

DIXON'S SESQUICENTENNIAL

1869 - 2019

by Susan E. Hohman

"To the occupants of this scenic region, both those who have inherited it by birth and those who have claimed it for their own through adoption, may none forsake the God-given duty and privilege of protecting its heritage and beauty."

~Ethel M. Plunkett (from *Dixon, Missouri 1869-1969*, published by the Dixon Advancement Association)

One of the most momentous conflicts fought on American soil was the "War Between the States" or the American Civil War (1861-1865). Bloody battles and skirmishes of all kinds were conducted in forests, on green hillsides, near rocky creeks, and in places where no towns were even established 158 years ago. The railroad became pivotal in transporting both soldiers and supplies, but was limited in that it did not extend to every needed destination.

Perhaps because of the war, and the realization that transportation by rail was vital to the nation's progress, small towns sprung up in response to the demand for expedited trade and travel. One such town—Dixon—came into being in 1869 at the top of the hill that bears its name. At least three different stories live on as to its naming, but it is agreed that Dixon, Missouri was first of all a railroad town.

In 1868, the Frisco Railroad Company was organized and instructed to complete the railroad line from Rolla to Springfield, MO. The first large settlement near the town itself was a camp consisting of about 100 railroad workers. The camp was reportedly located on what – in 1969 – was known as the Bennett Jones property, west of Dixon. The town of Dixon was surveyed and laid out on both sides of the tracks, and had an area of one-half square mile. The village became a fourth-class city in 1906.

As Dixon celebrates its 150th year in existence as a city, a nostalgic look at bygone years and the history of the town is vital to a healthy appreciation for this small town in the Ozarks. Rapidly expanding from a railroad camp to a town meant there were vital issues that had to be addressed as the town grew in both population and size.

The earliest records indicate the original citizens were concerned for "law and order, for health and sanitation, for free use of streets and alleys without obstruction from 'ox, ass, mule, horse, or cow'." (from *Dixon, Missouri 1869-1969*, p. 4) Springs abound in the Ozarks, and Dixon depended largely on cisterns and deep wells. Eventually, in 1938, a bond issue for a Dixon water and sewage system was carried, and public water was turned on in 1939, with the sewer system ready in 1942.

After the railroad honeymoon faded, Dixon settled into steady growth in business. People brought produce and stock, trading for staples from folks like William H. Heller, Jr., who opened his store in 1880. He was also the first man to pay cash for produce. Peddlers went from house to house in the early days, but when Dixon merchants began to offer dry goods, women could shop locally for their needed merchandise.

The first physician in Dixon was Dr. A.L. McGregor. The first newspaper, *The Dixon Headlight*, was run by J.S. Speer. A total of five newspapers ran for brief periods until the establishment of *The Dixon Pilot* on February 25, 1911 by Arendall Goforth.

The Post Office department of Dixon was started around 1905 or 1906, and ran the first rural route in Pulaski County. Electric lights were first turned on in Dixon homes and on the streets for a few hours each evening in 1914. Alex McKinnon, owner of the first horse-drawn hearse, later sold it to Fred H. Gilbert, who became the town's first undertaker.

Cultural advantages such as town bands, quartets, and church choirs displayed part of the town's interest in music. Many performances took place in the pagoda, located in the town's square. Other early amusements were "circuses, 'medicine shows,' pie and box suppers, private picnics, basket dinners, sack races, public Fourth of July picnics, carnivals, and private parties." (from *Dixon, Missouri 1869-1969*, p. 7)

Dixon proved progressive in some areas, and had both boys' and girls' high school basketball teams in 1923. The first town festival was held on September 5, 1929, and was known then (and continues today) as Dixon Cow Days. The Great Depression of the 1930s affected rural America, and Dixon was no exception. Many young men served in the armed services in World War I and World War II, as well as succeeding conflicts. With the construction of Fort Leonard Wood in 1941, hundreds of construction workers sought lodging and food in surrounding towns, including Dixon. The town rose to the occasion, much as it had for the original railroad workers some seven decades earlier, and new housing was built, schools were enlarged to accommodate more students, and businesses grew.

For the past fifty years, Dixon has changed a lot from the look back in 1969. There are still businesses where commerce is transacted: Country Mart grocery store, Dollar General Store, Tri-County Hardware, and Ace Hardware, to name a few. Insurance companies, banks, hair salons, antique stores, car repair shops, gas stations, re-sale shops, a variety of churches, and some local eateries still grace the city landscape. Instead of Fred Gilbert's one funeral home of 1924, Dixon now has two: Long-Kloepfel Funeral Home and Birmingham-Martin Funeral Home.

No longer is there a town square, and yet the citizens of this small Ozark community still meet and greet one another as neighbors and friends who have shared both good times and bad, joy and sorrow with one another. They know they must be resilient enough to continue to change to meet the demands of the global community of which they now find themselves a part. In 2019, as its residents now celebrate the town's sesquicentennial, let us hope that—as Ethel Plunkett wrote in 1969—they do not "forsake the God-given duty and privilege of protecting this heritage and beauty."