



150 YEARS OF  
SEBASTIAN COUNTY



## David Hudson

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October 2001

To the Citizens of Sebastian County

Re: Sebastian County Sesquicentennial 1851 - 2001

Sebastian County was officially established by State Act on January 10, 1851. Our County has been blessed with a rich and colorful history over the past 150 years.

Celebration of the County Sesquicentennial includes publication of this history reviewing the past 150 years, issuance of special bronze and silver "commemorative coins", a parade down Rogers Avenue and joint activities and displays with the Valley of the Arkansas Gathering in and around the National Historic Site in Fort Smith. Earlier this year, on the 4th of July, the County participated in joint Sesquicentennial activities with the City of Greenwood in and around the Greenwood Courthouse and Greenwood Square.

It is interesting to note the population of Sebastian County over the years :

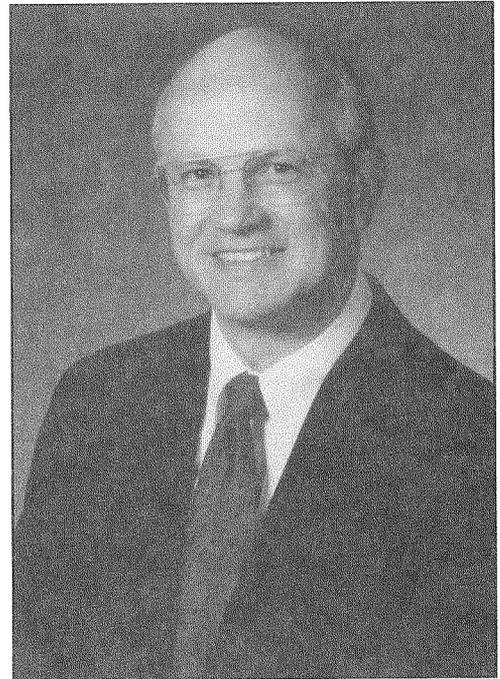
1860 (The first County Census recorded)	9,239
1900	36,935
1950	64,202
2000	115,071

Sebastian County in 2001 is a strong and vibrant community. The strength of character and commitment to God, Family, Country and Community that our people have demonstrated over our 150 year history is something for which all County residents should be proud. We enjoy beautiful and pleasant living conditions and a quality of life second to none. Our education system, business & industrial enterprises, health care system, transportation system, volunteer & nonprofit agencies, churches and government services help ensure continued success and a dynamic future.

I hope you enjoy this publication and the celebration of our County's history. As we continue to work together with enthusiasm and pride, our County will continue to grow and prosper for the next 150 years and beyond.

Sincerely,

David Hudson  
Sebastian County Judge



David Hudson *Sebastian County Judge*



THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

October 10, 2001

I am pleased to send warm greetings to the people of Sebastian County, Arkansas, as you celebrate your 150th anniversary. This milestone provides a great opportunity to rejoice in your accomplishments and look back with fond memories at your community's history.

As you remember the past, you help teach new generations of Americans about the sacrifices made by those who came before us. Your county is rich in history and is a vibrant contributor to the growth and development of the United States.

May your community continue to grow in faith and friendship. Also, may the love that you share with others be a reflection of the common values we all share. Best wishes for a memorable celebration.

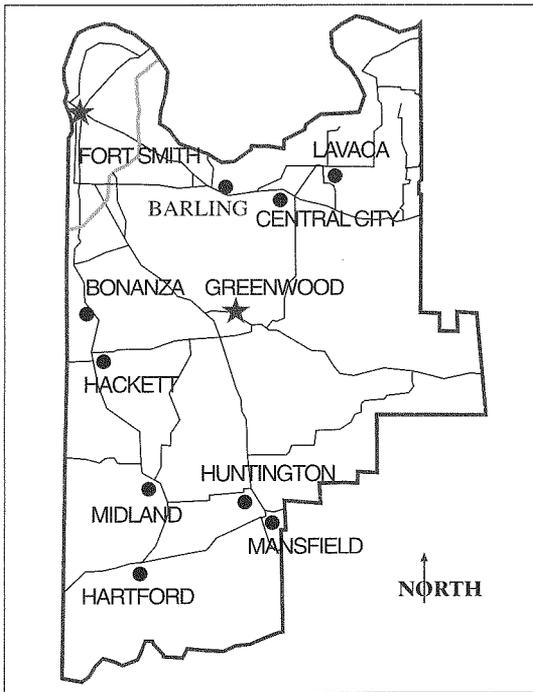
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## “Glorious News!”

On January 10, 1851, the weekly *Fort Smith Herald* proclaimed (in a headline almost hard to read by today’s standards) “Glorious News!” and followed with a dispatch from Little Rock to Herald editor John Wheeler that said Sebastian County had been created out of por-



*Sebastian County was created by the Arkansas Legislature in 1851. The county is blessed with abundant resources, a prosperous economy and stunning natural beauty.*

zens of any sizeable community would delight in seeing even more government imposed on them. In 1851, Fort Smith was already the dominant trading center of a huge area that included most of western Arkansas and all of the vast, adjacent Indian Territory. But at the time, local residents had little control over decisions that were often unique to their own area.

To get any sense of appreciation about why the creation of Sebastian County meant so much to our ancestors of four and five generations ago, it’s best to look back – and try to see how they viewed the history of extreme western Arkansas from their own personal perspective.

tions of Crawford, Polk and Scott counties, and the bill had been signed by governor John Seldon Roane. The newspaper reported the next week that there had been “considerable celebration throughout the city.” (Fort Smith)

In this sesqui-centennial year of Sebastian County, it seems difficult for us to understand why the citi-

zens of any sizeable community would delight in seeing even more government

## A Small Fort in the Louisiana Wilderness

In the late 1680’s, French explorers were likely the first white men to visit the lowland hills and forested valleys of what would become Sebastian County. These men were perhaps veterans of LaSalle’s earlier explorations beyond the west bank of the Mississippi River. These explorers undoubtedly encountered roving bands of Indian tribes such as the Osage, Cherokee, Caddo, Creek, and Quapaw, all of whom lived off the land in the vast, empty central part of the new continent known as America.

The tiny settlement of Arkansas Post that Frenchman Henri deTonty founded in the Arkansas delta a few years later likely wasn’t even affected when a huge chunk of American wilderness passed into Spanish hands after France was defeated in the French and Indian Wars of the 1750’s. But his small trading post continued to grow, as more trappers and explorers moved up the Arkansas River.

By the early 1800’s, the French emperor Napoleon needed money to fight his war against England. In 1803 he offered to sell the 800,000-square-mile territory he knew little about – except for the port at New Orleans – to Thomas Jefferson, then President of the United States. The \$15-million exchange, called the Louisiana Purchase, doubled the size of the new nation, and made it a growing threat to Spanish colonial interests in the Southwest and on the Pacific coast.

President Jefferson ordered two men, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, to lead an expedition into the upper regions of the huge Louisiana Territory, and after a two-year trip up the Missouri River, they brought back tales of scenic wonder and possible riches. Those words opened the West to more exploration and settlement as trappers,

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pioneers, and other explorers tramped trails and poled up rivers from points east all along the mighty Mississippi.

Among them was an 1807 expedition led by Lt. Col. Zebulon Pike up the Missouri River toward the Rockies. In Kansas, Pike sent a small detachment of men under the command of Lt. James Wilkinson south to follow the Arkansas River to its mouth with the Mississippi.

Some sources say Wilkinson made note of a potentially strategic bluff on the east bank of the Arkansas near the mouth of the Poteau River.

After an 1808 treaty confined the Osage Indians to a smaller geographic area, the government began encouraging orderly settlement – and sub-divided the Purchase area into smaller territories that would someday become states. By 1812, the popular route west past de Tonty's settlement at Arkansas Post and on up the Arkansas River was included in the new Territory of Missouri.

But the federal government soon realized that the influx of settlers into lands previously roamed by Indian tribes would likely cause cultural confrontations that could lead to bloodshed. Other tribes, besides the Osage, were moved to the undefined western edge of the Purchase area. It was decided a string of military posts would be established at strategic locations along the border to keep peace on what was being called the "western frontier."

And so it was in late 1817 that Major William Bradford and his men came up the Arkansas River and established a military post on the bluff reportedly noted

ten years earlier by Wilkinson. The encampment area had been known as "belle point" to nearby Indians and early French trappers. It was renamed Fort Smith, after brigadier general Thomas A. Smith, the man who organized the expedition from St. Louis.

But the presence of the new fort failed to halt aggression between the Osage and Cherokee tribes fighting for living space. As early as 1818, the Cherokees took their case to Missouri Territorial Governor William Clark in St. Louis. In negotiating a new treaty with the Cherokee, Clark took even more land from the Osage. The angry Osage retaliated with sporadic raids around the new fort at Belle Point.



*General Thomas A. Smith, commander of the Belle Fontaine near St. Louis, assigned Major Stephen Long and Major William Bradford to establish a fort on the Arkansas River.*

### A Young City in a New Territory

Just one year later, on March 2, 1819, Congress passed a new law creating the Arkansas Territory, which contained most of the present state of Arkansas and a small strip across southern Missouri.

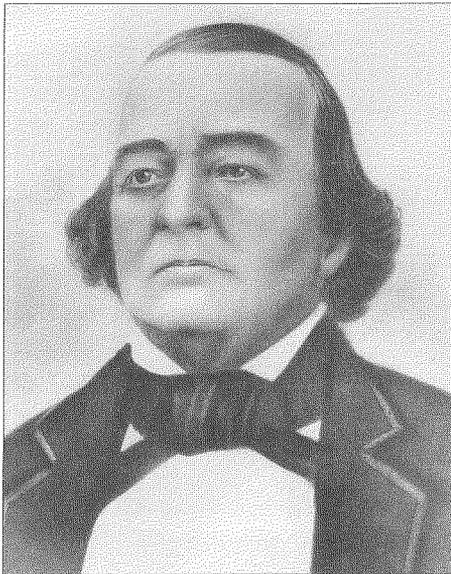
The new territory had just five counties, including Lawrence on the north and Arkansas to the east. Hempstead, Clark and Pulaski counties were parallel strips of land that continued west to the new Osage boundary line in present-day southeast Oklahoma. By 1820, an estimated 14,000 people lived in Arkansas Territory.

Although Fort Smith was located on the northern edge of the extended Pulaski County, creation of the Arkansas Territory did little to solve the local Indian wars. North of the Arkansas River at the fort, the boundary line-

between Osage land and the Arkansas Territory was much further east. It ran straight north at a point from about present-day Mulberry to the current Missouri state line.

The Indian skirmishes continued, and in April of 1820, the Cherokees threatened a major attack on the new fort. The feared attack never materialized, but the skirmish did result in the deaths of several Delaware Indians. Several other later Cherokee raids took place farther west in present-day central Oklahoma.

Despite the constant threat of Indian warfare, a few adventurers and profiteers set up dwellings outside the walls of the fort on the Arkansas – to sell their wares to the soldiers, and also exchange goods with the increasing traffic



*John Rogers, the founder of Fort Smith, was instrumental in the prosperity and military presence in Fort Smith. Growth of this city on the northern edge of the county fueled the controversy over where the county seat should be.*

*Courtesy, Fort Smith Museum of History*

on the river itself.

In April of 1822, many around the fort saw a strange sight – as a steamboat, the *Robert Thompson*, chugged into Belle Point, bearing supplies for the garrison, and a host of passengers. Among those who reportedly disembarked were two men who were to play major roles in the future of the city of Fort Smith – John Rogers from New Orleans, and John Dillard, a lawyer from

Lynchburg, Virginia.

Within the next few years, other steamboats brought more families to the area, among them men who would leave their mark on the development of western Arkansas – Samuel Rutherford, Captain William DuVal,

1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant B. L. Bonneville, and a young enlisted man, Aaron Barling. When his term of duty ended, Barling chose to remain in the area, and established a farm ten miles east of the fort. A later arrival was an eastern-educated lawyer, Albert Pike – later an author, explorer and military commander.

As more civilians continued to establish homesteads outside the walls of the fort, some of the settlers – knowingly or not – built homes across the boundary line on land deeded to the Indians. The new fort commander, Colonel Matthew Arbuckle, was told to remove the whites that had settled on Indian land. Some reports indicate he had little success. But his problem soon became moot.

Because in 1824, Arbuckle was ordered to abandon the fort at Belle Point and build a new fort more than 50 miles upriver near the mouth of the Verdigris River. About a year later the Cherokee boundary line was also moved farther west, resulting in a new county within the Territory – named Lovely County for Major William Lovely, the agent for the Cherokees.

Because of the ever-expanding population, the five original territorial counties had been split into several other counties. By late 1820, the area containing the fort overlooking the Arkansas River had been placed in the new and smaller Dorsey County, which still included much land on the north side of the river. But for reasons apparently lost to history, the county's name was soon changed to honor Congressman H.K. Crawford instead.

Despite the loss of the fort, the community on Belle Point – now referred to as the “town of Fort Smith” – continued to grow. By 1830, there was considerable traffic on the Arkansas River, and all the boats stopped at Fort Smith. A few years earlier, merchant John Rogers had begun buying several adjacent tracts of land and established the city's first hotel.

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## On to Statehood

By 1836, the population of the Arkansas Territory was estimated at more than 50,000, and territorial leaders petitioned Congress for an enabling act asking for statehood. On June 15, 1836, Arkansas entered the Union as the 25<sup>th</sup> state – a slave state in accordance with the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

Even as the Arkansas Territory was pushing for statehood, the federal government was trying to hammer out an agreement with representatives of several “civilized” eastern Indian tribes. White settlers coveted rich land in North Carolina, north Georgia and Alabama farmed by the Cherokees, Choctaws, Creeks, Chickasaws and Seminoles. Under an 1835 removal policy carried out by President Andrew Jackson, the Indians were all promised new lands just west of the new state of Arkansas.

But negotiations between Indian leaders and the federal government stalled, and the movement of more than 10,000 Indians was speeded up in an attempt to meet the original evacuation deadline. Many problems ensued along both the overland route, and the water route up the Arkansas River. Thousands of Indians died during the 1838-39 journey that became known as the “Trail of Tears.”

With statehood, and the gradual flow of thousands of Indians to the unprotected western border of Arkansas, area settlers feared more hostilities were likely, and as early as 1834 began petitioning the federal government to consider a new fort in the area.

Both Fort Smith and the newer settlement across the river at Van Buren competed for the new facility. But the matter was reportedly decided when it was learned that Captain John Rogers had sold 300 acres of his property adjacent to the site for \$15,000 – a price that Arbuckle himself protested as being too inflated – to the federal government. But his protests were to no avail, and work was

begun on the newer and larger fort in the summer of 1838, using stone quarried from the bluff at Belle Point.

The population of the village of Fort Smith in 1840 was estimated at about 500 people, and the community was officially incorporated on December 24, 1842. With the booming manufacturing and commercial activity enabled by its natural resources, and its strategic location on the Arkansas River, Fort Smith was becoming a small city.



*Fort Smith became an important departure point for prospectors in the California Gold Rush of 1849. This prompted a sudden increase in the town's population.*

In late 1848, word came from the West that gold had been discovered in California. Within months, thousands of fortune-seekers sought every route possible to be among the first to reach the diggings on the Sacramento River. By the spring of 1849, hundreds of gold-hunters had arrived in Fort Smith, and the city was bustling with activity. Under the leadership of local resident John Dillard, about 400 wagons left on April 10, and several smaller trains left later in the year because of the warmer climate along what was referred to as the “southern route.” The wagon rush west resumed in the following spring.

Some gold miners came back to Fort Smith, and

a few never really left – all adding to the growing population. The 1850 census showed 964 people in the city, and almost 8,000 in all of Crawford County. The majority of them lived south of the Arkansas River, and the lack of a bridge presented hardships for them crossing the river to conduct county business at the distant courthouse in Van Buren. They began lobbying with the state legislature about creating a new county seat closer to Fort Smith.

### A New County, but Where is Justice?

By the time word came from the legislature in January of 1851 that Sebastian County would become a reality, it had already been agreed that a county seat would be established near the center of the new county, which had been named in honor of former county judge and U.S. Senator William K. Sebastian. A very temporary seat of justice was set up at the home of Eaton Tatum, in Marion Township near the tiny village first called Actus, and later Jenny Lind. The designated county commissioners met on January 27 and chose James Clark the first county judge, and Samuel Brooke Stevens as sheriff.

In March, after considerable debate, the commissioners voted to locate the permanent seat on about 40 acres of land donated by Reuben Coker, who just happened to be one of the commissioners. Perhaps that kind

deed gave him the honor of naming the new county seat, which he did – calling it Greenwood, for his friend Alfred. B. Greenwood, who had been chosen Circuit Judge for ten northwest Arkansas counties just the year before.

Under the guidance of Judge Greenwood – who later was named Commissioner of Indian Affairs by his friend President James Buchanan – the novice Sebastian County commissioners held their first official meeting in Coker's home, with Judge Greenwood reportedly using one of Mrs. Coker's tables as a desk, pulled close to his "bench" near the fire in order for him to stay warm. It wasn't until summer that a temporary 16-foot-square log court house was built by County Clerk John Carnall and others near what would become the southwest corner of Greenwood's future public square.

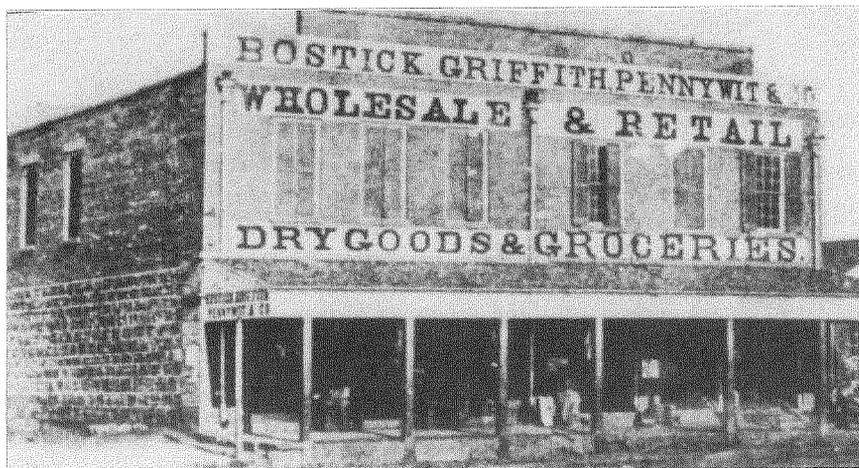
But the idea of traveling 20 miles south through the near-wilderness just to conduct county business didn't appeal to the merchants in Fort Smith. In the first place not all the county offices had moved to Greenwood yet, namely the county clerk, who vacated in January, which was about the time James Baker was elected sheriff.

John Rogers, the merchant referred to as the "father of Fort Smith," fanned the location controversy in May of 1852 by donating a downtown lot for a "permanent seat of justice." The election of Sheriff James Baker was suddenly contested, and within a few weeks, most of the Sebastian County records had somehow turned up in Fort Smith.

South Sebastian county residents retaliated by quickly erecting a new double-log courthouse, on the northeast corner of the original donation of land for the city of Greenwood. It was the county's first courthouse paid for by county funds. But that didn't sit well with Fort Smith residents.

Each city claimed it was the seat of the new county's government. Fort Smith had about 1,000 people, and

*Merchants, craftsmen, outfitters and traders were attracted to the safety of the Fort. In turn, they brought customers, farmers and ranchers to the area.*



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the county records. Greenwood had less than 50 residents, but they had the legal designation, and a log court house.

Fort Smith reclaimed the county seat designation in 1853, but disgruntled south Sebastian County residents called for an election the next year, and “won” the court house back to Greenwood. In 1855, they built yet another court house – a two-story frame structure in the middle of the town’s square. But the two factions remained divided on the issue, and took the case to Little Rock. Finally, in 1860, the state legislature passed an act that divided the county into two judicial districts. The matter was settled at least for a while.

### Divided Loyalties

In the fall of 1860, the controversial Republican candidate from Illinois – Abraham Lincoln – was elected president, and a nation already split over the slavery issue

groups in Fort Smith had already been organized, among them the “Fort Smith Rifles,” “Belle Point Guards,” and “Reid’s Battery.” And they were eager to fight for the new cause. So without much visible local support –and learning that a large contingent of pro-Confederate forces was already coming upriver from Little Rock – Captain S. D. Sturgis made the hasty decision on April 23 to evacuate the strategic federal post on the river and move his troops to Fort Washita in Indian Territory.

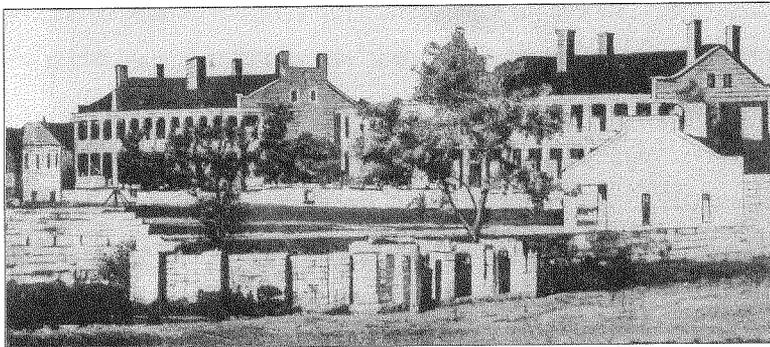
With the bloodless capture of Fort Smith, the Confederacy now controlled the important military supply lines to potential Southern sympathizers in the West. And a now-Confederate officer, Albert Pike, was negotiating with Indian tribes to help fight against the Union forces.

But the men in blue scored a big victory in early 1862 at Pea Ridge, in northern Arkansas. Later the same year, Union troops won again in the “Battle of Prairie Grove.”

The military stranglehold the gray forces had on the area around Sebastian County was beginning to weaken, and outright guerilla warfare was becoming more common.

When Confederate troops led by General William Steele lost a battle to Union General James Blunt’s forces in the Honey Springs area of Indian Territory (near present-day Muskogee) on September 1, 1863, the tide shifted quickly. Two days later, Blunt’s men marched back into the garrison at Fort Smith and calmly reclaimed it for the North – in much the same fashion it had been lost more than two years before.

Blunt’s forces pursued the gray troops further south, but straggling Confederate soldiers regrouped in south Sebastian county in September to launch what has become – from a geographical point of view – one of the



*A stone fortification, built between 1838 and 1846, provided stability in the development of Fort Smith that lasted until the 1850’s.  
Courtesy, National Historic Site*

reluctantly prepared for war. After secessionists attacked Fort Sumter, South Carolina, the following April, most southern states seceded, and on May 6, the Arkansas Legislature followed suit.

Sebastian County support for the new Confederacy was weak compared to eastern Arkansas, but two weeks before the state secession vote, the loyalty issue was pretty well decided. Several area southern volunteer

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most confusing area battles of the Civil War. Reports indicate Brigadier General William Cabell and his men ambushed Blunt's forces in a three-hour battle on Backbone Mountain, a ridge south of Greenwood and close to Fort Smith's Texas Road near the present Oklahoma state line. But historical markers erected in both Arkansas and Oklahoma dispute both the location of the battle and the number of casualties.

Blunt's men won the Backbone battle for the North, but the fierce fighting convinced him the Confederate guerilla attacks could continue in an effort to regain the fort. During the winter and spring of 1864, federal troops and private citizens built additional fortifications south and west of the city near the area known as Massard Prairie.

In late July, Confederate cavalry forces led by generals R. Gano and Stand Watie did attack from the west, near present-day Pocola. The sporadic fighting on the prairie lasted about three days, and some historians say a daring shelling by a Confederate detachment on the garrison itself on August 1 should be considered a separate battle, although apparently no casualties or major damage resulted.

But it was a harrowing six-day ordeal for Sebastian County civilians, and the assorted troop movements around Fort Smith's outskirts frightened many area residents on both sides of the boundary with Indian Territory, who sought refuge closer to the garrison. They joined hundreds of displaced others who had been trickling into the city shortly after the war began.

By early 1865, Fort Smith officials became concerned about food supplies, and with support from the military garrison, made an appeal to federal authorities for immediate relief. Little was forthcoming, because two events (less than a week apart) in mid-April had a profound effect on Sebastian County's immediate future:

Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered in Virginia to end the war, and five days later, Lincoln was assassinated.

Divided north-south loyalties strained by the war continued to fester in Arkansas, as what became known as the "Reconstruction Era" began in 1866. The controversial federal plan was designed to help Southern states overcome a war-damaged economy and gain re-admittance to the



*A crowd gathers on the Greenwood Courthouse Lawn to hear native son Governor Sebastian Little speak. The 48-star flag dates the photo sometime after 1912.*

*Courtesy, South Sebastian County Historical Society*

Union, provided each state made legal concessions to the now-free slaves – in accordance with the controversial 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

Perhaps nowhere in Arkansas was the leftover bickering more intense than in Sebastian County, which had been divided from the beginning of the war. Shortly after Union troops retook the fort in 1863, union sympathizers began flocking into the city, increasing the contrast with continued support for the Southern cause in the Greenwood area. And since most of the early county records from both courthouses had somehow been destroyed during the war, it wasn't long before the "who-has-the-courthouse?" debate began all over again.

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## The Courthouse War Resumes

In May, county commissioners passed a tax to pay for the public buildings at Greenwood, and the “radicals” carried the county elections three months later, solidifying south Sebastian County’s hold on the courthouse. The matter continued to simmer for the next few years without any concrete action being taken.

But in late 1868, Fort Smith supporters were able to force another election on the courthouse location. At first, reports varied over which city actually won because the election results were contested. But Fort Smith was declared the winner. Bitterness increased, and in March, Valentine Dell, the unionist editor of Fort Smith’s *New Era* newspaper editorialized, “. . . Greenwood is an ‘ambitious mud-hole’ that should be turned into a ‘calf lot.’”

In early 1870, all the court records were returned to Fort Smith, and three months later the Arkansas Supreme Court officially declared Fort Smith the county seat. Plans were again made for a new courthouse – this time on land once occupied by the second fort. This infuriated Greenwood residents, who, by 1870, numbered more than 300 strong. Fort Smith had a population of about 2,200. Greenwood state representative C. B. Neal introduced a bill that would allow Sebastian County court to be held in two places.

In March 1871, the state legislature approved a plan that saw the Sheriff and County Clerk positions remain in Fort Smith, but allowed Greenwood to collect its own taxes. The decision angered Fort Smith residents, perhaps explaining why the clerk’s office was burglarized a month later and county records scattered. In May, it was reported Fort Smith Mayor E. J. Brooks engaged in a “fist-fight” at the courthouse with a citizen named I. W. Fuller.

Tempers were escalating everywhere. Sheriff T. H. Scott called out the local militia and put them on a “war

footing” after an unknown gang that the Reverend A. J. Hopkins claimed was “the Klan” destroyed his house not far from Greenwood. Two months later, the county commissioners in Fort Smith “got even” by refusing to pay militia expenses. Muddling matters even more, a state appeals court said the recent legislative bill was invalid.

Fort Smith’s civic pride was shaken in October when word came from Washington that the second fort was being abandoned by the military, although it was agreed that the U.S. District Court offices would be moved from Van Buren to Fort Smith and relocated in the old barracks of the fort.

More bad news came in January 1872, when the Arkansas Supreme Court ruled that Greenwood should be the only Sebastian County seat, saying “. . . county individuality would be destroyed if there were two.” Perhaps feeling a little *de-jà vu*, Fort Smith business leaders again appealed, and in June the high court amended its ruling, saying it would be legal for circuit court to be held in both cities.



For reasons unknown, that seemed to placate leaders in both cities. But after the elections in the fall of 1873, candidate Henry Falconer claimed he was the rightfully-elected county sheriff instead of winner J. H. McClure. That caused more disturbances in Greenwood,

*Coal and railroads in the southern part of Sebastian County brought prosperity to towns such as Greenwood.*  
 Courtesy, South Sebastian County Historical Society

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and there were reports that the State Militia General Robert Newton was sending 100 armed men to Greenwood to protect Falconer.

McClure was at least acting as sheriff, but not for long. In early 1874 he broke up a supervisor's meeting in Greenwood and was later arrested. The angered board



*Congressman Isaac Parker was appointed by President Grant to be Judge of the Western District of Arkansas. Parker's job was to restore public confidence in the court and control lawlessness in the Indian Territory. Courtesy, Fort Smith Museum of History*

reported the disturbance to Governor Elisha Baxter, who promised assistance. Somehow, McClure was able to escape jail and by April was reportedly enroute to California. A year later, Falconer ran again as sheriff, and served 10 years in that position. McClure returned from wherever he'd been hiding, and served two terms as Sebastian county clerk, from 1874 to 1878.

The courthouse disturbances had become a thorny problem for state elected officials, who were in the throes of calling an 1874 convention to revise Arkansas' constitution. Convention delegate William Fishback, a former Arkansas governor and Fort Smith attorney, was successful in inserting a paragraph into the later-approved new constitution that once-and-for-all stated that Sebastian

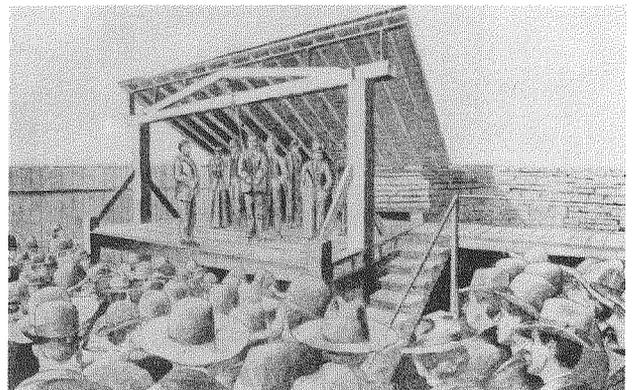
County should have two separate courthouses. For all practical purposes, the matter was settled.

In looking back, the nearly 25-year struggle for the Sebastian county seat seems ironic. County school-children taught Arkansas history today soon learn that Sebastian County has only 536 square miles – making it the smallest of Arkansas' 75 counties.

### Here Comes the “Hangin’ Judge”

Ironically, the in-fighting between the Greenwood and Fort Smith factions for control of the courthouse in the early 1870's almost hid the questionable politics and policies of the new federal courthouse in Fort Smith. In early 1872, President Grant had appointed William Story, labeled a “carpetbagger” by some, as judge for the Western District of Arkansas. Within months, there were reports of embezzlement, the bribing of witnesses, and lax law enforcement – especially in Indian Territory where outlaw warfare was increasing by the week.

It took months for the truth to seep out, but finally formal federal charges were brought against Judge Story in the spring of 1874. Rather than face removal from office, the judge resigned in June. The following March,



*During the tenure of Isaac Parker, executions became commonplace in Fort Smith. Here, Cherokee Bill is Hanged on the gallows that were later reconstructed at the National Historic Site.*

*Courtesy, Fort Smith Museum of History*

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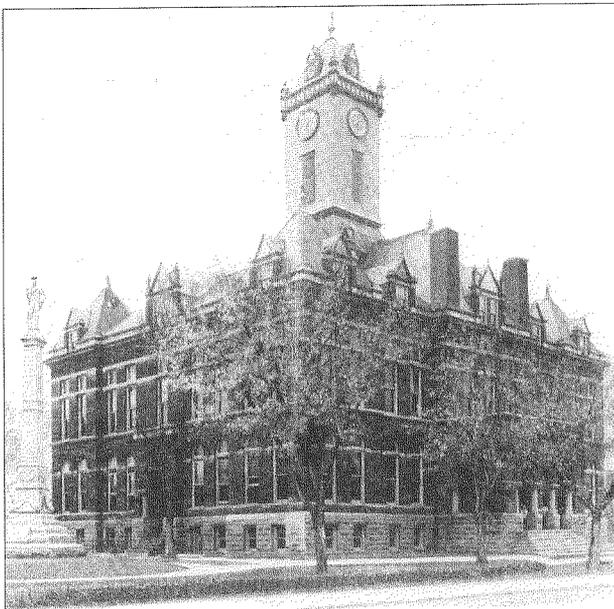
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Grant appointed 37-year-old former Missouri judge and Congressman Isaac Parker to the position. He arrived in Fort Smith on May 2, 1875.

The area was sharply divided between supposedly “civilized” Sebastian County and the rest of western Arkansas – and the rough-and-tumble “no man’s land” in Indian Territory. Parker wasted no time in assessing and remedying its problem of growing lawlessness. In those days, Fort Smith itself was a rowdy frontier town with little local law enforcement.

Judge Parker firmly believed upholding the law as it was written. He felt justice should be “equal and exact,” and that the *certainty* of punishment for the guilty was a big deterrent to criminal behavior. Privately, he opposed capital punishment, but in 1875 the sentence for capital offenses was death. For a man of his integrity, Parker had no choice in the matter.

Six prisoners were found guilty of their crimes



The old Fort Smith County Courthouse had two bell towers. The first sustained daily damage from the tolling of its enormous bell. The replacement tower (shown here) had similar problems. The bell is displayed in the Fort Smith Museum of History.

Courtesy, Fort Smith Museum of History

and hanged on the same day – September 3, 1875, and the story got the attention of eastern newspapers. Soon Parker earned the nickname, “The Hangin’ Judge,” in Fort Smith. Those words put fear into many would-be outlaws fleeing across the river to escape his justice, and his reputation spread rapidly. The antiquated dingy federal jail in Fort Smith became known as “Hell on the Border.”

Parker was aided in his gradual but systematic near-extermination of area outlawry by teams of efficient deputy marshals. They sometimes spent months tracking known desperados deep into Indian Territory, while facing constant danger and death – often under extreme weather conditions as well. On top of that, the pay was not good for comparable wages of the day. Marshals got six cents per mile for tracking an outlaw, and two dollars for each arrest. The per-mile rate was upped to ten cents when the prisoner was brought back to Parker’s court.

But for the record, during his 21 years on the federal bench, Judge Parker heard more than 13,000 cases, most criminal. About 9,000 resulted in convictions or guilty pleas. Less than 400 were tried for capital offenses, and 160 were found guilty – and according to the law – ordered hanged. But only 88 actually died at the end of a rope. And by the time of Parker’s own death in November of 1896, his stern adherence to the judicial system had helped clean up a city, a county, a territory, and a federal court district. He had earned the respect of prominent and law-abiding citizens throughout the Southwest.

### “Sebastian South” Emerges

A surge of lawlessness in western Arkansas followed the end of the Civil War. It led to the beginning of the “Judge Parker Era” in the mid-1870’s, but did little to stop the slow but steady flow of settlers into the county’s upland hills and fertile valleys far south and east from the

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*Belle Point  
Ranch*  
The David McMahon Family  
Lavaca, Arkansas

strife in Fort Smith. They had been arriving, perhaps almost family-by-family, for more than half-a-century. They settled alone or sometimes in small clusters, in crude log huts built near a tiny sparkling stream, and a staked-out plot of plowable land.

The 1870 Census showed just under 13,000 people living in Sebastian County, but only 2,200 in Fort Smith, and about 300 in Greenwood. That meant more than 10,000 people were scattered throughout the wilderness, some perhaps barely aware of or even caring about



*The short train from Mansfield arrives at the Hartford Depot, May 7, 1913. Huge investments in coal mining and the railroad system to take the coal to market brought prosperity to the southern part of the County.*

*Courtesy, South Sebastian County Historical Society*

the struggle for their courthouse.

Some sources say that it was 1834 when a man named Jeremiah Hackett came west from Pomeroy, Ohio, to settle in a place he called Hickory Grove, just two miles from the territorial line. Other future settlers liked the trees, and some 40 years later they named their town Hackett City, after old Jeremiah.

Sometime in the early 1840's, a man named Gwyn came to the valley just a few miles from the border with Indian Territory. Soon more settlers came, including C.E. Goddard, back from the gold fields near San Francisco. Gwyn's growing town was renamed Sugar Loaf, and by 1868, one of the residents was reportedly a widow named Hart who lived next to the stream.

No one can remember why, but somehow the

community came to be known as "Hart's ford," and a few years later the name was officially changed to Hartford. In much later years, the community became home to the Hartford Musical Institute, and by the 1920's, Hartford had become almost a nationwide mecca for enthusiasts of gospel music.

A tiny community in eastern Sebastian County was first referred to as Military Grove until the late 1860's, when the name was changed to Lavaca. One report said Lavaca was an Arkansas corruption of the Spanish word "Las Vaca," which means, "the cow."

Not far from the relatively new county seat of Greenwood was an even older community, Actus, reportedly settled about 1840. There is disagreement as to just why the town was re-named to honor the popular Swedish singer Jenny Lind, but the name stuck. Some reports say the town's central location made it the obvious original choice for the county seat, but the Greenwood site on Vache Grass Creek was selected instead.

About five miles south of Greenwood, a handful of settlers – including brothers J. P. and W. J. Witcher – formed a community in the 1850's they named Salem. They later realized there was already a town named Salem in Fulton County in eastern Arkansas. The Witcher's mercantile outlet was doing a sizeable business, so the new name was easily decided. Witcherville prospered, and in 1875, Buckner Baptist College was established there. The impressive three-story brick building was a cultural rival to Ouachita Baptist College, but lost the state funding battle to the Arkadelphia school and closed its doors to students in 1910.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were many other solitary cabins in the wilderness throughout Sebastian County. They might have remained alone, but there was amazing wealth beneath some of them that would literally change the face of the county forever.

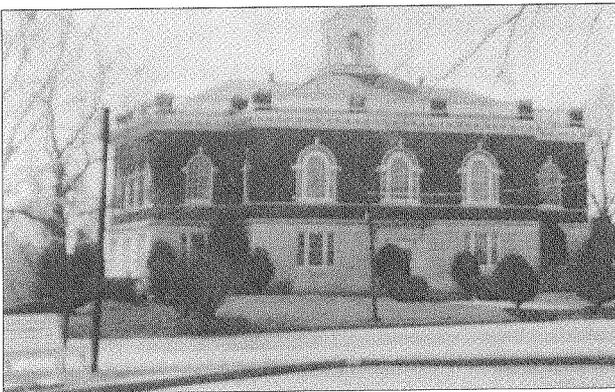
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And a few of these early settlers would soon have boomtowns named in their honor.

## The Veins are Thick!

In August of 1867, the *Arkansas Gazette* printed a report from J. W. Washbourne, a geologist. It said, in part, “. . .the whole of Sebastian County is underlain by coal. The thickness of seams varies from 16 inches to 4 feet, growing thicker as you go deeper. The coal is everywhere,



*The people of Greenwood built this courthouse in 1916 on the south side of the square to replace the brick one that had burned down. It was destroyed in the tornado of 1968.*

*Courtesy, Cinda Bell*

easy of access. . . .they are of the greatest value . . . from Fort Smith out to the “May place” about 4 miles south, on the verge of the Massard Prairie, we noticed many coal shales along the road. In and around Jenny Lind are numerous coal banks, about 6 feet below the surface, but easily quarried.”

At the time the entire nation depended on coal. It powered industries, heated houses, and ran railroads. And as it turned out, the “easily quarried coal” lay just under the ground from near McAlester in Indian Territory all the way to Clarksville in west-central Arkansas. South Sebastian County was near the center of the vast deposit!

The eventual coal boom was surprisingly slow in coming. Perhaps it was the devastation and near-poverty left in the county by the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Maybe reports of the vast coal deposits were not taken seriously. Most likely it was the absence of track and railroad cars necessary to haul out the heavy loads of coal. In any event, it would be nearly two decades before widespread mining began in the area.

The Little Rock-Fort Smith Railroad was completed to Sebastian County in 1876, and seven years later the St. Louis and San Francisco line was completed to Fort Smith. Others quickly followed, linking Fort Smith to the rest of the nation by rail. Soon after, strip-mining began here and there in the south part of the county. Even then, it took years for the mining of coal from the area to become a commercial success.

But as word of the strike gradually spread, soon spur lines were being laid directly to the digging. In Hackett City, one of the first true deep mines in the county began operation in 1882 with the arrival of the Midland Valley Railroad, and the town mushroomed. The M-T Coal Company laid out the future town of Huntington in 1887, and opened a huge mine within a year. The future town of Mansfield, also sitting atop the coal, was platted the same year. The West Mining Company started a large operation not far from Jenny Lind at a site they named “New Jenny Lind.” Bonanza began in 1896 as a mining camp of the Central Coal and Coke Company.

In the 1890’s and early 1900’s, the rivalry between Sebastian and Johnson/Logan counties for the most area coal production reached a near frenzy. East of Fort Smith, both strip and shaft mines were operating in thriving towns like Spadra, Coal Hill, Alix, Denning, Hartman, Clarksville, and Ouita - not far from Russellville.

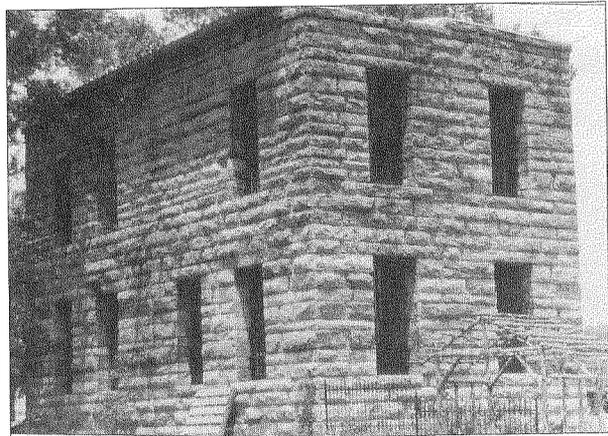
Companies in Sebastian County were opening new mines almost monthly. The Central Coal and Coke Company had mines at Hartford, Prairie Creek, Bonanza and Huntington. Other mines were running in communities like Midland, Excelsior and Jenny Lind. Some towns

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had several mines in operation at the same time. By 1912, the Choctaw and Midland Valley Railroad served more than 15 mines and reportedly had nearly 1,800 coal cars.

Behind the miners, many of them immigrants –



*The Quorum Court allocated \$5000 to build this stone jail in the 1890's. It stands today and is used as the home of the South Sebastian County Historical Society.*

*Courtesy, South Sebastian County Historical Society*

all eager to earn decent wages by descending into the dirty and dangerous darkness of the deep shafts – came their hopeful families.

Following them

came the merchants, storeowners, and saloonkeepers, eager to turn a profit from the influx of humanity into rough-and-tumble towns where nothing had existed before. The following official populations of these coal towns in the 1910 Census have been thought to be far below the peak various estimates – also shown – of the days when coal was king in western Arkansas.

Sebastian Co. Population	1910 Census	Est. Peak
Bonanza	811	(1,500)
Hackett	363	(3,500)
Mansfield	816	(2,500)
Hartford	1,780	(4,000)
Midland	639	(1,200)
Huntington	1,700	(2,800)

As the Sebastian County coal-mining industry grew even more competitive after the turn of the century, subtle changes were taking place. Wages and working conditions were disputed, some men were talking union, some mines tried to lure other workers. Fortified by alcohol readily available in the boomtown saloons, miners were involved in more acts of violence.

Some Sebastian County miners organized to take

part in a general mining strike in 1888 that hurt the coal industry. Another took place in 1894. Shortages, and the increasing refusal of the miners themselves to work long hours for low pay in horrible conditions, caused the mine owners to finally submit to the demands of the United Mine Workers by about 1903. But this in itself bred more violence in Sebastian County, because some miners were against the unions.

Perhaps it was only coincidental to the escalating violence, but after a fire destroyed the old wooden Greenwood county jail about 1890, the Quorum Court allocated \$5,000 to build a new sturdy stone four-cell, two-story jail on the south side of the square. The huge stone blocks were quarried from Backbone Mountain after holes were drilled into stone and then filled with water. During the winter, the water froze and cracked the stone into manageable size. It's reported that mental patients were once housed there when the hospital was full. The stone jail is now the Sebastian County Jail Museum.

In the sticky spring of 1914, many union miners became angered over mostly non-union workers at the Bache-Denman Mine #4 near Midland. Several hundred unionists apparently attacked security guards and several miners were injured. But that was just the first of several confrontations between union and non-union miners that lasted well into the summer. One report said two miners were killed in a later incident and the Bache-Denman mine destroyed.

Yet the area's coal production continued unabated into the 1920's, when more than 20 separate mines were still operating in Sebastian County. Even more mines were still producing in nearby Johnson County, especially at Coal Hill and Spadra. Reports show that in the late 1880's, Coal Hill supposedly shipped 90 percent of Arkansas' coal for two straight years.

But as early as the late 1880's, another by-product

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**ARKANSAS OKLAHOMA GAS CORP.**

of the same ancient forces that created the area's coal veins just below the surface was discovered. Geologists had long suspected that with the coal, there also could be pools of natural gas buried deep underground. In 1887, the Natural Gas and Power Company was organized in Fort Smith with that very thought in mind.

The next year, the company sank a nearly 14-hundred foot well near the present-day Darby Junior High School, and produced an amount large enough to light a flame. A few months later, a well twice as deep near the site of the Civil War battle on nearby Massard Prairie 25 years earlier, brought in an estimated 200 pounds of natural gas pressure. A celebration was on!

But it was premature, because no more reserves were discovered until 1901, when improved drilling technology brought in a big well near Mansfield. Within two years, the area around Mansfield was producing gas commercially, and geologists realized that Sebastian County was at the center of a vast deep pool of natural gas known as the Arkhoma Basin.

Ironically, natural gas spelled a decline in coal production by the late 1930's and early 1940's. Some of the early Sebastian County towns - not all of them mining communities - are now just a cluster of small homes or sadder yet - just memories. Among them Montreal, Milltown, Auburn, Dayton, Frogtown, Beverly, Chocoville, Excelsior, Burnville, Cornish, Washburn, Slaytonville, Ursula, Jenson, and Arkola.

Industrial growth in the county helped offset the mine closings. Furniture factories, drawn to sources of hardwood, sprang up in Sebastian County.

### Early Prosperity from the "Ripple Effect"

Although there was no major coal mining within Fort Smith during the heyday of the mines, the constant activity to the south touched off a surge of speculation in the north part of the county. In two decades, Sebastian



County's population nearly tripled, to just over 33,000 by 1890. Twenty years later - by 1910 - it reached 52,000.

Fort Smith's population reflected the same story. The city counted 3,000 residents in 1880, and swelled to over 11,000 by 1890. By 1910, Fort Smith itself had grown into a city of almost 24,000 residents.

The bustling prosperity was making good things happen. The wooden buildings along the city's spacious Garrison Avenue were coming down, replaced by significant brick-and-mortar structures, among them a Grand Opera House, the new LeFlore hotel, and other lavish buildings that seemed more magical at night when illuminated under electric lights.

Fine Victorian-style homes were being built on Fort Smith's near-north side in what is now the Belle Grove Historic District. On May 27, 1891, the city declared a holiday with the opening of the Gould Railroad and

*Coal brought the miners. The miners brought their families. The families supported the merchants and the merchants needed good roads. This photo of Midland shows the prosperity in South Sebastian County at the turn of the Century. Courtesy, South Sebastian County Historical Society*

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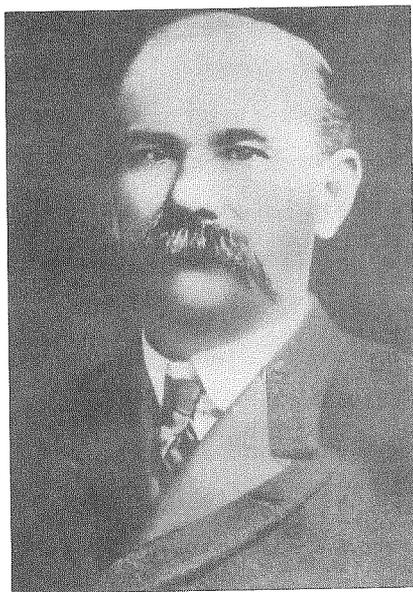
**SIMMONS FIRST NATIONAL BANK**  
MEMBER FDIC • ESTABLISHED 1903

Highway Bridge, officially linking Sebastian County with Indian Territory.

By the time the county observed its first 50 years in 1901, Fort Smith boasted three newspapers, fine churches, new schools, streetcars, and several banks. It also had an established hospital and a second on the way. St. Johns was begun out of charity in 1887. Nine years later, the Charity Hospital opened. In 1899, the two merged as Belle

*John Sebastian "Bass" Little, the first child born in Sebastian County. Known as "the great commoner" he became the only "elected" Arkansas Governor born in the county.*

*Courtesy, South Sebastian County Historical Society*



Point Hospital, but the name was changed again in 1908 when trustee George Sparks bequeathed \$25,000 with the provision the hospital be renamed to honor his wife, Ann Dibrel Sparks. That was the same year the new

Sebastian County, Upper Township Hospital was built on a 40-acre tract of land east of Fort Smith.

Three years earlier, in November of 1905, members of the Sisters of Mercy, a Catholic religious order, founded St. Edward's Infirmary on 15<sup>th</sup> street, and a new hospital was built on the site in 1923.

Thanks to the Fort Smith Light and Traction Company, residents would soon enjoy Electric Park, a showplace of an amusement park illuminated at night by thousands of lights.



*There were chores and jobs enough for everyone at the turn of the Century. But friends, neighbors and relatives still found time to gather for this 1907 hayride in Jenny Lind.*

*Courtesy, South Sebastian County Historical Society*

With spacious, well-groomed gardens and a 2,000-seat auditorium, it was – during its decade of existence between 1904 and 1914 – the city's premier tourist attraction.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Greenwood was bustling, too, and by 1910 counted nearly 1,200 residents, two banks, and many new local businesses. A new red-brick courthouse, built in 1882 on the site of the frame building destroyed by fire, stood in the center of the courthouse square. The modern two-story structure cost nearly \$5,600 to build, but Greenwood citizens donated almost \$2,500 of that cost.

Fitting, perhaps, but as Fort Smith's most luminary citizen of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Judge Isaac Parker, was fading from his un-sought moments of fame, Greenwood's "star citizen" was just emerging. He was the first child of European descent born in the new county, on March 15, 1851, a few weeks after Sebastian County was formed.

John Little's parents were so proud of him after his birth in their home near Jenny Lind, that, – perhaps at the urging of his maternal grandfather Eaton Tatum – the baby was given the middle name of Sebastian. But even as a toddler, he was "Bass" Little to everyone.

"Bass" studied law, and became an attorney in Logan County, and was elected to the state legislature in 1884, and ten years later took over an unexpired term in

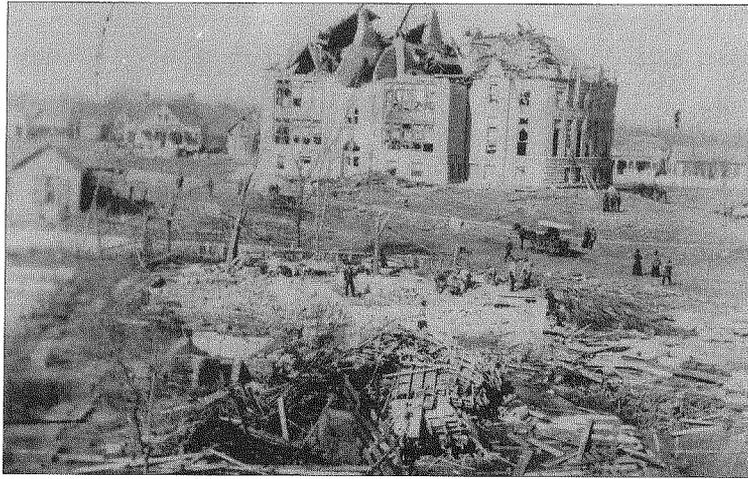
the U.S. House. He served 13 years until he decided to resign, come home, and run for governor in 1906. Little won and served ten years in Little Rock, but failing health cut his brilliant political career short. He died in September of 1916. Many Sebastian County residents –

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especially in Greenwood – mourned the loss of “the great commoner.” In the same year, 1916, a new south Sebastian county courthouse was built on the south side of the square. It was built for \$62,500, and financed by a Greenwood District county bond issue.

### Deaths, Disasters, and Disease



A tornado struck Fort Smith on January 11, 1898. The destruction was widespread and 52 people were killed. The recently-constructed Fort Smith High School, shown here, was badly damaged.  
Courtesy, Fort Smith Museum of History

The three-to-four decades of relative prosperity in Sebastian County from the late ‘80’s to the early teens of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not without tragic moments.

A few days before Christmas in 1890, a story surfaced about a mass killing in Jenny Lind that horrified county residents. The gory details were splashed over the front page of the *Fort Smith Herald*, and indicated that Charley Joplin, a married miner from Illinois, had supposedly become infatuated with young Lula Miller, who was also being courted by Jenny Lind doctor N. H. Stewart. In a drunken rage, Joplin left Fort Smith late one night, armed with a shotgun and headed for Jenny Lind. He first shot and killed a total stranger on the road, then blasted away rival Dr. Stewart at his small store. Victims three,

four, and five were Lula’s parents, and an aunt – a Mrs. Key – at their Jenny Lind home. Reportedly ranting and raving by then, Joplin stalked young Lula in the bloody house, and shot her in the face before turning the gun on himself. Grieving friends buried the Millers the next day, but reportedly left Joplin’s body where it fell until his relatives arrived to claim it – four days later.

The “Judge Parker Era” ended dramatically in July of 1896, when five members of the Rufus Buck gang were hanged in Fort Smith. The youthful gang spent nearly two weeks terrorizing residents of the Creek Nation in 1895 before they were tracked down and caught. Two men were killed and several women had been raped during their escapades.

January 11, 1898, dawned very warm in Fort Smith for winter. By nightfall, towering thunderstorms roamed in Indian Territory.

Then, as the *Elevator* reported later, “. . . at 11:20 there was a momentary lull. This was followed by a heavy dull, grinding rumble that gave notice of the approach of the cyclone fiend.” Within seconds a huge tornado smashed into the National Cemetery, then heavily damaged the downtown Wellington Hotel where 52 people died, most of them in the fire that followed. The storm smashed Immaculate Conception Church, and the newspaper said the First Baptist Church was “. . . reduced to kindling wood.” The storm was, and is to this day, Fort Smith’s worst tragedy.

In early 1914, Fort Smith citizens were locked in a furious debate about prohibition. The Anti-Saloon League wanted to shut down all the saloons along Garrison Avenue. Having supposedly at last rid the city of the old brothels along Front Street – the last being the infamous “Miss Laura’s – the righteous wanted the bars closed. The local “drys” lost the first round, when County Judge Ezra

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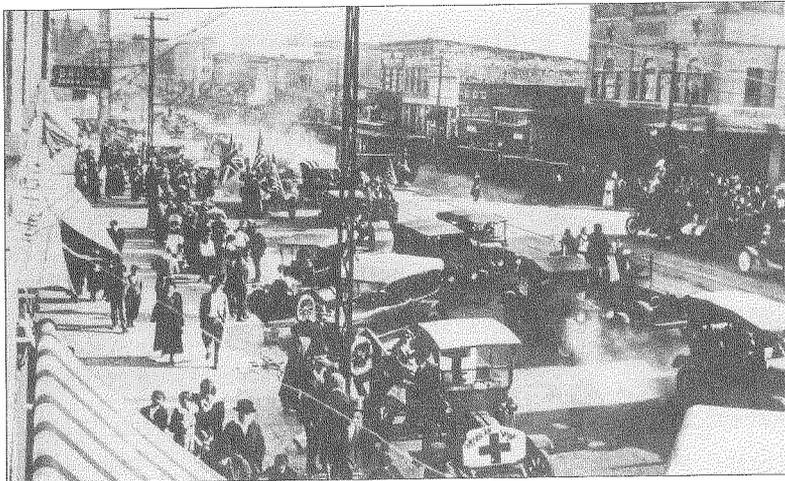


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Hester ruled the bars near the river could stay open, provided they were properly licensed. But prohibition did come to pass in 1919.

A political assassination in eastern Europe in the summer of 1914 soon plunged the world into its first global war, but it was almost three years before American troops entered the fighting in France. When the Armistice was signed in November of 1918, hundreds of Sebastian County's young men returned from the fighting, having joined outfits such as the 153<sup>rd</sup> Infantry and the 142<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery. In conjunction with the war, a deadly influenza outbreak that supposedly began in the Midwest was unknowingly carried to eastern Europe by U.S. troops. It struck the weakened area with deadly force, and began spreading around the globe. In the summer before the Armistice, the influenza reached Sebastian County. Reportedly 85 people died, but thousands became sick. The county's hospitals were overflowing with patients for months. Theaters closed and public meetings were cancelled, in an effort to slow the spread of the disease.

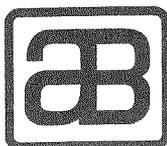
*Armistice Day (November 11) looking east on Garrison Avenue. A deadly epidemic of Spanish influenza followed the doughboys home, filling local hospitals and emptying public places. Courtesy, Fort Smith Museum of History*



### Depression and Drought

The "war to end all wars" was over, but as what was to become "The Roaring 20's" decade dawned,

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Sebastian County and other parts of the country would endure more hardship.

In the early spring of 1927, unusually heavy rainfall deluged not only the eastern slopes of the Rockies, but also the entire watershed of the upper Midwest. Within weeks, the Arkansas, Missouri, and other tributaries of the Mississippi River were at record widths and depths. Fort Smith was not spared, and on April 16, the Arkansas River crested at nearly 37 feet, closing the bridge to Oklahoma and pushing two-to-three-foot deep floodwater into much of the city's downtown. North of downtown, in the industrial area, the water stood even higher.

The flooding caused hardships in the rest of Sebastian County as well. Water from the flooding Poteau River and Vache Grass creeks overflowed in many places because the backed-up water had nowhere to go. The main highway to Greenwood was closed at several locations, as were rural roads connecting most county communities. Even low-water bridges were filled with foaming torrents of water. But there is no known record of any Sebastian County fatalities.

Flood damage was estimated at more than \$1,000,000 in Sebastian County alone, and the Fort Smith Red Cross chapter called it "the greatest flood in the Arkansas River valley ever recorded."

One small step toward Sebastian County's educational progress no one then could truly envision was taken in 1928, when Fort Smith opened a "junior college" in what was then the old high school between 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> on Grand. The first class numbered 34 students. But somehow, the young Fort Smith Junior College survived the dark days that followed and prospered later on.

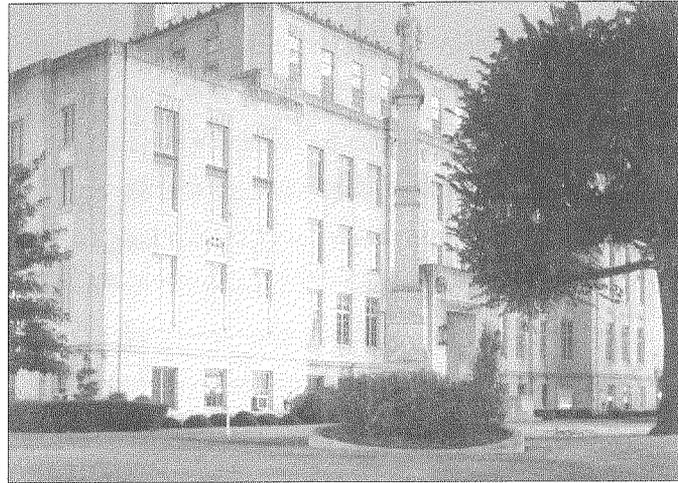
In the fall of 1929, a then-unsecured stock market

top-heavy with investments crashed, and within a year, the nation's economy was in shambles. As everywhere else in Arkansas, Sebastian County was caught up in the Depression. By 1932, one report showed nearly 1,700 Fort Smith families were without any visible means of job support, but local officials thought the real total was twice that high. The number of unemployed families in the Greenwood district was estimated at 2,600. And the cluster of shanties on Fort Smith's "Coke Hill" near the river continued to increase. After President Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated in 1933, one of his first acts was to declare a "bank holiday" to stem the panic. Banks in Fort Smith, Greenwood and other county towns obliged.

Fort Smith and Sebastian County were both impacted by two federal programs initiated by Roosevelt to put people back to work. Local workers employed via the Public Works Administration, or PWA, built the city's water supply containment at Lake Fort Smith, and the new Sebastian County courthouse and federal office building in downtown Fort Smith in 1937. Another government project saw the paving of the new U.S. 71 highway from Fort Smith to Greenwood. The CCC, or Civilian Conservation Corps also employed local people for smaller jobs throughout the county, ranging from street and drainage programs to landscaping city and county parks.

Even the weather seemed to match the desolate mood of the early 1930's. Much of western Arkansas and points north and west through Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska experienced little rainfall for several summers in a row. The drought only compounded the plight of the farmers, and winds picked up the dry, loose soil and created a "dust bowl environment." Huge black clouds of dust blew in over parts of Sebastian County on several occasions, prompting many fed-up area farmers to trek to better land in California. Without rain, the ground also heated up during summer months, and the years 1933

through 1936 produced some of the hottest temperatures the county had ever seen. On August 13, 1936, Fort Smith set a still-existing all-time high of 113 degrees.



*The Fort Smith Courthouse was built during the Depression. It is presently undergoing a renovation to make it safer and more functional.*  
Courtesy, Sebastian County

Survivors today agree times were tough during the Depression in Sebastian County, but they knew it wouldn't last forever. Storm clouds were already gathering on the other side of the world that would soon produce an unwanted type of relief.

### The Military Returns

About the time the flood of "Arkies and Okies" heading west was reaching its peak in the mid-1930's, a former World War I soldier was reaching his peak as the new leader of a demoralized Germany anxious to regain its sovereignty. Adolph Hitler was making waves in Europe that threatened to upset the delicate balance of the peace established 15 years earlier.

To make matters worse, Japanese imperialism was on the rise on the other side of the globe.

After the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, all of Europe was put on a war footing. And rumblings of possible U.S. involvement began to increase. In 1940, rumors reached Sebastian County that whispered of a new military training base not far from Fort Smith. A few months

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Delmar "Butch" Edwards and Jim Edwards

later, those rumors became reality.

The federal government began buying up property in much of the eastern part of Sebastian County, eventually displacing more than 1,300 families. Many felt they were never reimbursed for the full amount of what their property was worth. The relocation was well underway by early 1941 and continued even as Army bulldozers moved in behind them. In the process, the tiny community of Auburn virtually vanished, and other small county towns such as Cornish and Marietta gradually disappeared.

Almost daily, the *Southwest Times-Record* was filled with front-page stories describing the building of the camp and what the arrival of soldiers would mean to the county's economy.

It was estimated, for example, that the camp would use 3,000,000 gallons of water daily, taxing the area's water supply. A firm from Kansas City began a survey of construction needs in May, and the building was rumored to start by August 1. Wages for area workers hired for the project would be based on Fort Smith pay rates.

In early August, strong rumors circulated that a huge military hospital would be built in Fort Smith, and by the end of the month the actual camp contract went to a Georgia firm for just over \$15 million. The authorization to begin construction came on September 13, and after a long and impressive military parade down Fort Smith's Garrison Avenue, all activities moved to the camp area, where Governor Homer Atkins turned the first shovel of earth on September 20.

The base was named to honor Major General Adna R. Chaffee, the first chief of the Army's armored force. Chaffee died just four weeks before ground was broken for the post.

It is estimated about 5,000 people worked almost day and night to finish construction, and the first recruits reported for duty on Saturday, December 6, 1941, less than

24 hours before the fateful attack on Pearl Harbor. In March of 1942, the famed Sixth Armored Division began training at Camp Chaffee, and by the war's end, thousands of young men had passed through the gates as combat-ready soldiers.

After the United States entered the war, most Sebastian County residents enthusiastically supported the war effort, and the nearby military base that – especially on weekends – often brought them into direct contact with thousands of homesick recruits. Many Fort Smith area churches began regular programs to lend moral and religious support to the young men, some of whom were almost “adopted” by local civilian families. Especially dur-



*World War II became a major factor in Sebastian County life when Fort Chaffee was built. Thousands and thousands of soldiers trained for Infantry and Armor assignments. Many of these soldiers went straight to Europe to serve under Gen. George Patton.*

*Courtesy, Fort Smith Museum of History*

ing 1942 and 1943, county residents consistently exceeded quotas to buy “war bonds,” which were used to provide financial support for the war effort. Some county manufacturing plants suspended or reduced production of normal products to make items needed during the war.

For a nearly two-year period between 1943 and early 1945, Chaffee housed a “camp within a camp.” In a secluded area within the sprawling military base were three

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compounds holding more than 3,000 prisoners of war. Many of them were captured German and Japanese soldiers from the two theaters of war.

After "V-E Day" and "V-J Day" ended the war in the summer of 1945, Chaffee remained open long enough for final processing, and was officially closed on July 31, 1946. But it was reopened in 1948 as the home of the reactivated 5<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. On March 21, 1956, short ceremonies were held to officially rename the post as *Fort Chaffee*. And almost two years later to the day, popular young rock-and-roll singer Elvis Presley strained security at the base when he reported for active duty.

The base was closed in 1959, but reopened again in 1961, as a reserve training center for the possible use of troops in the growing crisis in Berlin. The arrival of recruits again boosted Fort Smith's economy, but eventually prompted local officials to ask that the fort be closed permanently to avoid the "yo-yo" effect on area businesses. Fort Chaffee was deactivated once again in July, 1965.

Aggressive recruitment of smokeless industries, led by Fort Smith Chamber of Commerce manager Paul Latture, changed the economic base of Sebastian County and made it the manufacturing center of Arkansas.

### The River is Tamed at Last

Early trappers and traders traveling the lower Arkansas River quickly discovered the waterway could be very moody, depending upon the season. Sometimes it was smooth and docile. Other times it was too shallow and dry to navigate. On still other occasions it was downright dangerous and prone to spread out over rich farmlands and towns along its banks. And once every three or four decades it could even freeze over during a cold spell.

Generations of settlers along the river's banks in both Arkansas and Oklahoma had dreamed of a time when

the river could be controlled, and perhaps realize its full potential as not only a source for irrigating farmland, but also a vital lifeline carrying commerce to and from the heart of the continent.

One of the first Sebastian county men to openly preach of the tremendous economic benefits a harnessed river could bring to the area was Clarence Byrns, editor of Fort Smith's *Southwest American* newspaper. For nearly 30 years, Byrns wrote front-page editorials, many of them urging the Arkansas River be developed as an inland waterway. Opponents of the idea thought that Byrns was nothing more than a crazy dreamer.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers agreed with them. As early as 1935, their report to Congress on an Arkansas River Navigation Project said it was "... technically (possible) but not economically feasible." Perhaps the disastrous floods on the Arkansas in 1941 and 1943 changed some minds, because the Arkansas Basin Development Association was formed in Tulsa in 1946. And a few months later, Congress approved the Rivers and



*The McClellan-Kerr Navigation System turned the unpredictable Arkansas River into a dependable navigable waterway.*

*Ocean-going vessels can come as far inland as Catoosa, Oklahoma. This is the westernmost river port in the United States.*

*Courtesy, Times Record.*

Harbors Act, which authorized creation of the Arkansas River Navigation System.

By 1950, senators John McClellan of Arkansas

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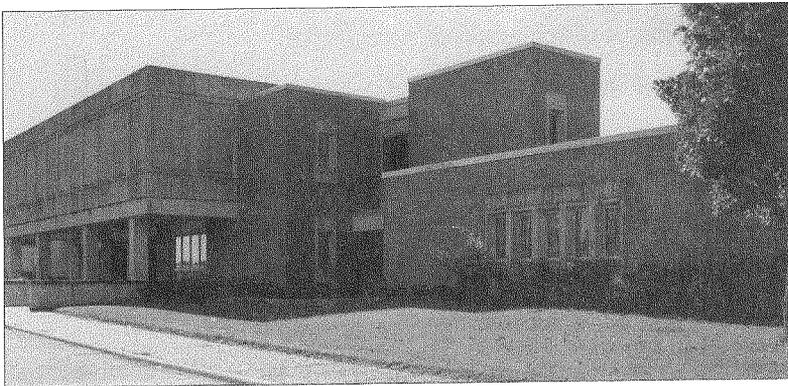


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and Robert Kerr of Oklahoma had secured year-to-year funding for the giant project, and work was begun on the first stage - the building of the Oologah Reservoir in Oklahoma. But the Korean War halted the project, and the plan lay dormant until construction of three Oklahoma reservoirs began again in 1956.

Work on the first lock and dam in Arkansas began at Dardanelle a year later, and soon construction was underway at other lock and dam sites in both states. By 1965, construction had started on Lock and Dam #13 near Barling. In December of the following year, Governor Orval Faubus cut the ribbon opening the new Clarence Byrns Memorial Bridge on the I-540 spur over the Arkansas River. By October of 1968, deep-water navigation traffic was opened on the river as far west as Little Rock.

When Fort Smith, state and federal dignitaries dedicated the completed Lock and Dam #13 in December of 1969, Fort Smith became a port city at last. A year later,



*The Greenwood Courthouse was completed after the devastating tornado of 1968. The new facility brings all county services to the people of South Sebastian County.*

*Courtesy, South Sebastian County Historical Society*

the entire 448-mile navigation project containing 17 locks and dams was completed, allowing deep-water vessels to travel up the Arkansas River to the port at Catoosa, Oklahoma. President Richard Nixon formally dedicated the McClellan-Kerr Navigation System on June 5, 1971.

### Lightning Strikes Twice!

Construction work was continuing at the lock

and dam site near Barling almost as usual on Friday afternoon, April 19, 1968, until dark gray skies, high winds, and torrential rain made further work difficult. What the workers didn't know right away was that about 15 miles to the south, a giant tornado was dropping out of the clouds and drawing a bead on the city of Greenwood, just as school classes were letting out for the day.

Eye-witnesses said the sky turned an eerie green-black color, followed by the roar of the on-coming twister. From the southwest, it smashed into the center of town, destroying the 1916 courthouse and almost everything else in Greenwood's downtown. Those who survived said the air was immediately filled with flying debris, and people were running everywhere.

When the storm was over, 14 people had been killed and many more injured, and a diagonal scar of destruction had been ripped across the city to the northeast.

Gallant rescue efforts were begun within seconds, and volunteers quickly arrived from Fort Smith and eastern Oklahoma to help with emergency services, search for victims, and begin cleaning up. The Red Cross set up relief stations, and soon truckloads of supplies arrived from several different sources.

Today the rebuilt Greenwood square is a monument to those who died in the storm, and the new county courthouse on the square's south side is a constant reminder of the occasional fury of Arkansas' spring weather.

Weather circumstances were much the same in Sebastian County on April 12, 1945. An advancing cold front was battling unseasonably warm weather across western Arkansas, resulting in severe afternoon thunderstorms that spawned several tornadoes basically along a line from Oklahoma City to Little Rock. One deadly twister hit just west of Fort Smith, causing several deaths and numerous

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**Randall Ford** 

injuries. One report said more than 100 people were killed and nearly 700 injured in the two-state area.

The deadly storms received scant media attention outside the Fort Smith area because most newspapers and radio stations were filled with coverage of the sudden death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in Warm Springs, Georgia, the very same day.

### The Fort – A Presence Yet Again

The costly and controversial war in Vietnam officially ended on January 27, 1973, with the signing of a cease-fire agreement in Paris. And thousands of U.S. troops began returning home. But guerilla soldiers in both halves of the divided nation kept fighting each other for almost two years, until South Vietnamese forces finally surrendered to the Communist Vietcong in late April of 1975.

Most Sebastian County residents were not particularly concerned when they learned that Army helicopters were quickly airlifting the remaining U.S. occupational forces and thousands of displaced Vietnamese refugees back to American shores. But they soon quickly took notice of the fact that the empty Fort Chaffee was rumored to be one of several “processing centers” to formally admit more than 50,000 refugees.

On May 2, 1975 – the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the very day Judge Isaac Parker arrived in Fort Smith – the first C-130 transport carrying refugees arrived at the Fort Smith Airport to be welcomed by local, county and state officials, among them Governor David Pryor. The immigrants then boarded a bus to their new temporary home a few miles away.

Almost daily through the summer of 1975, more

of the big planes landed on the airport’s long runway, and the shuttle buses through Barling to the fort became a familiar sight. At one point, Chaffee’s peak population



*Westark College becomes University of Arkansas at Fort Smith effective January 1, 2002. The college has its origin in 1928 as the Fort Smith Junior College. The first classes were held at the high school. Later, the campus was moved to the old County Farm. Courtesy, Westark College*

was about 25,000. Hundreds of Sebastian County civilians were hired to assist State Department officials and the Red Cross in finding new homes and sponsors for the Vietnamese families.

While at Chaffee, the refugees attended schools, and even got a touch of home when a special low-power Vietnamese-speaking radio station was set up. In early August, president Gerald Ford flew to Fort Smith to meet personally with the Vietnamese refugees. The population of the fort slowly dwindled, and the last refugees departed in December 1975.

Hundreds of the Vietnamese chose to remain in Sebastian County, and their presence has enriched the area’s diverse culture to this day. Little did anyone realize the entire evacuation scene would soon be repeated – just five years later.

In the spring of 1980, Cuban president Fidel Castro was concerned about the “Freedom Flotilla” carrying boatloads of immigrants to freedom in south Florida.

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**SMITH**



*The new 140,000 square foot Convention Center in Fort Smith is part of a revival of city pride that includes a new library system, new parks, a new riverfront amphitheater and a downtown beautification.*

*Courtesy, Fort Smith Convention and Visitors Bureau.*

Perhaps in retaliation, he chose to empty his island's prisons into the refugee mainstream. They came – some of them hardened criminals – by the boatloads. State department officials were not equipped to handle the flood into Florida. Once again, nearby Fort Chaffee was selected as one of the “holding points” to temporarily house the fleeing Cubans.

But in contrast to the frightened and educated Vietnamese families seeking freedom five years before, many of the Cubans were single, angry young men who had spent much time in prison. Their processing was more difficult, and tempers rose in the record-setting summer heat of 1980. The mini-Cuban city at Fort Chaffee was about to explode.

It did on June 1, when thousands of Cubans rioted, throwing rocks, harrasing security forces, and trying to scale the makeshift barbed-wire fences. Then-Governor Bill Clinton sent the Army and Air National Guard units to Fort Smith to help Arkansas State Police, the U.S. marshals, and border patrol officials halt the disturbance.

When it finally ended two days later, nearly 70 Cubans were injured and several barracks were partially

burned. Scared nearby residents, particularly in Barling, were at last able to get a good night's sleep. Yet rumors persist to this day that several Cuban refugees may have been killed during the rioting.

Because of the totally unexpected outbreak, President Jimmy Carter quickly assured county residents that no more Cubans would be sent to Fort Chaffee. Yet the fort was soon named as the “consolidation point” for un-sponsored Cubans

still being held at places in Wisconsin, Florida, and Pennsylvania. For that reason, Chaffee continued to house Cuban refugees until early 1982 when the processing was completed. But as with the Vietnamese, many of the Cubans chose to live and work in Sebastian County, adding yet another element to the area's proud ethnic diversity.

Many of those strangers to Sebastian County learned even more about their country and state by enrolling at Westark Community College. From its humble beginnings in 1928, the old Fort Smith Junior College continued to grow as an educational beacon to a current enrollment of almost 5,000 students. Four-year degrees were offered in conjunction with other Arkansas universities, and in early 2001, county residents voted the school be absorbed into the University of Arkansas system, to be known as University of Arkansas-Fort Smith.

A lot of those new “settlers” also chose to stay because of Sebastian County's excellent medical facilities. Through constant expansion, St. Edward Mercy Medical Center and Sparks Regional Medical Center have each kept pace with the incredible and rapid changes in modern

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medical techniques and practices, and offer quality health care to people in a wide area.

### Are We Coming Full Circle?

In looking back over 150 years of Sebastian County's existence, two things stand out as extremely significant in our long and colorful development and diverse history.

Our county's roots are forever entwined with the first fort - a military presence designed to ensure our western expansion and fulfillment of America's "manifest destiny." And it was no coincidence that the fort was placed at a strategic point overlooking the Arkansas River at that time a broad and vital liquid highway running straight into what would become our nation's "breadbasket."

Consider our early phenomenal growth and development because of our proximity to those two vital ingredients. Later the discovery of coal kept our county's economy thriving. Without any of those catalysts in our early days, it is conceivable neither Fort Smith nor Sebastian County would even exist today; or perhaps at best be a small obscure village in a remote part of a large

western Arkansas county.

Consider this: By the 1930's, our second fort had been long gone, our river was not fit for navigation, and coal was falling out of favor as a fuel source. Our area nearly stagnated.

Sixty years ago, a military fort returned to Sebastian County. Periodic openings and closings produced a yo-yo affect on Fort Smith's economy, and spurred local leaders to bring in more stable industry. More recently the fort itself became a doorway - allowing for strangers from foreign lands to settle here and further enrich our area's ethnic heritage.

Completion of the McClellan-Kerr Navigation System gave our county a navigable inland waterway and new economic vitality. Today, coal mining in Sebastian County is slowly picking up again in response to a surge of coal-fired generation requests from industries. And some abandoned, water-filled mines are now being checked as a plentiful and inexpensive area water source.

If 150 years of history mean anything, then these ironic recurrings are perhaps a good sign for the future of Sebastian County.

### About the Author

*David Ross, Iowa native, has been immersing himself in the details of Sebastian County's rich and colorful history since he moved to Fort Smith in 1972. Ross is a writer, broadcaster, researcher, advertising man and playwright. "Rewind," his monthly column appears in Entertainment Fort Smith.*

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Sebastian County Judge  
Elected 1999 to present  
Appointed 1982



In appreciation of the following former County Judges

Glenn Thames	Elected	1970 - 1978
Bob Boyer	Elected	1978 - 1981
W. R. Harper Jr.	Elected	1983 - 1997
Frank Glidewell	Appointed	1997 - 1998