



THE HISTORY OF SARCOXIE, MISSOURI

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CHAPTER 1 – EARLY HISTORY

Just a short distance from I-44 rests Sarcoxie, the “oldest town in Jasper County”. The historic town of Sarcoxie has a population 1,330. As one exits I-44 and drives toward the Historic Business District, the drive is over what once was Hwy 166, the main means of travel to and from surrounding towns before I-44 was completed in 1965. The highway has been moved slightly but still carries travelers to the edge of Sarcoxie’s Nationally Designated Historic Business District. In days past, “Old Timers” told of hearing horses hooves clanging on the old iron bridge that welcomed visitors as they traveled toward town. The bridge has long since been replaced but visitors are still warmly welcomed!

Sarcoxie’s history began in 1803 when Edmund Jennings, from Tennessee, came to the “Country of the Six Boils”, the earliest name given to this region. He lived in the region, learning the language and ways of the Osage. After living in the region for 15 years, he returned home to speak of the land with enthusiasm. By 1831, a convergence of resilient pioneers emerged in the area seeking to take advantage of the numerous streams and rich farmland. Today, visitors cross Center Creek, where in 1831 Thacker Vivion from Kentucky became the first permanent settler in the area. He settled along the creek considered to have been the campground of the Turtle Band of the Delaware tribe until 1829. Thacker Vivion built a log house and in 1834 constructed the first crude grist mill and soon thereafter a saw mill. At that time settlers traveled long distances and waited days to grind their seed at the mill, or “corncracker”, as it was called in those days. Initially, Thacker’s mill was the only mill within a 30-mile radius so farmers camped along the creek while they waited their turn to grind their flour. Often this took days which allowed the men time to enjoy a period of fellowship in an otherwise wilderness territory.

Families were drawn to the area during the 1830s and 1840s. One by one, other adventurous trail blazers came. John M. Fullerton, from Tennessee, was the first full-fledged farmer. He and his wife, Ann, arrived shortly after Thacker Vivion. In 1833, William Duncan bought property in the area and served the area as preacher/teacher/brick master and tanner. In 1833, Dr. Abner Wilson, the first known doctor of medicine, arrived and opened his practice. He opened Sarcoxie’s first mercantile/drugstore. Later, he became the postmaster at the first post office west of Springfield. Mail was delivered to Sarcoxie and returned by horseback. It is believed that John Powers was the first Caucasian birth in 1834.

It wasn’t long before others adventured into the area and a real town began to take shape. The town was first named Centerville. Old Settlers said the name was derived because, “It was halfway between Springfield and the end of the world”. After the post office was established, Centerville was renamed because it was discovered that the name belonged to another settlement in Missouri. Therefore, it was decided that the town should be named for Chief Sarcoxie, the friendly chief who had camped along Sarcoxie Spring. Thus, the name Sarcoxie!

In 1834, entrepreneurs, William Tingle and Benjamin Massey, partnered and erected a general store which they filled with a large stock of goods. The business thrived and later they purchased Vivion’s Mill and increased its size. The mill drew settlers to the area and Sarcoxie’s commercial district grew as entrepreneurs, Tingle and Massey and others, continued to envision lucrative financial opportunities.

Through the efforts of several founding fathers, who are too numerous to cite, Sarcoxie began to flourish and was officially platted in 1849. Early entrepreneurs Tingle and Massey developed the first plat of the town in August 1840 but a controversy of the plat took an act of the Missouri General Assembly to authorize the legal recording of the plat in February 1849. By 1869 the population of Sarcoxie was 300 and was the 3rd largest city in the county. Only Joplin and Carthage were larger.

CHAPTER 2 – RUMORS OF WAR

Two of Sarcoxie's finest, Benjamin Massey and James Rains, became politically active. In 1856, Massey won election as Missouri's secretary of state. He served a full term but his second term was cut short because he joined Governor Claiborne Fox Jackson and other state leaders in declaring allegiance to the Confederate States of America. James S. Rains, a gentleman farmer, was elected state senator and then to Congress but was not able to serve as he took up the confederate cause.

As the turmoil over slavery began to fester, strong feelings deepened and military companies began to form. By March 1, 1861, a company of 80 pro-Southern militiamen was organized under the leadership of James Rains and the Cravens family. It has been reported that the group formed was probably the first in the area and occurred in Sarcoxie. Major James S Rains became a major and later a brigadier general in the State Guard during the Civil War. Although the area saw both Confederate and Union soldiers camped in the area, Sarcoxie declared allegiance to the confederacy. Many of the large bodies of troops that operated in southwest Missouri passed through Sarcoxie. Troops camped in the surrounding areas and some accounts indicate the city was damaged by fires as the troops "squirmished" in the area. In 1961, historians report that the first Confederate flag, "Stars and Bars," flew on the square from a 100 foot pole which was guarded closely for several weeks.

It was reported that a school teacher from Kansas hired to teach in Sarcoxie was tar and feathered for his views expressed to his students regarding slavery. When asked to resign, he refused. A group of angry citizens took him out of town and applied the tar and feathers. Undocumented legend tells that five years later a scarred lieutenant heading a U.S. cavalry from Kansas looked on as his men torched Sarcoxie. Many of Sarcoxie's young men lost their life during this sad time!

CHAPTER 3 – AFTER THE WAR/MOVING FORWARD

Sarcoxie's commerce and population stagnated following the Civil War but soon Sarcoxie began to rebound from the effects of the war. Many entrepreneurs opened dry good businesses, millineries, grocery stores, barber shops, blacksmiths and restaurants appeared in frame buildings around the dusty square. It was believed at one point that Sarcoxie might become the county seat due to its growth in population. However, that was not to be. Instead, Carthage became the county seat.

Fires were a common hazard that threatened the frame structures around the square. In the early 1900s with no fire department and only primitive resources available to fight the devastating fires, many of these frame structures were consumed. Frame structures on the west, north and south side of the square burned. By 1918, newly constructed brick buildings encircled the square. Most of the buildings still remain today.

In the late 1890s, Sarcoxie was a cow town of some importance, providing Texas' cowboys a "stopping point" as they moved their herds through the area on the way to Sedalia or Kansas City. The daily stage coach carried passengers between Sarcoxie, Rolla and Springfield; thus, connecting the area to other parts of the state. The Atlantic and Pacific Railroad initiated rail service between Sarcoxie and Pierce City in 1872. Budding entrepreneurs took advantage of this rail service. In the future, train service became an important means of transporting both passengers and the agricultural products that became so important to the areas growth.

An active newspaper has been published in Sarcoxie since 1877. The Sarcoxie Democrat, published by Sebastian Armstrong and later Gilbert Schooling, was the first paper published. The Vindicator was published in 1882 by J.M. Rice. Bernard Finn arrived in town at the request of Mrs. Armstrong and printed the first copy of the Sarcoxie Record in 1901. Finn published the paper until 1945. Since that time, Sarcoxie has maintained at least 1 newspaper and at one point 3 papers. The Sarcoxie Record continues to publish a weekly paper with a circulation of over 400.

As Sarcoxie's population and commercial markets increased, the need for financial institutions became apparent. In 1868, local businessmen and farmers had to depend on Gilbert Schooling, local business man to keep their money in his safe. However, this proved to be risky when after a few years his safe was broken into and the contents stolen. A.A. and C.J. Case executed the first official bank statement for the Bank of Sarcoxie, August 25, 1883. The bank became the First National Bank of Sarcoxie in 1900, located on the northeast corner of the square. Henry B. Boyd began as its bookkeeper in 1892 and later became president until 1933. The State Bank of Sarcoxie was organized by J.W. Perry in 1900. Theodore Sabert became one of the officers in 1901. This bank was located at the southwest corner of the square where it remained until 1939.

CHAPTER 4 – SARCOXIE CHURCHES

Sarcoxie churches played a major role in the town's history. Early settlers came from various religious backgrounds and gathered in various locations to worship. Settlers met in camp meeting settings, on the J.P. Boyd property and in sheds or homes of various residents including J.C. Reynolds and S.P. Burress. It soon became apparent to the citizens that a church was needed in Sarcoxie. A meeting was held in a store owned by Thomas Hammer. At that meeting in 1868, four local men pledged \$100 a piece to start construction of a church. Claborn Osborn donated the land and in the spring of 1869, construction began for the church that became the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The decision was made that all denominations were to be welcomed. Over the years, the original building was torn down and replaced by the structure presently standing.

Other denominations soon followed. St. Agnes Catholic Church was established, November 25, 1871 in the Sarcoxie Prairie. A new church was built in 1900. In 1942, a fire destroyed the church and rectory. A new church was dedicated in 1944 and a new rectory was completed by 1946. The Sarcoxie First Baptist was first organized in November 2, 1878 on Ninth Street but was later moved to 17th Street where they still worship. In the 1880s there were two groups of Methodists worshipping in Sarcoxie but by 1939 the South and North Methodist Churches joined. Currently, they worship at 11th and Clarence. The Trinity Lutheran Church was organized officially on May 21, 1883. The church was concerned about the Christian education of its children so a parish school was maintained for many years.

CHAPTER 5 – SARCOXIE SCHOOLS

The community realized the need for the children to have a proper education so the one room schools began to pop up. At that time, schools didn't have state or federal funding for schools. It was up to the local residents to provide the building supplies and all financial support for the schools. The first schoolhouse built was made of logs three miles below Sarcoxie on Center Creek and Samuel Teas was the headmaster. The Sarcoxie Academy was incorporated in 1849 and served as a boarding school for girls. Sarcoxie's first public school located in the area was northwest of Sarcoxie. This became the Union School. The children attended about six months of the year. The girls attended regularly. However, boys frequently attended only when field work permitted.

One by one, several one room school buildings begin to appear. Since the youngsters had to walk to school, schools were spaced accordingly, allowing for that possibility. From 1882 until 1910, a six room brick high school was located on Center Street near 8th Street. In 1911 a new high school was erected and dedicated west of the old building on Center Hill. This building was vacated in 1962 and demolished in 1964. The Grand Masonic Lodge of Missouri laid the cornerstone of the new \$260,000 high school built on 17th Street in 1959. Dedication of the building occurred in December 1959. Over time expansion has occurred and Sarcoxie students still attend junior and senior high school at this location.

In June 1939, the foundation for a new elementary school on land that had been donated in 1909 by Herman Wild was started. In honor of Herman Wild, the stone above the auditorium door revealed the school's name "Wildwood". The WPA was involved in the original construction of the new elementary school. Sarcoxie students still call Wildwood Elementary home!

CHAPTER 6 – SARCOXIE ECONOMIC GROWTH

In the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, the natural resources found below the ground west of town provided a boon for the region and prospered Sarcoxie's commerce. A strike on Sam Block's farm started the discoveries. It was reported, "In a few days, he had approximately 200 pounds of lead shining in the front yard". The largest producer in the area was the Optimo Mine. Numerous other mines operated in the area including the McCowan Mine, Plymouth Rock Mine, the C.Z. Camp, the Sagamo Mine and the Cameron Mine. Other factors influencing the prosperity of the region included quarrying of granite and production of lime at the Sarcoxie White Lime and Marble works founded in the 1880s.

Production of agriculture goods was the most important financial impetus driving Sarcoxie's growth and commercial prosperity. Hermann Wild from Saxony, Germany, migrated to America, coming to Jasper County in 1868. In 1875, with his sons, James B., Henry N., and Frank H. Wild, Sarcoxie Nurseries was established on the southwest edge of Sarcoxie. That endeavor became the beginning of a first-class nursery. By 1906 Gilbert Wild, the largest peony grower in Missouri, was shipping flowers to all parts of the U.S. and several foreign countries. In time the business split and a grandson, Gilbert Wild started the daylilies, iris and peonies branch called Gilbert H. Wild and Son. Over the years, the company has shipped their stock to 48 states and seven foreign countries. Throughout the 20th century during the month of May, visitors flocked to Sarcoxie, the "Peony Capital of the World" to view the blooming array of flowers and purchase bulbs for their gardens. For many years it was reported that as many as 20,000 visitors traveled to Sarcoxie to enjoy the array of beautiful blooms.

The soil was perfect for raising strawberries and other marketed berries. Due to the abundance of berries during good weather years and the ability to transport them by rail and trucks, Sarcoxie became one of the leading producers of strawberries in the world. The growers organized the Sarcoxie Horticultural Association, a cooperative that collectively marketed their berries. Demand around the country for the "juicy, red fruit" grew, allowing hundreds of car loads to depart by rail or truck each growing season. Local growers lined up at the "berry barn" at the end of 7th and Joplin Street to have their berries packed in ice and loaded in the train cars at the depot on the east side of 7th Street to be shipped throughout the U.S. Thousands of pickers flocked to the area during picking season. Campsites were set up all over town including just northwest of the square by the railroad tracks. Another large camping area was set up southeast of town at Stebbins Park and always overflowed with pickers called "Willy's".

Another major impetus for Sarcoxie's commercial success was the Juvenile Shoe Corporation. Through the negotiations promoted by the Commercial Club in 1947, Juvenile Shoe Corporation, producer of children's

Lazy-Bones style foot ware, was convinced to bring their operation to Sarcoxie. This endeavor was extremely important to the local commerce. The operation employed local citizens. The operation provided jobs and boosted the local economy from 1948-1984.

CHAPTER 7 – THE HISTORICAL SQUARE OF SARCOXIE

Approaching the historic business district, the unique square comes into view. The park in the center of the square is unique because most small town squares contained court houses not gazebos. The gazebo sits in the center of the square where it was originally built in 1904 under the inspiration of J. J. Sprague. The original design had two levels with bathrooms on the lower level and a band stand on the upper level. Over the years, the bathrooms had to be removed converting the gazebo to the single-story structure appearing today. The gazebo has provided a stage for government officials to speak, concerts and ceremonies to be held.

As in years past, the square remains the hub of social events. Over the years residents and visitors alike have participated in various events. Automobile Day brought people to town to see the new gas run cars and the parades circling the square. Families traveled to town to enjoy the weekly Saturday Exchange Day as they brought their produce and items to town to sell and trade at the local businesses. Old Timers reminisced, “Everyone parked their cars three and four deep around the square. They left their keys in their car in case someone might need to leave early. If there weren’t keys in the car, the car was just pushed out of the way. No one ever had to worry about their car being stolen.”

The festivities went well into the night as citizens listened to the musical entertainment, danced, shopped, picnicked and just socialized with old friends. The young folks hung out at the Sarcoxie Confectionary owned by Sam and Neta Feather and then watched a John Wayne movie at the “Avalon”. Parents might attend a special political meeting at the “Star”, the local opera house.

The square still draws crowds for the annual “Chief Sarcoxie Days” celebration, the city-wide garage sale, the annual Christmas light display and the parades that make their way around the square during various celebrations. Locals and “out of towners” alike enjoy the musical performances while sitting under the shade trees, talking with old acquaintances and enjoying the food during the festivities. The Senior Citizens building is always busy hosting morning coffee or noon lunch, monthly chicken dinners, hot chocolate after the Christmas Parade and any other event that might need a meeting place where visitors and residents congregate.

Yes, Sarcoxie was the perfect small town to grow up in said many locals as they shared their stories. A town that cares and looks out for their neighbors! This attitude still prevails!