

A Very Short History of Wichita Falls

Migration in the mid-eighteenth century to what is now North Texas, by Caddoan Indians, principally the Wichitas and Taovayas, laid the groundwork for establishing thriving communities in the area. Other Indian tribes that lived in the area included the Apaches, Comanche's and Tejas.

A number of Europeans, beginning with the Spanish Indian trader Athanase de Mézières, visited the area during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Others included Pedro Vial and José Mares, who crossed the region in the course of developing trails from San Antonio to Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1786 and 1787, and members of the Texan Santa Fe expedition in 1841.

The City of Wichita Falls was born with a town lot sale on September 27th, 1882. The arrival of the Ft. Worth & Denver railroad transformed Wichita Falls from a loose collection of shanties to a thriving market center. The railroad enabled ranchers to ship their cattle to Ft. Worth and farmers to market their products to national outlets.

By 1910, Frank Kell and Joseph Kemp, city business leaders, organized and built three railroad lines that linked Wichita Falls to markets throughout the country. The formative years of the city were economically driven by farming and ranching. Most everyone in the city, including merchants, bankers, restaurant owners and even city employees owed their living to the land.

Corn was the first major cash crop in the area. By the early 1900's, wheat had surpassed corn thanks in part to Frank Kell's efforts in establishing milling operations. Cattle were brought from ranches throughout the area for processing and shipping to various markets, but farming and ranching weren't the only industries in town.

By the 1950's Wichita Falls carried the nickname of "Factory City," for having over 100 manufacturing companies, 127 wholesale outlets and 741 retail stores. It wasn't all work for Wichitans, though, as early as 1909, area citizens enjoyed movies, vaudeville acts, live theatre and concerts at the Wichita Opera House, which later became the Wichita Theatre and is still in use today.

Some firsts for the area: the first church, First United Methodist Church, was built in 1881, schools sprang up in 1890, the first automobile came to the city in 1907, regular street car service began in 1909 and ended in 1933, the state's first manmade lake, Lake Wichita, was built to furnish water to the city, Wichita Falls was the first Texas city to have natural gas service and to purchase a motorized fire truck west of the Mississippi (all other Texas cities were using horse drawn wagons).

The City has a long aeronautical history beginning in 1911 as record setting aerial pioneers passed through the city. The earliest came with a visit Louis Bleriot, the first man to fly across the English Channel and his airplane the Bleriot XI the plane he designed, built and used to set the record. Frank Hawk, holder of nearly all city-to-city

speed records, stopped at Staley Field in 1930 on the first ever transcontinental glider flight and Amelia Earhart flew into the “Falls” in 1931 with her Beechnut Autogyro. In 1910, during World War One, Wichita Falls became home to Call Field, one of the few Army Air Corps training facilities in the country. Sheppard Field was established in 1931 and named after Senator Morris Sheppard. Sheppard Field closed down following World War II but reopened in 1949 as Sheppard Air Force Base.

In 1945 Sheppard Field Training Center, as it was called then, had 46,650 men and was the largest concentration of air troops in the world.

In 1918, oil was discovered in Burk Burnett, Texas and sparked oil exploration throughout North Texas. Populations of both Burk Burnett and Wichita Falls swelled as businesses and towns sprang up overnight. Oil was king for decades as Corporate giants like Texas Company (later known as Texaco), Guffey Oil Company (Gulf as it would come to be called) and Magnolia Oil, soon to be named Mobile Oil, all attributed some of their success to the production of the oil fields surrounding Wichita Falls. Area expansion in the mid-1930's brought the Municipal Airport and Hardin Junior College, which later expanded to become Midwestern State University.

The worst tornado in Texas history and one of the five worst in the nation's history destroyed a large portion of the city's southwestern area in 1979 leaving 10,000 homeless. Despite the destruction the spirit of Wichitans prevailed and on April 13, 1981, Wichita Falls was recognized nationally for its rapid and successful recovery. The National Municipal League named Wichita Falls an All-America City.

The Wichita Falls waterfall was built in 1986, dedicated in 1987, to replace the falls that washed away in a flood more than 100 years ago. The 54 foot multi-level cascade adjoins Lucy Park, acting as the centerpiece to a 170 acre landscaped park that houses pavilions, a four mile walking trail, a log cabin activity center, a duck pond, and a public swimming pool. Wichita Falls received the Tree City USA Award in 1996, 1997, and 1998.