

FAIRLAND, A SLICE OF AMERICANA

There was trouble in Prairie City. Established in 1872 along the St Louis and San Francisco (Frisco) Railroad the town had become “land locked,” unable to expand. One reason was a restriction created by Cherokee law regarding land appropriation that wasn’t changed till passage of the Curtis Act in 1898. The other was the reluctance of a pioneer family to part with a portion of land they had homesteaded in 1847. So the town had become boxed in, an impact that was so restrictive that even the post office had been moved to Wyandotte, several miles to the east.

Following the end of the Civil War and due to renewed efforts of the government to relocate Indian Tribes to “Indian Territory,” towns and settlements begun to emerge and provide convenient trading centers in what eventually would become Ottawa County. A Quaker Mission had been established in 1869, followed shortly by Prairie City and Wyandotte.

But now in 1888, taking advantage of the “land locked” situation that restricted growth down the road, Dr. A. M. Collins, purchased 225 acres, along the Frisco just 2 ½ miles to the west, then platted the land for a town. He also added an incentive for development when it was advertised that one lot would be given free for each one purchased. Collins may have depended on the magnetism of that unrestricted growth potential or the excitement of creating a new town or simply the sweeping view of the plains when he decided to name it “Fairland.” Whatever the circumstances, by 1891 the booming town had acquired a post office and boasted a population of 120. Shortly after statehood, the population increased to 569, with a flourishing main street and businesses to accommodate surrounding farms. Fairland typified growth in America.

The town’s early development saw the end of the stage coach era in the region. The Sawyer – Ficklin stage coach route that passed 1 ½ miles west of this new town had served patrons for many years. Benjamin Ficklin, instrumental in starting the Pony Express, owned stage coach routes in both Oklahoma and Texas. This one originated in Baxter Springs, continued through Oklahoma on the Military Road and connected with other stage lines in Texas and with another that originated at Fort Gibson and ended in California. But now, with the Frisco east and westbound, crossing the Missouri, Kansas and Texas tracks, that ran north and south through Vinita, fewer passengers or freight made the stage coach trip. By 1912, when another railroad, the Missouri, Oklahoma and Gulf, completed building tracks from Wagoner through Fairland to Joplin, stage coach travel in the region disappeared completely.

But Fairland flourished, developing as a center for distribution of farm products. The Bluestem Grass, which had been a staple for buffalo herds, then later for cattle driven from Texas, now combined for export with grain harvested from Cowskin Prairie. Frequently, as many as twenty wagons could be seen in line at one time, waiting to unload at the railroad station. The community soon gained a reputation for shipping more grain than any other point on the Frisco between Sapulpa, and Springfield, Missouri.

While Fairland was becoming noted as a shipping center for farm products, it also gained a local reputation in the early 1900s as “fun city.” Farm laborers who worked hard

all week, laid their chores aside, and aided with the local adult beverage of choice, frequently celebrated by riding their horses up and down the board sidewalks. This activity, as well as fights and an occasional pistol whipping, often resulted in an over-packed jail. That small space, reportedly just 16x12 feet, required the marshal to keep dogs in the surrounding fenced yard, to discourage prisoners from escaping. Sunday mornings found miscreants facing the judge and being patched up by doctors.

Through the 30s and 40s, Fairland's citizens engaged in activities typical of mid-America farm communities. Merchants sponsored cash drawings and free movies on Saturdays and "Fun City" gave way to the conservative establishment. But, like most rural communities, life changed after World War II. Many young men did not return, farms became much larger and citizens found employment elsewhere. However, like many rural communities Fairland adjusted, today balancing local commerce with commuters and Collins creation remains, "a slice of Americana."

