FIFTY YEARS AGO IN SHAWNEE AND POTTAWATOMIE COUNTY

By Ernestine Gravley*

The year 1903 in Shawnee and Pottawatomie County marked the opening of a new era. The town had been established in 1895 and the eight years preceding half a century ago saw the village mushroom to a booming young city.

Whites and Indians had learned to live together in harmony and real industry and business were underway. Land was fertile and plentiful, selling for from $5 to $60 an acre. Great numbers of men with their families arrived daily from the East to settle in this fabulous land of plenty.

The country was still looked upon as a frontier but the element of danger was far behind and hardships were not unavoidable. Shawnee was never a cattle town in the strictest sense but a trading center and Indian town. One historian has observed that few gun-wearing cowboys appeared on Shawnee's streets, either before or after the stumps were pulled from the middle of Main.

Coming of the railroads made Shawnee the metropolitan center of the county although Tecumseh was the county seat and a much older town. Every effort was made by Tecumseh leaders to bring the first railroad their way, but geographic conditions and other factors favored the newer and larger town of Shawnee. The latter grew phenomenally and bitter rivalry grew between the two towns as Shawnee sought the county seat as early as 1899. County elections allowed Tecumseh to win again in 1909 and 1911. Shawnee forced the issue and won in 1930, but all the early years of the century saw the two-city tug of war over both the railroad issue and that of the county seat.

Shawnee gathered to see the first train pull in on the Choctaw, Oklahoma & Gulf tracks here on July 4, 1895. There was a big

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2 Scrapbook in the collection of Mrs. D. H. Cofer, of Shawnee.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
parade and celebration. Among the merrymakers was a one-family band consisting of a Mr. Coffman and four sons, Raymond, Harvey, George and Charlton, playing three fifes, snare drum and bass.\(^8\)

The first Santa Fe train arrived on June 29, 1904,\(^9\) and the Texas and Oklahoma Railway announced plans of coming to Shawnee, the same year after Charles Effenger made the first donation to the site fund on February 17, 1903.\(^10\) Freight receipts for the year ending March 1, 1903 were almost double that of any other city in Oklahoma, according to a local newspaper of that year.

Not to be completely outdone in the matter of railroads, aggressive Tecumseh built a short line to the Choctaw, Oklahoma & Gulf (later Rock Island) junction in Shawnee.\(^11\) It’s train, the “Lillian Russell” was the butt of many cruel jokes, but it did a thriving business nevertheless. Roads being poor, passenger business was brisk on the junction. In one year the railroad shipped 11,000 bales of cotton out of Tecumseh.\(^12\) One newspaper carried an account when “the Lillian Russell, fast mail train collided with a buggy on one of its four daily trips. The buggy lost a wheel but the engine was laid up in the shops for a whole day.”\(^13\)

While the railroad dispute was raging, rumors flew among the citizens on both sides of the Canadian. News would reach Shawnee that Tecumseh had lost, and mobs of citizens would celebrate by running to the nearest blacksmith shop to shoot anvils. This was done by placing powder between two anvils and touching a match to it. Citizens of Tecumseh when awakened by the loud noise, would mourn their luck all night. Perhaps the next night, the procedure would be reversed, with the people of Shawnee suffering while Tecumseh gleefully shot anvils.\(^14\)

After a few years, the Tecumseh Railway company made a deed of sale, conveying ownership to the Choctaw, Oklahoma & Gulf for the sum of $12,000.\(^15\) The railway company built a 20-mile line from Tecumseh to Asher in 1903,\(^16\) and all these holdings later became a part of the Rock Island in Pottawatomie County.

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\(^8\) “Memoirs” of Mrs. Sarah Worthington, of Shawnee, daughter of F. A. Hill.
\(^10\) Shawnee Daily Herald, Feb. 20, 1903.
\(^12\) Fortson, op. cit., p. 13.
\(^13\) Worthington, “Memoirs.”
\(^15\) History of the Rock Island in Oklahoma, Rock Island Railways, manuscript notes.
The C. O. & G. R. R. was taken over by lease on March 24, 1904 by the Rock Island for a period of 999 years.  

Half a century ago, 1903-04, the first brick paving was going down in Shawnee but mainly, the streets were hub-deep to the wagons in mud and, in dry weather, were so deep with dust that when the wind blew, one could hardly see across the street. Board sidewalks skirted the thoroughfare on either side.

There were several one-story brick buildings here, one of the first of these erected by a Mr. Wayland, who hauled the bricks from Oklahoma City, fording the river at Sweeney's Crossing. Shawnee had offered Tecumseh business men a lot for every brick building they would construct and a number of them came over. Most of the buildings, however, were wooden structures with porches, none on the same level with its neighbors.

Up and down Main street on the north side, the principal business houses in 1903 were: Vintage Grocery, Fanny Reese's millinery shop, Drs. Crampton and Henderson, Harryman's drug store, Shawnee National Bank, Wright's store, Keller and Logan barber shop, Remington-Pottenger drug store, Charley Miles' jewelry, Brown bakery, Christney building and Becker theater.

On the south was Martin Brothers bottling works. At the corner of Main and Beard was A. B. Carroll's drygoods store, followed by Pace furniture, First National Bank, Mitchell and Johnson Men's store, Oklahoma National, Tackett undertakers, Dilworth hardware, Racket general store, Dad Sparks cafe, Saunders shoe store and the Mammoth Building. Down the street were Meeks butcher shop, Saddle Rock Hotel, Huggins general store and Hotel Burt.

Saloons were almost as numerous as other businesses combined and bore such colorful names as the "Silver Moon," "Cotton Blossom Saloon," "Log Cabin Saloon," "House of Lords," "Coney Island" and "Kentucky Liquor House." Mustached bartenders stood in doorways wearing long, white aprons. Out of consideration for the ladies, saloons were generally grouped on one side of the street and the ladies were careful to walk on the other side.

Full dresses that swept the ground had to be lifted a trifle to avoid dust and mud, milady meanwhile balancing a parasol. One elderly lady recalls that "We bought wire bustles at the

17 History of the Rock Island, op. cit.
19 Interview with Judge and Mrs. Clarence Robison of Shawnee.
20 Cofer, scrapbook collection.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
Mammoth store where they were kept in barrels. Of course, we would never allow a male clerk to wait on us."^23

Wagon yards and mule barns were many and blacksmiths were kept busy. Harry Johnson,24 who also made lightning rods was head of the "General Blacksmith and Carriage Shop." This establishment employed 24 men, manufactured as many as 75 buggies and 175 wagons a year, and shod about 150 horses a day. Johnson recalls that a fine buggy retailed at $125. Best known wagon brands were "Studebaker," "Moline," "Springfield" and "Webber."

Two gray horses stood ready in stalls at the fire station one block south of the Mammoth Building.25 Harness hung above already hooked up to a ladder wagon. A pull rope dropped the harness onto the horses, the collars were snapped together and they were ready for a run. On the wagon were the words: Our Motto—Rescue. A bell tower in front of the building had a bell with a double clapper and two ropes rang out the fire alarms.

Next door was the police station where prisoners were chained to the floor. F. A. Hill26 was police chief and there were eight other men to assist him. J. T. Farrall was mayor, E. C. Stanard was police judge, and Bill Day, sheriff.

A public watering fountain for horses was set up in the center of what is now Broadway at the corner of Ninth. This useful and ornamental object was known all over the country and regretfully removed when the streetcars came to town about 1903. The relic now stands in the 200 block of East 7th Street.27

Fifty years ago was a memorable time for Shawnee. Both the Santa Fe and the Rock Island established shops which employed several hundreds of men.28 More hotels were built and boarding houses flourished.

The Shawnee Roller Mills, later named Shawnee Milling company29 and one of the largest industries of its kind in the country was getting into big production for its size, with a capacity of 100 barrels of flour a day. J. Lloyd Ford bought the business in 1906.

23 Ibid.
26 Worthington, "Memoirs."
27 Shawnee Chamber of Commerce pamphlet.
29 Interview with J. Lloyd Ford Sr., owner of Shawnee Milling Co.
A cloudburst on May 29, 1903 destroyed many homes and washed out railroad tracks near town. Fire destroyed eight business blocks in Shawnee on July 16, 1903. A strike of city plumbers just laying the first pipe was settled with an agreement of an eight-hour working day for $3.50 on August 6, 1903.30

All the 1903 graduates from Shawnee Highschool were girls: Bertha Ellis, Lena Linn and Pearl Linn.31

George E. McKinnis was postmaster in 1903, and long an educator. One evening that year, as he talked with two dinner guests in his home, Drs. E. E. Chivers and N. B. Rairden, the idea for Oklahoma Baptist University was born.32 McKinnis did probably more than any other individual to establish the University in Shawnee, eight years later.

In 1903,33 a franchise was voted the Shawnee-Tecumseh Traction company for the interurban line and streetcars did a thriving business for several years. Many think this did more for neighborly relations of the two cities than any factor of the day. An article in the old Sturm's Oklahoma Magazine of May, 1908 read: "Tecumseh's future is insured because it is in the suburbs of Shawnee, the second city in the state and the most likely to become the permanent state capital."

Black gold excitement was real in Shawnee in October, 1903 when representatives of the Pennsylvania Oil & Gas company announced intention of drilling four test wells and the city council voted a gas franchise to the company, effective on completion. It was twenty years later, however, before real oil prosperity came here.34

Cotton was the principal farm crop at the time of our story. In 1903, there were shipped from Shawnee by rail 555 cars of cattle, 15 cars of horses, 100 cars of hogs, 245 cars of corn, 400 cars of cottonseed and products, 400 cars of potatoes and 26,000 bales of cotton.35

A pioneer resident, William Keller observed: "I've seen Main street so filled with cotton bales that you could travel from the Santa Fe tracks to Union street (about five blocks) by jumping from one pile of bales to another."

31 Cofer, scrapbook collection.
34 Oklahoma, A Guide . . . , p. 195.
The first bale of cotton raised here was an accident. H. Barrett had bought too much cottonseed for feeding purposes and his wife pestered him day and night about the pile in the yard. At last, when he could take no more, he took the seeds out and scattered them across a field. With no cultivation, he had 2,000 pounds of cotton that fell.36

The Evening News and the Daily Herald, 8-pagers, were the leading Shawnee newspapers half a century ago.37 Each published a weekly edition besides. The Shawnee Quill was a smaller paper. All were civic boosters as this excerpt shows: "Shawnee is called the Forest City and the natural beauty of her magnificent groves are a present delight, one long to be enjoyed if intelligent care is afforded them. The social life of Shawnee is equal in character to that of any city her size in the union."

Horse racing was a popular pastime and just west of the city was a race track and grandstand. The first baseball club was organized about this time. The Shawnee Blues were champions of Indian Territory. They were: Santany, catcher; Potts, catcher; Bankhead, second base; Ogee, shortstop; Jameson, first base; Shelby, left field; Vandine, third base; Swartzel, pitcher and right field; and Congdon, manager.38

Lush grazing land surrounded Shawnee. One oldtimer recalls that at the end of Kickapoo street, just south of the tracks were a hundred acres literally covered with longhorn steers, possibly 3,000 of them. Steak, she remembers, was 10 cents a pound.

On January 1, 1903, the Shawnee Evening News39 published an historical edition announcing the city’s population as being 12,000 and almost equal with Oklahoma City. This was fantastic growth considering the fact that it was on September 22, 189140 that the “run” by white pioneers was made into Pottawatomie country.

Miss Etta B. Ray staked the first claim on the site of Shawnee and she and her husband of a short time later, Henry G. Beard built the first log cabin here, which is preserved for history and stands in Woodland park.41 Pottawatomie County was first known as County B and was later named for the Potawatomi tribe.42

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36 Fortson, op. cit., p. 69.
37 Oklahoma, A Guide . . . , p. 196.
38 Cofer, scrapbook collection.
39 Worthington, "Memoirs."
41 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 412.
42 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 555. (The officially approved name of the tribe is “Pottawatomi.”—Ed.)
Mr. Beard named both the town and the county and was the first mayor.

The town was built on the rise immediately north of the North Canadian river around a trading post operated by Clay and Blossom. It was called in turn Brockway, Forest City and finally Shawnee, in tribute to the Indian tribe first to make its home on this land. There was previously a postoffice designation for "Shawnetown," about the present site of the Indian Sanitorium, south of Shawnee, halfway to Tecumseh.

Homesteaders Henry Beard, Charles Farrall and Martin Bentley laid out the village and started angling for railroads. What is now Farrall street, south of the Rock Island tracks was the main street and it was several years later before the town extended further north than Highland street.

Names of streets, as the town developed were chosen thusly: Beard and Farrall were for original townsiters; the city market centered on what is named Market street; Park street was so named because it ended at Farrall park; Louisa was for Farrall's wife. Other streets named for promoters were Aydelotte, Bentley, Cammack, Chapman, Darrow, Draper, Douglas, Hobson, Pottenger, Wallace, Dill, Tucker, Wood and Whittaker. Numerous others were for wives of these promoters: Rosa, Alice, Fay, Elizabeth, Dorothy and so on.

History of Shawnee would at no period be complete without at least touching upon the part in the drama played by the Indians. The Shawnee tribe had lived contentedly in the forest of Oklahoma and Indian territories for many years before the Potawatomi pushed down from Kansas, and earlier from the Great Lakes region. It was during the Civil War period that the Citizen band of the Potawatomi (those who intermarried with whites and held individual plots of land) came to this country, while the Prairie band clung to tribal law and tradition, remaining in Kansas.

William Griffinstein, the German trader who founded Wichita, Kansas married a Potawatomi woman and came here to take up her allotment. Here he founded the little town of Burnett in what is now the southern part of the county and which was named for Joe Burnett, father of the well-known Lee Burnett of to-

44 Fortson, op. cit., p. 36.
46 Interview with George E. McKinnis; Thoburn and Wright, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 262.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
50 Interview with Lee Burnett, of Shawnee, son of founder.
day's Shawnee. The latter's grandfather Abram, was a figure in history, the 240-pound Potawatomi chief who died in Kansas and whose grave is marked by an historical marker.51

Burnett was one of the oldest towns in the county and it was literally moved to Tribbey and Macomb later, when the railroad went through those little places. Today, nothing remains of the town of Burnett but the old Griffenstein home, a landmark.52

In 1900, the present Indian agency was established with management of the Shawnee and Potawatomi who were at last settled on allotments by the government after years of bickering. Missionaries of the Friends Society of Quakers had built the Shawnee Mission school53 and Frank A. Thackery, superintendent, also acted as disbursing agent, combining the work of the agency and the school.

The Kickapoo reservation lay in the area of McLoud and north of that town, the Friend's Mission was active, but a few years later, the Shawnee agency became the center under whose jurisdiction are still the five tribes: Potawatomi, Shawnee, Sauk and Fox, Iowa and Kickapoo.54

Ideas of civilization and education were new to the Indians when the white man arrived in Pottawatomie country, and two fine Indian men will go down in history as doing more than any others to further the progress of their people in a time of confusion and unrest. They were Thomas Wildcat Alford of near Tecumseh and John King, of the site of McLoud, both Shawnees. These two as lads overcame great obstacles to attend Hampton Institute in Virginia against the will of the more backward members of their tribe, to become educated for the purpose of guarding the rights and furthering the progress of their beloved people.55

Ghost towns across the Pottawatomie map, due to the course of the railroads and the later ushering in of Oklahoma as a dry state are several. One of them was Moral, so called because Brooks Walker, the first settler allowed no saloons. Principal occupation of the residents is jokingly said to have been catching squirrels for Kansas City and St. Louis parks. Other towns long gone are the Corner, near present day Asher, Young's Crossing, Violet Springs, west of what is now Konawa and Keokuk Falls in the northeast corner.56

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51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Thomas Wildcat Alford, Civilization, as told to Florence Drake, (Norman, 1936), p. 74.
55 Alford, op. cit., p. 89.
56 Fortson, op. cit., pp. 20, 21, 22, 23.
These border towns were wide-open brawling places which sprang up to serve men travellers the fire water they could not obtain across the line. They were hangouts for outlaws, among them the famed rustlers, Bob and Bill Christian. Here was the scene of activity of Al Jenning, notorious train robber who later reformed and crusaded against frontier crime. His father, J. D. F. Jenning was an early Pottawatomie County judge.

When Congress divided the land into Oklahoma and Indian territories, the border was what is now the Seminole-Pottawatomie county line. Under law, Oklahoma territory was wet and on this side, Indian territory was dry. Hence, the above named border saloon towns which wrote bloody history fifty years ago.

Travellers on cattle trails riding horses and wearing boots got liquor at these “last chance” saloons and hid it in their boots to enter dry territory. Here was coined the terms “bootlegger” and “last chance”, still national catchwords in today’s liquor traffic.

Oldtimers recall that foremost of the county saloon keepers were Andy Morrison, George Young, Bill Conner, Jesse West, D. N. Beatty and Dr. N. Stutsman. Rivalry in this business caused many gun battles and much bloodshed. There were 62 saloons and two licensed distilleries in Pottawatomie County fifty years ago.57

The Shawnee Herald, in a 1903 editorial said that “Shawnee’s daily consumption amounts to 700 gallons of beer and 25 gallons of whiskey.” When the Choctaw, Oklahoma & Gulf passenger trains stopped at the Shawnee depot, the conductors would call: “Shawnee—twenty minutes for lunch and to see a man killed.” So reports one pioneer who heard the call many times.

A number of fine citizens are today living memorials of unselfish promotion of a great city and county. Pioneers who made their contributions are too many to mention, but these few come to mind: Robert R. Hendon, Geo. E. McKinnis, E. L. Estes, Jesse Pelphery, Geo. K. Hunter, J. Lloyd Ford, Geo. H. Kerfoot, Drs. B. F. Nisbett, G. S. Baxter and W. M. Gallaher, M. M. Henderson, Kib Warren, G. C. Abernathy and Sid Clarke.

One typical example is Clarence Robinson, now municipal judge of Shawnee.58 Judge Robinson was an educator in the early years and as superintendent, organized the 117 Pottawatomie County schools under statehood, riding horseback hundreds of miles a year for six years to complete the job. Earlier, as mayor of Tecumseh, he championed her cause for the county seat, meanwhile serving as president of the board of education and studying law.

57 Ibid., p. 20.
58 Interview with Mrs. Clarence Robison, wife of municipal judge of Shawnee.
When Shawnee strode ahead as the real hub of the county, Judge Robison, never a man to hold grudges came here in order to serve better. In addition to his work as a practising attorney for 40 years, he has continued almost constantly as a public official and an educator. Scores of other citizens have paralleled this record in the county and again it has been proven that people are what basically make a town.

The “good old days” were here in 1903 in all their glory. Despite the brawl that goes with settlement and early growth of any town, Shawnee was even then a church town, prominently Baptist. The churches were filled to capacity every service, and summertime revival meetings brought the gospel forcibly before the public. Civic clubs were springing into prominence and the Chamber of Commerce was boosting our advantages, and justifiably.

Thanks to establishment of both railroad shops and a number of other industries, times were good here fifty years ago, and money was spent freely. Patent medicine shows flourished on street corners on Saturday nights. Local theaters, notably the Becker brought top stock company players here with everything from vaudeville to opera.59

Sara Bernhardt appeared here that year in “Camille” and set a local style fad. The Becker had 808 reserved and 400 general admission seats and always had big houses. Dorothy and Lillian Gish, later great actresses, lived as little girls near the Santa Fe tracks in Shawnee and played around the nearby blacksmith shop with other girls and boys.60

Older residents remember an old gentleman, Tom Wright, a colorful person who used to walk daily up the middle of Main street, followed by his pet goose.

Benson Park, between Shawnee and Tecumseh was central Oklahoma’s brightest spot for the first quarter of this century,61 though nothing remains of it today. Open streetcars were loaded every evening and Sunday, particularly, with laughing, singing pleasure seekers bound for Benson Park.

Facilities were ample in addition to the natural beauty of the spot. There were a baseball diamond, a roller coaster, a band shell and outdoor auditorium, a skating rink and a large swimming pool called “The Plunge”. Sunday School picnics were always held there, school and social outings and family fests from over the

59 Cofer, scrapbook collection. (For history of Shawnee’s Episcopal Church, see Rev. Franklin C. Smith, “Pioneer Beginnings at Emmanuel, Shawnee,” The Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vol. XXIV, No. 1 (Spring, 1949), pp. 2-14.—Ed.)
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
entire county gathered in Benson Park. Oldtimers declare that we youngsters have no idea what we missed.

Celebrities were many who came to the Park, including Eugene V. Debs, socialist candidate for president, Bob Fitzsimmons, one time heavyweight champion of the world and Annette Kellerman, who created a local scandal by wearing a sleeveless and legless bathing suit for her dip in “The Plunge”.

Popular, though short-lived was another play spot, the Old Mill resort built by George A. Strauss, northeast of town. Here operated the first outboard motor in Oklahoma, it was claimed.6p

C. L. Estes built a proud boat, the “Shawnee Queen” and gave her several practice runs on the North Canadian river from the Beard Street Bridge to the Old Mill Dam, some five or six miles.63 Builder and captain Estes booked excursion runs for weeks ahead only to find that some crank smashed the propellers one night. The culprit was never found and shortly afterward, the war department declared the river unnavigable. Estes’ “floating palace” never plied the river, but she lives in the minds of many local oldtimers.

Yes, 1903 was a memorable year. Shawnee was flexing her muscles for greater growth. Newcomers flocked in, business and industry boomed, but life nevertheless had a leisurely pace and Shawnee folk were singing “In the Good Old Summertime”, “Bird in a Gilded Cage” and “Sweet Adeline” with the rest of the nation.

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.