

Gus Cloepfil and His Migration Westward¹

by Dave Strausfeld

“It was just like Gus Cloepfil to rush to the Daily Call office to pay his subscription to the paper for another year about as soon as he arrived in town,” declared the [*Beloit*] *Daily Call*, a small-town Kansas newspaper, on 21 June 1921. Gus, described as an “old time resident,” had arrived in Kansas the previous evening from San Diego, California, where he had been living “for several years.” He was “looking well and prosperous,” the newspaper added, and was planning to spend some time with his son L.A., whom he was visiting.²

Being back in Kansas was a significant change from southern California where Gus lived with his second wife, Mary, and a son from his first marriage named Bob, a vaudeville musician. One day after reporting Gus’s return, the *Daily Call* published an article about Bob and his traveling

¹ This article is an edited excerpt from an unpublished family history narrative.

² “Here from California,” *Beloit [Kansas] Daily Call*, 21 June 1921, p. 4, col. 1; digital image, *Newspapers.com* (<http://www.newspapers.com>) (from here forward simply *Newspapers.com*). All URLs referenced in this article were visited on 15 May 2015. More about Gus is found in San Diego censuses and city directories. See, e.g., 1920 U.S. census, San Diego County, California, population schedule (pop. sch.), East San Diego, enumeration district (ED) 243, p. 10B (penned), dwelling 56, family 56, Augustus Cloepfil household; digital images, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com>) (from here forward simply *Ancestry.com*); citing National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) microfilm publication T625, roll 130. Also, *San Diego City and County Directory* (San Diego Directory Co., 1916), p. 307, Augustus Cloepfil entry; “U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989,” digital images, *Ancestry.com*.

vaudeville troupe. “Bob can do several stunts of a fancy nature and can play a violin standing on his head equally as well as though he were standing on his feet,” the newspaper raved. “We saw some pictures of Bob recently showing him doing several of his stunts.” No doubt Gus, the proud father, was the one who handed the editor the photographs.³

Gus’s visit to Mitchell County, Kansas was not simply a pleasure trip to spend time with family and show off photographs of his entertainer son. There was a more serious purpose, hinted at when the newspaper added that Gus was in town “to look after his farming interest.”⁴ The unpleasant truth was that Gus and his family were facing some financial troubles. Things were less rosy than they seemed.

Gus was not from Kansas originally. He was born and raised in far northwest Missouri.

The Lamp in Conrad and Margaret Cloepfil’s Home

Today, inside a courthouse in northwest Missouri one finds hanging a lamp from the home of Gus’s parents, Conrad and Margaret Cloepfil.⁵ The family heirloom was placed in the Atchison County, Missouri, courthouse to commemorate the

³ “Is a musical prodigy,” *Beloit [Kansas] Daily Call*, 22 June 1921, p. 3, col. 4; digital image, *Newspapers.com*.

⁴ “Here from California,” *Beloit [Kansas] Daily Call*.

⁵ Photograph of lamp in Atchison County (Missouri) courthouse, 2015; digital image, privately held by author [ADDRESS FOR PRIVATE USE], Durham, North Carolina, 2017. Ms. Kim Evans, an officer of the Atchison County Historical Society, was extremely kind to take photographs of the lamp and the framed document beside it and to forward those to the author.

county's founding in 1845, an event that took place, interestingly enough, inside the Cloepfil home. The Cloepfils were, in effect, the hosts for the county's founding meetings.

A handsomely framed document hangs on the courthouse wall, near the lamp, titled "The story of 'Ye Olde Oil Lamp'." It explains that the historical object belonged to Conrad Cloepfiel [*sic*] and his wife, and that the first commissioners of Atchison County "sat around the Cloepfiel's kitchen table under this old lamp to discuss & decide issues concerning this budding county."⁶

Conrad Cloepfil, an adventurous soul, immigrated to the United States sometime before 1842, and he appears to have settled in northwest Missouri in that year. His naturalization papers reveal that he came from Hesse, a state in what eventually became the country of Germany.⁷ (At the time he and his wife emigrated from there, the various German states had not yet been unified into a nation.)

⁶ "The story of 'Ye Olde Oil Lamp'," framed document on the wall in the Atchison County (Missouri) courthouse, 2015; digital image, privately held by author of this family history article, [ADDRESS FOR PRIVATE USE], Durham, North Carolina, 2017.

⁷ Atchison County, Missouri, Circuit Court Naturalization Record Book 1:78, "Conrad Cloepple," November Term 1848; Missouri State Archives microfilm C294, Jefferson City, Missouri. This document granting Conrad U.S. citizenship indicates that he filed his declaration of intention to become a citizen in 1842. Note that Gus's 1930 census schedule states that his father and mother were both born in "Germany—Hessa." 1930 U.S. census, San Diego County, California, pop. sch., City of San Diego, ED 37-75, p. 1B (penned), dwelling 22, family 22, Augustus [Gus] Cloepfil household; digital images, *Ancestry.com*; citing NARA microfilm T626, roll 191. See also Atchison County, Missouri, Will Book 28: 205, "Conrad Kloepfield"; Atchison County Courthouse, Rock Port, Missouri.

The place where the Cloepfils chose to put down roots in America was a rugged, untamed corner of the northwest Missouri frontier. Conrad arrived there as one of the earliest non-indigenous settlers, along with his wife Margaret, who was also born in pre-unification Germany.⁸

A local history of Atchison County, Missouri, specifically identifies Conrad as one of the first white settlers in the part of county that became Polk Township, stating that he located there in 1842.⁹

In an area on the frontier such as this, when enough settlers eventually arrived they would petition the state legislature for permission to organize a county. In Atchison County, this happened around 1844, according to local historians, and the pivotal meeting was held in Conrad and Margaret's house.

The act organizing the County of Atchison, was passed during the winter of 1844. The names of the county

⁸ Conrad and Margaret's censuses reflect their birthplaces. 1850 U.S. census, Atchison County, Missouri, pop. sch., p. 144B (stamped), dwelling 157, family 157, "Conrad Cloepfield" household; digital images, *Ancestry.com*; citing NARA microfilm M432, roll 391. Also, 1860 U.S. census, Atchison County, Missouri, pop. sch., Polk Township, p. 540 (penned), dwelling 275, family 273, "Conrad Celopfiel" household; digital images, *Ancestry.com*; citing NARA microfilm M653, roll 606. Also, 1870 U.S. census, Atchison County, Missouri, pop. sch., Buchanon Township, p. 375 (stamped), dwelling 109, family 107, "Conrad Cloepfield" household; digital images, *Ancestry.com*; citing NARA microfilm M593, roll 756. Note, too, that Gus's 1930 census states that his mother was born in "Germany—Hessa." 1930 U.S. census, San Diego County, California, pop. sch., City of San Diego, ED 37-75, p. 1B (penned), dwelling 22, family 22, Augustus [Gus] Cloepfil household.

⁹ *The History of Holt and Atchison Counties, Missouri* (St. Joseph, Missouri: National Historical Company, 1882), p. 852; digital images, *Internet Archive* (<http://www.archive.org>).

commissioners as given by that act, were [a list of names appears here]. They were authorized to meet on the 14th day of April, 1845, for the purpose of organizing the county, at the house of Conrad Clifffield.¹⁰

The book, published in the 1880s, goes on to explain that Conrad's surname was correctly spelled "Cloepfel," not "Clifffield."¹¹

Gus's Push Westward to Kansas

The main subject of the present article is Conrad and Margaret's oldest son, Gus. Like his parents who had bravely crossed the Atlantic Ocean to put down roots in Missouri, he tended to aim his gaze westward. He chose to leave Missouri for neighboring Kansas.

In this time period, north central Kansas offered a new frontier where land was bountiful and inexpensive. "[C]hoice lands at low prices to the farmer," crowed an 1879 booklet titled "Emigrant Guide" that sought to encourage settlement along a new railroad route that traversed areas in Kansas, including Mitchell County. "Homes for the homeless and superior locations for capitalists and other business men," the guide claimed, and it went on to say:

The climate is delightful. There is no better fruit region in the United States. Winter wheat, corn, and all other cereals; potatoes, and all other vegetables grown in this latitude are produced...

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 585. Also see Kim A. Evans, *Atchison County* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2013), p. 7.

¹¹ *The History of Holt and Atchison Counties*, p. 628.

Next, the guide described the route that most settlers took:

Most of the emigration strikes for the Solomon valley...finding homes either in the valleys of the main streams, the smaller tributaries, or the intervening uplands—nearly all of which are suitable for cultivation, and very fertile.... [I]n the future, the leading railroads take the same course—one line passing up the south fork and another up the north fork, making their intersection at Cawker City [in Mitchell County].¹²

Perhaps not surprisingly, this encouragingly worded guide booklet was published by the Central Branch Union Pacific Railroad, which constructed a track across Mitchell County, Kansas, in 1879 and thus had a financial interest in the rapid settlement of the area.¹³ While it is not known whether Gus read this booklet, he ended up migrating with his family to this region within a few years after it was published. Gus, his wife Rachel, and their children settled in Mitchell County in about 1882.¹⁴

¹² W.R. Vaughan, compiler, *The Emigrant Guide or Handbook of the Central Branch Union Pacific Railroad & Company* (Advertising Company, 1879), cover page and unnumbered pages under heading “Cawker City”; digital images, *Kansas Memory* (<http://www.kansasmemory.org>); citing Kansas Historical Society.

¹³ “Mitchell County” in William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883); digital images, *The Kansas Collection* (<http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/>).

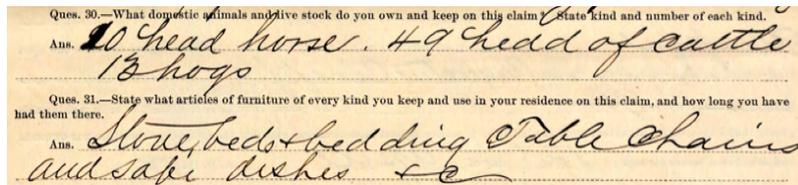
¹⁴ A directory listing for Gus’s son L.A. Cloepfil says that L.A. had been living in Mitchell County since 1882. “Patrons’ Reference Directory—Mitchell County, Kansas,” listing for L.A. Cloepfil; in *Standard Atlas of Mitchell County, Kansas* (Chicago: Geo. A. Ogle & Co., 1917), n.p.; “Indexed County Land Ownership Maps, 1860-1918,” database, *Ancestry.com*. Since L.A. was born in Missouri according to the census, the 1882 date probably represents when his parents brought him to Mitchell County. See 1885 Kansas state census, Mitchell County, Kansas, pop. sch., Custer Township,

There they staked a claim to a piece of vacant government-owned land that they were later able to purchase. The United States, then land rich and cash poor, had long relied on land sales as a means to not only promote westward expansion but also raise much-needed revenue. Gus's application filed at the Land Office provides a perfect window through which to glimpse the family's early life in Mitchell County. Gus may have filled out the application in his own hand.

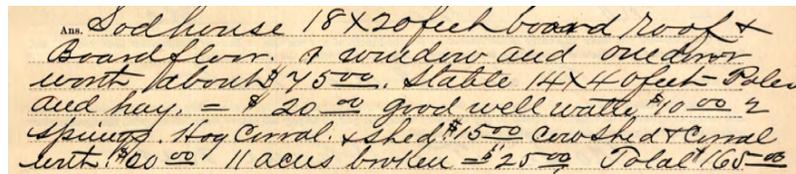
On the 1888 land purchase application, Gus was required to describe his family's farming and other activities since taking up residence on the 160 acre tract essentially as squatters. Responding to questions about his livestock, he stated that he owned "10 head horse. 49 head of cattle[,] 13 hogs." As far as household possessions, they consisted of "stove, beds & bedding[,] table[,] chairs and some dishes &c."¹⁵

p. 4 (penned), line 9, "L. Cloepfil"; "Kansas State Census Collection, 1855-1925," digital images, *Ancestry.com*; citing Kansas State Historical Society microfilm KS1885_89. By 1884, "A. Cloepfil" (Gus's given name was Augustus) appears as a landowner in a Mitchell County atlas. *Atlas of Mitchell County, Kansas* (Chicago: Gillen & Davy, 1884), 47, for Custer Township; "Indexed County Land Ownership Maps, 1860-1918," database, *Ancestry.com*.

¹⁵ Augustus [Gus] Cloepfil (Mitchell County) cash entry file, certificate no. 6570, Kirwin, Kansas, Land Office, testimony of claimant; Land Entry Papers, 1875-1894; Records of the Bureau of Land Management, Record Group 49; NARA, Washington, D.C. Gus had some formal education, because the 1870 census, taken when Gus was 15, indicated that he had attended school within the past year. 1870 U.S. census, Atchison County, Missouri, pop. sch., Buchanon Township, p. 375 (stamped), dwelling 109, family 107, "Augustus Cloepfield"; digital images, *Ancestry.com*; citing NARA microfilm M593, roll 756.



Other questions in the land application focused on what kind of house he had constructed on the property. Gus replied that, with the assistance of two neighbors, he had built a sod house: “Sod house 18 x 20 feet board roof & board floor[,] 1 window and one door.” The property also contained a stable for his horses “14 x 40 feet—poles and hay” as well as corrals and other structures for his livestock.¹⁶



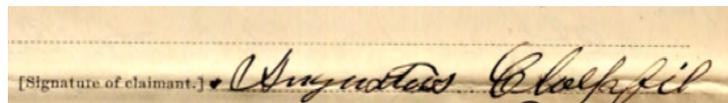
On the prairie, building materials such as wood and stone were scarce, but there was an inexhaustible supply of prairie grass, so sod houses were a common type of frontier prairie home. For Gus and his family, an 18 x 20 foot sod house with one door and one window would have been an extremely tight fit, because Gus and his wife Rachel already had six children.¹⁷

¹⁶ Augustus [Gus] Cloepfil (Mitchell County) cash entry file, certificate no. 6570, Kirwin, Ks., Land Office, testimony of claimant, RG 49, NA-Washington. Although the penmanship makes it unclear whether Augustus wrote “1” window, some of his neighbors filed affidavits on his behalf, and theirs clearly state that there was just one window. Ibid., testimony of neighbors.

¹⁷ Augustus [Gus] Cloepfil (Mitchell County) cash entry file, certificate no. 6570, Kirwin, Ks., Land Office, testimony of claimant, RG 49, NA-Washington.

It was an austere, rustic existence. When the family established its homestead, Mitchell County, Kansas, was still merely a half step away from being the Wild West. When the initial European settlers arrived in the mid-1860s, their relations with Native Americans were tense, and the United States cavalry rode in to provide the settlements protection. Some of the early settlers and some native persons apparently were killed in skirmishes. In addition to these frontier struggles, buffalo would occasionally stampede through the area. By the early 1870s, explains William G. Cutler in his *History of the State of Kansas*, such concerns had ceased. Over the next decade Mitchell County underwent phenomenal growth. By 1883, roughly the time when Gus and his family ventured into the area, the county had a flourishing school system with over one hundred teachers; however, not all of the school-age pupils were enrolled in school, and attendance was just over 50 percent.¹⁸

Ultimately, Gus's 1888 land application was granted, and he received clear title to the property upon making the requisite cash payment. Here is Gus's signature on his application, which he signed with his given name, Augustus.



[Signature of claimant.] • Augustus Clapp

¹⁸ "Mitchell County" in William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas*.

Epilogue

Gus would later separate from his wife and move to California. When he paid a return visit to Kansas in 1921, and the local Mitchell County newspaper remarked that he was looking after his “farming interest,” the true reason involved family financial straits and farm foreclosures. Further challenges lay ahead because in the mid-1930s, Gus’s family members in Kansas would be swept up in the Dust Bowl, and the prairie winds would scatter Cloepfils all across the American West.¹⁹

¹⁹ Dave Strausfeld, “Leaving the Prairie Behind: The Cloepfil Family’s Migration Westward” (unpublished manuscript, 2015); privately held by author, [ADDRESS FOR PRIVATE USE], Durham, North Carolina.