

1- The Last to See Them Alive

The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas; a lonesome area that other Kansans call "out there." Some seventy miles east of the Colorado, the countryside, with its hard blue skies and desert-clear air, has an atmosphere that is rather more Far West than Middle West. The local accent is barbed with a prairie twang¹, a ranch hand nasalness, and the men, many of them, wear narrow frontier trousers, Stetsons, and high-heeled boots with pointed toes. The land is flat, and the views are awesomely extensive; horses, herds of cattle, a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples are visible long before a traveler reaches them.

Holcomb, too, can be seen from great distances. Not that there's much to see - simply an aimless congregation of buildings divided in the center by the main-line tracks of the Santa Fe Rail-road, a haphazard² hamlet bounded on the south by a brown stretch of the Arkansas (pronounced "Ar-kan-sas") River, on the north by a highway, Route 50, and on the east and west by prairie lands and wheat fields. After rain, or when snowfalls thaw³, the streets, unnamed, unshaded, unpaved, turn from the thickest dust into the direst mud. At one end of the town stands a stark⁴ old stucco structure, the roof of which supports an electric sign - dance - but the dancing has ceased and the advertisement has been dark for several years. Nearby is another building with an irrelevant sign, this one in flaking gold⁵ on a dirty window - Holcomb bank. The bank closed in 1933, and its former counting rooms have been converted into apartments. It is one of the town's two "apartment houses," the second being a ramshackle⁶ mansion known, because a good part of the local school's faculty lives there, as the Teacherage. But the majority of Holcomb's homes are one-story frame affairs, with front porches.

Down by the depot, the postmistress, a gaunt⁷ woman who wears a rawhide⁸ jacket and denims and cowboy boots, presides over a falling-apart post office. The depot itself, with its peeling sulphur-colored paint, is equally melancholy; the Chief, the Super-Chief, the El Capitan go by every day, but these celebrated expresses never pause there. No passenger trains do - only an occasional freight. Up on the highway, there are two filling stations, one of which doubles as a meagrely supplied grocery store, while the other does extra duty as a cafe - Hartman's Cafe, where Mrs. Hartman, the proprietress, dispenses sandwiches, coffee, soft drinks, and 3 .2 beer. (Holcomb, like all the rest of Kansas, is "dry.")

Until one morning in mid-November of 1959, few American - in fact, few Kansans - had ever heard of Holcomb. Like the waters of the river, like the motorists on the highway, and like the yellow trains streaking down the Santa Fe tracks, drama, in the shape of exceptional happenings, had never stopped there. The inhabitants of the village, numbering two hundred and seventy, were satisfied that this should be so, quite content to exist inside ordinary life - to work, to hunt, to watch television, to attend school socials, choir practice, meetings of the 4-H Club. But then, in the earliest hours of that morning in November, a Sunday morning, certain foreign sounds impinged on the normal nightly Holcomb noises - on the keening hysteria of coyotes, the dry scrape of scuttling tumbleweed,⁹ the racing, receding wail of locomotive whistles. At the time not a soul in sleeping Holcomb heard them - four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives.

Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*, 1965

1 A **twang** = un ton nasillard

2 **Haphazard** = désorganisé / peu rigoureux / incoherent.

3 **Thaw** = melt

4 **Stark** = nu / désolé pour un paysage

5 **Flaking gold** = de la feuille d'or qui s'effrite, qui s'écaille avec le temps. Qui tombe en miettes.

6 **Ramshackle** = délabré / en piteux état.

7 **Gaunt** = starved-looking / sunken / skeletal.

8 **Rawhide** = cuir brut.

9 **Tumbleweed** = Boules d'herbes sauvages.