River valley. My search for evidence, physical and legend, began at Weigand.


"I wasn't real knowledgeable about the family and cemetery," De said. "After we purchased the land, I started to learn the history."

We jumped in the Carlson's SUV and headed for Weigand. We came to a minimum maintenance road, opened a barbed wire gate across its span and drove a winding dirt road down into the valley, near the route where the family had rumbled in their wagon as they first entered what would be their home.

Across quiet, trickling springs the road opens into a long abandoned farmstead, with a weather-worn old house nestled back among the trees.

"It's such a tranquil little valley," De observed. But the house isn't much to look at. The roof from an 1878 addition, complete with a bay window, had caved in, but the roof over the original part of the 1866 log house, stood firm. Windows were knocked out and flooring was all but gone, but the intact frame gave solid form to this quiet, forgotten place.
"From time to time, families with connections to the settlement still come back to view the old place," she said. So the Carlsons are content to spare the wrecking ball and allow the structures to die a natural death.

Dug into the side of a low hill that shelters the place, a crumbling springhouse is visible, probably used as a root cellar. This may have also been the dugout Leonard built to shelter his family the first years.

In a 1942 memoir penned by the Weigand’s third youngest child, Minnie Weigand Laird, she recalls the stories her parents told of their first season at the new claim. "That first winter was a long hard grind for our family in the dugout. While father and brother Frank hunted and trapped for wild game, mother ground the corn for meal, a little at a time", putting variety in her family meals by fixing corn mush and milk one day and milk and corn mush another.

As soon as the snow was off the ground, Leonard packed up the pelts he had accumulated, heading for Dakota City on their pony to trade for goods. He also wanted to make sure the paper work was filed correctly with the land office this time for their little valley claim in the SW ¼ of Section One in Addison Township.

He returned days later with all the packages of goods he could pack on the pony, including a bolt of pink calico that Theresa made into dresses and sunbonnets for the girls and shirts for the men, leaving the whole family "pretty in pink" for several months. On the next trading trip months later, Theresa would make only one request - no more pink calico.

While Leonard was in Dakota City, Frank and Theresa plowed and drug the ground with Buck and Bright, planting wheat and a little sod corn.

Government officials stopped by that summer, surveying a new road that would convey freight west to Fort Niobrara, utilizing part of an Indian trail.

As big freight wagons passed by, the Weigand dugout became a stopping place and travelers over the road kept the isolated family in touch with the outside world.

Ponca Indians made friends with the family those first years. After learning that Indians were being blamed for the massacre of their friends, the Wisemen children back in Cedar County, Theresa became especially frightened of local Indian visitors from tribes other than Ponca.

Minnie wrote, "Because of this, we often gave them more than she could spare, and through this generosity, the friendly Indians named her ‘Big Mama’.

Mary Emma, the Weigand’s fifth child was born in 1862. Three days later, settlers became frantic from reports of a warparty of Indians headed for the river valley, so everyone sought shelter at a hastily-developed fortification back near St. James.

After a week there, the Weigands started the three-day trek back to their valley, but light was mysteriously shining from the dugout as they reached home at dusk. Leonard hid his family and crept closer only to find soldiers from Fort Niobrara had sought shelter there and cooked supper to share.

De and I stepped into the old cedar tree-lined freight road. According to some sources, Kid Wade of Doc Middleton’s gang used the road to steal away some of the Weigand horses. The road carried settlers to the valley and became a reliable mail route when Theresa became village postmistress in 1881. Eventually, steamboat and railroad traffic would relegate the road back to the deer path it is today.

During the 1864 blizzard, twin boys, Carl Henry and Gustave Herman were born. Tragically, Herman passed away seven months later.

"Father carried the little casket in his arms, followed by mother with the other twin in her arms and the other children," Minnie wrote. After singing the old German song, "In God We Trust", Leonard alone filled the grave on a windswept hilltop behind the dugout.

About the same time the last of the eleven children, Martha Bobetta, was born in 1872, Leonard purchased another farm several miles east across the river from Yankton. The town of Strahmburg had just been platted there, named for Sabie Strahm.

More commonly known as Green Island, the village had 150 residents, a number of dwellings and stores and Methodist and Congregational Churches. Frank and his new bride Lena moved onto the Green Island farm, on the banks of the river about three miles west of that village.
The winter of 1881 was perilous, so local riverfront settlers knew it might be a rough Spring if ice gorges backed up the water.

One late March day, warm chinook winds blew, quickly melting the snow and raising their worst fears. The Weigand settlement was safe from flooding five miles from the river, but Frank and Lena, realizing they were in danger, drove their cattle and horses up to the hills just in time.

Sam Nelson’s grandfather John wasn’t so lucky. Having hand-built a brick house with walls three bricks thick on ground slightly higher just a half-mile east of Green Island, he thought he might be safe.

Sam and wife Eleanor and their son Doug still farm the old Nelson river land, a stone’s throw east of where the Nelson home stood near what is now called South Yankton. As an author and veteran researcher, Eleanor has chronicled the tales of Sam’s family.

Nelsons now live in a remodeled 1927 schoolhouse that was once called Green Island in honor of the former village. Sitting around their dining room table, Eleanor opened up copies of an old map showing us the layout of the Nelson farm, where much of the land was marsh in 1881 and the river channel was closer than it is today.

As ice gorges formed east of Green Island, water rapidly rose to flood stage. Crashing ice chunks awakened Green Island residents in the middle of the night. A few hours later, 42 residents were rescued from the upper levels of their flooded homes and moved by skiffs to Nelson’s place.

The next day, even those refugees were forced to the steep roof, cringing each time an ice chunk rumbled by and marred the home. Sam says his grandfather lost 150 head of cattle and hung onto the reins of his favorite team of horses from his perch on the house, until an ice chunk forced him to let them go.

In late afternoon of the second day, the waters subsided and cheers rang out, literally from the housetops. They made their way to safety across a four-mile sea of ice chunks to the south bluffs.

The town was gone. Sam said that his grandfather’s farm was either washed away or covered with several feet of silt, making it impossible to plant crops there. The stench from the dead livestock was nearly unbearable.

The Nelson house survived for over a century on land owned by relatives, Albert and Alma Mueller until it was recently torn down, still bearing scars of crashing ice. Sam and Eleanor salvaged a few bricks to line a planter in front of their house.

Grandpa John Nelson and several other Green Island settlers moved to much higher ground three miles upriver and helped start the new town of Aten.

Sam said that some of the timber used in building Aten was collected along the river after the flood. Green Island neighbor, Jim Marsh was one of the town organizers and old Saby Strahm donated the first Aten schoolhouse.

On the riverbanks just west of Frank and Lena’s Green Island farm, the same flood crushed the community of Frankfort. Begun as a trading post in 1856, when Charles and Amelia Mischke, Lois Keck’s great grandparents, settled there they built a cabin on high ground not far away.

Keck, who farms with her son Mark and his wife Judy northwest of Crofton, grew up on a place along the river, in view of the old townsite. Her grandfather John Mischke lived with Lois’ family, so she heard the stories of the town and the flood.

Keck’s great grandmother Amelia was in frail health during the big winter and she passed away on March 17, 1881. Because the snow was so deep, they couldn’t bury her immediately. She was finally interred at Frankfort Cemetery south of their home.

Then on March 30, the flood hit. The family crawled out of the loft window in the cabin and sought refuge in nearby treetops until a skiff came to the rescue. The cabin itself was lifted up, but it caught in the tree branches and was never swept away.

After the flood, they moved the historic cabin to higher ground. When Gavins Point Dam was built in the 1950’s just a couple of miles east of the old townsite, much of the river land owned by the Mischke family and the remaining foundations of Frankfort were flooded again, but this time by the new Lewis and Clark reservoir.

Riverfront families were often allowed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to move structures from the bottomland before the lake filled. The Mischkes petitioned the Corps, hoping to preserve the structure, but when they visited the site to pick up some of their possessions, they found it mysteriously burned to the ground.
Lois says she wishes the cabin were still around, but she’s proud of her family’s deep faith in God that pulled them through difficult times like the flood. Her recollections, a family memoir and a township and cemetery bearing the town name are all that remain of the community that sleeps at the bottom of the lake.

Back at Weigand, Minnie wrote, "Our home was the refuge for several weeks for a number of homeless flood victims until they could plan another start."

By 1900, Weigand had a general store, blacksmith shop and a lodge hall for church services and social gatherings.

But in 1901, as Theresa was out helping one of her neighbors deliver a child as she did hundreds of times over the years, she fell ill and passed away before they could get help.

The family built a vault and laid her to rest up on the hill where little Herman was buried. Neighbors attended the burial, including her Indian friends who stood in the background mourning the loss of kind "Big Mama". Leonard joined her in 1916 and other family members and neighbors have been laid to rest there over the years.

Local farmers, brothers Scott and Shawn Jordan, who also have family buried at Weigand, are the current cemetery caretakers. Scott says that the family built a vacuum-sealed vault with a glass wall and stairs down into a crypt, so visitors could view the bodies. But when snakes inhabited the underground room, it was filled up with dirt for good. The Jordans maintain a fence around the cemetery and they mow the area especially around Memorial Day.

As we turned the vehicle around on Leonard and Theresa’s old field and departed up the winding hill, leaving Weigand behind, I couldn’t help but wonder what might become of our own hometowns that seem so full of life - like Weigand, Green Island and Frankfort once were. What will remain of our living rural communities 140 years from now? Will anyone remember anything about our lives and local culture?

We headed through the gate and back out on the road toward Crofton. Written stories and generational legends, as well as the mysterious charm of a few physical remnants of these three lost communities were only part of what I had learned from my adventure.

Turning up Main Street in my own hometown, I realized that nothing lasts forever and that I need to appreciate a little more my own farmstead, my unique hometown and the lasting legacy of the folks who built it all up.