

## LOCUST GROVE, “THE WONDER CITY”

Oliver Winfield Killam, Grove resident and owner of a successful lumber and mercantile business, was about to embark on the biggest venture he had ever attempted...founding a town. The thirty eight year old entrepreneur had led an enviable and successful life. A football star at LaGrange College in Missouri, after graduation he had completed a law degree at the University of Missouri. But within months after setting up practice in Joplin, Killam had abandoned his law practice, become a laborer in the zinc mines nearby, and in 1898, six months later, been promoted to plant manager. In 1902, following his marriage to Harriet Smith in Southwest City, he had moved to Grove, and when Oklahoma became a state, the popular Grove businessman was elected as the state representative for Delaware County.

Always alert to potential business investments, in 1911, Killam became aware of the proposed extension of the Missouri Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad from Muskogee to Baxter Springs, Kansas. According to available information, after the proposed railroad left Wagoner, it would wind its way over 50 miles, generally northeast, before reaching Salina. Surveying the region between Wagoner and Salina, Killam determined that a large area between the two towns, known locally as Markham's Prairie, would be an ideal site to establish a town that could provide business services to the surrounding area.

The site Killam chose, toward the eastern portion of Markham Prairie, was overgrown with pod bearing Locust trees known locally as Locust Grove. Its only other distinguishable identity was related to history, the grove had been the location of a brief Civil War battle. Early on the morning of July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1862, Union forces had surprised Confederates, defeated them and captured 60 wagons loaded with supplies that had been acquired at Fort Smith. Although actual combat lasted only a few hours, during the day nearly one hundred rebels were killed and about as many captured. The conflict proved to be even more damaging to southern morale, leading to the defection of many disillusioned Cherokees to the Yankee side.

Upon further inspection of the Markham Prairie site, Killam focused on a quarter section of land toward the east, the allotment of Elzina Ross, a Cherokee who had been awarded the land as a result of the Dawes Act. Purchasing the 160 acre tract, he platted his town offering lots of varying sizes for sale. Frequently, when communities were founded, obtaining a permit for a post office could be a problem. However, a post office called Locust Grove had been established in 1873 and moved to various sites on the prairie, so when it was finally moved to Killam's location, the name came with it. The consummate promoter, Killam advertised Locust Grove as “The Wonder City of Grand Lake Valley,” and it drew an immediate response. Rapidly selling lots and promoting businesses, he had correctly gauged the fact that farmers surrounding Markham Prairie would benefit from this new center of commerce.

It would be an understatement to observe that Oliver Winfield Killam was “on a roll” with his business investment, which he predicted would ultimately become home to 5,000 residents. Location, a railroad, even a potable water supply, all fell in place to underscore his claims of a “wonder city.” As momentum for Locust Grove grew, Killam added buyer

interest through a series of promotional activities. One popular Christmas event drew attention to the community for several years. Killam would purchase 100 turkeys and invite townspeople to catch them, those who didn't were welcomed to the Montgomery Hotel where, for the price of twenty five cents, they could partake in a complete Christmas dinner. That custom continued until turkeys became scarce and they were replaced by geese. The event then became known as the "Annual Goose Grab."

During its formative years, Locust Grove prospered and, satisfied with the results, in 1914 Killam returned to the legislature, this time elected as state senator. But in 1919, seeking new business ventures in the Texas oilfields he left Locust Grove, now a robust community of over five hundred citizens. Growth continued through the 1920s, but like most Oklahoma communities, Locust Grove suffered setbacks resulting from the Great Depression of the 1930s, then again in 1965 when the railroad, never a profitable venture, was discontinued.

Despite those economic setbacks, Killam's label for the town he created as the "Wonder City," may have been more prophetic than even he imagined. Today, this community of over 1,400 has rebounded, serving the commercial and recreational needs of both area residents and tourists who are drawn to Lake Hudson nearby. Killam, who died in 1959, continued his long list of successful ventures as a well respected Texas Oilman, but his vision in founding Locust Grove must ultimately be counted as one of his finest achievements.



