The town of Salem was platted in July of 1880. Its location was determined by the railroad as it was one of the many town sites marked off at various intervals by the railway companies as they made their way west. Salem was named by Oliver S. Pendar for his home town, Salem, MA. He came to McCook County in 1878 and settled in Salem in 1880.

Salem is located on a small stream known as Snake Creek. The creek is never very full anymore and its existence in the town is hardly noticeable except in the southwest and north portions as the remainder is covered by culverts. This was not always the case at one time the streets of Salem, including Main Street, contained many bridges which enabled horses, buggies and persons on foot to cross the creek. The bridges were replaced by culverts over 100 years ago when many of them were washed out in the flood of 1907.

The first hotel in Salem was built by Martin Glaser and known as the Salem House. About the same time that the hotel was built, Clerk of Courts, J. F. Norton, moved from Cameron to Salem and opened a real-estate office. He later formed a partnership with Mr. John Brown and the two opened the first bank in Salem.

Salem grew rapidly for the first seven or eight years of its existence and by 1887 boasted a number of businesses. Among them were the Pioneer Hotel; the Salem Roller Mill; Peter Kremer’s lumber yard; Tuthill Lumber Company; Ben Jenneman Furniture Store; Serle’s Drug Store; the Pioneer Meat Market; the Salem Bakery; three general stores; two hardware stores; the Salem Bank; the Citizen State Bank; Cheadle Bros. ice wagon; John M. Woltz, interior decorator; Gapp Bros. livery & feed business; John McLand Liquors; C. H. Volkman, harnesses; Rohlf’s & Kuhle blacksmiths & wagon makers; Thull & Hiem’s billiard parlor; John Clark’s barber shop; Peter Johnson shoe maker and repair shop; four lawyers; two doctors; two real estate dealers and loan brokers; and two newspapers – The Salem Special and the Pioneer Register.

Salem was incorporated as a town in 1885. Its first mayor was W. D. Roberts. Salem’s first city ordinance had to do with the licensing of dogs. It forbade any dog owner to let a dog run at large within the city limits. The second ordinance passed had to do with the regulation and licensing of theatrical performances for which an entrance fee was charged. Other early ordinances had to do with the restraint of drunkenness, immoderate drinking and obscenity in the streets or other public places; the licensing of auctioneers, peddlers and hawkers; the restraining of animals such as cows, horses and sheep from running at large within the city limits; and discharge of firearms within the city.

Salem’s first city hall was the original Salem Public School building. It was moved from the school grounds to the site of the present city hall in 1899 when a new school building was constructed. The present city hall was built in 1935. The building plans included a room for the new city water filtration plant, a city jail, firehouse, engineer’s office, council room & kitchen. The old school and city hall, at the time one of Salem’s oldest landmarks, was torn down to make room for the new brick building. The City Hall building is still in use today, although it has undergone some major remodeling; and in 2009 a new water filtration plant was added.

Early Salem was a railroad town and the first 30 years of the city’s existence were peak railroad years. Salem was at the junction of two railroads, the Chicago Northwestern and the Omaha. There were eight passenger trains daily including one that made two round trips between Salem and Sioux Falls on weekdays. There were also 20 or more freight trains making their way through Salem daily. The depot was the busiest place in town in those days, employing around 30 people. It was located on the south end of Main Street until a new building was put up in the west part of town in 1887. Two other businesses that flourished in Salem before the automobile came into existence were the hotel and the livery barn. At one time Salem boasted five hotels: the Lewis House, the Commercial Hotel, the Irish House of Parliament, the Depot Hotel and the Lucerne.

RAILROAD FIGHT OF 1883: To many people, the area west of the Mississippi in the late 19th Century was a vast area of gunfights, stage coach and train robberies and general lawlessness. While this familiar picture was probably mostly due to vivid imaginations, some of it was true and the town of Salem had its share of trouble. One incident, known as the famous railroad gang fight of 1883, involved some rowdy track layers from the Chicago Northwestern Railroad which was at the time being laid from Huron to Hawarden, IA. The men had a reputation for trying to run the towns they came to as the rails ended. Before arriving in Salem they had sent word ahead that they intended to upset the law in Salem. The local men, headed by E. H. Wilson, a pioneer lawyer, were not going to be caught unprepared. They went to the pool hall and cut off the cues for clubs. When the gang arrived, the Salem men were ready. A free-for-all ensued and the local men came out on top, chasing the gang out of town.
SALEM'S BANKS: The first bank in Salem was opened in a frame building which had been intended for use as a claim shanty. The bank was operated by John Brown and J. F. Norton. Later Norton sold his share of the bank out to Brown who entered into a partnership with his brother, Pickering and O. S. Pendar. While Norton was still with the bank, he and Brown put up the first brick building in Salem in 1881 and moved the bank into it: this building is still standing and is located at 200 N. Main Street. In 1889 Willis M. Shepard built the next bank building which is also still standing and is located at 201 N. Main Street and currently houses Mt. Plains Evaluation. There was a third bank in Salem during its earlier years called Dakota State Bank. It was constructed in 1914 and is currently owned by Bryan Scheirholz and is located at 225 N. Main Street. Salem currently has two banks, the First Dakota National Bank and Service First Federal Credit Union.

SALEM CHURCHES: The Salem Methodist Church, built in 1886, was located on Highway 81 just across the street east from St. Mary’s School. The First Methodist Episcopal Church of Salem was organized by Rev. B. D. L. Dudley in the early 1880’s. Services were held in the old city hall, which at the same time was the school building until the church building was put up in 1886. Extensive improvements were made on it in 1907 and 1908, and the church was enlarged in 1913. Local Presbyterians joined the church in 1933 but returned to their own church in 1934. In the late 1960’s, the Methodist and Presbyterian churches merged and in 1970 the old Presbyterian church was torn down and a new United Church was built to house the congregation. The Salem United Church’s is located at 432 N. Main Street. The Old Methodist church was later torn down and a building was constructed for the Agriculture & Soil Conservation Service Centers.

The first attempt at the organization of a Lutheran Church in Salem took place in 1889 when Pastor Dietz held services for three years in the opera house. For the next 15 years several ministers came to Salem and held services in the city hall and various homes. On May 2, 1915, the people of the Lutheran faith finally voted to organize a congregation. The first baptism and communion service was held on May 23, 1915 and in August of 1915 the papers of incorporation were signed. That same year a church building was constructed. The first pastor of the Christ Lutheran Church of Salem was Rev. Heinz. The church building was added on to and improved in the early 1950’s under Rev. Philip Westby. The Christ Lutheran Church’s address is 232 E. Norton Ave.

The St. Mary’s Catholic Church of Salem was organized in 1885 under the guidance of pastor Father J. H. Juetting. For four years previous to its organization, the church had been a mission served by priests from Sioux Falls and Bridgewater. Father Juetting started building the first church on the site of St. Mary’s High School. He died before it was finished and was succeeded by Rev. Joseph Weixelberger under whose direction the church was finished in 1886. Father Bernard Weber came to the parish on January 22, 1897. Under his direction, the present church building was constructed in 1898. The cornerstone had been laid on July 4th of that year, and the building when finished cost $20,000.00. It was consecrated on June 18, 1907. The Salem St. Mary’s Church is on the Historical Registry and is located at 240 W. Vermont Ave.

SCHOOLS: The first school in Salem was built in 1881 by J. E. Miller. It was a two story frame building located on the site of the present high school. The first floor was divided into two rooms; the east room was used as the offices for the County Clerk and Register of Deeds and the west room was used for classes. The second floor of the building was used for church services, a courthouse and a public hall. The school opened in 1882. Before its opening, the children of Salem attended the Polk Turner School two miles west of Salem. Miss Minerva White was the first school teacher and was assisted by Professor B. R. Crandall. As time went on, school enrollment increased and in 1885 the partition on the first floor was taken out and the whole building was used for school purposes. The present high school was built in 1923 and the first high school teacher was Mr. Popham. Several changes have been made throughout the years, two smaller buildings each containing two classrooms were built to house grades one through four. The Salem Independent School District, at a cost of $17,000.00 a year, was leasing the old St. Mary’s High School to house the middle school students. The lease of the middle school was cancelled in 1973 and plans were made to construct an addition to the high school to house grades five through eight. Construction began in November, 1973. The building houses four classrooms, band and chorus rooms and a small gymnasium. The following additions were made to the school; the elementary wing was completed in 1990 and the frame classrooms housing grades 1-4 were sold. The Auditorium was completed in 1993 and the use of the Armory for athletic events was discontinued. The Science/Media Center was completed in 2000 adding two lab classrooms, a third science
classroom, the distance learning room and the school library. The Salem School District & Spencer School Districts consolidated and reorganized as the McCook Central School District on July 1, 1990 for the 1990-1991 school year.

The first St. Mary’s school building was put up in 1902. In 1908 an addition was added which doubled its size. A house to board students was built in 1914, and was later the Sister’s home. The high school building was constructed in 1928 and a new grade school was built in 1967. The high school was discontinued in 1969 and was later used for the 5th through 8th grades from the Salem Public School. In the mid to late 1990’s the top two floors of the old St. Mary’s High School were converted into apartments.

SALEM NEWSPAPERS: Salem has had three newspapers since the beginning of its history. The first was the Pioneer Register which was moved from Cameron to Salem in 1880 by Jonas Runat. Runat published the paper for only a few years and was succeeded by C. C. Lowe, Dan Nugent, D. C. Tiffany and M. A. Fuller. Samuel M. Gilbert purchased the paper in 1905 and published it until 1937 when he sold it to the Salem Special because of failing health. The sale marked the end of 50 years of competitive newspapers in Salem. In 1883 C. F. M. Schlenker started a paper called the McCook County News. It was purchased in 1886 by J. E. Patten who changed the name to the Salem Special. The Salem Special is Salem’s current newspaper, and through the years the Salem Special went through a series of owners. In 1908 it was sold to J. W. McMahon who published it until his death in 1934. The paper stayed in the family after McMahon died, being published first by his son and then by his daughter and her husband. It was consolidated with the Register in 1937. The Special was printed in a building on north Main Street until this time, when it moved into the present paper office. It was sold in 1959 to Mr. and Mrs. Dan Waugh of Sioux Falls and Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Tippens of Mitchell. Mr. James Larson of Madison published the paper for awhile after the Waughs had it and in January 1972 it was sold to Danny Schwans, Bridgewater Tribune and Wendell Anderson, publisher of the Canistota Clipper and Montrose Herald. Danny Schwans bought out Wendell Anderson in 1977; Gerald Hollingsworth bought the paper from Danny Schwans in 1988; Danny & Troy Schwans bought the paper back in 1992; and Danny Schwans retired in 2008 at which time Troy Schwans bought out his share.

PHYSICIANS: Two of Salem’s first physicians were Dr. W. E. Edgerton and Dr. P. Kendall. It is not known for sure which one came first but at one time they were both practicing at the same time in Salem. They were succeeded by Dr. R. C. Faust who was in Salem until 1910. While here he formed a partnership with Salem’s longest practicing physician, Dr. A. H. Hoyne. Dr. Hoyne took up residence in Salem in 1907. Those were the days when doctors still made house calls. Dr. Anthony Petres took over Dr. Hoyne’s practice in April 1959. Salem currently has two medical clinics, the McGreevy Clinic Avera and Avera Salem Family Medical Clinic.

BUSINESSES: One of Salem’s first businesses was L. S. Tyler’s hardware store which was built and opened by Tyler in 1882. Tyler’s brother, L. A. Tyler, came to work with him in 1885 and in 1901 he became associated with E. E. Hallas in the business. The two had an 18 year partnership. The Tyler and Hallas store burnt down in 1910. The hardware store was rebuilt and burned down a second time in 1944 when occupied by Hallas Hardware & Furniture. The hardware store building was again rebuilt after the fire and is currently occupied by Zapp Hardware. Salem did have other hardware stores, after the Tyler and Hallas store burnt down, E. A. Wicks and S. M. Gilbert, started a hardware store in the building which is now the north portion of the Salem Farmers Market; and the Farmers Hardware store operated in the early days and was also destroyed in the 1910 fire. A Coast to Coast store operated for several years in Salem and occupied the building on Main Street which currently houses Shop Wise.

Early Salem had no lack of entertainment facilities. In the days before the movie house, shows, dances and plays put on by local talent and traveling companies were staged in the Opera House. Salem’s first Opera House was built in 1886 by the local G.A.R. Post. The first floor was used as a bank and the safe was still there when the building was razed in 1976. The entire second floor was an Opera House. The building was purchased by Henry Engelman in 1895, and later remodeled it into a hotel. Another early Opera House was the second story of a two-story building located just south of the Salem Farmer’s Market. It was owned by Ben Jenneman and was known as Jenneman’s Hall. Jenneman ran a furniture business and an undertaking establishment on the first floor. Some of the rooms upstairs were used by the National Guard to store uniforms and equipment, but the main hall was used as an Opera House. The last of the old Opera Houses was the DeGrant which was built by Henry Kuhle in 1910. The DeGrant got its name somewhat by accident, it seems that the name was supposed to be The Grand, but the man who named it had a heavy
MILLS: In the early days, flour was not purchased in a grocery store but at the local mill where farmers would haul their wheat to have it ground into flour. The mills were either run by water or mechanical power and as Salem did not have sufficient water power to run a mill, its mill was run by steam engines. The first mill in Salem was owned by J. H. Brown and leased to Runkel & Schneider, L. S. Tyler, and Downer & Easland. The mill burned down on March 19, 1888 with an uninsured loss of $8,000.00. Salem was without a mill until March of 1890 when L. E. Kruger offered to build a mill in Salem. He made the arrangements and on March 30 started work on the new mill which was ready for business on June 19th of that same year. Later on he built a dynamo from information on electricity he had obtained in a book and had the first electric lights in town. L. V. Schneider took over the operation of the mill when Kruger died in 1895. The mill then had a capacity of 55 barrels daily and flour manufactured by Mr. Schneider was put out under the trade name of Mama’s Pride. Under Mr. Schneider’s management in 1903, the mill put out an average of 70 bushels of wheat per day.

The first franchise to operate an electric system in Salem was granted to Salem Milling Lighting and Heating Company in 1902. Electricity was first generated by a steam power plant located in a small brick structure at the back of the mill. Later a transmission line was extended from Salem to Montrose by the Interstate Power Company and power was purchased from the company by Salem Milling Lighting and Heating. In 1926 the property was purchased by the Central Electric and Gas Company who built a new brick building in 1926 and 1927. A 165 h.p. diesel engine was installed and a transmission line ran from Salem to Woonsocket to make the town a part of the company’s interconnected transmission system. Northern State Power Company took over the operation in June 1961.

CELEBRATIONS IN SALEM: The Fourth of July Celebration of 1904 was the biggest and best up until that time and for awhile yet to come. The day started out with the blowing of the anvil at 3:45 a.m., a practice in which the blacksmith would take the anvil from his shop, fill the empty space under it with black powder and blow it into the air. “Blowing the anvil into the air made the noise of 100 guns at sunrise. The firing continued until every person in the city, big and little, was awakened and was up and preparing for the biggest day in Salem’s history.”

Stores and houses throughout the town were decorated for the big event. J. E. Patten, then editor of the Salem Special, estimated that there were between 7,000 and 10,000 people present. The more conservative Mr. Lowe of the Pioneer Register reported between 3,000 and 4,000. The Salem and Bridgewater bands played for the event one at the old bank corner and the other at the site of the Lewis House. There was a parade with 17 floats headed by the Bridgewater band. After the parade there was a program in a tent south of the railroad tracks consisting of songs by the band and glee club, an oration, a saxophone solo and an acrobat. For those not able to get into the tent to see the show, there was a baseball game on the diamond on the north end of Main Street. Canistota beat Montrose 9-7 in this game. In the afternoon there was a second baseball game with Bridgewater defeating Ramsey 5-4. Other highlights of the day were a shooting demonstration by a champion shot artist, street sports including foot races, a tug of war, bike races, and a fireworks display at dusk.

The American Legion and the Salem Commercial Club were joint sponsors of the Harvest Celebration for the first time in 1938. The Legion’s Paris Days and the New Fall Festival were combined to make the Harvest Festival. The celebration was used for achievement days for the 4-H clubs. The first Harvest Festival was held on August 29 and 30, 1938. It featured a street carnival, two dances, 4-H and women’s extension club exhibits, a baseball game, street sports and many other attractions. Over the years the 4-H Days and the Carnival Days were split into two different events. The Carnival Days are held on the first Monday & Tuesday in June and is sponsored by the Progressive Salem Association. The McCook County 4-H days is the last week of July and is a three day event, and much like the early days there are exhibits, animal judging, and the event ends with entertainment and a barbecue.

FIRES: Salem has had many destructive fires in its 129 year history. One of the first occurred on July 1, 1900 when lightning struck the Schneider Bros. store building and the resulting fire burnt it to the ground. The L. S. Tyler hardware building next to it was saved only by a shift in the wind and the other buildings on Main Street were saved.
by the heavy rain which was falling at the time. Schneider rebuilt the structure which burned again on December 4, 1944 while occupied by the Hallas furniture store. This time the fire was started by an overheated stove. A heavy covering of snow on the roofs of the adjacent buildings prevented them from starting on fire.

The Peavey elevator burned on October 10, 1906 in one of the most spectacular and dramatic fires ever seen in Salem. The elevator was located on the site of the Farmer’s Union elevator which was purchased by Hansen Brothers. The building and 12,000 bushels of grain were destroyed.

On November 14, 1907, a night fire wiped out three businesses: Biersworths Store, Miss Harahan’s Millinery, and Stuelpnagel’s Bakery.

On July 1, 1910, the most disastrous fire in Salem’s history swept the east side of Main Street. It destroyed seven buildings including Mrs. L. H. Grimm’s Millinery, Dr. George M. Dotts dental office, Tyler & Hallas Hardware, the Racket Store, the Farmer’s Hardware, a residence and large barn. Flying embers set additional fires which were put out by citizens. Smoke from the fire which started in the rear of the Farmer’s Hardware could be seen clearly as far away as Spencer and for awhile it was thought that the entire business district of Main Street might burn. Damage from the fire was around $40,000.00.

A night fire on December 21, 1945 destroyed the Sunshine Hatchery building and Hub’s Café just east of the Special office. It started in the hatchery and was discovered at 11:30 p.m. The firemen saved the Special office to the west of the building but the café to the east was destroyed. The fire was brought under control at 4:30 a.m. but flared up again in midmorning and at 5:30 p.m. it was finally put out.

Salem has continued to grow and prosper throughout the years. A 1910 brochure on Salem placed the population at 1100. It stated that Salem had two first class banks, a flour mill, an electric light and power plant, seven grain elevators, two newspapers, three first class hotels, a first class creamery and many other advantages too numerous to mention.

More Salem Business and Public Building History: the Salem swimming pool was completed in 1959; construction of the Salem National Guard Armory began in the spring of 1960 after approval was gained from Washington D.C. in December 1959. The armory was completed and dedicated in May 1961. The bowling alley was built and opened in 1960 and in 1961 a new post office building was erected north of the bank. Two previous post office buildings had been the present bakery and the vacant brick building on Vermont Ave. that was formerly Allen Wegener’s Clothes Shop, a video store and a taxidermy shop. Another successful business that went up in 1961 was F & W Concrete owned by Leon Feterl and Herman Warn. The business and building are no longer in operation or standing. In 1962 the Home Café and Dairy Bar opened and in January 1965 Kiner’s Bakery became Salem’s newest business.

The Salem Community Development Corporation was formed in the 1960’s to secure Small Business Administration loans for the construction of Colonial Manors. In July 1966 the corporation received a $230,000.00 loan from the SBA and construction on the home began in August 1966. Originally to be only a 44 bed home when plans were formulated in 1965, the convalescent home ended up having 63 beds when completed in March 1967. Floyd Wilkerson was hired as the home’s first administrator in December 1966. The home is currently under the name of the Golden Living Center, is the city’s largest employer and the current administrator is Joan Raap.

In February 1968 a loan was approved to develop the McCook Country Club in Salem. The club would include a club house, nine-hole golf course and a tennis court. It is operated on a membership basis and the dues for the first year of operation were $65.00. The clubhouse was completed in 1968 and an open house and grand opening was held on December 20, 1968. The golf course was completed and ready for use by July 1969.

Salem still is the home to many service and retail businesses. Salem has an active chamber named the Progressive Salem Association that works hard to promote Salem and hosts many events throughout the year. Please visit the Salem website, www.salemsd.com, for a list of businesses and to view the many events and activities the town is involved in throughout the year.