

## **WAGONER, QUEEN OF THE PRAIRIES**

Although the actual dates are disputed regarding when Henry "Big Foot" Wagoner ordered construction of an additional siding on the Katy Railroad in 1872, it is certain that he didn't realize a community would become his namesake. Nor did the roadmaster when he telegraphed Katy officials that "Wagoner's switch was ready." Henry Wagoner's objective was to provide additional rail access for shipping cattle and for the booming walnut lumber business that was providing thousands of board feet to eastern furniture manufacturers.

Even then the City of Wagoner, eventually touted as "Queen of the Prairies," might not have become a reality except for construction of the Kansas and Arkansas Valley Railroad in 1887. The "Iron Mountain," built from Fort Smith to Coffeyville, Kansas, crossed the Katy tracks one half mile north of Wagoner's Switch. When a Katy employee, William McAnally, learned about the crossing, he quit his job and built what became known as "The Cottonwood Hotel." Shortly thereafter, another settler, William Teague, opened a general store, and a year later a request for a post office was approved. With that recognition, the future of Wagoner's Switch, now known as Wagoner, was assured.

Because the two railroads crossed at the site, both with new stations a few blocks apart, Wagoner grew rapidly. In just five years, the population had increased to 400, accommodated by five general stores, two drug stores, a newspaper and other businesses needed by an agricultural community. Of course, rail connections enabled shipping and travel connections throughout the whole country. Wagoner's population surged to 1500 in 1896 when the Dawes Commission was organized, created in part, as a first step toward encouraging non-Indian settlement of Indian Territory.

There were numerous growing pains from the town's inception. This was cattle country, so early on a fence was constructed around the community with four gates, one on each side, to keep the cows out. That proved to be a rather minor inconvenience in terms of what lay ahead. Wagoner's inhabitants, located in Indian Territory, were subjected to tribal laws, but most of those laws did not apply to non-Indians. Thus, the territory, became the destination for thieves, prostitutes, gamblers and similar ilk from "back east," and the hang out for some home grown felons. Consequently, the town was not exempt from incidents, many of which were investigated during the era of "Hangin" Judge Isaac Parker and his deputies. Several train robberies occurred nearby. In 1891 the Dalton brothers escaped with over \$3,000.00 at Leliaetta, a Katy switch four miles north of town. During October of 1894 Bill Cook's gang robbed an Iron Mountain train south of Wagoner, killing one passenger and wounding another. Just one month later, Texas Jack Reed and his gang failed in an attempt to rob a Katy passenger train. But, along with jailing local prostitutes, drunks and other minor criminals, the drama reached a climax. On October 25, 1895, Deputy Sheriff Ed Reed, gunned down the Crittenden brothers near Cherokee and Main Streets. The brothers were intimidating local citizens and Reed had been ordered by city fathers to "take them alive....or dead." This incident seemed to quell the violence along with the authorization of a federal court two years later. After the court was established, swift justice coupled with local efforts, saw lawlessness subside.

Already a railroad crossroads, in 1905 Wagoner was accessed by still another, the Missouri, Oklahoma and Gulf that served northeastern Oklahoma. This line began at Baxter Springs, Kansas, traversed the Grand River Valley to Wagoner, connected to

**Muskogee and on west to Henryetta. However, the railroad never was profitable and, following the development of Grand Lake and Lake Hudson, it folded in 1965.**

**At the turn of the century, it appeared that a new industry, mineral water called “germicide water,” might rival the railroads in importance. This new elixir, available either to drink or bath in, was promoted as a cure for a lengthy list of ailments ranging from ulcers to dandruff. Bath houses were built to accommodate as many as 500 people a day to soak in the miraculous waters. However, despite vigorous advertising, the venture proved to be short lived when the germicide water did not live up to expectations.**

**While railroads were the key to Wagoner’s development, in at least one instance, their relationship became strained. In one notable incident, the city clerk ordered employees to shut off water to the Katy railroad yards because of an unpaid water bill. This action so incensed officials they ordered the rail yards moved to Muskogee. The resulting domino effect also meant that 50 employees and their families would move which, in turn, impacted the local economy for several years. Compounding this error in judgment, it was later discovered that a check for the bill had already been mailed, but not received when the water was shut off. Never-the-less, despite miscues, early criminal activities, the Great Depression of the 1930’s and periodic dips in the agricultural economy, Wagoner deserves to reign as “Queen of the Prairies” in northeastern Oklahoma.**















