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Okolona settled in 1830s, grew for decades

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

The town of Okolona was first settled by Americans in the early 1830s when settlers began arriving by covered wagons from Okolona, Mississippi. These first residents built their homes on low ground northwest of where the railroad depot later stood. After a few years of mud, the small settlement moved to the town's current location on higher ground. The pioneers included the Shackelford, Ethridge, Buchanan, Tarp-ley, Anderson and McGuire families. Among others who came were Pettus, Cargile, East, Ross, Park, Bell, Hays, Hardin, Weir, Harris, Cloud, McGill, Bonner, Logan and Wingfield.

The little town grew. Situated in the center of a large section of farm land, cotton was very important to the community's agricultural economy. A number of gins operated in the area, and other activities common to rural Arkansas began as well. The Masons established a lodge in Okolona in 1857. An academy served school students beginning in 1859. In 1875 the Okolona Grange sponsored a neighborhood fair, which may have been the first fair to be held in Clark County. Okolona's first

bank opened in 1902 (and closed in 1927). The first train arrived from Smithton and Burtzell in 1885, and for a number of years Okolona was the end of the line. After numerous changes, the rail line became a part of the Missouri-Pacific. By 1920, daily freight service went through from Gurdon to Womble (Norman).

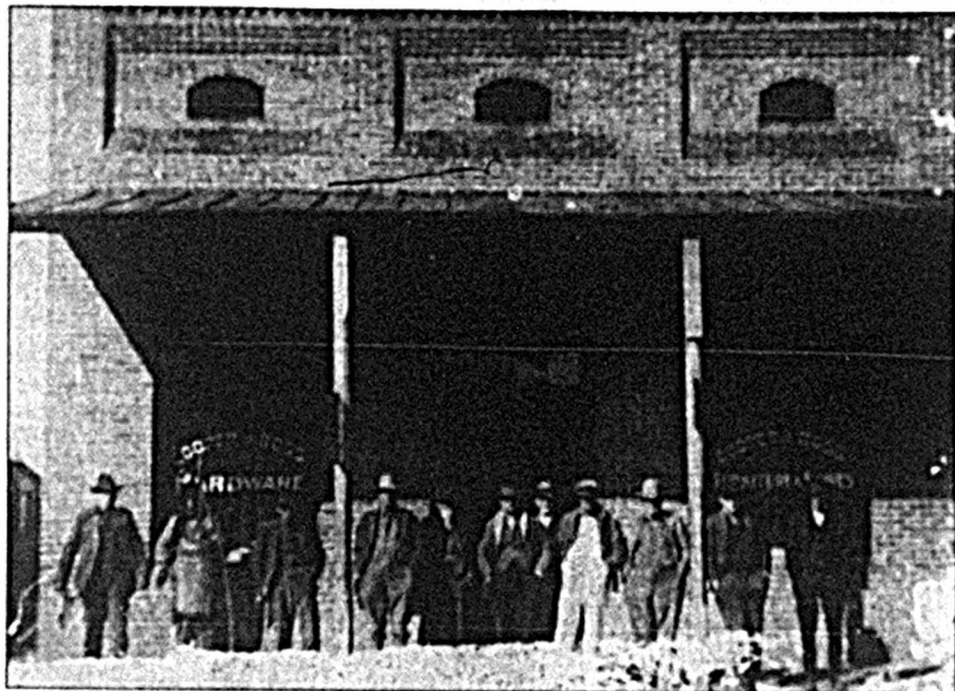
The firm of Ross & Weir was among the first to sell general merchandise. W.J. Bell came to Okolona in 1868 and opened a general store with Tobe Shackelford. By 1899, the town included Cargile and Garrett's General Merchandise (also to include an undertaking parlor), Boswell's Dry Goods, Ross & Hays' General Store, Orsborn's Grocery, R.H. Etheridge, G.W. Shackelford's Drug Store, Mrs. F.E. Phillips' millinery and Young East's store.

To fill communication needs, the Okolona Post Office was established in 1858, with Ashley Sloan as the first postmaster. Other postmasters included Lemuel Weaver, William Anderson, William Ross, James Young, George Grayson, Thomas Lowdermilk, Lizzie Cothan, W.G. Robbs, Lizzie Robbs, Frederick Hughes, Gabe Anderson, Jesse Osborn, Burnard Phelps, Paul Garrett, Charlie Hill, Lee Ors-

burn and Darroll Smith. By the early 1900s the office served a large area with four rural routes, and the post office remains operational today. Okolona even had its own newspaper — the *Arkansas Messenger* (later the *Okolona Messenger*) began publication in 1885. And, telephones first served the town in 1904, about the same time that Okolona became incorporated.

A new Okolona High School was built across town from the original academy. As schools began to consolidate in the mid-twentieth century, Okolona became the center of a very large school district. In 1969 Simmons High School (a Rosenwald school built in Okolona in 1928) and Okolona High School consolidated. However, the town began to fade. The student population also declined, resulting in the school's closure in the 1980s and pupils attending classes in other towns.

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum (www.clarkcountyhistory.org or 230-1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives or 245-5332).



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLARK COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION/FOR THE SIFTINGS
Above, several townspeople stand outside of the Cooper & Ross store in Okolona. Below, Clyde Rollins, Clib Golden, Joe Rollins, Floyd Payne, Oscar Hignight, Warren Sorrells and Henry Meeks pose at the bridge across Gentry Creek on Military Road around 1914.

