

CENTRALIA'S CRIME WAVE

The citizens of Centralia would be prepared the next time one of their banks was robbed. Although this attempt had failed, now, April 28, 1911, citizens had become aware of the need for a more aggressive response. Founded in 1898 in northwestern Craig County on a dirt and gravel road called the Ozark Trail, located about 16 miles equidistant between Blue Jacket, Delaware and Edna, Kansas, Centralia had prospered and the local bank had become an attractive target for thieves. The town thrived because travel, which involved walking or by wagon or horseback to those neighboring towns was too far to go and still be able to return home in one day.

Centralia had grown rapidly during the decade after it was founded, although there had been a setback in 1907, when a fire destroyed most of the business district. But the rebuilding was a testimony to how popular the location had become, and now in 1911, besides a school, there were two banks, hotels, general stores, several doctors' offices and other businesses and churches that provided for the needs of the surrounding population. The community had not only developed into an active trading center, but now there were rumors that two railroads that would connect Centralia to larger markets might be built through town.

The April 28th robbery attempt had brought a sense of reality to the surrounding community. Fortunately, an alert citizen had seen the men enter the bank and he notified the constable who rounded up a posse. But by that time, the would-be robbers had either become frustrated in their attempt or had heard the commotion and escaped. So, the lack of adequate protection from criminals was a major topic of conversation for awhile, but as time passed nothing was done.

As the robbery became a distant memory, the town's population and services to the surrounding community continued to grow, even after a second fire occurred in 1917 destroying nearly a third of the business district. Once again Centralia had rebounded and a vigorous building project re-established needed businesses. Soon after the fire and following the conclusion of World War I, prospects for the town's continued growth brightened even more when another railroad proposal was developed. This one supposedly would pass through Centralia by linking Vinita with Caney, Kansas. Citizens were encouraged as nine miles of grading northwest of Vinita was completed, but like the previous railroad project, nothing materialized.

A more pressing issue for most small towns in the region was the availability of electricity in rural areas. The invention of the light bulb in 1879 was followed with cities and even smaller communities "lighting up" and Centralians wanted that innovation too. Efforts to obtain this modern convenience were pushed even harder when several farmers and ranchers installed and operated a telephone line that extended for six miles. Soon afterwards, Centralia was able to acquire a generator that enabled the town to provide artificial lighting, at least for several hours daily.

Unfortunately, the very need that resulted in the founding of Centralia, its distance from other communities, ultimately became the instrument of its decline. When rail service and major roads connecting other towns developed and highway transportation improved, then

farms grew into ranches, the population in the region diminished. Consequently, services that had been provided by Centralia's merchants were no longer needed and, after the 1950s, the town simply faded away.

Although now regarded as a ghost town, like most communities stories about individuals and incidents concerning Centralia continue to be told and retold. One concerns the plan that eventually was developed regarding that earlier bank robbery. Although the discussion regarding the near robbery in 1911 was all but forgotten, an increase in gang activities and other crimes during the 1920s created recollections of that episode and renewed interest in protection. By 1927, Centralia had two banks, but still only one constable. Consequently, city fathers thought it prudent to devise a systematic plan that would enlist the aid of the whole community. Briefly, if the local constable suspected that a robbery was being committed during the night, he was to notify personnel at the electric light plant to turn on the generator and that would enable lights to come on all over town. This would alert citizens in the community who were advised to step outside and fire their guns into the air. The theory was that the artificial lights, coupled with the repeated gun fire would or should cause panic among the thieves into believing themselves surrounded, and then they could be captured. The preparations paid off. That same year, thieves were discovered in an attempted night robbery of the First National Bank. Each step of the plan was executed. The constable discovered the robbery in progress, notified the electric company and the lights came on. Citizens, now alerted, fulfilled their role by stepping outside and firing into the air. The plan was working perfectly until one citizen's errant shot hit a main electric line, plunging all of Centralia into darkness. In the ensuing melee, the robbers escaped, but without any money. Although the criminals weren't apprehended, for all practical purposes the plan worked... crime didn't pay in Centralia.

