

Tillman County Chronicles

Tillman County Historical Society Column

by Joe Wynn

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Tillman County Has Unique History

Last week this column referred to a mule barn that was once located in the block where the Tillman County Courthouse stands today. For those of us who live in the area today, it is hard to imagine Frederick before the courthouse was built.

For that reason, it is interesting to examine how Tillman County came to exist and where the county offices were located prior to construction of the current courthouse.

Most of the area that is now Tillman County was opened to settlement in the land lottery that took place near Fort Sill on August 6, 1901. The tent city of Lawton sprang in existence that day. The City of Frederick was organized in 1902. The eastern part of the current Tillman County, part of the Big Pasture, would not be opened for settlement until 1906 (by sealed bid).

This part of what would eventually become the state of Oklahoma was Oklahoma Territory. Indian Territory was located in the eastern part of what is now Oklahoma.

Pre-statehood, Oklahoma Territory was divided generally into only a few very large counties. The area that would eventually be Tillman County was at that time part of a very large area that was Comanche County,

with the new city of Lawton as its county seat.

A copy of *The Frederick Enterprise* (later to become *The Frederick Press*) dated February 27, 1903, showed the newspaper's location as "Frederick, Comanche County, Oklahoma Territory." A prominent article in that 1903 newspaper told about a plan to break the very large Comanche and Kiowa Counties into four smaller counties, with Frederick to be the county seat of Harrison County.

That early plan, of course, was not enacted and Harrison County would never exist.

Oklahoma statehood was a goal in those early years, but a constitution and a system of county governments would have to be in place when Oklahoma became a state. Therefore, the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention convened in 1906 to draft a constitution, and the convention's responsibilities also included the creation of counties for the new state, the establishment of county lines, and the naming of county seats.

The Constitutional Convention established 77 counties for the new state, dividing the pre-statehood Comanche County into two counties – the current

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Comanche and Tillman Counties, with Lawton and Frederick as county seats.

The Constitutional Convention named Tillman County in honor of Ben Tillman, a prominent Democratic U.S. Senator from South Carolina. What did Ben Tillman have to do with Tillman County? Absolutely nothing. While some counties bore names that related somehow to the area's history or heritage, other counties were named after prominent figures of the day. Ben Tillman was such a figure. Tillman never visited Oklahoma or the county that would bear his name.

Tillman County's borders at statehood on November 16, 1907, were much the same as today, although parts of Kiowa County to the north were incorporated into Tillman County in 1911 and 1925.

County Offices

So... Where were county offices housed in the early days?

According to notes at Frederick's Pioneer Townsite, prior to 1921 the Tillman County Commissioners rented building space to use as a courthouse:

"In 1907 the second floor of the Mosby-Schwartz building in downtown Frederick was rented and used until 1913."

The Mosby-Schwartz building was the current **Frederick Leader** building at 306 West Grand. Mosby-Schwartz real estate firm occupied the building's main first-floor space. At that time, the building had a large second floor. The second level was removed in the 1940s.

"In 1913 space for county offices was rented in the Frederick City Hall, 126 South Tenth, at \$1,000 per year. In 1917 the county rented the second floor of the Eberle building, 100 North Tenth, and continued the rental of City Hall for the use of the

courthouse. Finally, in 1919 the county purchased a city block of land at a cost of \$14,250 to build Tillman County's first county-owned courthouse.

"Accordingly, in 1921 the present Tillman County Courthouse was constructed by the Charles M. Dunning Construction Company at a cost of \$200,000. The architectural firm of Tonini and Bramblett combined the Neo-Classical (Palladian) and Renaissance forms in their plans for the massive structure."

Joe Wynn is a member of the Tillman County Historical Society Board of Directors.