

COMMERCE, CORNFIELD TO BOOMTOWN

For years there had been modest lead mining activity in the area we know today as Ottawa County, even some during the Civil War. But, in 1905 when George Coleman and his brother Alfred, contracted Bill Waddel to dig a water well in a muddy cornfield north of Miami, little did they know what was about to occur. When Waddel withdrew the drill bit and noticed traces of iron pyrites in the shale, not only was a multi-million dollar Oklahoma mining industry born, but a new boomtown as well. The lead and zinc mining industry that spawned what eventually became Commerce, encompassed parts of Kansas and Missouri, 1,188 miles in the tri-state area. However, discovery of these valuable minerals neither resulted in a systematic development of the mines that followed, nor in naming the town. The mines, eventually serviced by 248 mills, were developed helter-skelter throughout the area and Commerce underwent several different identities.

The first shaft, the Emma Gordon, was dug in 1906 and financed by Amos Hatton, so occupants of the new tent city that was created, soon were calling the site Hattonville. For a few years Hattonville grew, mostly as a tent city with a few wood buildings, later encompassing another tent city, Tar River. In the community's early stages of development, Hatton promoted Geneva, his daughter's name, for the growing community. Although a post office was established called Geneva, the local occupants who were mostly miners, never accepted the change so it remained Hattonville. The town grew and by 1912, it consisted of a main street about three or four blocks long lined with tents and boarding houses. However, the "name game" was about to end. During this time the Coleman brothers had joined with James Robinson and Charles Harvey to form their own mining business, the Commerce Mining and Royalty Company. So, in 1914, along with other acquisitions, the partners bought the town and ended the debate by naming it in honor of their new business.

The community grew steadily and by 1918 boasted two banks, two theaters two hotels, two newspapers and numerous retail stores. The 1920 census reported a population of 2,555. The mining output in the region prospered, first spurred by demands from World War I when more than fifty percent of the lead used by the Allies came from the Tri-state district. By 1924, the peak employment year in the region, 11,187 men made their living from the mines. In 1927, 248 mines were operating in Ottawa County, but gradually a decline in the world demand and job hazards...mine collapses, explosions, accidents, polluted water and an accompanying reduction in wages, all took their toll. The industry that had created Commerce was seriously troubled and the depression years in the 1930s proved to be the beginning of the end for mining ventures in the region, dictating the need for economic diversity.

Like most communities, the town struggled through those years, but unlike many it acquired a new, perhaps mixed blessing. In 1926, the "Mother Road," Route 66, had been dedicated, a concrete ribbon that extended from Chicago to Santa Monica, California. Route 66 passed through Commerce and proved to be an economic asset to local businesses, but the highway also proved to have a down side. The town's location, just a

few miles from both the Kansas and Missouri state line, made it attractive to an undesirable product spawned by the depression, an increasing criminal element. Fugitives traveling on highway 66 through Commerce could stop there, or if necessary, conveniently drive across nearby state lines and avoid capture by police, because at the time there was no legal reciprocity between states. Consequently, gangs or designated public enemy's like the Barkers, Pretty Boy Floyd or John Dillinger and their accomplices frequented the area. Unfortunately, this circumstance led to tragedy when on April 6, 1934, Bonnie Parker, Clyde Barrow and their associate Henry Methvin stopped in town and were recognized by Constable Cal Campbell. When Campbell attempted to arrest them, Methvin shot and killed him. In the ensuing fracas the trio kidnapped the police chief Percy Boyd. Crossing into Kansas, they released Boyd unharmed, That incident provided to be further motivation for authorities in their manhunt and Parker and Barrow were killed in Louisiana the next month.

Well known in sports circles as the home of the "Commerce Comet," Baseball Hall of Famer Mickey Mantle, the community has also produced other notable athletes including National Wrestling Hall of Fame member, Conrad Caldwell and professional wrestler Doug Furnas. And, despite economic reversals, Commerce, once site of a cornfield water well, has managed to sustain its population of over 2000 by re-inventing itself through economic diversity in agriculture and industry.

