

History of Early Phillipsburg

By Lynne Lohrmeyer

Phillipsburg, Kansas, was named after William A. Phillips. Phillips served in the army during the Civil War and served four terms as Congressman for the Phillipsburg area. Nicknamed "City Of The Hills" Phillipsburg sits in the uplands of Deer Creek. The town was organized in 1872 and in April a Charter of Incorporation was obtained, even though there were no buildings or houses at the site. By the end of the year there was one building on the site, for which the lumber was hauled over 250 miles. The home was used as a general store and later as a hotel.

The first family to settle in Phillipsburg was Mr. and Mrs. F.J. Dutcher, who arrived in the fall of 1872. It wasn't until the winter of 1873 that the first baby, A.M. Shelley, was born in the community. The first marriage took place on November 19, 1873 between A.M. Hitchcock and Carrie A. Smith. The first person to die in Phillipsburg was a stranger who died sometime during the winter of 1872.

Governor Harvey declared Phillipsburg the "temporary county seat" on July 26th 1872. Due to its central location in Phillips County, Phillipsburg was eventually named the official county seat. The land office originally was in Kirwin, then Colby, before making its way to Phillipsburg. The first courthouse, a frame building, was constructed in 1877 and belonged to the city. In 1881 the city constructed a stone building and gave it to the county. The current courthouse was built in 1912.

The post office was established in 1873. Prior to this time, all mail was delivered to the citizens by subscription, some as far away as Kirwin. In 1874 the Phillipsburg Post Office was designated as a money order office. The first jail was located at 245 State Street in 1876. In 1882 the jail was moved into the court house.

In 1873 a frame building was constructed on the north east side of the public square to be used as a school house. The first teacher was Cyrus Hickenlooper. The building was also used when the District Court needed a place to meet. Court was in fact in session one day when people sighted a herd of buffalo. Court adjourned – except for the judge – while the town's people gave chase. When sufficient buffalo had been taken, court resumed. For better or worse, the last herd of buffalo seen in the vicinity of Phillipsburg was in July 1875.

Phillipsburg did not miss out on the gold rush period of the 1870's. Someone reported finding traces of gold in Plotner Creek (now in City Park) and everyone in town rushed to the creek to try their luck. That day the city was deserted, the stores only opened when everyone returned to town. A young man was visiting his parents having spent some time in the Colorado gold fields. At the end of the day, it was discovered that the creek had been "salted" and the young man, probably feeling that it was in his best interests, had left town. His parents were among those looking for gold.

In 1873 crops of Phillips County were mostly wiped out by a plague of grasshoppers. It was said that when the grasshoppers settled on the ground, it looked as though the ground was moving. This caused many families to be discouraged and many left the area. It rained the following year and the population of Phillipsburg grew again.

In 1872 Phillipsburg had a real estate business which also acted as a loan office. A sawmill was in operation in the spring of 1873 on the west edge of town. On March 19, 1879 the first cemetery was established by the Close family and on June 4, 1889 was purchased by the Fairview Cemetery Association. All 25 interments were moved to the current site on the east edge of Phillipsburg.

The first bank – Phillips County Bank – was organized in 1880 with \$50,000 in capital. Its primary purpose was to make farm loans. Also in 1880 there was an abstract office, and Hardman Lumber opened for business. 1889 saw the opening of the first shoe repair shop.

The first church to be built was the Baptist church in 1879. It was destroyed by tornado a few years later. In 1882 an electrical storm destroyed 15 buildings and damaged many more, taking the roof off of the court house. There were injuries but no loss of life.

The first benevolent organization to be established in Phillipsburg was the Masonic Lodge in 1879, followed by the IOOF in 1880, and the Knights of Phthias in 1881. Phillipsburg Post 177 of the G.A.R. was established in 1882.

The Chicago, Kansas and Nebraska railroad came thru Phillipsburg in 1887. In 1891 it was taken over by the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific. Phillipsburg was a division point and had 5.26 miles of side track, a roundhouse, turntable, stockyard, boiler house, repair shop, freight house, and passenger depot. In 1888 the city population was 631. The advent of the railroad raised population to 1235.

Many newspapers were established in the city with some only lasting a few weeks, months or maybe only a year. The Sentinel – the first paper in Phillipsburg – lasted only a few weeks. It was followed by:

- Phillipsburg Advance (1877)
- Phillipsburg Herald (1878)
- Lively Times (1878)
- Daily Democrat (1882)
- Daily Herald (1882)
- Phillipsburg Dispatch (1886)
- Phillips County Democrat (1887)
- Phillips County School Journal (1889)
- Alliance Watchman (1890)
- Phillipsburg News (1899)
- Phillips County Post (1902)
- Phillips County Review (1923)
- The Advocate (2000)

The county had a population of 1287 according to the 1875 census. In 1878 Phillipsburg had 1286 people living within its borders. Around 1880 and 1881 the county suffered from drought, and more families moved away. Gradually the population returned. By 1910 the population was 1382. With the refinery opening in 1939, the 1940 population jumped to 2140, making Phillipsburg a 2nd class city.

A very bad storm in 1903 blew down the town's wooden water tower. It would be replaced by a steel standpipe to be completed in 1907. Unfortunately for the town, a fire in 1906 almost completely wiped out the south side of the square. Except for the building housing the newspaper office (which suffered considerable damage) and the a bank (with a lesser amount of damage) all buildings were destroyed. The only equipment available to fight this fire was a hose cart with a hand pump.

In 1907 the following businesses existed in Phillipsburg: 1 flour mill, shoe store, produce house, dentist, brick plant, book store, bowling alley, auto garage, shoe shop, carpenter shop, 2 banks, lumberyards, meat markets, jewelry stores, furniture stores, billiard parlors, fine hotels, blacksmith shops, machine shops, 3 drug stores, coal yards, clothing stores, livery barns, barber shops, newspapers, 5 general merchandise stores, churches, 6 restaurants, 8 physicians, 9 practicing attorneys, public schools, a thriving farm community, and an opera house.

On March 16, 1912 a snow storm covered the city with several feet of snow. On March 14, 1935, a dust storm hit town in mid-afternoon. By 7:00 p.m. it was pitch dark, and with the electricity off, people were reduced to using candles to see inside their homes.

August 1929 saw the birth of the Phillipsburg Rodeo, with events taking place at the location currently used as the high school athletic field. This event continues today at the arena north of town on the first Saturday in August with a parade through the downtown area. It follows the Phillips County Fair once held at the National Guard Armory and now takes place in the area east of the rodeo grounds. Although "Kansas' Biggest Rodeo" officially began in 1929, there were earlier events. In July of 1873, buffalo roping turned out to be a major event during a celebration held by the city. In 1923 and 1924, a group of cowboys came through town, and finding that several farmers of the area had horses that needed to be broke, offered to put on a wild west show using the animals and breaking them in the process.

Oil was discovered in Phillips County in 1939. The Co-op Refinery Association opened their new facility in Phillipsburg shortly thereafter.