

BAXTER SPRINGS, LINKED TO OKLAHOMA

There was excitement in Baxter Springs, Kansas, a vibrant community just beyond the northern border of Indian Territory. With congressional agreement, the Cherokee, Choctaw and Creek tribes had authorized three railroads to vie for construction across the Territory and the winner had arrived. May 4, 1870 the Missouri River, Fort Scott & Gulf Railroad reached the town and shortly thereafter crossed over into Indian Territory. But the celebration was short lived when it was determined that the railroad had reached Quapaw lands, not one of the three authorized under the agreement. A month later, June 6th and just fourteen miles west at Chetopa, the Union Pacific, soon to be the Missouri, Kansas & Texas (Katy) Railroad crossed into Cherokee territory north of Vinita. This particular turn of events proved to be just one in the interesting history of Baxter Springs.

The mineral springs that created the town, were eventually eliminated by lead and zinc mining, a later link in the early twentieth century. For hundreds of years they had been visited by Osage hunting parties, only becoming “Baxter Springs” when A. Baxter arrived. A squatter and self appointed Universalist minister, he built a small shack nearby around 1850. Shortly thereafter he constructed a small tavern to take advantage of a growing number of travelers passing through on the Military Road. But Baxter’s tenure both at the springs and on earth was terminated when he engaged in a gunfight involving a land dispute with another settler named Common.

Even before Baxter’s demise, the town that eventually bore his name had begun to be a stop on the northbound route for Texas cattle drovers. Traversing Indian Territory, cowboys found the settlement to be a convenient “watering hole.” But by 1861, politics further east leading to the Civil War would put a stop to that. Because of its location adjacent to the Military Road, Baxter Springs became important as a military outpost and eventually the site of a brutal massacre. During the spring of 1863 a small fort, officially known as Fort Blair, was constructed by Union troops. Since the beginning of the war, Kansas had become the scene of several bloody conflicts between Union and Confederate sympathizers. The following October, during the early afternoon of the sixth, Confederate William Quantrill and 400 bushwhackers, traveling south on the Military Road bound to winter in Texas, engaged the small garrison of 150 at the Fort. The same day, General James Blunt, with 10 wagons and about 100 men headed for Fort Smith, approached from the north unaware of the fighting taking place at Baxter Springs. Quantrill, many of whose men were dressed in stolen Union army uniforms, attacked. Caught unaware, nearly all the Union troops were gunned down, even when attempting to surrender, resulting in a heartless massacre.

The end of the war in 1865 proved to be a boon for Baxter Springs. Huge herds of long horn cattle, dramatically increased because of the war, were herded north from Texas to high price markets. Once again, the town became not only a destination where cattle were bought and sold, but wide open to cowboys who had been on the long trail from Texas. As a result, historians would designate Baxter Springs as “The First Kansas Cow Town.” But the bonanza was short lived, because of the arrival of the Katy Railroad mentioned

previously. By 1871 tracks had been completed along the Texas trail all the way across Indian Territory and cattle were soon riding by rail to every market in the north.

In 1876, essentially bypassed by the cattle trade, the population of Baxter Springs had dropped to 800, but events in the town's colorful history continued. Because of its location astride the Military Road, Baxter Springs hosted an increasing number of travelers, most bound for Texas but a few with other plans. On April 19th that year, two members of the James-Younger gang robbed the Crowell Bank. This event seemed to set the standard for a series of bank withdrawals by gangs that eventually led to the communities unenviable title as, "Most Robbed Town." Even after it was linked with Highway 66, and the era of western bad men had ended, the tradition was continued by Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow. In the early 1930s, the duo robbed Eden's Grocery twice in one week, first on their way to Joplin, then again on their way back to Oklahoma.

After the cattle drives and a later surge when Baxter Springs, like other communities, benefitted from the lead and zinc mining until the 1930s, the economic booms and busts were essentially over. Today, diversified with a variety of regionally supported businesses, undoubtedly only on occasion do the community's 4,000 residents pause to reflect on the past and the links to their neighbor to the south.

