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VOICES FROM THE SHORT GRASS COUNTRY: A HISTORY
OF LAWTON NEWSPAPERS, 1901-1970

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OF LAWTON NEWSPAPERS, 1901-1970

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PREFACE

When frontier towns were established in Oklahoma during the various land openings, newspapers invariably were on the scene recording the news. These newspapers were typical of the press in the American West. Their editors were tireless boosters for their communities. They were constantly involved in personal journalistic battles with fellow newsmen. These pioneer newspapermen established their papers as political organs, with hopes of winning the city and county printing contracts from the politicians in power. And the editors reflected their partisanship in the news columns and editorial pages. Gradually this stage of newspaper boosterism and political partisanship evolved into a one-man monopoly newspaper situation of unbiased news coverage relying on advertising for revenue. This process is evident in microcosm in towns within the Territory, and later the State of Oklahoma. In particular, this case study will show how this pattern worked in the town of Lawton, Oklahoma.

No important investigation ever has been made of daily newspaper operations in Oklahoma, and little has been done on small town journalism anywhere. The standard histories of American journalism dwell extensively on stories of the metropolitan newspapers and of the famous "giants" of the press. Almost untouched in journalism history are the social-economic-political roles of the small-town press in the American West. It is my hope that this study of these "voices from the

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Short Grass Country" will contribute to a better understanding.

I was on the news staff of the Lawton Constitution for ten years, from December, 1957, to September, 1968. I worked on the copy desk as wire editor and news editor, and beginning in 1963 as city editor. On leaving the Constitution, I joined the journalism faculty at Oklahoma State University and also worked on advanced degrees. After deciding to pursue a doctorate in history, I gravitated toward the idea of writing a history of the Lawton newspapers. Because I was directly involved for several years with the editing of the Constitution, I hope there are benefits from this inside view. Yet this should be tempered with the realization of the hazards resulting from possible non-objectivity. The present management of the Lawton newspapers cooperated with me in every way I asked, but the newspapers have had no direct connection with this study. Also the management was not responsible for any opinions expressed. The results are entirely mine. Unfortunately, the Lawton newspapers' business records have not been preserved. However, approximations of advertising revenue were gained in interviews.

Although this study ends in 1970, much of importance technologically has happened to the newspapers since that time. On Monday, December 31, 1973, printers permanently turned off the eleven linotypes at the Lawton Publishing Company, Inc., and from that day on the Lawton newspapers have been produced by computerized phototypesetting. Through this half-million-dollar investment, the Lawton papers have become part of the technological revolution which has swept the printing industry in the past decade: the conversion from "hot type" to "cold type."

My deepest debt as a student is to Dr. Theodore L. Agnew of the Oklahoma State University History Department, who patiently and critically read this work chapter by chapter. His skills as an editor and his suggestions as to changes add much to this study's improvement. The staffs of the newspaper collection at the Oklahoma Historical Society and Steve Wilson, director of the Great Plains Museum at Lawton, made the reading of decades of newspaper files much easier than it might have been. My wife, Susan, participated in every step of the work, and the final result is as much hers as mine. She had many helpful suggestions, in addition to typing the final draft copy. I cannot fully express my appreciation to her and to our daughters, Dana and Karen, for their patience.

I also want to thank Miss Velda D. Davis and Mrs. Marilyn J. Bond, the author's typists, for their assistance with preparation of this thesis for publication.

I am especially grateful to the Oklahoma Newspaper Foundation, to its trustees, to its President, Harrington Wimberly, publisher of the Duncan, Oklahoma, Banner, and to the many people of Oklahoma who have donated to the Foundation. They acknowledged the value of this study through the Foundation's financial assistance in its publication. I sincerely appreciate their support.

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CHAPTER I

BEGINNINGS

A Frantic Newspaper Race

In the summer of 1901, a caravan of covered wagons carrying the heavy equipment of a daily newspaper plant wended its way across the prairie hills and vales of Southwest Oklahoma. J. T. "Bert" Howard, a newspaperman, was guiding his prairie schooner expedition toward Lawton. The young editor recently had dismantled his printing plant equipment at Horton, Kansas, where he had published a weekly newspaper, The Headlight. Howard had decided to launch a newspaper at Lawton, one of three county seat towns in the newly opened lands of the Comanche and Kiowa Reservation. National attention had focused on the opening of this land in Oklahoma Territory, one of the last Western frontiers in American history. Through a land lottery scheduled July 29, some 13,000 lucky homesteaders were to win the right to settle on 160-acre farms. The lottery was to be followed by the sale of townsite lots in Anadarko, Hobart, and Lawton, beginning August 6. Various newspaper accounts had described Lawton as the most attractive townsite in the opening, and it generally was believed Lawton would become the metropolis of the area. And Howard, similar to thousands of others seeking a new and perhaps a better life, had decided to try his luck in this "queen city" of

Southwestern Oklahoma.¹

A stiff breeze made the 100-degree heat somewhat bearable as the wagons followed ruts in the red dust made by earlier pioneers. Howard's caravan was traveling the Short Grass Country, the southern, high plains section of a grassy region some 500 miles in width stretching from Canada southward for 1,500 miles almost to Mexico. Still untouched by the farmer's plow, the land was covered with an unbroken mat of buffalo grass, grama and mesquite, all short grasses rarely even six inches high. Although this Southwest Oklahoma section of the Short Grass Country is dominated by stretches of level land, it also includes country of a more varied character: wandering streams, usually dry, fringed with cottonwood, willow, and elm. Often the travelers had encountered broken hills decorated with red cedars.²

The Short Grass Country presents much of the three dominant characteristics of the Great Plains environment. It is a comparatively level area, it is mostly a treeless land, and it has a climate that is sub-humid, one that is deficient in rainfall. In climate, the dominant feature is the lack of water. For all practical purposes, the Short Grass Country is almost a desert. The annual rainfall can vary from fifteen to more than fifty inches, but usually averages around thirty

¹Howard described the details of his covered wagon journey from Kansas to Lawton in two accounts, one in the Daily Republican, July 26, 1902, p. 4, and the other in the Weekly Republican, August 6, 1903, p. 1. Several stories said Lawton appeared to be the city with the most promising future in the land opening. See the Kansas City Star, June 7, 1901, p. 1. The Star carried front-page stories almost daily for about a month prior to the August 6, 1901, opening, from its reporter in Lawton. Also see the New York Times, June 9, 1901, p. 3; July 8, 1901, p. 7; July 14, 1901, p. 1.

²Stanley Vestal, Short Grass Country (1st reprint; Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1970), pp. 6-7.

inches. And the country is characterized by long and awful droughts, dry spells of such intensity and duration that water supplies disappear and farming becomes impossible. The droughts usually are broken only by brief, torrential rains. Another characteristic of this plains country is the wind, which blows with a constancy unsurpassed elsewhere. In the summer, it can be a wilting furnace blast. In the winter, the "norther," or cold front, rages, dropping the temperature with incredible speed and sometimes bringing blizzards.³

As the covered wagons neared the Lawton townsite, their occupants were astonished to see craggy mountains thrusting abruptly out of the plains. They had arrived at the Wichitas, an ancient range of under-sized mountains that rose in the center of the Indian reservation. The Wichitas were another reason that made nearby Lawton a highly attractive townsite. Prospectors planned to swarm the granite hills and to seek their fortunes in a gold rush. Howard called a halt to that day's travels, and the newspaper group camped out that night near Medicine Creek, a popular watering hole and camping site.⁴

The next day, July 24, Howard and his group reached the Lawton townsite. Thousands involved with registering for homesteads were camped along two streams near Fort Sill, but only about a dozen tents could be seen around the Lawton townsite. It did not appear a very inviting field for starting a daily newspaper. Howard felt a sinking feeling that Horton, Kansas, would have been a better place for

³Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1931), pp. 3-9, 17-26; Odie B. Faulk, Land of Many Frontiers: A History of the American Southwest (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 3-4.

⁴Daily Republican, July 26, 1902, p. 4.

publishing a newspaper than this prairie home of cattle and Indians. However, no time was lost in setting up the newspaper plant and office. They unloaded the eleven wagons of machinery and other wagons containing the big tent which was to house the newspaper.⁵

Howard ordered his newspaper tent set up in a temporary location along the east border of the townsite. No one was allowed to camp on the newly platted Lawton townsite, and Army troops from nearby Fort Sill were there to keep the early arrivals out of this area. Camping, however, was allowed along the outside edges. Another tent city street gradually formed south of the townsite, and some pitched their tents along the north boundary. The tent city bordering the townsite seemed to mushroom by the hour, though, and Howard grew more optimistic about his newspaper's future. Crowds of men, women, and children arrived in wagons, buggies, and on horseback. Some walked across the prairies from railroad points with packs on their heads. Motley caravans brought covered wagons drawn by either horses, mules, or oxen, or a combination of all three. The wagons were piled high with household goods--here a crate filled with chickens, there a pig squealing in a box. It was like the migration of a people to the promised land.⁶

They were arriving from all parts of the United States, but most of them were from Texas, Arkansas, and other adjoining or nearby states. Most were in good spirits. Many arrived to be on hand when the results of the land lottery drawing would begin to be announced on July 29, while other thousands came to start life in the new town. A few, such

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

as the adventurers, vagabonds, gamblers, and prostitutes, came to prey upon the others.⁷

In the midst of all the dust, heat, confusion, and curious crowds, Horton's Lawton Daily Republican emerged on Saturday afternoon, July 27, three days after his arrival. Triumphant, he had won a frantic race to be the first to publish a newspaper near the townsite that was to be Lawton. After he and his crew of printers had erected their tents at Rag Town on the eastern border of the townsite, they had sweated day and night to turn out their first effort, an unpretentious four-page, four-column, tabloid-sized paper. It followed the standard format of small daily and weekly newspapers of that period, with headlines and stories only one-column wide "tombstoned" across the page. Although it contained no disturbing editorials, no screaming headlines, no blaring typography, no innovations, it marked the introduction of journalism to this Short Grass Country of Southwest Oklahoma.⁸

In an editor's column, Horton stated the policy of the paper would be Republican in politics, but its principal aim was to furnish the news. He bragged that his evening newspaper was the largest in the new territory and equipped with its own electric plant, that he had a large 14 x 20 cylinder press capable of printing 1,800 papers an hour, and that the management intended to purchase a lot to erect a permanent building for his newspaper plant when the auction got under way.⁹

Howard advised readers that his newspaper crew had accomplished

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., July 27, 1901.

⁹Ibid.

quite a feat in getting out the first issue less than a week from the time the plant was packed up in Kansas and moved 600 miles. On the front page was a letter to the editor signed by a "Visitor" who described the area before its formal opening. A news item reported about water wells being dug on the school blocks and at the land office to provide free water for all the people. A story on the Rock Island Railroad reported that contractors expected to have the line completed into Lawton by August 6, the date of the formal opening. The paper indicated its Republican party leanings by printing a page-one editorial suggesting that Oklahoma Territorial Governor William Jenkins should be elected as governor to succeed himself if Oklahoma became a state.¹⁰

The Republican's top news story on the upcoming land opening and auction of townsite lots, which in modern times would be played up on page one, was found on page four. The story reported that some men in town were ready to pay \$10,000 to get the lots they wanted. In an editorial comment in the story, Howard wrote: "The Republican is inclined to think the best way for those who have a desire to buy is to take a sober thought before they go into it at a high rate." He added that "\$2,500 would not be an unreasonable price for some of the corner lots, but over that amount would be." Elsewhere in the paper, the Republican contained eight paid advertisements and numerous house ads eagerly appealing for advertising and job printing. In later editions under the inside masthead, the Republican said it was consolidated with another newspaper, the Last Frontier, on August 2, 1901. However, the Frontier

¹⁰ Ibid.

evidently had a fleeting existence, and no copies are extant.¹¹

The Republican was eager to be the first newspaper established in Lawton because it probably would win the county printing contract and other advantages a party newspaper could reap from Republicans appointed as the first county officials. Its editor also was aware that others hurriedly were preparing to enter the newspaper race.

Over on the south border of the Lawton townsite on Goo Goo Avenue, printers rushed to set up equipment under a tent for printing the first issue of the Lawton Daily Democrat, the second daily paper to be established in Lawton. It was first issued on August 6, the formal day of the land opening. The editor-publisher, L. T. Russell, lamented that his paper was late in coming out and that his press was still without power or an engine "on account of the congested condition of freight." He apologized for subscribers being forced to read "this handbill" instead of a regular size paper and promised that he would put in a new and up-to-date plant.¹²

In its first issue the Democrat claimed 2,500 advance subscriptions and promised "everyone who subscribed for the paper previous to the opening will be given an additional six months subscription whether they were successful or not, if they move to the new country." Russell's reference to success was to those who had won homesteads in the lottery. The editorial page masthead contained the motto: "First all news that's good; then free homes, union statehood and democracy."¹³

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Daily Democrat, August 6, 1901.

¹³Ibid.

The Democrat's news stories included details of the Lawton townsite lot sales, an account of the strange sight of gaudily clad squaws with papooses strapped on their backs at gambling tables betting their money freely, and an item that Miss Mattie Beal of Wichita, who drew number two in the lottery, had arrived in Lawton. Another story said that the previous Sunday would never be forgotten by the people of Lawton, for at least a dozen gambling dives were run wide open, two or three bold robberies were committed, and at the same time hundreds of good people were attending worship services. A crime roundup story detailed accounts of highwaymen staging robberies of wagons en route from Rush Springs to Lawton, told of two killings, and editorially commented that the marshal and his six deputies could not handle all the problems. Twenty per cent of the first edition's column inches were taken up with local advertising.¹⁴

In an August 15 edition, stories reported that Postmaster Joe T. White had assumed full charge of the Lawton office, and that a group of St. Louis gentlemen of means were in Lawton with a view to building a telephone system to cost \$20,000. Other articles reported that county commissioners had asked bids on building a temporary courthouse, that the Eighth Cavalry would leave Fort Sill soon for the Philippines, and that a ghastly find had been made of a skeleton of an infant at the northeast corner of town, and "is at present at the Democrat office where it may be inspected."¹⁵

Only a day after the Democrat first hit the streets, the city's

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

third newspaper appeared on August 7, 1901. It was a weekly, the Lawton News, published by Gunn and Musgrove. It was Republican in politics. Little is known about the early months of the News as the earliest files available begin in January of 1902. However, an anniversary issue in July of 1902 noted that the Lawton News man arrived at the townsite on August 5, 1901, and that two days later the first issue of the newspaper came out.¹⁶

Keeping the newspaper competition pot boiling was the appearance of Lawton's fourth paper, the Lawton Post, which was first published on August 23, 1901. T. H. Records was the editor-publisher of the four-column, four-page tabloid, a giveaway sheet with a circulation claim of 2,000 daily. Evidently advertisers liked the idea of a newspaper circulated free of charge. The fifth issue and the only 1901 file copy available contained twenty-four advertisements. One of the advertisements was for the Kirk Brothers News Stand at 421 D Avenue, offering nineteen newspapers and seventy magazines for sale.¹⁷

A front-page editorial in the Post furnished an insight into the hard times the new community was having with its water supply. The Post charged that Lawton's water was contaminated and was causing a steady rise in typhoid fever in town, with no fewer than twelve cases reported the previous day. The editor said the water wells in the city contained the refuse of present residents and of 50,000 campers. The Post demanded a mass public meeting to be called to explore a better water supply source. Another editorial urged other improvements for the town,

¹⁶News, July 31, 1902, p. 2.

¹⁷Post, August 28, 1901.

such as a strong commercial club, a local police force to rid Lawton of federal jurisdiction, good schools, streets, and city lights. A news story noted that the El Reno and Topeka Telephone Company had its long distance lines in operation and that calls could be made to Texas points, Marlow and Duncan. The Post, which attempted to be a gadfly about local news and also adopted an independent stand on politics, is believed to have perished late in 1901.¹⁸

The Lawton Lariat, a Democratic weekly, apparently was the fifth and final newspaper venture launched in Lawton during 1901. The paper was started August 30, 1901, and in 1902 it listed its company officials as L. J. and Keene Abbott and H. M. and W. S. Tilton. By 1902 the Lariat was being published as an evening daily. It was consolidated with another Lawton paper, the Enterprise, in September of 1902.¹⁹

Rough, Tough Early Years

Lawton's early years were rough and tough ones for journalists, with the city blooming with newspapers as though they were the ever-popular saloons. Most did not weather this raw, frontier press period. Of the five papers that began their fierce competition in 1901, none survived the first decade except through consolidation. Altogether from 1901 to 1910, fifteen newspapers were started in Lawton, yet only five survived in some form to advance into the next decade.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Enterprise, February 13, 1903, p. 4. See also Carolyn Thomas Foreman, Oklahoma Imprints, 1835-1907, A History of Printing In Oklahoma Before Statehood (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1936), p. 348.

²⁰ These figures were calculated from the author's survey of newspapers during this period.

It may seem incredible that so many newspapers sprouted in this small city in Southwest Oklahoma in its first years. For one reason, it did not take much money to launch a newspaper, even by present-day standards. From \$1,000 to \$3,000 would put a small daily in business. The only equipment a newspaper needed was a small cylinder press, usually electrically driven, and several cases of handset type. Printing technology had always moved slowly. For decades and even centuries, newspapers were hand set, one piece of type at a time, in type sticks by tireless printers who stood at their type cases for hours on end. And once the paper was printed, each individual piece of type had to be "distributed" back in the type cases so that the process could begin all over again. The invention of the linotype typesetting machine revolutionized type composition. It could take the place of four to five hand compositors, and a publisher could speed up his production and turn out a far bigger and even more attractive newspaper. The linotype had come into general use before the turn of the century but mostly in the larger, big-city papers. Lawton newspapers did not purchase linotypes until 1906. Other equipment a newspaper had or purchased after being established was one or more job printing presses. Job presses were relatively cheap and could be purchased for \$100 to \$200. Newspapers customarily did job printing, or commercial printing, on the side. It provided fill-in work for the printers and revenue to support the entire operation.²¹

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to generalize as to the types of people these pioneer editors of Lawton were. They were of all

²¹State Democrat, February 2, 1905, p. 2; Constitution-Democrat, July 12, 1906, p. 1.

ages, types, and shades of moral fibre. Each editor on each paper had his own individual story. Similar to their predecessors of the Old West, most of these Lawton editor-publishers had little formal training in their profession. Journalism schools were not in vogue, so most learned newspapering through apprenticeships or by just going to work at it. By this time, though, many appeared to be high school graduates with some command of syntax and spelling. A few were holdovers from the old frontier days and were former printers who had turned to editing. Some even were one-man newspapers, doing everything from writing the news and editorials to setting the type and running the presses.

Personal journalism was still in practice during these first years of Lawton's existence. Using back alley and bar room language, Lawton editors ignored libel dangers and attacked and counter-attacked each other or criticized other citizens in the town. The editors descended to gutter-style language most often when they were attacking the opposition political party during campaigns or were fighting over city and county printing contracts.

This was one of the great pleasures of early-day newspapering, when two or more editors kept the pot boiling as they exchanged invectives or goaded one another to further editorial combat. These editorial battles did little to raise the public esteem of newspapermen, but they certainly entertained the readers--and sold newspapers. It was an era of journalism that both readers and newsmen were to miss and fondly recall after the more antiseptic, detached, and far less personal "modern journalism" came into practice.

All of the Lawton papers were boosters for their city. The pioneer editors as businessmen had a vital interest in the growth of their town,

and it was to their natural advantage to see new businesses and more residents come to Lawton--it meant more advertising and more subscribers.

Lawton journalism during its early years lagged far behind the improved methods and techniques of the "new journalism" being practiced in the larger American cities. This lag also was common among the small-town American press in general. Nor was the journalism being practiced in Oklahoma Territory after the turn of the century any better than Lawton's.²²

This new journalism largely was an outgrowth of the techniques started by the "yellow journalists," Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Their newspapers were known for dealing in the sensational, especially sex and crime, and for stretching the truth. Although scorned and reviled, yellow journalism had some promising aspects. To increase their profits through mass circulation, Pulitzer and Hearst took advantage of the technological advances in printing presses, type composition, paper, photoengraving, and other areas.²³

Other methods in combination with sensationalism were employed to attract readers. Faster and more efficient type composition through use of linotypes made larger newspapers possible, and with more news space came larger headlines and photoengravings. On page one, advertising

²²Edwin Emery, The Press and America (3rd ed., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 441-449; Frank Luther Mott, American Journalism, a History: 1690-1960 (3rd ed., New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 589-590. This lag in other Oklahoma Territory newspapers can be seen by scanning the Oklahoma City Daily Times-Journal, Daily Oklahoma, Guthrie Daily Leader, and the El Reno Globe from 1900-1905.

²³Emery, pp. 307-323; Mott, pp. 538-544.

was eliminated, and the use of balanced makeup and multi-column headlines broke up the monotonous one-column format newspapers had used for centuries. Papers became departmentalized, with women's pages, sports pages, and financial pages. Feature stories and comics were introduced. In reporting, there was the start of a striving to be objective and less opinionated. Reporters began leaving most of the editorial comments to the editorial page--not entirely, but it was a start. The inverted pyramid approach to reporting--that is, summarizing the most important elements of the story in the lead paragraph and detailing the rest of the story in order of descending importance of facts--had come into use during the Civil War. Yet up to this time, the inverted pyramid-style reporting also included much editorial comment and opinion of the writer. With the new journalism, leads were honed and refined, and stories were improved in writing techniques.²⁴

Through the methods and techniques employed by the yellow journalists, newspapers became more lively and more attractive. Although possibly no more sensational than in the past, they appeared to be. The big headlines, the more skillfully written stories, and the photographs illustrating the stories impressed readers as never before. Sensationalism also was employed by the yellow journalists to expose crime, corruption, and other social evils, and generally reflected the demands of the progressive movement for reforms. Realizing that the yellow journalists had made newspapers more timely, lively, and interesting than ever before, and had gained millions of new readers, journalists

²⁴Emery, pp. 311-313; Mott, p. 346.

over the country began to adopt their methods.²⁵

Only one of these trends toward modern journalism was picked up by Lawton newspapers before 1908, although all the innovations were adopted in the second decade of the century. That year the Lawton papers began to use balanced, page one makeup with larger, multi-column headlines. This was a change from the use of the one-column format with one-line headlines or several decks of heads above each one-column story. However, the papers could not afford photoengraving to utilize photographs. And throughout this first decade, the style of reporting continued to be highly opinionated, and abusive, personal journalism attacks were common. Generally, news stories in the Lawton papers in the early period were written in a rambling, verbose style without summary lead paragraphs. Most stories were told in chronological order. The new journalism styles had little influence on Lawton papers in this era.²⁶

In news coverage, the emphasis in Lawton was on local stories, plus county and Southwest Oklahoma events. Politics was covered more thoroughly than any other topic. Stories from elsewhere in the territory usually were clipped out of newspapers from Oklahoma City and Guthrie, the capital city. Social news items made filler copy throughout the papers. Toward the end of the first decade, some of the Lawton papers subscribed to a brief telegram summary of the news from the Associated Press. Editorial pages were lively ones, with several locally written editorials daily, usually on city or area issues.

²⁵ Emery, pp. 325-341; Mott, pp. 436-439.

²⁶ The front pages of the Constitution-Democrat on April 23, 1908, and the News-Republican on November 5, 1908, illustrate this change in format.

A newspaper was a business, but to make one a paying proposition in Lawton during its first years was the big problem. One major headache was too much competition--there were too many newspapers for all to survive. Another was overseeing the daily problems of selling advertising, reporting and writing the news, setting the type, printing, then distributing the type for the next issue. The editor-publisher had to see that his business drew enough hard cash to purchase supplies, pay the rent and other business expenses, and to pay his printers. If any profits were left over for him to live on, he was lucky. Newspapering was a tough way to make a living and certainly no way to get rich.

Skilled printers were hard to find, and keeping a crew on the job and happy with their wages and work was a major factor in getting out a newspaper in Lawton. The printers were strong union men, and the Lawton Typographical Union signed contracts with most of the papers starting in 1902. It was still the era of the tramp printer, and many of the Lawton "back shops" in the early years almost entirely comprised these itinerant workers, most of whom held union cards. Often a newspaper would lose a tramp printer overnight when wanderlust would seize him after he had drawn his weekly pay.²⁷

Union printers worked for \$8 to \$10 a week during Lawton's first years. Women compositors were paid \$3 to \$4 a week and devils \$2.50. By 1908, wages were considerably higher when the typographical union signed a contract with all the newspapers and job shops, making Lawton a "union labor only" town. The contract called for an eight-hour day and a working week of forty-eight hours. The weekly wage scale included

²⁷Weekly Republican, July 9, 1903, p. 4.

foremen, \$18; linotype-machinist operator, \$20; job printers, \$15; advertising and news makeup, \$15; makeup only, \$12, and hand compositors, \$12.²⁸

To pay printers' wages, to purchase supplies, and to eke out a living, the Lawton editor-publishers scrambled for revenues from several sources. One of the most obvious was subscriptions, although this source was a meager one. For years subscription rates were fixed in Lawton for dailies at 5 cents a single copy, 10 cents a week, 40 cents a month, and \$4 a year. Weekly rates were \$1 a year or 50 cents for six months.²⁹

Display advertising was becoming more of a vital source of income for newspapers of this period. Many retailers still simply purchased what were known to printers as "standing ads," advertisements run repeatedly in the papers which simply listed the firm name and type of goods sold or services offered. This had been the custom for decades, and in Lawton the papers carried this type of advertising for years. But in the 1890s retailers in the bigger cities began to advertise specific items through "sales," especially with the idea of offering these items at bargain prices.

The metropolitan newspapers as a part of the "new journalism" promoted this new kind of display advertising, which listed, described, and gave the price of the goods for sale, often with illustrations of the

²⁸Constitution-Democrat, February 13, 1908, p. 1; Constitution, August 4, 1946, p. 11. Mrs. Cleve Joyner, Constitution society editor, recalled setting type by hand for the Lawton Enterprise in 1903.

²⁹Democrat, August 6, 1901, p. 2; Republican, July 2, 1903, p. 4.

product. Far bigger advertisements were run in the papers, and the psychological concept was that the bigger the advertisement, the bigger the bargain. And of course all of this brought a bigger supply of cash into the newspapers' tills.³⁰

The large display advertisements were costly, so most retailers ran their bargain advertisements in the paper with the largest circulation in order to reach the widest range of readers. This led to circulation battles, with newspapers trying all sorts of promotion stunts and "gimmicks." By 1905 Lawton retailers were advertising some bargain sales in large display advertisements, and the newspapers launched numerous circulation promotions, from pianos as prizes for signing up the most new subscribers to giving away buttonhole and trimming scissors.³¹

Although display advertising was on the increase in Lawton in the later years of the first decade, the editor-publishers often appealed for the city's merchants to advertise more. Editorials urged merchants to boost their sales volume through advertising and also asked Lawtonians to patronize these businesses. Apparently some Lawtonians rode the trains to Oklahoma City to do their shopping, and editorials criticized this practice, citing the economic needs and benefits of buying at home. Another large source of revenue for present-day papers,

³⁰Mott, pp. 593-599, says that between 1892 and 1914 advertising in American newspapers increased two-and-one-half times, and that the advertising of retail merchants, particularly department stores, was chiefly responsible. Such advertising was very interesting to readers and helped to increase newspaper readers and subscribers, adding to the general increase brought by the new journalism. In particular, this growth of department store advertising was directed to women in the home.

³¹News-Republican, December 17, 1904, p. 1.

classified advertising, was not yet utilized by the Lawton papers. Instead, the papers ran what was known as "reader ads," which were actually small advertisements similar to classified "ads" but which were run throughout the papers as fillers. Classified advertising sections did not come into use in the Lawton papers until the second decade.

One device often employed by the early Lawton papers was the use of "ready print." These were pages of newsprint, pre-printed on one side with national advertising surrounded by feature stories or short stories of the literary type. The newspaper would buy these sheets and would print its local news and advertising on the other side of the readyprint sheets. The readyprint sheets were sold at reduced rates to the newspapers by such printing supply firms as A. N. Kellogg or Western Newspaper Union. Developed during the Civil War, this ready print service spread over the nation and was a popular labor-saving device with small newspapers. The national advertising considerably reduced the cost of the ready print and enabled many small publishers to turn out larger newspapers than they otherwise would have been able to afford.³²

Some of the Lawton papers used what was known as "boiler plate." This was stereotyped news matter which could be inserted directly into the printing forms. It was also a labor-saving device often used when papers were short of printers. Both makeshift devices were the earmarks

³²John Tebbel, The Compact History of the American Newspaper (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1969), pp. 250-251, 259. The A. N. Kellogg firm developed the ready print service after the Civil War. However, by 1901 the service largely had passed into the hands of Kellogg's chief rival, the Western Newspaper Union. In 1952 Western Newspaper Union discontinued this service because technology had largely displaced the need for it.

of undercapitalized publishers. The readers also were aware of this fact, and consequently most papers sought to avoid or discontinue the practices when they could afford to publish better papers.

Another form of newspaper revenue that was a continuing "lifesaver" was legal advertising. The "final proof" notices for homesteaders, the last step required by law to prove up their land claims, were a bonanza for some papers in Lawton's early years. These "legals" were so lucrative that some greedy publishers merely followed the homestead trail in Oklahoma Territory, producing colorless papers crammed with "legals," boilerplate, readyprint, and news clipped from other papers. The "legals" varied from \$4 to \$6.50 for each notice. These publishers were more interested in the money than in journalism, and when they had skimmed the cream from one region, they moved on to the next in the vanguard of homesteaders.³³

Frank V. Wright, editor of the News-Republican in Lawton for many years, said during this boom period of land "legals" that he used to pocket from \$200 to \$250 a week alone from these notices. Wright said it was later required by law that the final proof notices be printed in the newspaper with the largest circulation in the county, and that the going price then for the "legals" was \$5 each. "I was always a Republican newspaperman in a Democratic county," Wright said, "and I needed those notices for survival." Wright added that in order to retain the right to publish these "legals," he had to prove that his weekly paper's circulation was the largest in the county. This was one of several reasons why the daily newspapers during this early period

³³Foreman, p. xviii.

also published weekly versions of their newspapers. Usually these weekly editions contained a roundup of the week's news from the daily issues, and they also were utilized as vehicles for publishing the "legals." Because the weekly issues were cheaper in subscription cost and contained the week's roundup of city and area news, they gained a large circulation, particularly in the rural areas outside the city. On a lesser scale, other kinds of "legals," such as an advance notice of the opening of a new saloon, brought in welcome cash. Because there were some eighty saloons in the county before statehood in 1907, this was at least a small source of income.³⁴

Yet during the early years in Lawton, there was only one revenue source that enabled a newspaper to be solvent and allowed it to make some profits. That source was the politicians in power at the county and city levels, who controlled and dispensed printing contracts and several other forms of printing largess. Revenue from all the other sources simply was not enough to keep a newspaper going, and so these printing contracts spelled life or death for a newspaper during this period. The printing contracts for Comanche County and the City of Lawton combined in one year would amount to as high as \$8,000 to \$10,000. To fulfill these contracts, a newspaper would publish all

³⁴From Constitution morgue files, an unpublished interview with Wright in 1949. The value of the county printing contract is cited by the famous editor of the Emporia, Kansas, Gazette in The Autobiography of William Allen White (New York: Macmillan, 1946), pp. 131-132. Said White: "The county printing was our reason for being. For that, we would sacrifice anything! For that, we wrangled and rowed with the other editors of the town and the county. The county printing was a major objective. In every western county newspaper in that golden day, the county printing, which amount to five or six thousand dollars a year, was chiefly profit; and it was, as a matter of fact, almost our only profit. For that we lived, moved, and had our being."

kinds of official public notices, sometimes called legal notices, city council minutes, county commission minutes, ordinances, delinquent tax lists, bid notices, and additionally would do all the various kinds of job printing required for all the city and county offices.³⁵

The newspaper being dispensed these favors was so tightly bound to the politicians that it was expected to support party policy without any protest. On occasion when the newspaper disagreed with the politicians in power, the party would either give its favors to another newspaper or help to establish a newspaper itself. Such an event occurred in Lawton in 1902 when L. T. Russell's Democrat fell out with the Democratic officials in power, and a party organ was established, the Lawton Enterprise.³⁶

The party newspaper also was expected to support candidates without regard for their qualifications. The extent and limitations of this concept were evident when Russell proclaimed in the Democrat: "This paper is Democratic to the core and we will always support the party nominees from city scavenger to President and is thoroughly convinced that politics cannot be entirely eliminated, even from local affairs."³⁷

Another manifestation of this party newspaper subservience to politicians was the publishing under its masthead the names of party candidates for President, for Congress, for legislative seats, and for county and city offices from the time they were nominated until the

³⁵Constitution, January 5, 1905, p. 1. This story points out that the Board of Comanche County Commissioners paid out \$8,941.56 in county printing contracts over a two-year period.

³⁶Enterprise, February 13, 1902, p. 1.

³⁷Democrat, August 15, 1901, p. 1.

election was over. Also published was the complete party platform--not once, but several times. Before election time, the paper was expected to endorse editorially all party candidates and to list their qualifications for office--whether or not the editor believed they had any such qualifications. And of course the reward for all this faithful service was the continuation of the printing contracts, plus the bounty of printing the election ballots.

While under the thumb of politicians, Lawton newspapers lagged behind in accepting the new journalism styles, mechanical methods, and advertising and business techniques of the big city newspapers. Because their income was so meager from all other sources, the early Lawton newspapermen sought rewards from politicians. From Lawton's earliest times, then, newspapers were founded as organs for political parties, and for years the papers remained captives of the politicians. The same was true in this period of most other Oklahoma Territory newspapers. In fact, the subservience of the press at this level was not unusual, as the political control of small-town papers was characteristic of American journalism in this period.³⁸

Turmoil and Change

Bert Howard was one of many Lawton businessmen who moved their operations from tents along the townsite's borders into new and more permanent frame and brick buildings in the Lawton business district.

³⁸Will Irwin, "The Voice of A Generation," Collier's, July 29, 1911, reprinted under the title, "How Far Have We Come? A View from 1911," Columbia Journalism Review, II (Summer, 1963), p. 42. Interestingly, this assessment of the state of small-town and rural journalism in America cannot be found in the major histories of journalism by Mott and Emery.

Howard first set up shop for his Republican in a frame building at 220 B Avenue, but later moved into more spacious quarters on C Avenue opposite the post office. After the beginning of 1902, he also acquired a business partner, J. L. Sponsler, who was listed as associate editor.³⁹

Howard's goal of being the first Republican newspaper editor in Lawton had paid off handsomely. The Comanche County Board of Commissioners in its first meeting on August 12, 1901, had named the Republican as the official county newspaper. Soon his newspaper, which usually ran eight pages in size, was crammed with legal notices of all kinds. A heavy content of display advertising containing standard business announcements of location and services offered also was evidence of prosperity for the new newspaper. A notarized statement under the editorial page masthead said the subscription list of the Daily Republican was 728 bonafide subscribers.⁴⁰

His luck in winning the county printing contract was a result of Republican domination of Oklahoma Territory politics. Under a Republican presidential administration, the appointed governor of Oklahoma Territory was a Republican, and he in turn named all Republicans to Comanche County's first board of commissioners. These appointed county commissioners were to continue in office until the first election in the county on November 4, 1902.

Of Lawton's early-day editors, Howard was the most erudite and

³⁹Republican, January 9, 1902, p. 4.

⁴⁰Comanche County Board of Commissioners' Minutes, Volume I, on file at the Comanche County Courthouse, Lawton: Republican, January 9, 1902, p. 4.

accomplished as a writer. His newspaper was lively and highly readable and kept his readers informed of important events happening in Lawton. At times his news coverage extended into interesting feature stories. One such story under the headline of "One Life's Romance" read:

From San Antonio comes the story that Houston A. Ward of that city will soon wed the daughter of Geronimo, the old Apache chief who has been so long a prisoner at Fort Sill, and who still lives near here. There is quite a romantic story told of the betrothal of this strangely mated pair. Young Ward is said to be one of the richest young men in southern Texas. His father was an old-time mustang king of the Rio Grande country, from whom the son inherited his fortune. The son is a graduate of the Champaign, Illinois, college.

Last year he was forced to look for pasture for his cattle and that brought him into the Comanche country. Near Fort Sill he was lying under a tree enjoying a nap. Awakened, he found the herd stampeding and him in their path. His rescuer was the Apache girl, Lola, the 'Red Rose of the Forest,' daughter of old Geronimo. His own horse had strayed and the Indian girl helped him escape the hoofs of the herd. The wedding is to occur soon.⁴¹

Under Howard's guidance, the Republican far exceeded the other Lawton papers in journalistic excellence in editing, news coverage, advertising, and quality of printing. And he was ever the watchdog in looking after the needs and problems of Lawton and Comanche County as the young prairie town struggled to improve conditions. He tempered his boosterism with repeated warnings and suggestions on how the town and county should develop and maintain schools, streets, water supply, sewerage and sanitation facilities, county bridges, light and gas utilities, and the general buildup of businesses and homes.

The Republican repeatedly campaigned for better sanitary conditions in Lawton and warned that if something was not done in the summer of 1902, the city would suffer one of the worst epidemics ever known in the

⁴¹Republican, January 11, 1902, p. 1.

country. His editorials noted that the alleys were filled with rubbish and that outdoor toilets stank so badly that one could not pass near them. He proposed early approval of a sewerage system for the city or passage of an ordinance requiring sewage vaults, or septic tanks, to replace the outdoor toilets. He also urged that the city council create a water supply system suitable for the growing needs of Lawton. By the end of 1902, the city council had heeded his warnings and had approved use of \$152,000 from the townsite lot sale fund for a city waterworks and sewerage system.⁴²

But Howard also could descend from journalistic heights and enter into the "no-holds-barred" political squabbles that were to play a prominent role in Lawton's early newspapering. The spark that ignited the editorial fireworks in January of 1902 was the city printing contract. From that time, it and the county printing contract were the focus of editorial battles that filled the pages of the Lawton papers for years to come.

The debate came about after the establishment of Lawton's sixth newspaper, the Lawton Enterprise, an evening daily. J. Roy Williams as editor-publisher issued his first paper on January 1, 1902, from offices at the corner of Fourth and E Avenue. The Enterprise was Democratic in politics and obviously was established as a rival to the Democrat, published by L. T. Russell, whose vitriolic and unpartisan-like editorials had alienated the Democratic majority of the city council. Only three weeks after its establishment, the city council took the printing contract out of Russell's hands and gave it to the

⁴²Ibid., April 21, 1902, p. 1.

Enterprise. Thereafter Howard referred to the Enterprise as the "city organ" controlled and operated by Democratic Mayor Leslie P. Ross and the Democratic members of the city council. In reaction to the city council action, Howard exploded in an editorial headlined "Disgustingly cheap":

It has been apparent for some time that the members of the present city council were a lot of weak sisters; that they are of mighty small calibre and altogether about the cheapest outfit that ever assumed to discharge their public duties. . . .

That they made such an acknowledgement when they introduced and unanimously passed a resolution expressing their gratitude that at last a newspaper had been established with so little sense of propriety and with such utter disregard of the public interests involved as to give its unqualified endorsement to every action of the mayor and councilmen since they came into office, is the only fair interpretation to be put upon the resolution. . . .

They have proved their cheapness on numerous occasions, but these have always been in the dark and around the corner where they were so dense as to believe that perfidy would not be exposed. But this resolution tells the public the price for which they can be bought. . . .

Cheap little paragraphs, with a tearful, whining tone asking for the city printing was all that was required to make this aggregation stultify themselves and bring a blush to every man in Lawton who appreciates the dignity and self-respect that should attach to every public officer, and especially so to those who are acting in a representative capacity. . . .⁴³

It was obvious from examining the pages of the new daily that it was being published solely as the city council organ to get the profits from the city printing contract. The Enterprise contained little news coverage of the Lawton area but mostly reprinted clippings from other newspapers. Its editorials lambasted the opposition and unerringly glorified the party heroes under a masthead statement that proclaimed:

⁴³Enterprise, January 21, 1902, p. 1; Republican, January 21, 1902, p. 4.

"The Official Paper of the City."⁴⁴

Separated into two political warring camps, Lawton's newspapers continued their editorial battles all through 1902. As elections approached or as city and county problems arose, the editors would fire their partisan editorial shots at each other. The Republican newspapers, with Howard's Republican leading the way, continually took issue with the city council's handling of the waterworks, sewerage, and electric utility problems. The Democratic papers, led by Russell's Democrat, defended their cause and the actions taken by the city Democratic administration.

In the municipal election of April, 1902, Russell's Democrat charged that if the Republicans won the election it would be because the blacks were on their side, and that soon many more would be persuaded to move to Lawton to insure Republican domination. As had been the case since the Civil War, the Negroes regarded the Republican party as their champion and protector. That feeling was still prevalent at this time among Oklahoma Negroes, who thought that the Republican party would best serve their civil rights interests and help achieve their objectives to eliminate racial discrimination. Howard editorially deplored Russell's maneuver to make racial prejudice the leading issue in the election. But the issue did spark intense racial feelings, and the Democratic councilmen led by Mayor Ross soundly defeated the Republicans. Realizing an effective political weapon, the Democrats repeatedly were

⁴⁴Enterprise, January 21, 1902, p. 4.

to utilize the alleged Republican-Negro alliance in future elections.⁴⁵

The raising of the racial issue by the Democrats did have ugly consequences immediately after the Lawton election. Stories were printed elsewhere in the state that Comanche County authorities wired Governor Thompson B. Ferguson, the sixth Territorial governor, that private proclamations had been posted at Lawton warning all Negroes to leave town and that street riots between blacks and whites had occurred. A newspaper spokesman for the Negro cause, the Oklahoma Guide at Guthrie, reported that Lawton was in the throes of a race war and that the governor had been asked to have troops readied to be sent there. The Guide reported:

. . . when the Kiowa country was opened to settlement a large colony of Negroes was located there. Their numbers were augmented in December by emigration agencies in Mississippi and other Southern states, who shipped them by the car load to Lawton. In the recent municipal campaign the preponderance of Lawton Negroes was used as a campaign issue by the Democrats.

The feeling against the Negroes has been tense for weeks. It culminated today in several street fights between blacks and whites. Information which came to the governor from Lawton says the whites are in arms and threaten to drive every Negro out of Lawton before sunrise Monday morning. .

. . .⁴⁶

The Guide added that Governor Ferguson assured Comanche County officials that he would have peace maintained if all the soldiers in Oklahoma were necessary to enforce it. The Guide also quoted an unnamed

⁴⁵ Arthur Lincoln Tolson, "The Negro in Oklahoma Territory, 1889-1907: A Study in Racial Discrimination" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1966), pp. 76-100; Republican, March 27, 1902, p. 4; April 3, 1902, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Alva Review, April 10, 1902, p. 1; Oklahoma Guide, April 10, 1902, p. 1.

Negro who claimed he was driven out of Lawton. The Negro said notices were posted warning all blacks to leave Lawton by April 6. He said the blacks appealed to City Marshal Heck Thomas and Sheriff W. W. Painter, but that both told them they had to go. After crowds of hoodlums followed him and other blacks, jeering and abusing them, he said he and about thirty others left by train.⁴⁷

No Lawton newspapers printed any similar accounts about the "race war" and the forced exodus of blacks from Lawton. Even Howard, evidently alarmed that the stories would be damaging to Lawton's reputation, commented editorially that "newspapers everywhere have printed the abominable fabrication" of a race war in Lawton. Howard recited the details as reported by another paper, but branded all of them as outrageous lies.⁴⁸

Following the city election and racial troubles, the Republican and Democrat resumed their editorial wars and personal attacks in the best style of personal journalism. Russell, angered because Mayor Ross had taken the city printing contract from his paper, began attacking the mayor in print and criticizing him because his administration could not keep law and order in Lawton. In defense of Ross, Howard argued that Russell was "maliciously stigmatizing the fair reputation of Lawton," and labeled him the "low-browed mangy yellow cur of Lawton newspaperdom."⁴⁹

⁴⁷Alva Review, April 10, 1902, p. 1; Oklahoma Guide, April 10, 1902, p. 1.

⁴⁸Republican, April 17, 1902, p. 4.

⁴⁹Ibid., July 26, 1902, p. 4; July 28, 1902, p. 4.

Days stretched into weeks as the war of words and name-calling continued. In August, 1902, Russell laid down his pen and resorted to physical violence. The target of his attack was not Howard, his arch editorial foe, but J. Roy Williams, editor of the Enterprise, whose newspaper had taken the city printing contract from Russell. Under the headline of "Cowardly Assault," the Republican reported:

Yesterday evening soon after the evening papers were issued, L. T. Russell, of the Democrat, committed a brutal and cowardly assault on editor Roy Williams, of the Enterprise. Williams was walking along Avenue D, when, without saying a word of warning, Russell approached him from behind, grabbed him by the collar, whirled him around, and struck him a vicious blow in the face. Williams was knocked to the sidewalk, and eye witnesses say Russell kicked him three or four times. It is stated also that he drew a big gun half out of his pocket as though intending to take a shot at his helpless victim, but decided not to do that.

Editor Williams is a small man, physically infirm and unable to defend himself from assault of a man like Russell, even if he had warning of attack.

There is a general feeling of indignation against Russell, and the assault is pronounced a cowardly act by everybody.⁵⁰

Russell's attack on Williams seemed to temper the verbal battle in the editorial columns, and the newspapers turned their attention to the upcoming general election in November. The results were a sweep for the Democrats in all the races. Sponsler, associate editor of the Republican, also a printer and president of the newly organized Lawton Typographical Union, was defeated as a Republican candidate for representative in the territorial legislature. The election result had further consequences for the Republican. It meant the end of the county printing contract for Howard.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid., August 2, 1902, p. 1.

⁵¹ Republican, November 5, 1902, p. 1.

Two significant newspaper changes were made in the latter months of 1902. On September 16, two Democratic afternoon dailies, the Enterprise and the Lariat, were consolidated into one afternoon daily, the Enterprise-Lariat. The Lariat was a weekly established in August of 1901, but which later had turned into an evening daily. Although avowedly Democratic in politics, the Lariat had led a quiet life and had always been a sidelines spectator in the Lawton editorial fights. J. Roy Williams was named editor of the merged paper, and other officials included J. C. Tousley, business manager, and Keene Abbott, city editor. The new paper contributed little to Lawton's journalistic history except that it carried political patronage printing and constantly chanted the litanies, praises, and pronouncements of the Democratic party. Late in 1903, the newspaper abandoned its daily publication and continued as a weekly under the name of the Lawton Weekly Enterprise.⁵²

The other newspaper change occurred in November of 1902, when a second Lawton Republican newspaper, the Lawton Weekly News, announced that it was starting publication of a daily paper to be called the Lawton News. Frank V. Wright, who had been operating a job printing shop at the corner of Fourth Street and B Avenue, joined L. J. Gunn as publishers of the combined weekly-daily operation. With new offices at 410 C Avenue, the publishers also boasted that new presses made their newspaper and job printing office the best printing plant in the new country.⁵³

⁵²Enterprise, February 13, 1903, p. 4.

⁵³News, October 16, 1902, p. 1; November 7, 1902, p. 4.

The year 1903 was an especially hard one on Lawton's Republican newspapers. The Democrats had dominated municipal elections from Lawton's opening. On the county level, terms of the Republican officials who had been appointed at the opening were to end after the November general elections of 1902. In that election, the Democrats had made a sweep of the county offices. With the start of 1903, the outlook was bleak for Howard's Republican. As soon as the Democrats assumed their Comanche County posts, they took the county printing contract out of Howard's hands and awarded it to the Enterprise.⁵⁴

Also in 1903, L. T. Russell at long last got his wish. In June, the city council and the county commissioners both removed their printing contracts from the Enterprise after a falling out and awarded them to Russell's Democrat.⁵⁵

With the Republican political connection lost, Howard's Republican was on a downhill slide without the county printing contract money. In fact, it and the other Republican newspaper, the Lawton Daily News, announced in May of 1903 that they were suspending publication of their dailies but retaining their weekly issues. Both papers announced it was a compromise agreement reached after it was decided that Lawton could not support four competing daily newspapers, two for each party.

Commented Howard:

Everyone admits that there are too many daily publications in Lawton and for some time past an effort has been made to get one or the other of the Democratic dailies to drop out of the daily field with one of the Republican papers thus leaving one paper of each political faith in each field,

⁵⁴This evolution of the printing contract was explained in an editorial in the Constitution, June 1, 1905, p. 4.

⁵⁵Ibid.; Republican, June 11, 1903, p. 4.

but the Democrat and the Enterprise seem to be in the fight to the finish, neither being willing to concede anything, so that the sacrifice had to be made by the Republican papers both of which go to a weekly with this issue. . . .

It might be well for the business men to select one or the other of the Democratic newspapers and give it their support, thereby helping to adjust this difference which must be settled by the death of one or the other.⁵⁶

Then in June of 1903 Howard's problems mounted when union printers staged a walkout after he had hired a young woman as a printer's devil to learn to hand set type. Howard claimed in an editorial explaining the situation that the union printers he had employed in his shop after signing a contract in 1902 generally were incompetent in their trade and that most were drunks. He charged that most of them were transients who could not be depended upon to be at work every day and generally that none was worth the \$7 a week scale demanded by the union. As a result of the walkout, the publisher hired an apprentice crew of "four young ladies and one boy." Although the Republican was full of typographical errors, Howard said he would retain his young apprentices until they learned the trade and that he would refuse to hire any more union printers.⁵⁷

But the labor and financial problems proved too much. On August 20, 1903, the Lawton Republican ceased to exist. Howard sold his subscription list, a portion of the type and machinery, and the good will of the newspaper to the Lawton News. He announced that Lawton was not large enough to support the newspapers then in competition. He added that he was moving the rest of his printing machinery to Oklahoma City to set up a job printing plant and to issue a weekly and possibly a

⁵⁶Republican, May 28, 1903, p. 4; News, May 28, 1903, p. 8.

⁵⁷Republican, June 11, 1903, p. 2; July 9, 1903, p. 4.

daily in the future. The exodus of Lawton's first newspaper publisher left a void in the city's journalism that was not to be filled for several years. Howard had wielded a trenchant pen in the journalistic wars of the new city, had published a highly competent and readable paper, and had been an asset to Lawton's progress. He would be missed.⁵⁸

The merged newspaper, the weekly News-Republican under Gunn and Wright, later began issuing a daily edition in March of 1904. The publishers announced that because two Democratic dailies continued in operation the News-Republican would "take up arms and print a paper in defense of the Republican party . . . and fight for its place in the daily field."⁵⁹

Meanwhile, Lawton's Democrats, long split into two bitter factions, decided in March of 1904 to end their squabbling and to form a united political front. To accomplish this it was planned to abolish one of the two Democratic daily papers, get rid of both of the present editors, and bring in some new blood to head the remaining paper. The mechanics of the maneuver apparently included persuading Williams of the Enterprise and Russell of the Democrat to sign contracts for a certain amount of money and to remain out of the newspaper business for one year. The Enterprise would be abolished, and new editors and staffers would be hired for the Democrat. This scheme also would end the two papers' rivalry over the city and county printing contracts, as the reorganized Democrat would then receive both. Williams and Russell agreed to the compact. Russell apparently was persuaded because he was heavily in

⁵⁸ Ibid., August 20, 1903, p. 1; News-Republican, August 20, 1903, p. 1.

⁵⁹ News-Republican, March 10, 1904, p. 4.

debt, and Williams evidently had made secret plans to be connected with a new Democratic paper to be started in Lawton, which incidentally was a violation of the contract he had signed.⁶⁰

It was announced in the Democrat that arrangements had been made to shut down one of the Democratic dailies because Lawton could no longer support two rival papers of the same political faith. It was pointed out that the overcrowded newspaper situation in Lawton would be solved with the two remaining dailies, one for each party. The new management of the Democrat included Sam G. Umphrey of El Reno as editor, W. F. Kerr as city editor and business manager, and Miss Mary Buell as bookkeeper. A portion of the Enterprise printing equipment was moved to the Democrat's offices on Sixth Street across from the courthouse.⁶¹

Unknown to the Democrats who thought their factional dispute had been ended with the newspaper settlement, another disgruntled clique of the Lawton Democrats, led by Leslie P. Ross, attorney and Lawton's first mayor, had made arrangements to launch a new Lawton newspaper representing his group. Ross secretly struck a deal with Williams to be editor of the new paper, although it would be an open violation of the contract Williams had signed to stay out of newspapering for one year. The News-Republican, continuing its lengthy investigation, learned that the new paper was supporting two of the nominees for county commissioner and the nominees for county clerk in order to get their patronage and be awarded the county printing contract. Enraged, the Democrats who

⁶⁰ Ibid., March 24, 1904, p. 4. The News-Republican thoroughly reported the inside story of the Democrats' plan. Russell told the details in an interview with the paper.

⁶¹ Ibid.

subscribed to foot the \$4,700 bill to abolish the Enterprise openly complained they had been "double-crossed and buncoed."⁶²

The new Democratic paper referred to was the Lawton Constitution, the newspaper which ultimately was to survive all of the journalistic battles and become the city's dominant paper. To set up the paper, the Ross faction purchased a small weekly, the Elgin Eagle, in the county town of Elgin, moved it seventeen miles to Lawton, and renamed it the Constitution. Because the Eagle had been established in Comanche County for twelve months, it was entitled to publish all forms of legal publications, plus immediately be eligible for city and county printing contracts. It was a clever move on Ross's part, and as the News-Republican observed, "Ross is 'playing the game.' He now has an 'official organ.'"⁶³

The Lawton Daily Constitution with J. Roy Williams as editor made its first appearance on May 11, 1904. The new paper quickly found the going rough, and two months later in July, abandoned its daily edition. However, the Constitution continued as a weekly through 1904, and it resumed daily publication the next year. Its Republican rival commented that "this time no one was paid to quit," and added:

Two more newspapers that entered the Lawton field but a few weeks ago to fill a 'long felt want' turned their toes to the daisies Saturday. One was the Daily Constitution, the other a little free weekly known as the Harpoon.

Lawton is once more down to a legitimate daily newspaper basis--one Republican and one Democrat daily is an ample sufficiency and all that the business men will tolerate, as

⁶²Ibid., May 12, 1904, p. 4.

⁶³Ibid.

has been shown. The defunct daily announces that it will continue to publish a weekly and do 'artistic job work.'⁶⁴

In the same edition announcing the Constitution's change, the News-Republican carried a list of "newspapers defunct in Lawton." Under a headline, "In Memory of Those Departed," the list included the Last Pioneer, founder unknown; Leader, by Frank Prouty; Jeffersonian, by Tousley and Williams; Post, by T. H. Records; Lawtonian, by Johnson and Smith; Republican, by Bert Howard; Lariat, by Abbott and Tilton; Enterprise, by Johnson, Williams, Tilton, Abbott, et al; Advertiser, by Ross and Davis; Harpoon, by Johnson and Harness, and Daily Constitution, by Williams, Tilton, Johnson, Abbott, et al.⁶⁵

The list is illustrative of the ease in which newspapers were started during the early press period in Lawton. Yet out of the eleven papers listed, only three--the Republican, Enterprise, and Constitution--had any degree of permanency. The remainder are presumed to have had only a fleeting existence--such as the Harpoon--and no copies of their editions are known to be extant.

Meanwhile, L. T. Russell, who had sold his interests in the Democrat, became a central figure in one of the most sensational shoot-outs in Lawton's history. On April 4, 1904, at high noon in downtown Lawton, a dramatic gun duel occurred between Russell and Colonel William Hawkins, former assistant chief of police under City Marshal Heck Thomas. Hundreds in front of City Hall on D Avenue saw the gun play which erupted just after the two had left a Democratic county convention.

⁶⁴Ibid., July 7, 1904, p. 1.

⁶⁵Ibid.

A remark between the two started the trouble; Hawkins then pushed Russell off the sidewalk and followed him to the street. Russell drew a .45-caliber Colt pistol and fired two or three shots at Hawkins. Although Hawkins drew his Colt pistol, he held his fire because of the crowd of spectators around the editor. Russell ran to a stairway across the street and, using the wall as protection, emptied his pistol at Hawkins, who only fired a wild shot in the air.⁶⁶

Critically wounded with bullets in the abdomen and both legs, the thirty-seven-year-old Hawkins was taken to Heck Thomas's home, where he died eight days later. In a statement before he died, Hawkins said there had been ill feelings between the two growing out of remarks Russell had made about him in the newspaper. Hawkins was well known and liked in Lawton, and businesses closed and practically the whole town turned out for his funeral. Playing a dirge, the Lawton band led a long procession of mourners as the casket was carried from Heck Thomas's home to the church for services.⁶⁷

Editorials deplored the "wide-open, wild West, gun toting" image of Lawton raised by the shooting and urged that citizens abandon the practice of carrying weapons. Russell was indicted for murder by a grand jury and held without bail in jail until his trial in December. The trial was held in Anadarko after Russell was granted a change of venue on the grounds that intense feelings against him in Lawton would prevent a fair trial. He was found guilty on a reduced charge of manslaughter and sentenced to three years in prison. Later through a

⁶⁶Ibid., April 4, 1904, p. 1.

⁶⁷Ibid., April 14, 1904, p. 1.

technicality (the grand jury which indicted him had been irregularly drawn) the charge was dropped. Russell later edited a weekly in Ardmore but sold it in 1909 and went to Newark, New Jersey, where he again edited a newspaper.⁶⁸

By 1905 the Constitution was on a more solid economic footing and had resumed its daily publication. And the Ross faction's plans were working. The county commissioners and clerk who were allied with the Ross group had been elected, and in January the Constitution was awarded the county printing contract. The Constitution remarked that it was "not disposed to exult over its good fortune in being selected as the official paper of the county." The next day, however, the editorial masthead added the words: "The Official Paper of Comanche County."⁶⁹ Indignant at charges of being called a "Ross faction organ," the Constitution pointed out that the county had paid out \$8,941.56 in printing contracts over the past two years, and that most of it had gone to the "organ" of the county and city officials--the State Democrat. The Constitution asserted:

It costs money to keep up an 'organ.' The money must come out of the taxpayers and 'the organ' must put up the defense of the officials. The editor of the Constitution has never edited an organ and never will. The official who is honest and is not afraid of an untrammelled expression of public opinion won't have one.

The Constitution is simply a democratic newspaper, laboring for the purpose of democratic principles and the upbuilding of the party along the proper lines. . . .⁷⁰

For the next few years the editorial pages of the State Democrat

⁶⁸ Constitution-Democrat, April 14, 1909, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Constitution, January 5, 1905, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

and the Constitution overflowed with charges and countercharges as the two Democratic papers squabbled over party patronage, candidates, and printing contracts. And both papers waged a personal journalism war by lashing back and forth at each other in back-alley terms. The State Democrat editors labeled their foe as "Jay Roy, a lying, moral degenerate and the knock-kneed wart that presides over the columns of the Constitution's sore."⁷¹ In reply Williams countered that the State Democrat was the "organ of the official grafters and treasury looters" and a "yeller dog newspaper."⁷² At other times the partisanship fight would include the News-Republican, and all three dailies would fire shots at each other. The two lucrative printing contracts continued to be divided between the two Democratic papers, with the State Democrat retaining the city patronage and the Constitution keeping the county contract.

In February of 1905 the State Democrat ownership was assumed by Robert A. Neff and Thomas M. Bixby, who announced they would be both proprietors and editors.⁷³ By 1906 the State Democrat also had changed from a morning paper to an evening newspaper. J. Roy Williams announced in December of 1905 that he was sole owner of the Constitution after purchasing stock owned by Sol K. Rush, who had been with the paper from its founding. Rush left Lawton and purchased control of the Anadarko Tribune.⁷⁴ James H. Timmons, a printer, was named city editor, and

⁷¹State Democrat, April 12, 1906, p. 4.

⁷²Constitution, June 15, 1906, p. 4.

⁷³State Democrat, February 23, 1905, p. 2.

⁷⁴Constitution, December 7, 1905, p. 4.

A. W. Anderson, a Wichita, Kansas, banker, joined the paper in July of 1906 as business manager. The News-Republican also underwent a change of ownership in September of 1905, when Frank V. Wright became the sole owner after purchasing stock from L. J. Gunn, the co-editor and co-manager. Gunn, one of the original founders of the paper in the land opening, left Lawton to attend to other business interests.⁷⁵

Other significant changes in the newspapers during this period included the addition of linotypes and a new press. In June of 1907, the Constitution-Democrat installed a Cottrell double revolution, seven-column, four-page press in its new quarters at Fourth Street between D and E avenues. The Constitution in July of 1906 acquired the first machine, a "Linotype, Jr.," from the Mergenthaler Company of Brooklyn, New York, at a cost of approximately \$3,500. The Constitution bragged that the new machine with an operator could do the work of four or five hand compositors. The paper also commented that the typesetting machine would help solve the problem of printing help in that most of the hand compositors were tramp printers who would often put the newspaper in a bind by leaving overnight.⁷⁶ The News-Republican during this time had paid to have its type set on linotypes at the Corey Typesetting Company. However, the News-Republican abandoned that practice in July of 1909, when it installed its first linotype.⁷⁷

All through this early press period the Democratic newspapers used racial prejudice against Negroes as one of the principal issues in city,

⁷⁵News-Republican, September 7, 1905, p. 4.

⁷⁶Constitution, July 12, 1906, p. 1.

⁷⁷News-Republican, July 6, 1909, p. 1.

county, and territorial political campaigns. Racial hatred was the constant drum which these politically controlled papers beat in the elections as the important and real issues rarely were raised and never became the chief points of debate. It is the contention of sociologist Harold D. Lasswell that all politics is a battle between competing "political elites" or groups for power and wealth in which "symbols" rather than real issues are used to win popular support. Lasswell's ideas offer an insight as to how the politicians used patronage and purchase of loyalty, such as the city and county printing contracts, to induce the journalists to appeal to racial prejudice in the campaigns as a "symbol" and avoid the actual issues.⁷⁸

In the 1905 municipal election campaign, for example, both Democratic papers charged that election of a Republican mayor would mean Negro domination of Lawton. The Constitution charged that a Republican mayor would be a calamity in that it would be a standing invitation for Negroes to colonize Lawton and Comanche County, and "they would flock here like black birds to take the place of the white laborers who are now employed in our city."⁷⁹ Although each Democratic paper supported a different candidate in the mayor's race, none of the issues which the candidates stood for was debated. The State Democrat, highly vitriolic

⁷⁸Porter A. Stratton, The Territorial Press of New Mexico, 1834-1912 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), pp. 81-116, employs Lasswell's theory in an incisive and brilliant study of New Mexico's early press. Stratton's use of this sociological analysis or "model" helps analyze the political role of Lawton's early-day press, and this writer has borrowed heavily from him. For a discussion of the term "political elites," see Harold D. Lasswell, Politics: Who Gets What, When, How (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1958), p. 13.

⁷⁹Constitution, March 23, 1905, p. 4.

in its language, argued, "Whether Lawton shall be a white man's town or a nigger town depends upon the result of this election."⁸⁰

But it was in the 1906 campaign for the election of delegates to the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention that the appeal to racial prejudice as a "symbol" sank to an all-time low in scurrility in Lawton and Comanche County. "Jim Crow" and the grandfather clause were leading topics in the campaign, but other issues were entirely ignored. Typical of the editorial comments run almost daily in the Lawton Democratic papers was the following:

If you believe in the supremacy of the white race over that of the nigger, if you are opposed to social and political equality between the whites and niggers, if you believe in separate schools, separate coaches, separate waiting rooms and separate hotels for whites and niggers, of course you are a Democrat. That's all there is to it. That's the issue in this campaign. That is the difference between the Democratic and Republican parties. White or nigger rule. Democratic or Republican success at the polls. That, and that only, is the paramount issue.⁸¹

The Republicans, long in power in Oklahoma Territory, were shocked by the Democratic landslide. Of the 112 seats in the constitutional convention, the Democrats captured 100, and thus won the privilege of organizing the convention. In effect this election marked the emergence of modern Oklahoma's one-party system that remained until the 1960's. Typical of the territory, Comanche County elected all three of the Democratic candidates to the convention, with large majorities for each. The Republicans carried only one precinct in the county. Named delegates were G. M. Tucker, William H. Edley, and John M. Young, who was

⁸⁰State Democrat, April 6, 1905, p. 6.

⁸¹Ibid., November 1, 1906, p. 4.

elected secretary of the convention.⁸² Crowded the State Democrat over the results: "That means the Democrats will formulate the constitution of the new state, and Oklahoma will be a white man's state, which means a Democratic state."⁸³

After nearly three years of battling each other, the two Democratic papers merged on April 25, 1907, pointing out that under one management some profits should be realized rather than each having to fight the wolf from its door. J. Roy Williams and Thomas M. Bixby were listed as editors and publishers and A. W. Anderson as business manager. No mention was made of Robert A. Neff, who had been one of the co-owners of the State Democrat with Bixby. The daily edition first was known as the Lawton Democrat and Constitution, but shortly afterward was changed to the Lawton Constitution-Democrat. Officers of the merged paper remained at the Constitution office, located at the corner of D Avenue and Fifth Street, the southeast corner of the courthouse square.⁸⁴

A year later Bixby sold his interest in the paper and retired from newspapering. J. W. Perry, former news editor of the News-Republican, and Victor L. Spaulding, business manager of the Constitution-Democrat, joined Williams as partners in the newspaper. In 1907, Williams was a candidate for one of two House of Representatives seats in the first Oklahoma legislature. He won the seat in the election, which also saw Thomas P. Gore of Lawton, the blind attorney, named as United States

⁸²Ibid., November 8, 1906, p. 5. See also James R. Scales, "Political History of Oklahoma, 1907-1944," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1965), pp. 22-36.

⁸³State Democrat, November 8, 1906, p. 5.

⁸⁴Democrat and Constitution, April 25, 1907, p. 1.

Senator from Oklahoma. In a bid for re-election in 1908, Williams lost the Democratic nomination to his "political patron," Colonel Leslie P. Ross.⁸⁵

Four other newspapers were published in Lawton during the first decade. Charles M. Wilson, operator of Wilson's Quick Print, a job printing shop, began publication of the Daily Hornet in 1903. It was a giveaway sheet, smaller than tabloid size, containing four three-column pages, filled mostly with advertising. The Hornet was a politically independent "gadfly" sheet which editorially commented and gossiped about Lawton happenings and politics. On March 5, 1908, Wilson also began publication of Wilson's Weekly Democrat, a four-page weekly selling for \$1 a year. His weekly was operated much in the same manner as the Hornet and contained much of the same advertising and legals. Both were still being published by 1910.⁸⁶

Frank C. Davis launched the Mineral Kingdom, a mining paper, in 1902. In 1903, it was changed to the Oklahoma Farm News and Mineral Kingdom. The paper supported the Farmers' Union and also printed news about mining in the Wichita Mountains. It usually contained eight pages, with ready prints filling the inside pages. Issued on Saturdays, the paper sold for \$1 a year.⁸⁷

On February 6, 1907, Frank C. Davis merged his Oklahoma Farm News and Mineral Kingdom with a new publication which was named the

⁸⁵Constitution-Democrat, September 19, 1907, p. 1.

⁸⁶Hornet, December 3, 1909; Wilson's Weekly Democrat, December 2, 1909.

⁸⁷Oklahoma Farm News and Mineral Kingdom, December 7, 1905.

Semi-Weekly Star. The Star attempted a non-partisan stance politically, but leaned in the direction of the Republican Party. Its inside pages were ready prints. Robert Johnson was first named managing editor, but he was soon replaced by A. M. Kinne, late of Winfield, Kansas.⁸⁸

On October 5, 1907, the Star announced it was having financial difficulties and was converting from a semi-weekly into a weekly. The management of the Star again changed hands on November 30, 1907. J. B. Howard became business manager, replacing Pennington, who retired; V. L. Spaulding was named city editor, and Mrs. Margaret Day became secretary. The Star later became a daily publication and merged with the Lawton News in 1911.⁸⁹

By the end of Lawton's first decade, five newspapers of fifteen started in Lawton were still being published, including the Constitution-Democrat, News-Republican, Daily Hornet, Wilson's Weekly Democrat, and the Weekly Star. Except for the giveaway Daily Hornet and the two weeklies, Lawton was approaching the national trend. In towns large enough to support more than one paper, usually competition was limited to two papers representing the major political parties. Lawton in its first decade clearly was an overcrowded field for newspapers. Many started on a shoestring. And generally it was true that those which did not receive political patronage in the form of city or county printing contracts did not survive. In the final result it was the cash register--the counting house side of the business--which decided whether a newspaper would be a permanent institution in the town.

⁸⁸ Semi-Weekly Star, February 6, 1907.

⁸⁹ Ibid., October 5, 1907; November 30, 1907.

Newspapers As Boosters

"Gold in the Wichitas!"--"Lawton to be the Second Denver of the West!"--"Rich Discoveries!"--"Boom Coming!" Those were only a few of the hundreds of headlines in the Lawton papers as several thousand prospectors and miners swarmed the Wichita Mountains in search of gold and silver. The last great gold rush east of the Rockies officially started August 6, 1901, when the Kiowa-Comanche lands were opened to settlement. It was legal then to stake mineral claims in the Wichitas, although the government had set aside more than 58,000 acres as a forest reserve.

As the twentieth century argonauts swarmed into the new Eldorado, another kind of gold fever gripped Lawton newspaper editors. They had visions that Lawton would become another Denver, a mammoth business and trade center supplying the many needs of a mining area--and that they and other Lawton businessmen would become fabulously rich in the process.

Promoting the gold boom was one way newspapers acted as boosters for their community. Pioneer journalists inevitably filled the roles of being a frontier town's leading promoters. The reasons were simple. Frontier editors were also businessmen, and if the town prospered, so would they. And newspapermen were the only ones in the frontier towns who had the media and the skills and inclinations which could transform a dusty town into a booming city or an underdeveloped area into a prosperous region. The trouble was that a lot of newspaper boosterism

was highly exaggerated, overly optimistic, and sometimes used downright lies.⁹⁰

In the Wichita Mountains gold boom, the newspaper boosterism was based largely on flimsy evidence. Tiny pockets of gold and silver were found in the ancient granite hills, but not rich veins. And these tiny pockets were just enough to keep hundreds of miners searching for a mother lode, with the Lawton newspaper boosters cheering them on and keeping other Lawtonians' hopes soaring that the city would become another Denver or another Cripple Creek.

The Lawton newspapers also fed the gold fever by reporting stories of gold strikes in the mountains, such as the following:

Excitement is running high in the Wichitas.

Late yesterday afternoon Wm. Mulholland, an old and experienced miner, was in town with his pockets full of mineral specimens of rare value--both gold and silver. He was somewhat excited over the prospects and seemed to be very earnest in his declarations of the Wichitas' wealth.

'There are better prospects in many parts of the Wichitas today than I ever saw in Colorado or Arizona. I am a miner of 19 years experience and never before has fortune appeared so near at hand,' he said.⁹¹

Other stories told how several Lawton businessmen had opened offices as mining brokers and had filled their windows with piles of ore. The stories reported how the talk in Lawton was scarcely of anything but assays, buttons, nuggets, and mining machinery. Other reports told how promoters from as far east as New York were organizing mining

⁹⁰For a discussion of newspaper boosterism in Oklahoma, see Bobby H. Johnson, "Booster Attitudes of Some Newspapers in Oklahoma Territory--'The Land of the Fair God'," Chronicles of Oklahoma, XLIII, No. 3 (Autumn, 1965), pp. 242-264.

⁹¹News, April 30, 1903, p. 3.

companies. Several companies advertised mining stocks in Lawton, Oklahoma City, and other Oklahoma Territory newspapers.⁹²

For years prior to the land opening there had been talk among miners of gold nuggets to be had for the taking in the Wichitas. But the land belonged to the Kiowas and Comanches, and as prospectors slipped into the mountains they were driven out, arrested, and harassed by Fort Sill soldiers and Indian police alike.

When the August 6, 1901, opening arrived, feverish gold seekers swarmed all over the rugged Wichitas, wide-eyed, anxious, dust-choked in the sizzling August heat. Tent cities or rag towns sprang up from one end to the other of the sixty-mile-long mountain range which stretches west from Mount Scott to north of Altus. Their numbers steadily rose, and estimates were made that as many as 3,000 were working claims in the granite hills.⁹³

Mining camps with the colorful names of Wildman, Meers, Golden Pass, Craterville, and Oreana dotted the area. Several newspapers were established--Wildman's Otter Creek Miner, the Mount Sheridan Miner, and the Mineral Kingdom at Lawton--and their stories heightened the gold fever. Smelters were constructed to process the ore--six were constructed in the Wichitas from 1901 to 1915. Other ore samples were sent to smelters at El Paso, Pueblo, and Denver for tests.⁹⁴

⁹²Ibid.; Kansas City Star, October 17, 1903, p. 6.

⁹³Steve Wilson, "Economic Possibilities of Mining in the Wichita Mountains," Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Science, XLIII (1963), pp. 160-163.

⁹⁴News-Republican, September 24, 1903, p. 1; Enterprise, September 24, 1903, p. 1.

When the mining activity reached a peak in 1903, the Lawton newspapers feverishly claimed that the boom had arrived. Although the results of the assays sent to out-of-state smelters were clouded in confusion, the Lawton papers reported the tests showed there were precious metals in paying quantities to be found in the Wichitas. One such report by the News-Republican claimed that eighteen tons of ore shipped to Colorado smelters by Lawton people sold for \$11.60 per ton. Excited people are swarming to the mountains, the story reported, and hundreds of prospectors have joined the already large number of pioneer miners there. "The rush to the Wichita Mountains will equal the Black Hills' rush years ago," the story added.⁹⁵

Booster editorials such as the following prodded Lawtonians to keep the mining activity going:

The Wichita mines have passed the doubtful stage. It is no longer a question of their being anything there, but a question of how big a thing it is and who will reap the benefits. The thing for Lawton to do is to step in and take hold. The town can't go to the mountains, but you can bring the riches of the mountains to the town.

A smelter, or some equivalent, and a railroad to the mountains are two essential steps in the process. It is necessary to get machinery to handle the raw material and the railroad to bring it here to be handled. Get a railroad that will reach the various mountains and mining centers and so bring all the people to Lawton who want to visit these places.

Get your machinery and then get the crude oil for fuels. It will be possible to do this. The wells on the Woods claim prove this. This would give them cheap fuel and no other element is wanting to make Lawton a second Denver.⁹⁶

In late 1903 the federal government sent a geologist to investigate whether paying ore actually existed in the Wichitas. H. Boster Bain, a geologist from the University of Oklahoma, visited many mines, gathered

⁹⁵News-Republican, September 24, 1903, p. 1.

⁹⁶Ibid., October 1, 1903, p. 4.

over 300 pounds of samples, and made 71 assays. He reported that although some of the assays showed small traces of lead, copper, and silver, none showed any gold. His conclusion: there was no gold, silver, lead, copper, or zinc in paying quantities in the Wichitas.⁹⁷

The Lawton newspapers expressed disbelief and continued their boosterism by voicing hopes the miners would continue their efforts to make Bain out a liar. And the miners, a tenacious breed, also refused to believe Bain and kept digging. "Mr. Bain's report will put a damper upon the sale of stock and also upon the foisting of blue sky propositions upon the unwary," commented W. P. Waldron, president of the Wichita Mountains Miners Association, "but the legitimate mining of the Wichitas has nothing to fear." By December, 1904, Wichita Miners' Association Secretary J. S. Soule reported the miners were determined to hold onto their claims in the Wichitas because they "know there is wealth there." His report in the News-Republican claimed that a smelter was in operation which showed "beyond any doubt there are minerals in the mountains in paying quantities." Soule added that the Wichitas continued to be a scene of great activity by mining companies and individual miners. Two smelter firms, the Illinois and Black Bear companies, will prove to the world that the Wichita Mountains are as rich as any, if not the richest, mineral district in the American continent, Soule bragged. "Just think what this will mean to Lawton," he declared, "providing her enterprising businessmen use as good judgment as those of Denver did on the opening of the mineral interests of the

⁹⁷U.S., Department of the Interior, Bulletin 31, 1903, Foster H. Bain, Reported Ore Deposits of the Wichita Mountains, pp. 82-93.

Rocky Mountains." Soule concluded: "In fact Lawton may, if she wills it, become a second Denver."⁹⁸

Many state newspapers branded Bain's report a severe economic blow to Lawton's future. But the News-Republican, in true booster spirit, claimed the mining would continue, and at the same time the paper took a swipe at other newspapers which appeared to revel in the bad news of Bain's report:

A perusal of the Oklahoma City and Guthrie papers, concerning Bain's report on the Wichita Mountains, confirms what the News-Republican has already asserted, that there is little if anything in Oklahoma that gives these towns so much satisfaction, or which their papers publish with the same amount of satisfaction, as a knock at the prosperity of Lawton.

Ever since the opening of Lawton the papers and people in these outside towns have been prophesying a slump in Lawton. But the town has moved along and continued to do business. The town has held her own with the towns of Old Oklahoma, in spite of the fact that the contingent country is underdeveloped. . . .

Oklahoma City, Enid, Guthrie, Perry, Kingfisher and El Reno are all temporarily dead in a business way. And some of them . . . cannot bear the thought of the brighter prospects of Lawton, with her more than \$400,000 lot fund, the opening of the Big Pasture, and the development of the Wichita Mountains. Their envious sheets grasp at a measley straw, flung out by an expert and publicly glory over what they see fit to consider an awful blow to this section. They do not say they are glad of it but they make it as plain as if they did.

But their opinion will have as little effect on the development of the mines as will the report of Bain itself. . . . The mountains will continue to develop and the other good things will continue to come to Lawton in the same old way.⁹⁹

Within three to four years after Bain's report, nearly all the gold and precious metal seekers were gone. Nonetheless, the Lawton papers from time to time continued to print booster stories about how bright

⁹⁸Enterprise, January 1, 1904, p. 1; News-Republican, December 17, 1904, p. 1.

⁹⁹News-Republican, January 7, 1904, p. 4.

the prospects were for mining in the Wichitas. It was hard to kill gold fever. The big bonanzas the miners had hoped to find remained elusive-- as did the Lawton newspapermen's dream of being a second Denver.¹⁰⁰

As the mining boom fizzled, the Lawton newspapers searched for other ways in which they could boost their town and turn it into a thriving city. They little realized that at their very doorstep was a potential industry for the town. It was Fort Sill, then only a small western post garrisoned by a cavalry unit. It had been many years since the army troops were needed to control the Indians. The army had assisted in the opening of the Indian lands to settlement, but since that time troops were stationed at Fort Sill simply because the post had permanent quarters to house them.

With its usefulness at an end, it appeared as if the post would be closed. There was talk in Washington that part of the military reservation lands would be turned over to the Chiricahua Apaches, including Geronimo, after they were released from their status as prisoners on the post. However, no action was taken on this proposal. In 1902 a battery of field artillery was stationed at Sill in addition to the cavalry, and by 1905 the army decided that Fort Sill with its size, varied terrain, and climate would be an ideal site as a field artillery post. A provisional regiment of Field Artillery troops was organized at Fort Sill and a tent camp established in front of the post trader's store. In 1907 the last cavalry regiment to garrison the post departed, and the

¹⁰⁰ Constitution, August 17, 1905, p. 1; January 25, 1906, p. 4; March 22, 1906, p. 1; March 15, 1908, p. 1.

First Field Artillery Regiment was organized, bringing far more soldiers to the post.¹⁰¹

A proposal to modify the old post area to provide for the increased number of troops drew loud protests from soldiers who had been stationed there and who wanted to preserve the old limestone fort for historical purposes. Secretary of War William Howard Taft visited Fort Sill in 1907, liked what he saw of the old post grounds, and ordered that not a single stone be changed.¹⁰²

Taft's orders made it necessary to locate new grounds for the expanding number of troops. Major General Franklin Bell, Army Chief of staff, who envisioned making Fort Sill a large military showplace, paid a visit and selected a site for the new post along the southern border of the military reservation. But this plan was soon complicated by the idea that the new post grounds would be too close to civilian areas. General Bell then decided that additional land would have to be purchased as a "buffer zone" south of the site he had selected. Lawton citizens were told that if they wanted to keep Fort Sill, they would have to buy options on the land and donate it to the government.¹⁰³

The Lawton newspapers, seeing that Fort Sill could prove highly valuable to the city, began beating their editorial drums to persuade the landowners to sell their property at reasonable prices. The

¹⁰¹W. S. Nye, Carbine & Lance (Centennial ed., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), pp. 315-316; Constitution, November 8, 1906, p. 1.

¹⁰²W. S. Nye, p. 317.

¹⁰³Constitution-Democrat, January 11, 1909, p. 1; News-Republican, August 30, 1909, p. 4.

Constitution-Democrat painted a rosy future ahead for Lawton as a companion city to a major military installation:

. . . Few of our most optimistic people realize what the building of the new fort means to Lawton. It will make this the most important military post in the United States. It will be a division headquarters. Several thousand men will be kept there in times of peace and it will be the maneuvering grounds for the United States army at which the soldiers will be gathered once a year and practiced and maneuvered in modern warfare. To the thousands of regulars will be added the thousands of state militia from the various states of the Union who get in touch with Uncle Sam's troops once a year.

In the building of the post more than a million dollars will be expended. This will give employment to hundreds of men who will reside in Lawton and spend their money here. It is estimated that it will require five years to complete the plans the department has mapped out. The raising of Fort Sill to a division post will make this an attractive post for railroads as the government business will amount to thousands of dollars annually and all of the railroads in the Southwest will want to share. To get it they will build to Fort Sill and Lawton.¹⁰⁴

Some of the landowners asked for more money for their property than the Lawton Chamber of Commerce was willing to pay. But after condemnation threats and newspaper stories that the city might lose the fort, the landowners agreed to sell the property to the city. W. H. Quinette, the veteran post trader at Fort Sill and a close friend of high-ranking military officers, carried the options to Washington. Approximately \$400,000 in funds were approved to finance construction of buildings on the new post site.¹⁰⁵

Construction of the new post buildings began June 20, 1909. It was Fort Sill's start as a permanent army installation and Lawton's as a business and residence center. Lawton in future years would find that

¹⁰⁴Constitution-Democrat, January 16, 1909, p. 1.

¹⁰⁵Nye, pp. 318-319.

the army post would be its only "major industry" and key to prosperity and growth.¹⁰⁶

From the time of the land opening in 1901, Lawton newspapers insisted that the town secure an adequate water supply. It was another phase of boosterism. The newspapers preached the virtues of living in Lawton, in hopes of gaining population. At the same time the papers realized that the town must have sufficient water for additional residents and new businesses. Although the newspapers battled each other on most issues, they presented a unified front on solving the water problem. The papers supported the Lawton city council's initial efforts to solve the problem by drilling wells. Lawton sank three wells in the Cache Creek area--the future Flatiron Addition--northeast of the city. When this water supply ran low, the papers enthusiastically backed a project in 1907 to dam Medicine Creek near Mount Scott, which would create a lake fed by waters from the Wichita Mountains stream. Fort Sill at this time in 1907 also ran out of water from its single well source, but solved its problem temporarily by building a new well north of Ambrosia Spring.¹⁰⁷

Lawton received permission from the War Department to lay a pipeline across the military reservation connecting the lake with the city's pipelines. By September of 1908, a seven-foot dam was constructed across Medicine Creek, and water was flowing in a downhill pipeline system into Lawton mains. The Constitution-Democrat boasted that "pure soft Medicine Creek mountain water is now in the homes of the citizens,"

¹⁰⁶ Constitution-Democrat, June 28, 1909, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., February 16, 1907, p. 1.

and that the new system could furnish two million gallons of water in twenty-four hours, far more than the city's current usage of 400,000 gallons in a full day. The entire dam and waterworks system was completed at a cost of \$200,000 to the city. The old pumping station at the wells was shut down and put on an emergency standby operation.¹⁰⁸

But in the summer of 1909 during a severe drought, Medicine Creek turned into a mere trickle, and Lawton was forced temporarily to pump water again from the Cache Creek wells. Both the Constitution-Democrat and the News-Republican called for the city council to raise the dam across Medicine Creek to a height of fifty feet. The papers argued that the water supply would be far greater when rains came, and that Fort Sill could be furnished water. The News-Republican observed that the city should lose no time in erecting the new dam. "We have an ample water supply for a city of a hundred-thousand people if it is properly handled," an editorial noted. While work was going on the dam, water consumption from the Cache Creek wells soared to nearly a million gallons daily in the severe heat. Then to complicate matters, the well water was found to be contaminated from sewage sources. Lawtonians were forced either to boil the well water or to get drinking water from private wells. It was not until the dam was completed in 1911 that the lake problem was solved. Rains in the fall of 1909 brought temporary relief, but the water problem was one that would haunt Lawton for years to come.¹⁰⁹

Newspaper boosterism in Lawton also focused on the opening of the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., September 24, 1908, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., July 12, 1909, p. 4; News-Republican, July 8, 1909, p. 2.

"Big Pasture" to settlement in 1906. The Big Pasture was 401,000 acres of Kiowa-Comanche lands in southern Comanche County set aside as grazing pastures in the 1901 land opening. Texas cattlemen had continued to graze their herds in the Big Pasture for five years since the 1901 opening, but pressure had steadily mounted to open the lands to settlers. Lawton newspapers continually printed editorials favoring the opening of the lands to settlement. The principal argument of the editorials was to the effect that the settlers would bring more business to Lawton and Southwest Oklahoma, and that the agricultural output of the region would be increased materially. The Indian Tribes approved sale of the lands, and Congress on June 5, 1906, approved an act providing for the opening by Presidential proclamation.¹¹⁰

The pastures to be opened to settlement consisted of 401,000 acres in the Big Pasture in southern Comanche County, two small pastures in Kiowa County totalling 80,000 acres, and the Fort Sill area pasture of a little more than 25,000 acres. Allotments in the Big Pasture lands were given to the Kiowa, Comanche, Wichita, and Caddo Indian children who had been born between 1901 and 1906. After allotments were made for the Indian children, some 2,531 separate tracts totaling 396,140 acres remained for settlement in 160-acre homesteads. Neither a run nor a lottery was conducted to open these lands, but they were sold to the highest bidder for cash, with no bids accepted for less than \$5 an acre. Only 126 quarter sections were not sold in the auction. Prices for which these lands were sold averaged from \$1,200 to \$1,800 a quarter section, the highest price being \$7,000. Total of the sale was over

¹¹⁰Constitution, February 15, 1906, p. 1; News-Republican, March 22, 1906, p. 1.

\$4,000,000, which was added to the funds set aside for the Kiowa and Comanche Indians.¹¹¹

The Lawton land office was placed in charge of the auction, and thousands came by train to look over the land before making bids and to find out information. The railroads widely advertised the land opening and did a land office business themselves in selling tickets to Lawton. The increase in the valuation placed on the lands greatly reduced the competition for the lands. The establishment of townsites was provided in the Big Pasture. These townsites, as named by the Secretary of the Interior, were Randlett, Eschiti, Quanah, Isadore, and Ahpeatone.¹¹²

The First Decade

In evaluating the Lawton press during its first decade, it is apparent that the newspapers were captives of the politicians. Income was insufficient from advertising and circulation revenues for the newspapers to make much profit. Instead, the newspapers depended for their profits on political patronage from the city and county printing contracts. In content and style, Lawton newspapers lagged behind the "new journalism" practiced in the larger cities. The mechanical and business practices likewise lagged. In their personal journalism attacks, the newspapers wasted much time and effort that could have been spent in serving and informing the public. In the final result,

¹¹¹Constitution, June 14, 1906, p. 1; June 28, 1906, p. 1; News-Republican, June 21, 1906, p. 8.

¹¹²Constitution, November 8, 1906, p. 1; February 7, 1907, p. 1; February 14, 1907, p. 1; News-Republican, November 29, 1906, p. 1.

politics and politicians were more important to the Lawton newspapers than the readers or service to the community in these early years.

Lawton's population in the 1910 census stood at 7,788 persons. It was quite a comedown from the crowds of up to 25,000 that swarmed the townsite during the opening days in 1901. The newspapers and city officials had hoped the population would be at least 10,000 in the first federal census since the opening of the Indian lands to settlement. The census of Comanche County showed 41,489 residents. Lawton by 1910 was primarily a sleepy, county seat town in an agricultural area. It would have a long way to go before even approaching the dream of being the metropolis of Southwest Oklahoma.¹¹³

¹¹³U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Population: II, 576,591.

CHAPTER II

THE BATTLE FOR SUPREMACY

Newspapers Dwindle in Lawton

Journalism in Lawton during the 1910's entered a new phase in which competition among several dailies and weeklies eventually would be limited to two papers representing opposite viewpoints and political beliefs. These two newspapers as much as economically possible copied the techniques of the new journalism in advertising, circulation, equipment, treatment of the news, and business practices. Yet in their battle for supremacy, both newspapers--the Constitution and the News--resorted to the old personal journalism habits of bitter, personal invective. It was a brawling, mud-slinging fight that had no equal in Lawton's brief history.

This new era also was to see politicians lose most of their influence with the newspapers. Political subsidy printing through the city and county printing contracts gradually became less important toward the latter part of the decade. The newspapers found that revenue from burgeoning display advertising gave them economic independence, and they could sever or relax their ties with the politicians. Although vestiges of the politically partisan press remained at the end of the decade, Lawton newspapers were no longer tools of the politicians.

Lawton readers were startled to learn in January of 1911 that both of the city's leading dailies had been sold. It was announced on

January 1, 1911, that John N. Shepler, a veteran newspaperman, had purchased the Constitution-Democrat from J. Roy Williams. There was an announcement on the editorial page--but no news story--that the paper had changed owners. Said Williams, in part:

. . . At times it may have occurred to you that my way of conducting a newspaper was not the right way and I have oftentimes made mistakes. But I have always conducted my newspaper according to such light as I possessed and I have never permitted its policy to be dictated by those who had interests contrary to the public interest.

While the Constitution-Democrat has been a success from the business standpoint, commercialism has never dominated its editorial policy. It has never prostituted its columns. A newspaper in order to command respect must have character, ideals, and independence. These qualities have won success for the Constitution-Democrat.

In laying down my work it is a source of gratification to know that it will be continued by such worthy gentlemen.¹

Shepler accepted the reins of the newspaper with this statement:

. . . It is not our object at this time to enter upon an extended discourse as to the course to be pursued in the future conduct of this paper. Suffice to say, that it is our aim to build up one of the greatest newspapers and printing plants in the Southwest and as a newspaper, we will endeavor to make it a medium for the dissemination of general information, the general news, political and otherwise, pertaining to the public welfare, and essentially a newspaper for Lawton and Comanche County.

Believing that in the success of the democratic doctrines and policies is to be found the happiness and prosperity of the whole people, this paper will continue to advocate the success of the Democratic party and to inculcate its principles.

In our endeavor briefly outlined, we desire the aid and assistance of the entire Democratic party, and the support of all others who are materially interested in the progress

¹Constitution and Democrat, January 2, 1911, p. 4; News, January 1, 1911, p. 2. Ironically the story about Shepler purchasing the Constitution was first disclosed in the News on Sunday morning, January 1, 1911. The News also disclosed inside information about the sale such as the \$20,000 capital stock formation of the new company. To J. Roy Williams, the News bid a kind farewell and said: ". . . we . . . forgive him freely for all the mean things he ever said and trust that he may prove as successful at farming as he has at the newspaper business."

of Lawton and Comanche County, and when we know the right, that path will we follow.²

With the start of the newspaper under new owners, the page one flag was changed from the Lawton Constitution-Democrat to the Lawton Constitution on one line with and Democrat underneath in smaller type. A few issues later the Democrat name was dropped. The new company was incorporated under the name of the Constitution Company, with a capital stock of \$20,000. However, Shepler paid Williams \$12,000 for the paper.³

Williams, owner of the Constitution since its start in 1904, had again been elected representative to the state legislature from Comanche County. He announced that after the adjournment of the legislature in 1911 that he would manage several of his Comanche County farms in the raising of hogs and alfalfa.⁴

John S. Shepler, in his salutatory upon taking over the Constitution, said he would serve as business manager. He also announced that J. W. Perry, city editor of the Lawton News, would serve as the Constitution's new city editor; S. C. Chatham would be foreman of the mechanical department, and Victor Spaulding would serve as assistant manager and solicitor. Shepler, forty-five years of age, noted that he spent a week in Lawton the previous year handling school land sales and that he concluded that it would be a good place to live and to publish a newspaper. Born November 7, 1865, at Greencastle, Missouri, he taught

²Ibid.

³Personal papers of John N. Shepler, morgue files, Lawton Constitution and Morning Press.

⁴Constitution and Democrat, January 2, 1911, p. 4.

school before buying the Milan Standard, a weekly he published for eighteen years at Milan, Missouri. He sold it in 1902 and moved to Pawnee, Oklahoma, where he purchased two Democratic weeklies, the Courier and the Dispatch, which he consolidated as the Courier-Dispatch. He sold the papers in 1909 and accepted an appointment of Governor C. N. Haskell as sales superintendent of state school lands. A year later he resigned to go into the real estate and stock exchange business in Oklahoma City. He and his wife had three children, a girl and two boys.⁵

The News, which was sold later that same month in 1911, had had its name changed from the News-Republican on August 16, 1910, when Republican was eliminated. Wright said the shorter name was the one by which the newspaper was founded during the 1901 land opening, and that it was simply a change for convenience as the hyphenated name was rather awkward and lengthy. The paper also had changed by 1910 from an afternoon publication to a morning newspaper.⁶

Wright disclosed sale of the News on January 24, 1911, in a page one statement. At first it was announced that only part interest was being sold, but a few days later it was officially stated that the new owner had purchased controlling interest. The new editor-publisher of the News was E. L. Gregory of Mount Pleasant, Tennessee, a newspaperman of many years' experience. Also associated in the new venture was G. E. "Scribe" Thompson, of Keokuk, Iowa, who had been with the News

⁵Ibid.

⁶News, August 16, 1910, p. 1.

for several months and who was to act as business manager. No sale price was revealed.⁷

Although Wright did not give his future plans, he later was appointed deputy Oklahoma game warden for Comanche County. He remarked of the new owner:

Mr. Gregory is a staunch Republican and comes well recommended by the press and public of his home town and state. His writings and ideas will, of course, stand on their merits in the future, but it is quite certain that readers of this paper will not be disappointed.⁸

In his salutatory editorial on February 5, "Colonel" Gregory, as he was called, remarked that conditions in Oklahoma were vastly different from those that existed in Tennessee, and that it would require some time to get into step with the "spirit of this new state" and to be familiar with its conditions. He added:

. . . There will be no change in the politics or the policies of the paper. It will continue to stand for and advocate the doctrines of the Republican party and will expend its best efforts for the upbuilding and advancement of the interests of Lawton, Comanche County, and the State of Oklahoma.

It will be our desire to live at peace with all our neighbors and join with them in every commendable movement for the betterment of the interests of the community. We have no axe and will not get one unless its procurement is forced upon us; but if it becomes necessary to provide ourselves with this somewhat dangerous weapon, we will procure a 'keen kutter,' well sharpened, and wield it with both energy and good will.⁹

Although the Constitution and News were Lawton's two principal newspapers during this second decade of the twentieth century, other dailies and weeklies struggled for survival. In August of 1910, a

⁷Ibid., January 24, 1911, p. 1.

⁸Ibid.; Constitution, June 15, 1911, p. 1.

⁹News, February 5, 1911, p. 4.

weekly, the Lawton Free Lance, made a fleeting appearance. Selling for \$1 a year, its editor and publisher was John C. Lawrence and its associate editor was the Reverend M. D. Early. Religiously oriented, the few issues extant show the paper campaigned vigorously against illegal whiskey traffic in Comanche County and for improved law and order.¹⁰

By 1911 two other dailies, the Hornet and the Star, were still being published in Lawton. The Hornet continued its gadfly existence as a free afternoon paper under publishers Charles Wilson and Tom Bixby. Wilson's Weekly Democrat, the Hornet's companion weekly, was abandoned November 16, 1911. The Hornet's small size and light volume of advertising posed little competition for the other papers in Lawton. However, the Lawton Daily Star waged a vigorous fight for survival and for the advertising dollar. It usually contained only four pages an issue. Its wire news obviously was clipped from other newspapers, although it was active and thorough in covering Lawton and county news. Its editorial policy was mostly "lukewarm Republican" as it avoided rabid partisanship.¹¹

Late in 1911 the Constitution and News achieved a long-sought goal as they bought out their opposition and reduced Lawton to a two-newspaper town. The Constitution purchased the plant and business of the Daily Hornet and the News merged its operations with the Daily Star. In an editorial headlined "The Newspaper Situation," the Constitution

¹⁰Free Lance, August 10, 1910, pp. 1-4; August 17, 1910, pp. 1-4.

¹¹Hornet, April 17, 1911, pp. 1-4; Wilson's Weekly Democrat, November 16, 1911, pp. 1-4; Star, May 21, 1911, pp. 1-16. This issue was an example of the Star's enterprise in seeking out advertising in Lawton and Comanche County. The sixteen-page booster edition was keyed toward visiting members of the Oklahoma Press Association who were holding a meeting at Medicine Park.

was exultant:

. . . Those two deals, which are in effect one cooperative move for the consolidation of newspaper publications, so far as numbers are concerned, probably mean more to the city of Lawton than any other one business proposition which has been accomplished in many months.

It means that, in the future, Lawton will have but two newspapers--one morning and one evening, one Republican and one Democratic--and that these two papers will be in a position to build up into publications which will be a credit to the town and this section of Oklahoma. . . .

With two newspapers in the field, and only two, both merchants and readers can afford to give more substantial patronage--and they can afford it because they get more for their money. Better business will beget better newspapers and better newspapers will beget more readers and better advertising value.

There is probably no other one thing which can build or drag down a town so rapidly as its newspapers. Breezy, creditable newspapers will not only spread in circulation and advertise the towns because they reach more people in the outside world but, when they do reach the people, will force the impression that they are published in a town that is doing things. On the other hand, an insignificant local sheet will have no interest for outside people, and if even read beyond the borders of its own bailiwick, will of necessity leave the impression that the town in which it is published is nothing more than an inland, jerk-water village.

And now that the number of Lawton papers has been reduced to the two, it is to be hoped that the people of Lawton will discourage further attempts at new newspaper ventures--and will lend their best efforts to the work of giving encouragement toward building up two publications which they will themselves enjoy reading and to which they can refer with a just measure of pride.¹²

Under terms of the consolidation, the Hornet discontinued publication, with its plant being purchased by the Constitution. Its editors and publishers, Charles Wilson and Tom Bixby, continued to make Lawton their home. However, the News and Star merged under the new title of the Lawton Daily News and Star. None of the financial arrangements was revealed. Colonel E. L. Gregory became the editor-publisher. A. W. Maxwell, editor of the old Star, was named business manager, and G. E.

¹²Constitution, December 7, 1911, p. 4.

"Scribe" Thompson of the News remained as city editor. The subscription lists and good will of the two papers were consolidated. The corporations of the two newspapers remained separate, and the Star's plant was moved to Guthrie to take the place of an abandoned daily, the Guthrie State Capital. Mrs. Margaret Day, Harry Maxwell, and Colonel William H. Hornaday, all of the Star's staff, managed the editorial and business ends of the new paper. Maxwell and Hornaday were in charge of the editorial part and Mrs. Day was business manager. The new paper, the Guthrie Daily Star, continued operations until January of 1913, when it suspended publication because of financial troubles.¹³

Lawton was to remain a two-newspaper town for more than a decade except for relatively brief appearances of four other newspapers, a daily and three weeklies. The Lawton Daily Courier, a five-column, four-page, Democratic paper made a short-lived appearance of two months in August and September of 1912. A giveaway paper, it was published at 411 C Avenue by the Courier Publishing Company, but no names of the editors or publishers were ever listed. It contained mostly political news from over the state, with some local news coverage and editorials. The Courier continually jabbed at the other Lawton papers for refusing to take editorial stands on local issues. On September 7, 1912, the Courier announced it was suspending publication to reorganize and secure better equipment. But that issue was its last.¹⁴

Another newspaper that made an appearance in 1912 was the Comanche

¹³Star, November 25, 1911, p. 1; News and Star, November 26, 1911, p. 1; November 28, 1911, p. 4; December 10, 1911, p. 1; Constitution, January 2, 1913, p. 2.

¹⁴Daily Courier, August 2, 1912, pp. 1-2; August 22, 1912, pp. 1-4; September 7, 1912, pp. 1-4.

County Socialist, a seven-column weekly sponsored by the Socialist party of Lawton. Its editorial staff consisted of A. G. Sechrist, editor; N. W. Gatewood, associate editor, and F. B. Judd, secretary-treasurer. The Lawton editors contributed several locally written stories and editorials, and the rest of the paper was filled with national Socialist party stories, listings of candidates, and national party platforms. The Lawton paper was one of several printed cooperatively in the four-state area of Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and Oklahoma for local Socialist parties. The newspapers were published by the Socialist Co-Operative Publishing Company of Iola, Kansas. It sold for fifty cents a year or twenty-five cents for six months.¹⁵

In discussing Lawton issues, the Comanche County Socialist criticized the Constitution and News-Star for being "tools" of the Democrats and Republicans--the "capitalist parties." In one issue, a page one editorialized column opposed Scott Ferris of Lawton for reelection as Congressman from the Fifth District. The column hit at Ferris's record in Congress and said he did not represent the working man's welfare. It also charged that Ferris refused to seek government aid and seeds for new crops for farm families stricken by the severe droughts of 1910 and 1911. The Socialist said Ferris offered only token handouts of government garden and flower seeds to the farmers.¹⁶

The Socialist programs and activities in Oklahoma were a reflection of the nationwide progressive movement. It was easy to understand the

¹⁵Comanche County Socialist, October 12, 1912, pp. 1-4.

¹⁶Ibid., October 19, 1912, p. 1.

party's appeal to some Oklahoma voters--particularly the tenant and landless farmers. Generally in Lawton, Comanche County, and the remainder of the state, the two political parties avoided the chief issues in American life. They appealed principally to party loyalty and the necessity for the party being in command at all levels of politics, from city hall to the presidency. The real issues, especially economic ones, were ignored.

But the Socialists did not ignore them. They took up these "gut" economic issues and campaigned widely for them in Oklahoma, through speeches, meetings, and through their party newspapers. For example, the Socialist platform in Oklahoma in 1914 demanded that industries "collectively used" by the people should be collectively owned. State ownership would have as its purpose, not the making of profit, but the assurance of "the full social value of their labor" to workers. There were demands for legislation to regulate the hours, conditions, and wages of workers in numerous nonfarm industries.¹⁷

The Socialists declared that the working class in Oklahoma consisted primarily of "agricultural workers." The platform proposed a renter's and farmer's program which would not nationalize privately owned land but would propose plans to enlarge the state's public domain. From these public lands farms would be rented at prevailing share rents to tenants until they had paid rent equal to the land's value. The tenant and his children would have the right of occupancy and use, but the title would remain in the "commonwealth," an arrangement that might

¹⁷Garin Burbank, "Agrarian Radicals and Their Opponents: Political Conflict in Southern Oklahoma, 1910-1924," Journal of American History, LVIII, No. 1 (June, 1971), pp. 5-11.

be called "Socialist fee simple." Also in Oklahoma the Socialists proposed to exempt from taxation all farm dwellings, animals, and improvements up to the value of \$1,000. The State Board of Agriculture would encourage "co-operative societies" of farmers to make plans for purchase of land, seed, and tools, and for preparing and selling produce. In order to give farmers essential services at cost, the Socialists called for the creation of state banks and mortgage agencies, crop insurance, elevators, and warehouses.¹⁸

In demands for political reforms in Oklahoma, the Socialists favored women's suffrage, demanded that school houses be opened to public meetings for discussion and recreation, asked easier initiative, referendum, and recall procedures, and assailed a proposed poll tax. On the question of blacks, the Socialists emphatically proclaimed they stood for equal political rights for the "colored members" of the working class and added: "The Socialists will vote to a man against the disfranchisement of any section of the working class, be he white, black, yellow, or red."¹⁹

The Socialists made their strongest electoral showing in Oklahoma in the statewide elections of 1914. But they consistently put up candidates for all levels of political offices. In Lawton and Comanche County, the Socialists were on the ballots from 1910 until the 1930's, although no Socialist was ever elected. Lawton newspapers generally ignored reporting of Socialist activities except when the papers were giving voting totals. The Comanche County Socialist continued a

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Comanche County Socialist, October 26, 1912, p. 3.

spasmodic existence for some three years through 1915 before being abandoned.²⁰

A third weekly which emerged during this second decade in Lawton was the Comanche County Booster. The masthead listed L. V. Shroyer as editor and owner and Mary J. Shroyer as assistant editor. Priced at \$1 a year for subscription, the newspaper was located at 408 South Fifth Street. Basically the Booster was a religious publication. It carried little local news and its inside pages were usually ready print. What few editorials were printed attacked gambling and opposed playing baseball on Sunday.²¹

A fourth weekly that existed for about a year in Lawton during this period was the Comanche County Times. The Times, a Democratic paper, actually was a continuation of the Comanche County Booster. In its initial edition on June 18, 1915, the Times' editor, J. W. Lawter, announced that the plant and subscription list of the Booster had been purchased. Offices for the new publication were located at 323 Sixth Street. The paper underwent a change in management on July 30, 1915, when J. L. Tullis was named editor and C. E. Miller as business manager.²²

On August 6, 1915, the Fletcher Times was consolidated with the Comanche County Times, a move which subsequently won the county printing contract away from the Lawton Constitution. But the Times lost in the

²⁰News, March 24, 1915, p. 4. A passing reference to the existence of the paper was made by the News in listing candidates for the school board.

²¹Comanche County Booster, September 25, 1914, pp. 1-4.

²²Comanche County Times, June 18, 1915, pp. 1-4; July 30, 1915, pp. 1-4.

economic struggle for existence with the Constitution, and it even charged that Lawton merchants in a conspiracy with Shepler were boycotting its advertising columns. That resulted in criminal libel charges being filed by Shepler against Tullis and Miller. It also caused Tullis and Miller to sell their paper, which was purchased by F. E. Royer on September 15, 1915. Royer said the paper would change its politics to Republicanism. The paper, however, was discontinued shortly afterward.²³

By 1916, then, the newspaper competition in Lawton was again reduced to two publications--the Constitution and the News. Many reasons can be listed for the decline in competition, but the main one was economic: the town simply was not large enough to support so much competition. Publishing was reduced to a struggle for existence with the most meager income. Most journalists then became increasingly reluctant to start or maintain papers for political reasons, especially since advancing wages and the greater capital requirements of newspaper plants left potential printer-publishers unwilling to struggle to sustain unprofitable newspapers.

This reluctance to launch competing newspapers was a facet of modern journalism. The founding of new papers was not only deterred by increased capital requirements but as well as by the desire of merchants to patronize the newspaper which would most effectively advertise their goods--whatever its politics. This was but a preview of the present day, when capital requirements and the preference of

²³Ibid., August 6, 1915, pp. 1-4; June 30, 1916, p. 2; September 15, 1916, p. 1.

advertisers for the most efficient advertising medium would limit most Oklahoma towns to one newspaper.

The decline in journalistic competition in Lawton reflected the national trend during this period. The years 1910 to 1914 mark the high point in numbers of newspapers published in the United States. In 1910, some 2,600 dailies were published in the nation. Weekly newspapers numbered approximately 14,000. But consolidation, mergers, and deaths began rapidly after 1914 and continued for many years. The total number of weeklies, semi-weeklies, tri-weeklies, and dailies declined by one-eighth in the years 1914-1919--a total reduction to about 2,435. By 1930 half the dailies and three-fourths of the weeklies in the United States were published as the only newspapers in their communities. Seventy-one per cent of daily newspaper cities and eighty-six per cent of country weekly towns had but a single newspaper by 1930.²⁴

New Techniques, Changes

Lawton's two major newspapers showed some over-all improvements in the finished product during this second decade. Influenced to a degree by national developments in the "new journalism," the publishers adopted new styles, improved the contents of their newspapers, and purchased some new machinery that allowed them to serve their readers better and to capture the profitable new retail display advertisements.

²⁴Most of these figures are tabulated in the appendices of A. M. Lee's The Daily Newspaper in America (New York: Macmillan Company, 1947), pp. 720-724. For a general discussion of this topic also see Frank Luther Mott, American Journalism: A History: 1690-1960 (3rd ed., New York: Macmillan Company, 1962), pp. 632-637, and Edwin Emery, The Press and America (3rd ed., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), pp. 441-448.

In 1915 the Constitution moved from a building it had rented at 309 C Avenue to new quarters constructed by Shepler at 409 C Avenue just west of the Midland Hotel. Installed at that time was a Number Seven Babcock Express printing press that would print 3,000 papers an hour. The Constitution also purchased its second linotype that year.²⁵ Further modernization of the Constitution printing plant occurred in 1919 with the purchase of a new Duplex flatbed printing press which would turn out 5,500 four, six, or eight-page papers per hour "printing from a roll of paper four miles long." Costing \$6,500, the new press folded, counted, and readied the papers for the carriers or for mailing.²⁶

Not to be outdone by its rival, the News by 1919 had also purchased a Duplex flatbed press and had increased its number of linotypes to three. The News' offices were located at 320 C Avenue. In typography, printing, and over-all appearance, the News at all times matched the Constitution. Both were union shops. Both newspapers ran seven columns in width. Generally until about 1916, both newspapers' daily editions ran four pages in size and the weekly editions ran eight. After that time, the daily editions for both papers averaged eight pages.²⁷

In advertising, the News and Constitution charged twenty cents per

²⁵Constitution, October 18, 1915, p. 1.

²⁶Ibid., January 6, 1919, p. 2.

²⁷Wilbur Rice, former advertising director of the Constitution, private interview held in Lawton, October 2, 1971. Rice worked as reporter, managing editor, and editor for the Lawton News from 1915 until 1918, when he quit and went to work at the Constitution as advertising director.

column inch until 1919, when both raised the rate to thirty cents per inch. Both papers defended the rate increase, citing that rates had not been increased in over four years, and that the Lawton rates were the lowest in the state. Unlike most dailies of this period which had dropped the practice, the Constitution continued its front-page advertising and charged seventy-five cents per column inch for it. The News long ago had ceased its front-page advertising, and as a result, its front pages were far more attractive in appearance. In other "up-to-date" advertising practices, both papers carried classified advertising sections, although these usually averaged only two or three columns in size.²⁸

After Shepler purchased the Constitution, he shrewdly developed a program of display advertising contracts which in effect "sewed up the town." These highly attractive contracts offered newspaper space at far cheaper rates than the usual "open display rate." For example, a 1911 contract with the Davidson Clothing Company in Lawton was signed for 12 months calling for the business to run a total of 5,000 inches at the cut rate price of 6 cents per column inch--far less than the open rate then of 20 cents per column inch. A contract with the M. Koehler Department Store, later the Dixie Store, called for purchase of 10,000 column inches in 12 months at 5 cents per inch. Contracts also were signed with out-of-town firms, such as one with the Rock Island Railroad of Chicago, calling for 750 inches of advertising in 12 months at 10 cents per inch.²⁹

²⁸Constitution, September 16, 1919, p.1; News, September 16, 1919, p. 1.

²⁹Rice interview. Rice has several of these early day contracts in his personal files.

Although the prices were far cheaper than the open rate, the contracts brought a guaranteed steady income for the newspaper. Shepler's business strategy results in a majority of Lawton businesses advertising only in the Constitution--leaving the News with the "left-overs." By 1918, the Constitution's annual gross revenue from all kinds of display advertising totaled approximately \$30,000. And that same year, Shepler hired Wilbur Rice, who had been employed with the News as managing editor, as the Constitution's first full-time advertising director. From that time, Rice continued and expanded the highly profitable practice of advertising contracts.³⁰

Political patronage printing--the goal and sustenance of Lawton's early day press--was far less important as a revenue source during the 1910-1920 decade. The city and county printing contracts were still highly valued, but the income from these sources had declined. And the printing contract revenue could not compare in volume to that from display advertising. For example, during this second decade the Constitution averaged \$2,000 a year income from the county printing contract. Certainly this was a significant income source, but it was far less than the \$30,000 a year brought in through display advertising.³¹

In makeup and appearance, the News outstripped the Constitution during these years. The Constitution consistently laid out its front pages in a balanced format, usually with two-column heads on the right

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ News, July 14, 1918, p. 1. The News in an editorial detailed the income from the county printing that the Constitution had received from 1911 through 1918.

and left and one-column, multi-decked headlines in between. Below the fold the paper continued to carry front-page advertisements, which hampered functional makeup and spoiled the appearance. Only on rare occasions would the paper resort to banner headlines. The over-all, day-to-day appearance was one of conservatism, grayness, and lack of imagination in news presentation. The front pages of the News were far more "modernized" and pleasing in appearance and layout. Banner headlines usually were used to play up the top story on page one. Several multi-column headlines were used on page one, and the one-column heads included several decks. The News front pages also were not hampered by use of page one advertising.

Both newspapers by this time made widespread use of photographs in the news. Mostly these were supplied from newspaper supply firms and were referred to as "mats." These were screened stereotypes which could be cast into lead plates and used directly in the printing forms. Some local pictures were printed, but their use was rare. Local pictures usually were taken by studio photographers and the photoengravings for printing had to be ordered from out of town. It would be several years before staff photographers would be added to the newspaper.

The News and Constitution subscribed to wire services and printed far more national and international news than the early day Lawton press. In the early years of the decade, both papers were served by 500-word telegraph dispatches via Western Union which included a skeletonized report of national and international news. By 1916 the wire services had changed to what was called a "pony telegraph" report. This was a thirty-minute digest of national and international news dictated over the telephone from Dallas and Kansas City and taken at

the newspaper with a phone headset and typewriter. The pony wire report turned many a newsman into an expert and fast typist. In order to furnish readers more news on the war, the Constitution in 1917 contracted for a full leased wire report with the United Press. Teletype printer machines were several years away, and this service required the full-time work of a telegraph operator taking the news by wire. For two years this operator could be seen at work in the front window of the Constitution, taking the news by wire from all four corners of the globe. After the war the Constitution reverted to its pony wire service, with United Press. The News was a member and subscriber to the Associated Press pony wire service.³²

Wilbur Rice recalled a half century later that, while he was working on the News, he devised a method to "pad" the AP pony wire report and put more national and international news in the morning paper. He paid a porter fifty cents a day to bring the latest street edition of the Oklahoma City Times to Lawton on the Frisco train. The Times then had a full leased wire report of the Associated Press. By including the AP wire stories from the Times, Rice said the News for a period offered far more extensive news coverage than the Constitution. Rice said he believed this expanded wire news coverage in the News was one reason the Constitution acquired a full leased wire during the war.³³

It was the editorial page that suffered the most in quality during the decade after 1910. During Lawton's early press era--the first

³²Rice interview.

³³Ibid.

decade--all of the papers maintained active editorial pages. Daily the editors would fill several columns with locally written editorials on local issues and subjects. Although editorials often were concerned with personal journalistic fights and others were heavily partisan in political preachings, there usually were other daily commentaries on other issues of vital concern to Lawton and the county. The early press period, then, was characterized by a highly active editorial page.

It was after Lawton was reduced to two competing dailies late in 1911 that the editorial pages lost their liveliness, interest, and attraction. Under Gregory's ownership, the News maintained a lukewarm and "boosterism"-type of editorial page until Gregory sold it to John C. Keys in 1914. Thereafter the News resorted to running "canned" editorials--ones purchased from newspaper supply firms--or editorials clipped from other papers. This drab and dull output continued until the News became involved in a personal "war" with the Constitution in 1918. The Constitution editorial page turned lackluster almost immediately after Shepler's purchase of the paper. Only on rare occasions such as around election time would the paper print locally written editorials endorsing the Democratic candidates or urging faithfulness to the party. It, too, filled its editorial columns for the most part with canned editorials or ones clipped from other papers. And it did not become active editorially until the journalistic war erupted with Keys' News in 1918.

In local reporting, the two papers showed they had picked up a few techniques of the modern journalism practiced by the metropolitan press. Stories in both papers somewhat followed the inverted pyramid style of reporting in which the main points of the story were summed up in the

lead paragraph and the details followed in descending order of importance. The quality of reporting varied considerably--some stories were fair, many others were poor.

However, all the reporting in the 1910's was heavily laced with editorial and politically partisan comments--a practice also common in the reporting of Lawton's early press period. This propagandized or partisan treatment of the news during the two decades reflected what is known as a libertarian theory of the news. In libertarian theory, society provides a free market place of ideas, and man, being independent and rational, is able to choose between right and wrong, good and bad. Thus under libertarianism, newspapers were expected "to reflect the world as their owners saw it, to tell the particular truth the owner preferred, to distort, to lie, to vilify. . . ." ³⁴ The reporting in the 1910's in the Lawton papers was "slanted" news; that is, news and opinion, or biases, were still mixed together. For the Lawton papers, the trend toward social responsibility in reporting the news was many years away. It would not be until the 1940's and 1950's that balanced, fair reporting of all sides of an issue coupled with objective appraisal or interpretation would find its way into Lawton reporting.

In the circulation "war," the Constitution lost subscribers during the period 1914-1919, while the News reported a slight increase. The Constitution claimed 2,580 subscribers for the daily in 1914 and 2,900 for the weekly edition. By 1919, the Constitution's daily circulation

³⁴William L. Rivers and Wilbur Schramm, Responsibility in Mass Communication (2d ed., New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 35-40; 45-52.

had dropped to 2,100 and the weekly to 1,000. The News reported a daily circulation of 1,900 in 1914 and 1,300 weekly. The daily News circulation had increased to 2,000 in 1919. No figures were available for the weekly circulation in 1919.³⁵

Although the Constitution's circulation declined by 480 in these five years, the News gained only 100 new subscribers. It is difficult to explain the Constitution's loss in daily subscribers. Certainly the News with its slight increase of 100 subscribers did not gain many from the Constitution. Possibly some shifts in population after the war could have caused some of the loss. Yet Lawton showed a slight gain in population over the ten-year period from 7,788 in 1910 to 8,930 in 1920. By 1919, the News was putting out a newspaper which was better written, better edited, and superior in appearance to the Constitution. It is possible this was a factor in the circulation changes. However, as has been pointed out, the Constitution evidently was winning the advertising war through its program of display advertising contracts. Subscription rates during this period were not a factor in circulation changes as both papers charged the same rates. Subscribers could buy either paper at ten cents a week by carrier delivery and \$4 a year by mail.³⁶

Another Personal Journalism War

The News and the Constitution in 1918 and 1919 fought a personal journalism war that reached record heights in intensity and new lows in

³⁵Circulation and population figures were taken from the American Newspaper Annual and Directory (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Sons), 1914, p. 356; 1919, p. 436.

³⁶Ibid.

depths of vile personal abuse. The fight involved several issues and as many scandals and embarrassing exposes as one editor or publisher could dig up against the other. Under orders from its new owner, who attempted unsuccessfully to stay in the background, the News began the all-out battle in 1918. For months the Constitution remained silent, but then replied in kind when it appeared that the News' owner was out to control Lawton through ownership of the town's utilities and its newspaper.

The newspaper war did not begin in August of 1914, but the battle lines were drawn when the News, or rather the News and Star as it was named then, changed owners. "Colonel" E. L. Gregory sold the News and Star to a new owner who was not publicly named. Gregory had published Lawton's morning daily for three-and-one-half years. The News and Star under his guidance was a well-edited and interesting paper, which did a good job of covering the local news. Gregory did not undertake any fiery editorial crusades or get involved in any personal journalism fights. He did maintain a lively editorial page containing locally-written editorials each day, mostly on Lawton issues and events. He looked after Lawton's interests and problems with the aplomb of a father concerned with his child's welfare, usually giving constructive advice and only on rare occasions resorting to harsh criticism. For a small town newspaper, it was a good effort on the colonel's part. But he was selling the newspaper, he said in his valedictory editorial, because he was offered such a good price that he could not turn it down. The price was not disclosed. He said he might resume the practice of

law and open an office in Lawton.³⁷

Although the identity of the new owner was not revealed, it was announced that Charles C. Black, a 1901 Lawton pioneer and an attorney who had newspaper experience, would be the new editor and editorial manager of the newspaper. A few days later it was also announced that the newspaper was shortening its name from the News and Star back to the News, the name the newspaper had before its consolidation with the Star and the name it had since its establishment in 1901. Black, in his salutatory editorial, announced that the newspaper would henceforth be an independent newspaper "with Democratic inclinations and tendencies." He said the paper would adhere to the national Democratic party, platform, and administration, but that in state and local matters "we reserve our independence." He pledged to continue giving the readers a newsy newspaper, "devoted to the upbuilding of Lawton and to promoting the onward progress, happiness, and prosperity of the community." Black said there would be little change in the newspaper staff and that G. E. "Scribe" Thompson would remain as city editor.³⁸

John C. Keys from Cleveland, Ohio, was the new owner-publisher of the News who attempted to conceal his ownership from the general public. Keys was a stockholder in a firm based in New York City that owned and operated several electrical utilities and other businesses in Southwest Oklahoma, North Texas, and New Mexico. He moved his headquarters to Lawton, and as the company's representative, he oversaw the management of this chain of Southwest utilities and businesses. He held the title

³⁷News and Star, August 4, 1914, pp. 1-2.

³⁸Ibid.; News, August 23, 1914, p. 1.

of president and general manager. The firm also owned an ice plant and laundry in Lawton. Keys also developed several side businesses and interests of his own, such as ownership of the News, several natural gas and oil wells, and Lawton's gas utility company. Keys personally developed and owned natural gas wells in a field southeast of Lawton near Walters. The wells and his pipelines furnished the only natural gas that the Keys' gas utility received to supply homes and businesses. Keys later struck oil in the same field and developed a large area of producing wells. Through his management of the power plant and his ownership of the natural gas supply, lines and utility company, he controlled two of Lawton's principal utilities.³⁹

Although the major "war" between the newspapers did not become an all-out one until 1918, a skirmish occurred in December of 1914. The News in several editorials announced that it had won the city printing contract away from the Constitution and was now doing the city's printing at a twenty per cent saving to the taxpayers. The Constitution countered that the News now was merely an organ of John Keys' Comanche Light and Power Company and that if the light company wanted to save the city taxpayers some money, it should lower the electric rates and also put a meter in for the city.⁴⁰

The News under Black's guidance filed a \$10,000 libel suit against the Constitution, claiming that Keys' power firm did not own the

³⁹Rice interview; Constitution, April 7, 1919, p. 2. Keys was president and general manager of Southwestern Cities Electric Company. Other utility firms owned by the company were located at Duncan, Oklahoma; Mangum, Oklahoma; Quanah, Texas, and Artesia, New Mexico.

⁴⁰Constitution, September 24, 1914, p. 4; December 11, 1914, p. 2; News, September 18, 1914, p. 2.

newspaper and that the Constitution's reference to it being a light company "organ" had damaged its business and reputation. The News also charged the Constitution misrepresented the circulation of the morning daily and further injured its confidence among advertisers. The News at that time contended that it, and not the Constitution, had the largest daily circulation in the county. The libel suit was dropped after Black left the News the next year.⁴¹

In July of 1915, the News announced that it was again "changing ownership." Charles C. Black left the paper as editor-publisher and resumed the practice of law in Lawton. The News said its new owners were G. E. "Scribe" Thompson, who had been city editor for the paper several years, and Eugene D. McMahon, a recent graduate of the University of Oklahoma who had worked during vacations and after school hours in Lawton newspaper offices. McMahon majored in journalism at the university and was business manager of the student newspaper. He was named business manager of the News. It was also announced that Wilbur Rice, a "cub" reporter for the News, was being promoted to full-fledged reporter.⁴²

⁴¹Constitution, December 11, 1914, p. 2; News, December 30, 1914, p. 1; December 31, 1914, p. 2.

⁴²News, July 7, 1915, pp. 1-2. Eugene McMahon left the News in 1918 for service in the army. He did not return to newspaper work. Later while speculating in leases he struck it rich in the East Texas oil fields. He and his mother in 1941 established the McMahon Foundation in Lawton, a philanthropic organization that contributed to civic and cultural activities. McMahon fondly recalled his early days in journalistic work and established an annual scholarship contribution from the foundation to the University of Oklahoma School of Journalism at Norman. Rice said he joined the News as a cub reporter at eighteen years of age just out of high school. He earned \$3 a week as a cub and after a year's work was raised to \$6 a week. A year later his pay was doubled to \$12 a week.

Although the News declared it was changing owners, it actually was only changing editors and other personnel. Keys always avoided any official disclosure on his part that he was the actual owner. He followed this same pattern in changing key personnel for the paper, always announcing a "change of ownership" for the newspaper. Thompson as new editor announced that the News would continue its independent policies politically. It was at this point that the News abandoned its active editorial page and began relying on canned editorials or editorials clipped from other newspapers. Locally written editorials usually appeared only in the Sunday papers. The local news coverage was adequate, but the papers were reduced in size mostly to four pages daily. This pattern was to remain approximately the same until 1918, when the News again was to "change owners."⁴³

In 1916, Thompson left the News in a disagreement with Keys and entered the motion picture theater business in Lawton. McMahon was appointed editor and manager for the paper, and Rice, who had been serving for a time as city editor, was named managing editor. Further changes were announced in January of 1918 when McMahon left for the army and Rice was named editor-publisher. Fred C. Hogan, formerly of Tulsa, was appointed business manager. On July 8, 1918, Keys hired Joseph F. Willetts, a Drumright newspaperman, as an editorial writer to launch an all-out editorial attack against Shepler and the Constitution. Willetts was an accomplished newsman, both on the news side as editor and reporter and on the editorial page, where he could masterfully wield a vitriolic pen in flaying his enemies. After a two-day editorial blast

⁴³Rice interview. This decline in editorial page activity was noted by surveying the newspapers from July of 1915 to July of 1918.

at Shepler, the News announced that Wilbur Rice had quit as editor and that Willetts was appointed as the new editor. Rice was immediately hired as advertising director for the Constitution, a position he held until retirement in 1965.⁴⁴

After his arrival at the News, Willetts lost no time in unloading all the editorial gunfire he could muster against Shepler and the Constitution. Day after day the News front-paged a series of editorials denouncing Shepler personally and the politicians the Constitution supported. Shepler was labeled a demagogue who pandered to popular prejudice to advance his own interests, a parasite who acquired nearly \$14,000 from county printing contracts and \$10,000 from other state patronage printing the past seven years he had been in Lawton, and a coward who shunned war-time patriotic duties and obligations. Hurling personal epithets, the News said Shepler was "vulgar, vicious, prurient, abominable, utterly and damnably contemptible." The News also charged Shepler with being a "slacker father" who tried to keep his two "patriotic" sons, Ned and Fred, out of the army during the present war. The Willetts' editorial accused Shepler of putting pressure on army officials to keep his sons from entering the army even though one tried to enlist.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Ibid. Rice said the staff changes made in 1916 when Thompson left the News were not announced in a story or in an editorial as had been done in the past. The News on January 13, 1918, announced in a page four editorial that McMahan was leaving for the army and that Rice had been promoted. On July 13, 1918, it was announced on page four that Rice had left the paper and that Willetts was the new editor. Rice said he refused to do Keys' bidding and write scurrilous editorials attacking local people without justification. Rice said it was obvious that Keys was hoping to run the town, and that one way to accomplish this was by putting the opposition newspaper, the Constitution, out of business.

⁴⁵News, July 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 1918, p. 1; August 3, 1918, p. 1.

In politics, the News attacked Scott Ferris, the Fifth District Congressman from Lawton, whom the Constitution was supporting as a future candidate against United States Senator Thomas P. Gore, also from Lawton. In one instance, Ferris backed Joe Rhinefort, Comanche County attorney, for renomination to the prosecutor's post. The News charged that Ferris secured a government job for Rhinefort's brother, Ben Rhinefort, who had been accused of being disloyal and favoring the Germans in the war. This, the News cried, made Joe Rhinefort a potentially disloyal person. In the November general election of 1918, Joe Rhinefort was defeated by a Republican, L. M. Gensman. The News was exultant that the "county had been purged of the taint of disloyalty" by the defeat of the "potential pro-German Joe Rhinefort."⁴⁶

For the most part, Shepler refused to answer these daily front-page editorial blasts against him during 1918. In brief reference he editorially stated that the pursuit of the war on the local front was more important than replying to "Kaiser Keys' tirades." In a comment on the Joe Rhinefort issue, he referred to "tunes wheezed out by Kaiser Keys' electric organ which brands the entire city and county as pro-German." In the same editorial, Shepler added:

The Kaiser has ably demonstrated or has had it demonstrated to him, in an unmistakable manner, how useless it is to maintain a newspaper as the defender of a private corporation or as a means to vent personal grievance. . . .⁴⁷

The battle ebbed for the first few months of 1919, but then flared in April when the Constitution, long silent in the journalistic war,

⁴⁶ Ibid., July 23, 31, 1918, p. 1; August 7, 8, 18, 1918, p. 1; November 5, 1918, p. 4; November 6, 1918, pp. 1 and 4; November 8, 1918, p. 4; November 13, 1918, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Constitution, August 7, 1918, p. 4.

unleashed an editorial barrage. The target of the Constitution's displeasure was a Literary Digest opinion poll of newspaper editors commenting on how their communities felt about the League of Nations. Joe Willetts, editor of the News, was quoted as saying this about Lawton's sentiments on the League:

This community is composed of Wilson worshipers, to whom 'he kept us out of war' was a most pleasing sound. They are being slowly led into the light, but we doubt if twenty per cent of them know what the League of Nations means. They know Wilson wants it, and that's sufficient. Some of them think it's a baseball league.⁴⁸

Said the Constitution about Joe Willetts:

. . . The journalistic derelict, who is responsible for the quotations of the dirty sheet, which outrages all public decency by its daily appearance, and whose pen is so steeped in filth that it is impossible for him to write an uncontaminated line, not satisfied with attacking individuals locally, stoops so low as to send a libelous statement regarding the whole community to a publication of national circulation.⁴⁹

The Constitution commented that Willetts' statement sounded as if the News were doing missionary work among barbarians who did not yet know that there was a war. The editorial contended that Lawton and its people did not dodge any war obligations, that nearly 1,000 sons of Lawton mothers went to war, and that Lawton oversubscribed every Liberty bond loan drive. The people of Lawton have stood for a great deal from Kaiser Keys and his "Fridays" on the electric organ, the Constitution said, adding that they have put up with overcharges on lights and gas and have stood for broken automobile springs caused by his failure to fix pavements after laying gas lines. The publication of "such a

⁴⁸ Constitution, April 4, 1919, p. 4; Literary Digest, April 5, 1919, pp. 13-16, 120-128.

⁴⁹ Literary Digest, April 5, 1919, pp. 13-16, 120-128.

malicious statement in the Literary Digest . . . is the straw that breaks the camel's back," the editorial added. The Constitution suggested that if the "public utilities gang" thinks this fair section of Oklahoma is "such a rotten bit of country and inhabited by such ignorant people," then they should go back to Philadelphia, Chicago, and Boston and other centers of culture and crime.⁵⁰

Willetts replied that he stood by his comment made in the Literary Digest. And in a five-column editorial he repeated all of the charges he had made against Shepler in 1918 and then asked the public which does most for the city of Lawton, "a slinking, slimy, parasitic, boot-licking journalistic groveler, who lives by fear and favor, or a \$30,000 monthly payroll from the Keys' interests?" The editorial added:

Which do the people of this community want, which can they afford to lose--Parasite Shepler or:

The Comanche Light & Power Company.

The Lawton Gas & Electric Company.

The Crystal Laundry.

The Lawton News.

The Keys' oil interests.

The supply houses (which came to this city when they were guaranteed the business of the Keys oil interests and not before).

The future business connected with the development of the Keys oil field and dozens of other allied interests which bring money and prosperity into this community and which are centered solely and wholly in the 'Keys interests.'

Which do the people of Lawton want?

That is a matter for the thinking, progressive people of this city to decide.⁵¹

For days the News again front-paged editorials on the same theme:

"Which does Lawton wish to retain? . . . Demagogue Shepler or the

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹News, April 5, 1919, p. 4.

\$30,000 monthly payroll of the Keys interests?"⁵²

The Constitution replied that last August "Kaiser Keys had the presumption to brand this community pro-German," and after seven months the "Literary Digest appears with an article branding the entire community as war-slackers, casting a reflection on every man, woman, and child in the city of Lawton." Constitution editorials claimed that the Keys payrolls were not the question, because if he should move, the plants would still be in Lawton and the payrolls as well. It was argued by the Constitution that the Keys interests had been a menace in every community in which they did business.⁵³

It was then the Constitution found a windfall in its fight with Keys. It published a fantastic conspiracy story that sounded like a plot for a grade "B" Hollywood movie with John C. Keys "taking the leading role as villain." The Constitution said it had acquired depositions from persons involved in the case and was printing the story "in order that the people who do not already know may know the character of the man with whom they have to deal." The case concerned the town of Mangum in western Oklahoma, where one of Keys' electric utility firms was located. Mayor G. F. Border of Mangum in 1914 had advocated passage of a city bond issue for the construction of a municipal power plant. The city-owned plant would replace the Keys' power plant which the mayor accused of charging exorbitant rates against the citizens of Mangum.⁵⁴

⁵²Ibid., April 6, 8, 9, 1919, p. 1.

⁵³Constitution, April 5, 1919, p. 4.

⁵⁴Ibid., April 7, 1919, pp. 2-3; April 8, 1919, pp. 2-3.

Former Keys employees involved in the conspiracy said that Keys conceived the idea of getting something on Mayor Border which would ruin his reputation with the people of Mangum and kill the bond issue. The Keys' employees testified that John C. Keys hatched a plot to ruin Mayor Border, a physician and surgeon in Mangum, by attempting to get him to perform illegal abortions on two young girls.⁵⁵

The men and girls Keys hired to take part in the scheme took rooms in a Mangum hotel and made a call to Dr. Border. But the Mangum mayor somehow had gotten wind of the plot. When Dr. Border entered the hotel room prepared as a trap for him, he pulled a six-shooter out of his grip. He was followed by Mangum police officers and Greer County officers, who arrested the four men and two girls and confiscated a dictograph the group planned to use to entrap Dr. Border. All were convicted of felonious conspiracy. During the trials it was brought out that Keys was the mastermind behind the scheme. As a result, Dr. Border filed a civil suit for damages against Keys and his electric utility corporation. Keys lost the lawsuit in February of 1919 in a trial at Mangum, resulting in a \$62,000 judgment against him. The depositions from the convicted conspirators were brought out in the civil suit, and it was this record of testimony that the Constitution acquired and printed as an expose of Keys' character and background.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid. A page one story from the Mangum Star, February 27, 1919, reported some of Keys' testimony during the civil suit trial. The story said Keys testified that he was the president of about a dozen oil companies and a "whole gang of electric companies" and that his income was a "cool million dollars a year." Keys testified that a little concern like the Mangum electric utility would hardly interest him because he made so much money. The Star also reported that when a letter implicating Keys and his general manager in the scheme was

It was an incredible story, and the Constitution was well aware of the damage it would cause to Keys' reputation and standing in Lawton. The Constitution printed every word of the sordid details revealed in the depositions aired in the civil lawsuit against Keys. It was printed in a two-page spread for two days in a row.⁵⁷

The Constitution then went to work editorially to wring the last ounce of damaging material it could out of the case. Keys also had been indicted on a charge of criminal conspiracy in Mangum, the county seat of Greer County. The Constitution said that five of his employees were tried and convicted of criminal conspiracy, that they had put the finger on Keys as being the mastermind, yet he had not been brought to trial on the criminal charges. "Why has he not been brought to trial?" the newspaper asked.⁵⁸

Repeatedly the Constitution reminded its readers of the Keys conspiracy at Mangum. It also went to work with a vengeance on other aspects of the Keys' enterprises in Lawton. One editorial accused the electric utility of charging the city of Lawton each month for 100 street lights at \$5 per light when not over 90 could be found burning in the city. It contended that Keys made \$81,186 profit in one year through his Lawton electric utility, and that he now wanted to raise the electric rates, which would bring the profit up to \$123,415 annually. Another charge levied against Keys was that he was not paying interest on 2,300 Lawton light connection deposits, which required a minimum of

⁵⁶(Continued) introduced in the trial, Keys collapsed on the stand and later could not recall any part of his role in the conspiracy.

⁵⁷Mangum Star, February 27, 1919, p. 1.

⁵⁸Constitution, April 10, 1919, p. 3.

\$5 deposit for each subscriber. And the Constitution uncovered a story that the Oklahoma Corporation Commission had determined that Keys had overcharged Lawton citizens a total of \$14,339 over a period from September of 1916 to April of 1919 and had not refunded the money.⁵⁹

All of these charges were used by the Constitution to build a case and to sound a rallying cry for a municipally owned electric utility to replace Keys' power plant. A petition with over 500 signatures was presented to the city commissioners which asked for an election on a bond issue providing \$200,000 to either buy Keys out or construct a new power plant. The bond election would also provide \$50,000 for purchase or construction of a city-owned ice plant. However, the three city commissioners, who were politically allied with Keys, ultimately refused to call the election and the movement died.⁶⁰

Disclosure of the Keys conspiracy case at Mangum tempered the volume of Willetts' fiery editorial blasts at Shepler and the Constitution. Occasionally the News in page one editorials would repeat charges previously raised against Shepler and Scott Ferris. And the News came out with several editorials citing the drawbacks of municipally owned public utilities and printed several case studies of cities which had gone bankrupt trying to run their own utilities. However, no editorial comment appeared in the News about Keys' involvement in the Mangum case.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid., April 11, 1919, pp. 1,4; April 15, 1919, p. 4; April 16, 1919, p. 4.

⁶⁰ Ibid., April 11, 1919, pp. 1,4; April 15, 1919, p. 4; April 16, 1919, p. 4; May 26, 1919, p. 1; June 13, 1919, p. 1.

⁶¹ News, April 11, 1919, p. 1; April 15, 1919, p. 1; May 27, 1919, pp. 1,4.

The unexpected death of John N. Shepler on June 16, 1919, ended the fiery journalistic war between the two newspapers--at least for a time. Shepler died at the home of his father, Peter Shepler, at Greencastle, Missouri. The fifty-three-year-old Lawton publisher had traveled to Greencastle to visit his seriously ill father, who died five days after his arrival. A few hours after his father's death, Shepler suffered a stroke of paralysis from which he never recovered, dying three days afterward. Mrs. Shepler and their two sons, Fred and Ned, hurried to the Missouri home, but Shepler died without regaining consciousness.⁶²

Shepler had published the Constitution for more than eight years. He had built it into one of Lawton's two leading dailies. It was not a great newspaper, but rather an average one not unlike many others in towns the same size as Lawton. The Constitution at the time of his death was locked in a life and death struggle with its rival, the News. The Constitution appeared slightly in the forefront of the journalistic war at the time of Shepler's death after the disclosure of Keys' involvement in the Mangum scandal. Also, Shepler had possessed a keen business sense and had managed to capture and keep much of the valuable display advertising business with Lawton merchants. This was another "plus" in the Constitution's favor that would weigh heavily in the next few years in deciding which paper would be the sole surviving daily in Lawton.

It was announced soon afterward that Ned and Fred Shepler would continue operation and publication of the Lawton Constitution. The two

⁶²Constitution, June 17, 1919, p. 1; June 18, 1919, p. 1; June 19, 1919, p. 1.

sons declared they would follow their father's example and attempt to publish "the cleanest and best newspaper that it is possible for us to publish, with the financial support at our command." In politics, they asserted the paper would continue to champion the "great Democratic party founded by Thomas Jefferson." They said the majority of the Constitution stock was owned by their mother, Mrs. Georgia Shepler, and that they were the only other stockholders.⁶³

Promoting Fort Sill, the War Effort

The Lawton newspapers vigorously supported Fort Sill and its role in World War I and the city of Lawton's efforts to maintain and supply the post. Indeed, the principal news story of this second decade was World War I. The Lawton papers relayed news of the war to their readers and reported the local angles connected with the war effort.

Well before 1917 Fort Sill had become a major factor affecting Lawton's economy, and the newspapers became all-out boosters for the post. Construction of the new post buildings which had started in 1909 was completed in 1911. That same year Captain Dan T. Moore established the School of Fire for Field Artillery at Fort Sill for the training of officers and enlisted men, further enhancing Lawton's economic future. Before plans could be completed to begin the new school a major obstacle confronted the military authorities, one that was an old problem in Southwest Oklahoma. As the result of a two-year drought, there was a severe water shortage at Lake Lawtonka, which supplied both Lawton and Fort Sill. For a time the shortage was so serious that military

⁶³Ibid., June 27, 1919, p. 1.

officials almost decided to abandon the new artillery school and the entire post.⁶⁴

Alarmed, the Lawton News suggested wells be dug in or near Cache Creek as the lake's level dropped so low that only a trickle came out of the water lines serving Lawton and Fort Sill. Rains a few days later temporarily relieved the crisis. That summer and winter more rains filled the lake, and by December, water was roaring over Lawtonka Dam. For a time, the water problem was solved.⁶⁵

The Lawton newspapers pointed to economic gains for Lawton as Fort Sill gained more troops. The Infantry School moved from the Presidio of Monterey to Fort Sill in 1913, although it was transferred to Camp Benning in 1918, and in 1915 the first of several aerial observation units arrived at the post. In the spring of 1916 the troubles with Mexico resulted in all of the artillery units at Fort Sill being sent to the border. This temporarily closed the Field Artillery School. With the entrance of the United States in World War I, the Field Artillery School was reactivated in 1917. During its peak weekly output, the school graduated some 200 field artillery officers and 100 air service observers. For the entire war period, the Field Artillery School graduated a total of 3,215 student officers.⁶⁶

Lawton felt the biggest economic impact during the war, however, from the establishment of Camp Doniphan, a large military cantonment

⁶⁴ News, February 8, 1911, p. 1; February 10, 1911, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Ibid., February 12, 1911, p. 1; June 18, 1911, p. 1; July 15, 1911, p. 1; December 21, 1911, p. 1; December 27, 1911, p. 1.

⁶⁶ W. S. Nye, Carbine & Lance: The Story of Old Fort Sill (Cent. ed.; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), p. 329; Constitution, June 24, 1916, p. 1; June 27, 1916, p. 1; July 6, 1917, p. 1.

which trained soldiers for duty overseas. But it was a struggle before Lawton succeeded in getting the army to locate the training camp at Fort Sill. Many other cities across the nation, including several in Oklahoma, made bids for the big army camp. When it was learned that the War Department planned to establish several of these cantonments across the United States, the Lawton newspapers editorially supported a delegation sent to Washington to lobby for a camp.⁶⁷

But the Lawton delegation to Washington was slapped in the face with an old problem, the lack of water. War Department officials pointed out that the pipeline from Lake Lawtonka was insufficient to carry water for a cantonment and to supply the city of Lawton at the same time. Also, three years of drought had lowered the lake considerably and the water pressure. Fort Sill then was dropped from consideration because of the inadequate water supply. But the Lawton newspapers and businessmen would not give up. They advised the Lawton delegation in Washington to tell the military officials that Lawton would turn over the city's water supply to Fort Sill and the cantonment, and that Lawton would use its auxiliary system of water wells until a second line could be built. With the assurance that Lawton would furnish five million gallons of water daily to the post, Lawton was notified that Fort Sill had been selected as the site of one of five national army cantonments.⁶⁸

Constitution editorials took the lead in supporting a city election

⁶⁷A roundup story of how Lawton and Fort Sill handled the training, supplying, housing, etc., of troops during World War I included details of how Lawton solved the water problem and won the cantonment. See the Constitution, November 16, 1918, p. 1.

⁶⁸Constitution, June 11, 1917, p. 1.

for funds to construct the additional pipeline to Lawton and Fort Sill. The election called for a vote on bonds totaling \$375,000 to construct a twenty-four-inch pipeline to Fort Sill with a graduated sixteen and fourteen-inch main leading into Lawton. The election also called for raising the lake dam ten feet to a height of sixty feet, which was expected to double the capacity of the reservoir. In the July election, the bond issue carried easily. The pipelines were completed in six months time, but construction on raising the dam did not start until late 1918.⁶⁹

The cantonment was constructed west and south of the main post area and was named Camp Doniphan. It was operated separately from the Field Artillery School and other Fort Sill units. Some 50,000 men received army basic training at the camp. The largest group stationed there was the 35th National Guard Division from Kansas and Missouri, which trained for six months. After the war most of the camp's temporary buildings were torn down and sold, but the site was used for many years as the summer camp grounds of the Oklahoma National Guard.⁷⁰

With the influx of thousands of soldiers at Fort Sill, Lawton was transformed from a sleepy town into a bustling city. During the economic bonanza, Constitution editorials constantly warned against overcharging and exploiting soldiers and their families. The city's population doubled, many new stores opened, and over 100 new homes were built. Especially at night, the soldiers thronged into Lawton for amusement, visiting the city's cafes, cabarets, picture shows, and

⁶⁹Ibid., July 24, 1917, p. 1; July 31, 1917, p. 1; November 16, 1918, p. 1; March 29, 1919, p. 2.

⁷⁰Constitution, March 10, 1919, p. 1.

vaudeville theaters. A disaster struck on September 24, 1917, when fire destroyed two blocks in the main business district. Within a year, however, the burned area was reconstructed with new buildings.⁷¹

Lawton had many problems with being a wartime army town, but perhaps the biggest headache was the control of vice--gambling, bootlegging, and prostitution, particularly the latter. Editorials in the News and the Constitution called for crackdowns on the vice. Yet prostitutes from all over the nation flocked to Lawton as the Cantonment and Fort Sill units increased in troop strength. The venereal disease problem associated with prostitution became so bad that Lawton set up a detention home to treat diseased prostitutes after their arrest and conviction. Those prostitutes who were not diseased were jailed for long terms and then placed on trains and sent home. All sorts of controls were set up to stop the influx of the camp followers. A vice committee was established, which helped to raise money to hire more police officers. Spotters visited incoming trains, and suspected women and girls were followed to their destinations. If they stopped at local hotels or rooming houses, the proprietors were warned. Lawton hotels and rooming houses also were put under rigid rules, and if they violated them, were closed down. Taxi drivers faced stiff punishment if they were found to be working with prostitutes.⁷²

Another major problem that arose was an outbreak of smallpox, which was blamed by health officials on Lawton's lack of sanitation controls. Health officers warned that the city streets and alleys had

⁷¹Ibid., September 24, 1917, p. 1; November 16, 1918, p. 1.

⁷²Constitution, December 14, 1917, p. 1; December 18, 1917, pp. 1-2; November 16, 1918, p. 1; March 12, 1919, p. 1.

to be cleaned up and kept that way. After several cases of smallpox were discovered, military officials threatened to quarantine the cantonment troops and Fort Sill soldiers and not allow them to come to Lawton. Constitution editorials pleaded with businesses to cooperate and warned they could lose most of their trade. The city arranged for wagon teams to clean up the business and residential areas and Fort Sill. Rigid rules were set up on disposal of garbage and refuse. Businesses, such as cafes, which refused to obey the rules, were placed off limits to soldiers. Contractors were hired to collect refuse and garbage from all over the city and from Camp Doniphan and Fort Sill on a regular basis. Garbage collected separately from the refuse was fed to hogs in big feeding pens owned and operated by the city. After the city and Fort Sill were cleaned up and the new sanitation rules put into effect, the smallpox crisis faded. Another disease which swept the country during World War I, influenza, also had its effects in Lawton and Fort Sill. Theaters were closed temporarily in December of 1918 and not more than twelve persons were allowed to congregate in one place.⁷³

The end of the war and the closing of Camp Doniphan ended the business boom. Lawton returned to its normal population size and peacetime pursuits. Fort Sill was still regarded as Lawton's major source of income. But Lawton businessmen and the newspapers repeatedly beat the drum of boosterism for other avenues of income and ways to increase the city's size. Lawton's population had stabilized at

⁷³Ibid., November 21, 1917, p. 1; November 22, 1917, p. 1; December 10, 1917, p. 1; November 16, 1918, p. 1; December 9, 1918, p. 1; December 16, 1918, p. 1; December 18, 1918, p. 1.

approximately 8,000 since the town's earliest years. The census of 1910 showed 7,788 living in Lawton at that time. The Lawton Chamber of Commerce, and newspapers, were eager to see the city gain new businesses or industries and greatly increase its population. Editorials stressed building up Lawton even further as the market and trade center for Southwest Oklahoma, servicing residents and farmers. Typical of this boosterism in the Lawton newspapers was this editorial:

. . . With uncertainty regarding the future of Fort Sill, Lawton businessmen must turn their attention to other things. Fort Sill must not be forgotten, however. The military committee of the Lawton Businessmen's Club should work continually in harmony with the officers at the post, endeavoring to find out what improvements should be made and work with the thought in view of a bigger and better fort.

. . .

The post however cannot be depended upon to make Lawton the city it is destined to be. Lawton is so geographically situated that with the proper amount of boosting on the part of her citizens, she can be one of the big cities of the state.

Lawton is a center of a great agricultural district. While there have been crop failures for several years, prospects are bright for the future. . . .

Lawton should be an oil center. Lawton is not forty miles from the Cement fields on the north. Shallow wells have been drilled all around Lawton. Lawton should make every effort to build roads into these fields and cultivate them. . . .

Lawton's business houses are metropolitan. Its up-to-date stores should attract citizens from the southwest part of the state. . . .

Lawton is an industrial center--it has good water and cheap fuel. . . .

Lawton climate is unsurpassed. . . .

Lawton's one big mistake has been its failure to advertise its advantages. All of her citizens should boost the city. . . .

Lawton is destined to become one of the biggest and best cities in the southwest.⁷⁴

⁷⁴Ibid., January 2, 1919, p. 4.

Railroad and Oil Boosterism

Lawton newspapers filled many of their columns during the 1910-1920 decade with editorials proclaiming that the best way Lawton could bolster its economy and size was through more and better railroads. And all through the decade Lawton sought additional railroad line connections, especially a main line or a transcontinental line, which would help build up the city as a regional marketing and trading center. Chamber of Commerce officials joined the newspaper chorus in calling for more Lawton railroads. Lawton had only the Rock Island and Frisco connections, and these were merely trunk lines serving the city.

In 1911, an east-to-west railroad was proposed from Ardmore to Lawton via Waurika. Lawton lacked railway connections with the east. The Frisco and Rock Island serviced Lawton from the other directions, and Lawtonians reasoned that if the new railroad were constructed, the city would be served by lines extending in all four directions. It would connect Lawton with the Santa Fe at Ardmore and with eastern Oklahoma. It would bring trade, customers, and goods from the east and would offer railway service for the farmers between Ardmore and Lawton.

The railroad was the Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Pacific Railway, a company of which the famous circus showman, John Ringling, was the president. Jake Hamon, Lawton's first city attorney and longtime resident, was Ringling's business agent for the railroad. Hamon struck proposals with towns along the route. The towns would pledge bonuses and donate right of way and in return would benefit by being linked with the railroad. Lawton was asked to pledge a \$50,000 bonus to insure that the railroad would be built. According to the agreement, half of

the \$50,000 would be paid when the railroad was completed, and the rest when trains were running between Lawton and Ardmore.⁷⁵

Lawton businessmen were openly enthusiastic about getting the railroad built, as were the city's newspapers. Commented the News:

Let us have that railroad to Ardmore. We need it and can afford to pay liberally for it. Don't bother yourself about how much the promoters are going to make, just figure what it is worth to Lawton. . . .⁷⁶

Lawton's money was soon pledged, and so was the money along the rest of the route. It was not until January 8, 1913, that the railway received a charter from the state of Oklahoma granting it the right to build a standard gauge railroad from Ardmore to Lawton. Construction began in 1913 and was completed as far as the town of Ringling in Carter County in January of 1914.⁷⁷

But an unforeseen factor entered into the future of the railroad. Oil was struck in a large field about five miles north of the railroad line and about twenty-eight miles west of Ardmore. It was the highly rich Healdton oil field. The railroad abandoned plans to build on to Lawton and instead laid its tracks to the new oil field. By 1917 the last spike was driven in the line which stopped near Healdton. The line proved highly profitable to Hamon and Ringling, both of whom also got rich from investments in the Healdton oil field and from selling lots in

⁷⁵News, March 4, 1911, p. 1; March 5, 1911, p. 1; Constitution, October 17, 1912, p. 1; October 31, 1912, p. 7.

⁷⁶News, March 4, 1911, p. 1.

⁷⁷Gilbert L. Robinson, "Transportation in Carter County, 1913-1917," Chronicles of Oklahoma, XIX, No. 4, (1941), pp. 368-376.

the new townsite. But for Lawton, it was the end of a dream for a profitable railway connection with the east.⁷⁸

In 1919 Lawton went through all the flurry and excitement of an oil boom. The city was frantically searching for another bonanza after the closing of the cantonment and the reduction of Fort Sill troop strength to peacetime levels. The boom came with the development of an oil field some twenty-five miles southeast of Lawton in Cotton County. Actually the field was next door to Walters, the county seat of Cotton County, and it eventually became known as the Walters oil field. However, it was referred to as the Lawton oil field in Lawton newspapers.⁷⁹

"Black gold" fever was not new to Lawton and Comanche County. Even before the land opening in 1901, shallow oil bearing sands were found in various parts of the county. Later in 1905, shallow oil wells were drilled six to ten miles east of Lawton, but production was negligible. After the opening of the Petrolia and Electra oil fields just across the Red River in Texas in the late 1910's, interest spread to Comanche County. Speculators leased practically all of the land. And for years several gas wells had been producing in this area near Walters.⁸⁰

By 1919 drilling was started and several wells brought in. The field at its peak output in 1919 had fifty producing wells with a weekly pipeline run of 10,000 barrels. And 200 rigs were drilling for

⁷⁸Ibid.; Constitution, September 24, 1917, p. 2.

⁷⁹Constitution, February 13, 1919, p. 1.

⁸⁰Ibid., December 16, 1915, p. 1.

oil during the year. Yet no big gusher was struck and the area did not develop into a major field.⁸¹

Both the Lawton Chamber of Commerce and the Lawton newspapers seized on the oil field as the sole economic hope to rescue the city from the post-war doldrums. On February 21, 1919, the Lawton chamber and newspapers even sponsored an "Oil Field Day." All businesses closed and practically the whole town toured the "Lawton Oil Field" so that everyone would "realize what Lawton has at her very door."⁸²

In a page one story that read more like an editorial, the Constitution raised these challenges:

Lawton's future depends on the oil and gas business. Every Lawton businessman must realize that Lawton's one best bet is the field southeast of the city. . . .

Millions are being spent in the development of the Lawton oil field and these millions are not being spent in Lawton. The Lawton oil field is just as good, if not better than Burkburnett or Ranger, and extensive development will take place during the current year. Millions of feet of rig timbers will be hauled into the field, thousands of tons of machinery will be taken out, supplies, drillers' equipment, clothing and everything needed by the hundreds of men who are employed on the wells must be purchased somewhere. Whether or not all of these supplies, the millions of dollars' worth of equipment, are purchased in Lawton depends on the enterprise of Lawton businessmen.

Lawton businessmen must secure an oil field machine shop for the city. They must get supply houses. They must get a pipeline and loading racks in Lawton, for Lawton is the logical shipping point for oil to the big refineries of the east.

The Lawton road to the field is longer than roads from other towns, but with the exception of that part of the highway in Cotton County, it is by far the best road into the field. Lawton businessmen must insist that it be the best road into the field. The Lawton oil field rightfully belongs to Lawton, and Lawtonians must see to it that they receive the full benefit from it which they should have. . . .⁸³

⁸¹Ibid., February 21, 1919, p. 1.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid., February 20, 1919, p. 1.

One pipeline was constructed to Lawton from the oil field, and it supplied a new refinery in Lawton, the Lawton Refinery Company, owned by J. R. Travis. The pipeline had a delivery capacity of 2,500 barrels a day, and the refinery had a capacity of 1,200 barrels a day. The surplus from the pipeline was shipped to other refineries in Oklahoma.⁸⁴

But the distance to the oil field--twenty-five to thirty miles--eventually proved too big an obstacle to make Lawton the center of business. The nearby towns of Walters and Duncan became the service and supply centers and reaped most of the economic benefits. Also the depression of the early 1920's shut down production from most of the field. As a result, Lawton's oil fever soon was to subside.

County Division Fever

A running story in the Lawton newspapers early during the 1910's and one that had a big economic impact on Lawton was on county division fever. Three attempts were made to carve new counties out of Comanche County. Only the third move was successful, when in 1912 Cotton County was created out of the southern part of Comanche County. During each of the attempts, Lawton newspaper editorials pleaded for the county to remain united. Editorials argued that the seceding county would suffer economically because its residents would have to pay for installation of a new county government in which the tax base would be higher than Comanche County's.

Portions of Comanche County, at one time the largest county in the state, were first sliced off by Oklahoma Constitutional Convention

⁸⁴Ibid., February 15, 1919, p. 1.

delegates in 1906. By act of the constitutional convention, about 648 square miles were taken from its southwestern corner to help form the new county of Tillman, and an area of 396 square miles was taken off its eastern border to help form the counties of Jefferson, Stephens, and Grady. Later in juggling of county lines, a six-mile strip was given to Grady County and a nine-mile strip to Stephens and Jefferson counties.⁸⁵

The first county division attempt occurred in 1909. Residents of the southern portion of Kiowa County and the western portion of Comanche County petitioned the governor and were granted an election to consider the formation of a new county, Park County. In the election held January 30, residents in the Kiowa County area voted 1,211 for and 624 against the proposal, while in the Comanche County strip only 83 favored the question with 272 opposing. Because less than sixty per cent of the voters favored establishing the new county, the effort to create Park County died.⁸⁶

Undaunted, the residents of these two sections again filed a petition with the governor requesting another special election to create a new county. This time they changed the name from Park to Swanson in honor of Oklahoma Governor Charles N. Haskell's friend, Governor Claud Swanson of Virginia. Governor Haskell set the special election for May 2, 1910. In filing the petition, the residents listed five reasons why the new county was being sought. They argued they did not receive their share of public improvements, such as bridges, for the amount of

⁸⁵Ibid., September 5, 1912, p. 3. A story about the carving up of Comanche County detailed this history.

⁸⁶Constitution-Democrat, February 1, 1909, p. 1.

taxes they paid, that costs of running the new county would be less, that their farm lands closer to a new county seat would be more valuable, that taxes would be less, and that county officials would have more interest in the new county than the present ones. The Lawton newspapers generally denied these charges and countered that the seceding area would find its taxes higher because of the costs of setting up a new county government.⁸⁷

After a vote on May 2, 1910, in which it was claimed that more than sixty per cent favored the new county, Governor Haskell proclaimed Swanson County an official Oklahoma county on August 13, 1910. Comanche County went to court to contest the action. The suit stated that the residents of the Comanche County strip voted 323 against and only 80 for the proposed new Swanson County. State law, it was argued, required approval of sixty per cent of the votes cast in the seceding portion of a county. The courts decided that the Comanche County petition was right and in October of 1911 ordered Swanson County to be dissolved.⁸⁸

While the future of Swanson County was being debated in the courts, a running feud had been going on between Snyder and Mountain Park over which town would have the county seat. The feud was an outgrowth of an earlier quarrel between the two towns over location of a Frisco railroad line. A "war" between the county seat factions resulted in one death and the kidnapping of several county officials.⁸⁹

⁸⁷Ibid., January 15, 1919, p. 1.

⁸⁸Constitution, June 15, 1911, p. 1; News, October 12, 1911, p. 1.

⁸⁹Constitution, March 9, 1911, p. 1; News, February 14, 1911, p. 1; February 15, 1911, p. 1; February 16, 1911, p. 1; June 28, 1911, p. 1.

In 1912 another drive was launched to form a new county of the southern part of Comanche County. This movement had failed in a previous attempt. A proposal to create the county of Cache was defeated in a special election in October of 1910. On August 22, 1912, over 60 per cent of the voters of 13 townships and 13 fractional townships voted to separate from Comanche County and create Cotton County. Walters later was chosen as the county seat. Comanche County lost the area of 457 square miles in the county division, leaving the county with some 1,084 square miles of land.⁹⁰

Other Major Stories of the Decade

Another story much in the headlines early in the decade was the switch in 1911 from a mayor-city council form of government operating under state statutes to a city commission operating under a charter. Prior to the election on the changeover, the issue was debated in the newspapers. The Constitution opposed the commission form of government on the grounds it would destroy representative government in Lawton. It contended that too much power would be lodged in the commissioners. The Constitution did not specifically say so but it was likely that the paper suspected it would lose influence with the city officials under the new form of government and would not retain the city printing contract. And that was what happened. After the commissioners came into office, the Democratic paper lost the city printing contract for several years.⁹¹

⁹⁰Constitution, August 23, 1912, p. 1; August 29, p. 1; Directory of Oklahoma 1973 (State Election Board, 1973), p. 258.

⁹¹Constitution, July 2, 1911, p. 4; August 23, 1911, p. 4.

The News supported the commission-charter form of government. In several editorials, the News argued that Lawton without a charter was at the mercy of the state legislature which could change laws at will under which Lawton was governed. The News said this was not "home rule" which a city should have to govern itself and that a city should not be governed by lawmakers from all over the state. Further, the News contended the new form of government would be best for lawton because it would eliminate politics from the city's business. Under the charter form of government, commissioners would not run for election as members of a political party but would run as independents.⁹²

Lawton voters approved the charter in September of 1911 and later elected three new commissioners to run the city. The new positions included commissioner of public safety, commissioner of finance, and commissioner of public property. In a comical anticlimax to the election, the outgoing mayor, G. H. Block, refused to turn over the city's records to the new commissioners and staged a forty-hour "sit-in" at city hall. Afterward Block filed papers in district court, charging that the election of freeholders to draw up the charter was illegal, that the filing of the charter was illegal, and that the ensuing election of commissioners was illegal. His petition claimed he was elected mayor of Lawton for two years on April 4, 1911, and that he had not served out his term. The court ruled that Block's charges were groundless and that the Lawton charter and elections were legal. Lawton was

⁹²News, January 18, 1911, p. 4; March 24, 1911, p. 4; July 2, 1911, p. 1; September 3, 1911, p. 2.

to function under the charter-commissioner form of government until 1922.⁹³

One of the ugliest chapters in Lawton's history occurred on a Sunday night, April 9, 1916, when a mob lynched a Negro man who had shot and mortally wounded a police officer. The shooting of the police officer, Patrolman Jim Hayes, had occurred that Saturday afternoon. Hayes and another officer had answered a call about a man disturbing the peace in Lawton's east side business district, a Negro area. The suspect, Carl Dudley, resisted arrest and ran into a cafe. When the officers saw him draw a pistol through the glass door, they drew their pistols and began shooting. Dudley returned the fire. Suddenly Officer Hayes reeled with a wound in the stomach, and his gun fell from his hand. He turned and walked slowly across the street to a hotel, where he lay down on the couch.⁹⁴

Dudley, also wounded in the shoulder in the shootout, filed out the rear of the cafe. He ran through the industrial area of Lawton and into the office of the Independent Cotton Oil Mill, where he had once worked. Dudley told the owner he wanted protection because he feared a mob would be after him. A doctor was called, and Dudley's shoulder wound was treated. He was taken to Southwestern Hospital for further treatment, and then, concealed in a car, he was taken during the night over the west road to Fort Sill as it was feared he might be mobbed

⁹³Constitution, September 8, 1911, p. 1; November 9, p. 1; News, September 8, 1911, p. 1; November 7, 1911, p. 1; November 8, 1911, p. 1; November 11, 1911, p. 1; April 11, 1912, p. 1.

⁹⁴News, April 9, 1916, p. 1; Constitution, April 10, 1916, p. 1.

if kept in a Lawton jail.⁹⁵

A doctor also was called to treat the police officer, who was lying on the sofa in the hotel lobby. Large crowds gathered around the outside of the hotel as news of the shooting spread. Hayes' wife arrived and the officer, still conscious, tried to calm her when she became hysterical with grief. An ambulance sped him to the hospital, where surgeons operated in an attempt to control the severe internal bleeding. The doctors found that the bullet had split the spleen in two, but they were able to somewhat control the mass hemorrhages. Yet the loss of blood and the shock proved too much for the patrolman, and he died about 4 a.m. Sunday.⁹⁶

Dudley, seriously ill from his shoulder wound, was kept in the guard house at Fort Sill until Sunday afternoon. Fort Sill officers asked the Comanche County sheriff to return him to Lawton because they had no suitable place to treat him and no authority to keep him at the post. Dudley was taken as surreptitiously as possible to the Comanche County jail Sunday afternoon, but the news quickly spread around Lawton that he was back in the city limits.⁹⁷

Small clusters of men began gathering near the courthouse at 9 p.m. Sunday, and the county officers kept close guard over their prisoner. Then quietly the members of the mob collected, and at 10:45 p.m.,

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷News, April 11, 1916, p. 1; Constitution, April 10, 1916, p. 1; Rice interview. Rice, then a reporter for the Lawton News, was the only newsman present during the lynching. Rice was tipped off that a mob was going to storm the courthouse and get Dudley. He saw most of the mob's work and later wrote an eyewitness account.

equipped with ropes and armed with guns, they made their way to the county jail door. None of the mob was masked. Deputy Sheriff J. S. Hanks answered a knock at the door and was quickly seized and held by two men. The deputy refused to give up his jail door keys, but they were found after a search.⁹⁸

Two close friends of Sheriff Tom Richardson went upstairs to the sheriff's sleeping apartment and asked to see him. The sheriff, hearing the commotion below, was just leaving the room with two automatic revolvers in his hands. His wife was holding him by one arm and begging him not to go downstairs, fearing he would be killed. The two men told the sheriff they were not members of the mob, but had come up to his rooms to keep him from getting hurt. They then wrestled both revolvers from him, and others from the mob joined the two men in pinning and holding the sheriff.⁹⁹

With keys in hand, the members of the mob then surged toward Dudley's jail cell. Before they opened the cell door, Dudley began begging for his life. "For God's sake," he shouted, "don't put that rope around my neck!" Dudley put up a stiff resistance, but was subdued. A rope was placed around his neck and he was dragged to the outside steps of the courthouse. Once outside, several of the mob seized the rope and jerked Dudley down the steps and into the courthouse yard. Immediately rifle and pistol shots seemed to fly in all directions from among the mob. Dudley was killed instantly by the fusillade

⁹⁸ News, April 11, 1916, p. 1; Constitution, April 10, 1916, p. 1.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

of shots which riddled his head and body.¹⁰⁰

Shots were flying everywhere during the shouting and confusion. One of the members of the mob was shot in the foot, another in the leg, and another's cheek was grazed. A seventeen-year-old boy, standing across the street among several other spectators, was painfully wounded in the left thigh by a stray bullet. A reporter covering the story remarked that it was a wonder more people were not wounded in the melee.¹⁰¹

Not content with Dudley's death, the mob then fastened the end of the rope to the axle of an automobile which was waiting close by. Dragging the bloody body behind it, the car drove up and down Lawton's two main business streets, C and D avenues. Hundreds of men, women, and children who had just left the moving picture and vaudeville houses lined the sidewalks and saw the ghastly spectacle. Many spectators thought the mob intended to burn the body, and autos loaded with people raced over the various roads leading from the town. But the body was found hanging from a telephone pole in the northeast corner of the city on the road leading to Cache Creek.¹⁰²

Wilbur Rice, a reporter for the Lawton News, was the only newsman who saw the lynching, the first in Lawton's history. With his eye-witness account, the News editorial staff and printers worked that Sunday night to put out an extra on the lynching. Normally the News was printed Tuesday through Sunday mornings and did not publish a

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Ibid.

Monday edition. But that Monday morning 1,200 extras were sold on the streets, over the counter, and in the residential districts of Lawton. Over 500 more copies were sold in nearby towns. The News extra scooped the paper's rival, the Constitution, which did not come out with stories about the lynching until Monday afternoon, its normal publishing time.¹⁰³

The Lawton police force stood by Sunday night for any further possible racial troubles. It was feared that either a Negro demonstration might erupt or whites might attack Negroes in their homes. But the night passed quietly. Police officers reported that many Negroes feared for their safety and that several left the city Monday and Tuesday.¹⁰⁴

Dudley's body was taken to a Lawton funeral home. He was married, and his wife had to borrow money to pay part of the expenses of the funeral, which was held Tuesday. Business houses were closed during the afternoon, flags hung at half staff, and hundreds attended the funeral which was also held Tuesday for the forty-six-year-old police officer.¹⁰⁵

Editorials in the News and Constitution both deplored and condoned the lynch mob violence. The editorials noted that lynchings usually damage the reputation of a town. Both pointed out that had Dudley been permitted to live, he would have met swift and certain justice for the

¹⁰³Rice interview.

¹⁰⁴Constitution, April 10, 1916, p. 1; News, April 11, 1916, p. 1.

¹⁰⁵Constitution, April 11, 1916, p. 1; News, April 12, 1916, p. 1.

slaying of the officer. The editorials also urged that because it was so horrible that a white officer had been shot down, that perhaps it was better that justice was done in this manner and that the incident should now be forgotten. Neither editorial hinted or asked for a grand jury investigation.¹⁰⁶

A grand jury was convened two months later on June 12, 1916, to investigate the lynching. The judge instructed the jurors that mob violence was against the law and that it was their duty to find out who the members of the mob were and to indict them. District Judge Cham Jones also remarked that a city such as Lawton should not tolerate vice conditions in its east end business district such as houses of ill repute, dives, and bootlegging joints. The judge charged that the mob's action was indirectly caused by the conditions that existed in the east end of the city, and that had these conditions not existed, the shooting and lynching probably would not have occurred.¹⁰⁷

The grand jury heard several witnesses, including county and city police officers and several members of the Lawton clergy. In session only three days, the jury returned a report that it had investigated the lynching but could not find enough information to identify anyone or to arrest anyone. The jury asked and was granted dismissal. The sordid chapter in Lawton's history closed with no editorial comment on the jury's lack of action in either newspaper.¹⁰⁸

Also in the news during the 1910's was the electric street car

¹⁰⁶ Constitution, April 10, 1916, p. 2; News, April 11, 1916, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Constitution, June 12, 1916, p. 1; June 13, 1916, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., June 15, 1916, p. 1.

system which operated between Lawton and Fort Sill. Franchises had been issued to several promoters, but it was not until July 11, 1914, that the line began operation. The interurban railway saw its heaviest use in 1918 during the first World War when the army cantonment and Fort Sill was at peak strength. Cars run over the line every thirty minutes from 6 a.m. to midnight daily carried home six million passengers.¹⁰⁹

The death of Quanah Parker, the last Comanche chief to surrender in the Indian wars, on February 23, 1911, at his ranch home near Cache made national headlines. A reporter for the Lawton News graphically described Parker's dramatic death scene shortly after his return on the train from a visit with the Cheyennes near Hammon, Oklahoma. The Associated Press carried the News reporter's accounts of the death and of the colorful Indian and white funeral ceremonies.¹¹⁰

In Retrospect

Lawton's population showed a modest gain of 1,142 persons during the decade, increasing from 7,788 in the 1910 census to 8,930 in the 1920 census. The Constitution noted that while it was disappointing that Lawton had not shown a larger increase, it was gratifying that the population at least had shown some gain during the ten-year period. However, Comanche County dropped in population from 41,489 in 1910 to 26,629 in 1920, a decrease of 14,860. The 35.8 per cent loss of population was due to the fact that a southern section of Comanche County

¹⁰⁹Constitution, July 11, 1914, p. 1; News, July 12, 1914, p. 1; August 3, 1921, p. 8.

¹¹⁰Constitution, February 24, 1911, p. 1; February 25, 1911, p. 1; News, February 24, 1911, p. 1; February 25, 1911, p. 1.

seceded and formed Cotton County. Circulation, previously discussed on page 82, showed the News at 2,671 daily in 1920, several hundred ahead of the Constitution with 2,150 subscribers.¹¹¹

In the latter years of this second decade, Lawton was reduced to two competing newspapers, the News and the Constitution. On a small scale both newspapers adopted some of the metropolitan press techniques in business, advertising, equipment, and news treatment. Both papers established a measure of independence from political control and depended more on advertising revenue than on patronage printing. In this sense, the newspapers became more answerable to their subscribers than to politicians.

Yet in the last two years of the 1910's, the tolerated rivalry that had existed earlier broke out in a personal, vicious war. This journalistic warfare might have served Lawton through improved and more widespread advertising for merchants, better reporting, more extensive news coverage, and as an effective forum for presenting contrasting views to the public. However, this personal journalism battle saw both newspapers expend most of their energies and a lot of their revenues in fighting each other. Instead of the rivalry producing improved newspapers, it turned out worse products.

¹¹¹Constitution, October 2, 1920, p. 1; American Newspaper Annual and Directory, 1920, p. 797; U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Population: II, 883, 884.

CHAPTER III

JOURNALISM IN THE TWENTIES

Toward A One-Newspaper Town

Lawton became a one-newspaper town for the first time in its history during the 1920's. The morning paper ceased publication after its purchase by the afternoon daily, a consolidation that followed the national trend. The reasons were many, including the increased cost of publishing a daily newspaper, the depression of the early 1920's, and the advertisers' preference toward one newspaper. Perhaps the principal cause was that Lawton was too small to support adequately two daily newspapers. But the consolidation in 1923 was not achieved on peaceful terms. The newspaper war fought in 1918 and 1919 continued for four more years before one newspaper bought out the other.

In newspaper history, the 1920's were known nationally as the decade of "jazz journalism." It got the name from tabloids which rose to new circulation heights feasting on sensational news. The big city tabloids, reflecting the spirit of the "roaring twenties," were pre-occupied with crime, sex, conflict, and entertainment. Lawton's press also went through a period of jazz journalism in which violence and sex got banner headlines and sensationalized treatment.¹

¹Simon Michael Bessie, Jazz Journalism: The Story of Tabloid Newspapers (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1938), pp. 15-25, 229-240.

Also of major importance in the history of Lawton newspapers during the 1920's was the revival of the Ku Klux Klan. The new Klan was a nationwide organization that had little in common, except the name, with the Klan of the Civil War and Reconstruction years. Through elections the Klan took over the city government and ran Lawton for several years. The city's only newspaper by that time, the Constitution did not openly contest the Klan but attempted to act as arbiter when Lawton became divided between Klan and anti-Klan forces.

The truce which had existed in the newspaper war between the Constitution and the News following the death of John Shepler in June of 1919 was ended early in 1920. The renewed war temporarily took on a side issue in March of 1920. It involved a Shepler relative, Mrs. Augusta B. Shepler, matron of the girls' dormitory at the Cameron State School of Agriculture. Cameron then was an agricultural boarding school for approximately 100 high-school-age students from Southwest Oklahoma. A controversy arose when students and teachers presented a petition to school officials asking that Mrs. Shepler resign. The petition charged that Mrs. Shepler had sent girls home from the school over a four-year period with unjust accusations that they were prostitutes. The latest dispute arose when two girls secured permission to leave the campus to go to one place in Lawton but instead had dates with two boys who took them to the theater. The petition charged that in such instances as this Mrs. Shepler usually sent the girls home for breaking the school rules and accused them of being prostitutes in notes to their parents. It was also charged in the petition that the president and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. A. C. Farley, had supported Mrs. Shepler's charges of immoral conduct against the students. The

resignation of the Farleys was also asked on the grounds they had been in sympathy with the actions of Mrs. Shepler.²

As a result of the petition, two members of the Oklahoma Board of Agriculture, the school's governing body, were sent to Cameron to investigate. In the wake of the investigation, the board asked and received Mrs. Shepler's resignation. However, no action was taken against the Farleys. On learning that the board did not take any action against the president and his wife but instead supported their policies, six of the schools' eight teachers resigned, and all but twelve students packed their bags and left. A few days later a compromise was reached between the students and Farley. It was agreed that the president and his wife would remain at the school and the students could return and finish their class work. Four of the six teachers who resigned did not return to the school, which resumed classes with four of the same teachers and a new one who was hired.³

The News could hardly contain its joy that a Shepler relative was at the center of the local controversy. Banner headlines proclaimed that the "Shepler Matron" was the cause of the school's unrest. The News also charged that the school was in control of the state Democratic administration and board of agriculture officials who were sympathetic to Scott Ferris. Ferris was the Fifth District Congressman from Lawton who was supported by the Constitution. He was in the running as a candidate for the Democratic nomination for the

²News, March 2, 1920, p. 1; March 3, 1920, p. 1; Constitution, March 2, 1920, p. 1.

³News, March 5, 1920, p. 1; March 6, 1920, p. 1; Constitution March 5, 1920, p. 1; March 6, 1920, p. 1.

United States Senate seat held by Senator Thomas P. Gore, also of Lawton. News headlines editorialized that the "Ferris Gang Wrecks Cameron," and stories claimed that the Ferris group was protecting their political appointee, President Farley.⁴

The News in editorials and news stories also criticized the Constitution's coverage of the story. Teachers and students at Cameron were quoted as saying that the Constitution did not report their side of the story and attempted "to smooth matters over in order to save Farley, their political protege." It was also reported that the Lawton Chamber of Commerce, after an investigation of its own, commended the board of agriculture for removing Mrs. Shepler as school matron. The News also did some digging into its old files and came up with the story that the same kind of trouble occurred at Cameron in November, 1915, the first year Mrs. Shepler served as matron. Then five teachers had resigned because of attacks by Mrs. Shepler on the character of the girls at the college. The story also said that Farley, who had been named president of Cameron following his ouster as superintendent of schools at Perry, Oklahoma, also supported Mrs. Shepler's stand then.⁵

It was an embarrassing story for the Sheplers. And instead of reporting both sides fairly accurately and taking their lumps, the Sheplers gave the story a partisan treatment in the Constitution. And while the News was giving banner headline treatment to the Cameron story, the Constitution to its discredit consistently downplayed the

⁴News, March 2, 1920, p. 1; March 3, 1920, p. 1; March 4, 1920, p. 1.

⁵Ibid., March 5, 1920, p. 1.

story in its news columns. Most of their stories were placed on page one below the fold with small, one-column headlines. No mention was made of the Shepler family connection. Nor did the Constitution interview or even report the contentions of the students and teachers. Instead the Constitution reported that the squabble was merely a dispute over a difference of opinion in the school rules on restrictions against the girl students. The Constitution reported that the agriculture board vindicated President Farley in its investigation. It also blamed most of the Cameron troubles on a disgruntled teacher who wanted Farley's job as president.⁶

The Cameron story was an example of the continued libertarian philosophy toward the news. Both papers distorted the issue. The News editorialized heavily in its news stories and headlines. The Constitution clearly printed only one side. Who were the readers to believe? The libertarian concept was that the readers were rational people who could seek out the truth from reading both newspapers, assuming that people bought both.

But the partisan coverage of the Cameron unrest was only a minor skirmish compared to the newspaper war that resumed full blast on the political front. The News and the Constitution before the election year 1920 had chosen up sides in the crucial race for the United States Senate. By early 1919 the Constitution had made it known that it would support Congressman Scott Ferris of Lawton in his bid for the Democratic nomination against the famed blind senator, Thomas P. Gore. To oppose its rival, the News quickly became a champion for Gore, who had

⁶Constitution, March 2, 1920, p. 1; March 3, 1920, p. 1; March 5, 1920, p. 1.

represented Oklahoma in the Senate since statehood.⁷

By 1920, Gore had thoroughly alienated himself from most of Oklahoma's Democratic party leaders because of his anti-war and anti-Wilson views and his stand on the League of Nations. A progressive pacifist, he opposed militarism and leaned toward isolationism. He also had opposed involvement in the European war because of his progressive obsession for saving the taxpayers' money. During the war his voting record generally was anti-administration. He became immediately unpopular with the Oklahoma press and the electorate in 1917 when he voted against the draft. He opposed the government's policy for financing the war, and he voted against giving broad powers over food production, distribution, and regulation to President Wilson. After the war, Gore opposed the League of Nations that Wilson wanted. Gore favored a watered-down league without an army to enforce its decrees.⁸

Angered by Gore's record, Oklahoma's Democratic party bosses were determined to defeat the senator in the Democratic primary of 1920. The factions agreed to settle on one candidate so as not to split the vote with several in the field, which situation would have favored Gore for the renomination. They chose Congressman Scott Ferris, who had made a name for himself in the lower house. With his party's blessing and a strong organization, Ferris campaigned on the theme

⁷Ibid., April 29, 1919, p. 4.

⁸Monroe L. Billington, "Senator Thomas P. Gore," Chronicles of Oklahoma, XXXV, No. 3, (1957), pp. 276-282; Monroe L. Billington, Thomas P. Gore, the Blind Senator from Oklahoma (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1967), pp. 110-126.

that he had supported the President during the war while Gore had consistently opposed the administration.⁹

The Constitution attacked Gore's actions and votes during the war period and hit hard at the theme that he was no longer a resident nor home owner in Lawton and was now a stranger in his former home town.

Said the Constitution:

Like the 'man without a country,' Senator Gore is a man without a home town, except as he may claim Washington, D. C. Most certainly Senator Gore cannot truthfully claim Lawton as his home. . . .

Not a citizen of Lawton, except of course the half-dozen or so of the Public Utility group, went to see the senator when he was in Lawton. Not a person . . . stopped to speak to him as he walked the streets of the city.

Senator Gore was due to catch an 8:30 o'clock train on the morning of his departure. Piloted by the chauffeur of the utility boss, he was driven to a local barber shop about 8 o'clock that morning. The barber shop was full of Lawton men, waiting for their turn, men who had known the senator prior to his election, and afterwards. He asked if it would be possible for him to get a shave by train time. He was told that men were waiting and that no chair would likely be vacant.

Not a man offered to give the former Lawton orator his place, as they undoubtedly would had Senator Owen, Governor Robertson, Scott Ferris, or any of the other big men who represent the State of Oklahoma come into the shop. Not even a man spoke to the senator. . . .¹⁰

Almost daily for several months prior to the August primary the two Lawton newspapers printed editorials upholding their own candidates and severely criticizing their opponents. The News charged that Ferris was the "bonehead" choice of the Democratic political machine. The News also was highly indignant at charges leveled by several state newspapers that it was "Republican" because it was supporting Gore.

⁹James Ralph Scales, "Political History of Oklahoma, 1907-1949," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1949), p. 212.

¹⁰Constitution, May 31, 1920, p. 4.

Replying to the charges, the News said:

. . . The News is not 'Republican'; it is not 'democratic.' It is independent, tied to no party and TIED TO NO CANDIDATE.

We refuse to accept Wilson's internationalism, his socialistic ideas; we denounce Scott Ferris because he's rotten, represents all that is rotten and smacking of 'gang-ruled' politics in the Democratic party in Oklahoma, and because, if a possibility of his securing the Senatorial nomination existed, it would constitute a veritable menace to the state of Oklahoma. . . .¹¹

The News became involved in one of the most unusual and interesting sidelights of the campaign about five weeks before the primary election. The Daily Oklahoman, perhaps Gore's most bitter and influential newspaper foe in the campaign, created a sensation over the state by printing an editorial dramatically apologizing for all of its criticisms of the senator. Two days later the Oklahoman printed a front-page editorial explaining that the editorial apology to Gore somehow had been smuggled into the newspaper by a disgruntled former employee who was now working for Gore.¹²

The day after the fake editorial was published in the Oklahoman the News printed several thousand extra copies of an issue carrying the Oklahoman apology to Gore. The copies were circulated across the state. The Oklahoman later charged that the News was one of Gore's "bought organs." Hotly denying the accusation, the News filed a \$100,000 libel suit against the Oklahoman. The News also commented that Senator Gore was a poor man and did not have money to "buy" any newspaper. The Constitution editorialized that the News circulation of the fake Oklahoman apology was but another "desperate trick" by the

¹¹News, April 7, 1920, p. 4.

¹²Constitution, June 29, 1920, p. 4; June 30, 1920, p. 1.

John C. Keys "utility gang" in its support of Gore. The Constitution claimed that the Keys newspaper would use any means to gain its point in "ways similar to the Mangum conspiracy."¹³

For the first time in Lawton newspaper history, the Constitution held a street election party for crowds to see the August 3 primary returns as they came into the newspaper office from across the state. The street election party became a tradition that the Constitution was to continue for many years until radio came into popular use. The paper secured the services of the Western Union telegraph wire of the Daily Oklahoman, which had a correspondent in every county in the state. As soon as returns came in from over the state and from United Press, they were flashed on a screen across the street for all to see. Huge crowds filled the sidewalks and street in front of the newspaper on C Avenue. When returns quit coming in at midnight, the crowds had seen results from forty counties over the state.¹⁴

And by midnight the crowds had heard that Scott Ferris had received enough of a majority that it was certain he was the Democratic nominee for the United States Senate. Oklahomans showed their dislike for Gore's outspoken opposition to the President by defeating the Senator, 106,454 to 80,243. In Lawton, the vote was almost three to one for Ferris and in the county it was nearly two to one.¹⁵

The bitter political war between the two newspapers ended with the primaries. About the only issue raised in the general election

¹³News, July 13, 1920, p. 1; Constitution, June 30, 1920, p. 4.

¹⁴Constitution, August 4, 1920, p. 2.

¹⁵Constitution, August 4, 1920, p. 1; News, August 4, 1920, p. 1; August 6, 1920, p. 1.

campaign came when the Constitution accused John C. Keys of giving financial support for an organization of "Gore volunteers" to fight Scott Ferris. In the November general election Oklahoma went for Harding and Coolidge in the Republican landslide. Ferris was defeated by Republican Congressman John W. Harreld, who became the state's first Republican United States Senator. Ferris even lost in his home county. Comanche County gave Harreld 2,984 votes to 2,572 for Ferris. In the Congressional race for Ferris' seat, L. M. Gensman of Lawton, a Republican, won over J. Elmer Thomas, a Democratic state senator also from Lawton.¹⁶

While the political fight was going on, the two papers also were battling over the Keys public utilities in Lawton. John C. Keys, chagrined over the Constitution expose of the Mangum scandal and over Gore's loss in the Democratic primary, moved his utility headquarters to Oklahoma City. He left his son, Albert Keys, to run the electrical and gas utilities and other Keys enterprises in Lawton.¹⁷

The utility squabble surfaced anew in February of 1920 when Keys' power plant won approval of the Lawton Chamber of Commerce for an increase in light rates. C. R. Reeves, a Lawton attorney who said he was a labor union representative, argued the case before the chamber. He said the rate hike was needed to give union workers of the light company a raise in pay. The Constitution accused the Chamber of Commerce of being "dominated and controlled by the public utility

¹⁶Constitution, September 23, 1920, p. 4; November 4, 1920, p. 1; News, November 4, 1920, p. 1.

¹⁷Wilbur Rice, private interview held in Lawton, October 2, 1971.

ring" after the endorsement of the rate increase. Hearings on the Comanche Light and Power Company's rate increase request were scheduled before the Oklahoma Corporation Commission.¹⁸

The Constitution filled its editorial pages with arguments against the rate boost for the Keys' electrical utility. "Will the public be represented at the hearing . . . or will the public utility crowd . . . be the only ones present?" the newspaper asked. The Constitution contended that the Chamber of Commerce endorsement of the rate boost showed that it did not represent the public. Replying to the Constitution charges, the News maintained that the Keys utility was only asking a rate increase which would give the firm a legitimate six per cent return on its basic investment.¹⁹

At the urging of the Constitution, Lawton City Attorney S. I. McElhoes filed a counter petition with the Corporation Commission at the hearing on the rate increase. The city of Lawton petition charged that the present electric rates were exorbitant and asked that they be lowered. McElhoes also pointed out that auditor's figures showed the valuation of the Lawton power plant to be \$306,171 instead of the \$525,000 claimed by the company. Through continued counter petitions, appeals, and protests the city attorney tied up the rate increase request with the Corporation Commission until May of 1921, when a minor increase was granted. McElhoes' persistent fight against the light

¹⁸Constitution, February 21, 1920, p. 1; February 24, 1920, p. 2; February 25, 1920, p. 1; News, February 21, 1920, p. 1; February 25, 1920, p. 1.

¹⁹Constitution, February 26, 1920, p. 1; News, February 25, 1920, p. 4.

rate increase drew the wrath of the News, which attacked him repeatedly. The News charged that McElhoes bilked the taxpayers out of \$6,000 when he charged that amount for auditing the electric utility's books for arguments before the corporation commission. The Constitution defended payment of the auditing fee, saying that it was a necessary expense in the city's fight to block a rate increase.²⁰

A sidelight to the utilities controversy occurred when the Constitution became involved in what appeared to be a labor union dispute. The new issue flared when C. R. Reeves, an attorney for the Keys industries, personally organized a Lawton labor union. It was called the Federal Labor Union, which Reeves said was affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Reeves announced that his labor union had passed a resolution declaring that the Constitution was unfair to organized labor. Several union printers working at the Constitution labeled the Reeves union charges as false and declared that the Constitution had never had any union troubles.²¹

The printers and other union workers in Lawton asked that a Lawton labor union be organized with the sanction of the American Federation of Labor. Subsequently the Lawton labor union was granted a charter from A.F.L. officials, who charged that Reeves' union was one that he had organized himself and that it was not affiliated with organized labor. Union officials also pointed out that Reeves as an attorney was

²⁰Constitution, April 16, 1920, p. 1; November 24, 1920, p. 1; May 17, 1921, p. 1; May 20, 1921, p. 4; News, May 20, 1921, p. 4.

²¹Ibid., February 27, 1920, p. 1.

ineligible for membership in a labor organization. The Constitution printed the story, adding that Reeves faked his charter with the A.F.L. In an editorial the paper charged that Reeves was a tool of the Keys industries. It also said that Reeves labor union and the resulting furor it caused were all a ruse to detract the public's attention from the main issue at hand, the increase in electric rates.²²

Reeves filed a \$50,000 libel suit against the Constitution, claiming that the paper had ruined his reputation and earning power by its charges that he was a tool for Keys. As an additional slap at the Sheplers, the lawsuit asked that a receiver be appointed for the Constitution in the libel case because the Sheplers were insolvent. The lawsuit was dropped by Reeves a few months later, and the Constitution smirked that all its charges against Reeves evidently were true.²³

War broke out on a new front in the utilities fight in August of 1920. John C. Keys announced in the News that gas service would be cut off to Lawton consumers on September 15 unless he received a rate increase. Keys advised the people of Lawton to lay in a supply of coal or other fuel to take care of their needs after the cutoff date. The notice was signed by Keys as president of the Lawton Gas and Electric Company.²⁴

²²Ibid., March 12, 1920, p. 1; April 9, 1920, p. 4; June 26, 1920, p. 1.

²³Ibid., July 10, 1920, p. 1; November 4, 1920, p. 1; News, July 11, 1920, p. 1.

²⁴News, August 7, 1920, p. 1.

The Constitution quickly branded Keys' threat to cut off the gas as a bluff to force an increased gas rate. The paper added:

. . . Whether the notice was inspired by resentment over the overwhelming defeat suffered by the utility crowd in the primary, or whether it was the usual effort of the utility crowd to attempt to bluff and use the 'big stick' over the people of Lawton to force an increase, citizens were at a loss to determine. Threats were made, prior to the election, it is said, that Keys would cut off the gas if Lawton and Comanche County failed to vote as he directed. . . .

The people of Lawton paid an ample price for bringing gas into the city when they granted the electric light franchise three years ago. The threat employed by Keys to force an increased gas rate is as futile as his attempt to trick the people of Lawton into paying an increased electric rate. The only way Keys can secure an increased gas rate, and he knows it, is to make formal application to the corporation commission, lay his cards on the table, give the city a chance to be heard and let the commissioners determine whether his claim is just.²⁵

The Constitution also explained that Keys owned the producing gas wells and pipeline which carried the gas to Lawton, where it was sold to the Lawton Gas and Electric Company, of which Keys was president.

Lawton city commissioners and Chamber of Commerce officials conferred with Keys about his threat to cut off the gas. Keys stuck with his original announcement that he would halt the supply unless he received a rate increase. Lawton officials carried their case to the Oklahoma Corporation Commission. It ruled that gas service could not be discontinued to any town by a public utility without the permission of the corporation commission. Keys' Lawton Gas and Electric Company then made formal application for an increase in gas rates. It asked that rates be advanced from fifteen cents to thirty-five cents a thousand cubic feet for business and industry and from thirty-five cents to seventy-five cents a thousand cubic feet for household use. The rate

²⁵Constitution, August 7, 1920, p. 1.

hike would increase the gas firm's revenues some \$220,000 a year, the Constitution estimated.²⁶

On November 6, 1920, the Oklahoma Corporation Commission granted a rate increase to Keys' gas company. The commission allowed the Lawton firm to increase rates for both businesses and homes from thirty-five cents per thousand cubic feet to sixty-two cents. Although a protest was filed by the city of Lawton, the commission allowed the rate increase to stand. Five days later Lawton's oil refinery and cotton gins were shut down because of a shortage of gas. The shortage resulted in a citizens' meeting to study the possibility of the city purchasing the gas and electric utilities. However, no further shortages occurred, and the movement for municipal ownership died.²⁷

A year later another natural gas crisis occurred when the Keys company announced in the News that the Keys field gas wells were almost exhausted. Citizens were told on November 8, 1921, that it would be necessary to purchase gas from the Lone Star Gas Company of North Texas to insure a supply for the winter. It would cost thirty cents per thousand cubic feet in the field, which would increase the cost to \$1.25 per thousand cubic feet for household use. The next day the city of Lawton served notice on the Keys firm that it was obligated under the terms of its franchise to furnish gas to every consumer in Lawton. Also that day the gas pressure dropped in Lawton and the Constitution reported that many children went to school hungry and cold because of

²⁶Ibid., August 14, 1920, p. 1; August 16, 1920, p. 1; August 17, 1920, p. 1; August 25, 1920, p. 1; News, August 7, 1920, p. 1.

²⁷Constitution, November 6, 1920, p. 1; November 11, 1920, p. 1; November 20, 1920, p. 1; News, November 6, 1920, p. 1.

the reduced supply. Angrily, the Constitution suggested that if Keys could not furnish gas to the city, he should forfeit his franchise and the company should be turned over to a receiver.²⁸

In a further development, the Lone Star Gas Company refused to supply gas to Keys. Its Dallas manager said his firm would not do business with Keys unless \$15,000 in cash was put up along with a \$50,000 surety bond. The Lone Star manager said his firm's experience with Keys had been very unsatisfactory and that it did not want to do business with him. However, the Texas firm said it would do business with the City of Lawton in an emergency.²⁹

On November 12, 1921, Oklahoma Corporation Commission officials, Lawton officials, and several Lawton citizens went to the Keys field to inspect the gas wells to see if Keys' claim was right that the wells were running out of gas. It was determined that the wells were nearly exhausted. The News editorialized that the Lawton city commissioners were to blame for the gas crisis because they did not hurriedly make arrangements with the Lone Star Gas Company to purchase gas. The Constitution replied that Lawton had "dilly-dallied with the Lawton Gas and Electric Company and the other public utilities controlled by Keys long enough." The paper declared that municipal ownership of public utilities in Lawton was the only solution to the present difficulties.³⁰

A few days later the City of Lawton sought and was granted a court

²⁸News, November 8, 1921, p. 1; Constitution, November 8, 1921, p. 1; November 9, 1921, p. 1.

²⁹Constitution, November 10, 1921, p. 1.

³⁰Ibid., November 12, 1921, p. 1; November 15, 1921, p. 4; News, November 15, 1921, p. 1.

order appointing a receiver for Keys' Lawton Gas and Electric Company. E. L. Richardson, a Lawton banker, was directed to take over the Keys properties and to obtain immediately a supply of gas for Lawton consumers to relieve the emergency. The city said it was forced to take the action because a large number of homes were without gas and another severe cold wave was approaching. A contract quickly was arranged with the Lone Star Gas Company for it to furnish gas to the city. Keys appealed the decision appointing a receiver to the Oklahoma Supreme Court. However, the state's high court upheld the lower court's decision in placing the gas company in the hands of a receiver.³¹

Lawton's city commissioners bowed to appeals by the Constitution and many other citizens and called a \$300,000 bond election for the construction or purchase of a municipal electric light plant. The gas utility had been taken away from Keys and placed in the hands of a receiver. It was announced that the power plant election would give Lawton citizens a chance to decide on whether to eliminate Keys completely from running utilities in Lawton. Both newspapers waged daily editorial battles over the issue. The News emphasized that the bonds would cause a heavy tax load on Lawton property owners already burdened by the depression. The Constitution countered that a city-owned light plant would throw off the Keys' yoke which the paper contended had been a constant source of strife and which had constantly retarded the advancement of Lawton. In the election on December 21, 1921, the bond issue carried by a large majority, with 990 approving it and 113 opposing it. The turnout of voters was considered light because

³¹Constitution, November 19, 1921, p. 1; December 2, 1921, p. 1.

only taxpaying property owners could vote in the election.³²

Events moved swiftly for the Keys industries following approval of the municipal light plant. New York City bankers, realizing that their Lawton electrical utility franchise was threatened by the move to build a city power plant, bought out Keys' interests in the utility corporation. Earl R. Ernesberger of Charles City, Iowa, was named the new president and general manager for the Southwest Cities Electric Company, which included utilities in Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico.³³

Quickly the new management of the Southwest Cities Electric Company set about to restore faith in the electric utility and to prevent construction of the city-owned power plant. The new manager, Ernesberger, purchased advertising in the Constitution explaining the company's new attitudes and policies. The advertisements said that the electrical utility business would be conducted on the "Golden Rule" plan. "We believe that the people of Lawton will in turn treat us as they would wish to be treated," the advertisement said. The Constitution at first was skeptical at whether Keys was completely divorced from the corporation. Later, after the utility had demonstrated a public service approach to its management, the Constitution began to warm to the change, although it still contended that the city should run its own light plant. The News sneered at the utility placing the public service advertising with its rival and accused the

³²Constitution, December 3, 1921, pp. 1, 4; December 21, 1921, p. 1; News, December 4, 1921, p. 4; December 21, 1921, p. 1.

³³News, January 22, 1922, p. 1; Constitution, January 1, 1922, p. 2.

Constitution of being bought by the new utility management for "thirty pieces of silver."³⁴

The change in management and policies paid off for the electric utility when a citizens' petition was presented to the city commissioners asking that a new vote be taken on building a city-owned light plant. On August 1, 1922, Lawton voters killed the municipal light plant by a vote of 1,141 to 902. The vote also was a manifestation that peace had returned to Lawton on the public utility issue after long years of turmoil.³⁵

Although the public utility issue was settled, the newspaper rivalry and war continued. Keys had sold his public utility interests but had retained his newspaper and the laundry in Lawton. A statement printed the same day as the announcement of the sale of the Keys utilities said the News would remain under the same management and would continue its policy "of printing the news and telling the truth of local conditions." Joe Willetts as editor directed several "crusades" in 1922 against alleged corruption at the county courthouse. But the News campaigns were minor in comparison to the wars he had waged with the Constitution. Willetts did publish a lively, interesting paper aside from his personal journalism wars. This was reflected in circulation figures for that year which showed the News had 2,782 subscribers compared to the Constitution's 2,743.³⁶

³⁴Constitution, January 1, 1922, p. 4; February 22, 1922, pp. 2,4; March 5, 1922, p. 6B; News, February 22, 1922, p. 2.

³⁵Constitution, May 23, 1922, p. 1; June 25, 1922, p. 1; August 2, 1922, p. 1; News, August 2, 1922, p. 1.

³⁶News, January 22, 1922, p. 1; February 26, 1922, p. 4; March 11, 1922, p. 4; American Newspaper Annual and Directory (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son, 1922), p. 815.

But circulation revenue was not sufficient to keep the News in business. The Constitution had maintained a large display advertising volume through advertising contracts. And, too, many Lawton businessmen advertised solely in the Constitution because of ill feelings toward the Keys' enterprises. It was obvious that Keys had withdrawn much of his backing of the newspaper during 1922. Although Willetts skillfully put out a popular paper in the news columns, the paper dwindled in the number of its pages.³⁷

It was announced in both papers on February 22, 1923, that the News had been sold to the Constitution. The Sheplers paid \$19,000 for the newspaper, although the price was not officially revealed. Willetts, in a traditional "30" signoff editorial, said the owners of the two papers had agreed that the local field was too small to adequately support two daily newspapers. He said a "buy" or "sell" proposition was discussed, that the Constitution elected to purchase, and the deal was made. Willetts refrained in his farewell editorial from commenting on his years in Lawton and on the long newspaper war he had waged with the Constitution.³⁸

The Sheplers had far more to say in commenting on the merger. Said the Constitution editorial:

. . . Experience of the past few years in Lawton, as well as in other communities of this size and larger, has proven that it is virtually impossible for two daily newspapers to be successful. One or the other must be a losing proposition. It has been common knowledge that the News was a losing property. Had it not been backed by ample money it would not have survived as long as it has.

³⁷Rice interview.

³⁸Ibid.; News, February 22, 1923, p. 1.

This is not purely a local situation and is no reflection upon business conditions here. Similar conditions are found in practically every other city in the state. The two daily papers at Enid, a city much larger than Lawton, recently consolidated. Chickasha has only one daily paper. McAlester, Ponca City, Shawnee, Guthrie, Duncan, El Reno, and practically all other cities of about the same size have been forced, through necessity, to only one daily paper.

Two daily newspapers impose an unnecessary burden upon the merchants of the city, through whose support they are made possible, as well as burdening the public in most cases with a conflict, or so-called newspaper fight, that inevitably results from the efforts of two papers to survive in a field where there should be but one. By the elimination of one daily the efforts of the other can be more successfully devoted to boosting and building than to the necessity of fighting its competitor. . . .

For years the Constitution waged war against the News and the interests it represented. We felt that we were fighting in the interests of the people of this city. Time has proven that the Constitution was right. Nevertheless the newspaper war that raged had a detrimental effect on Lawton. . . .³⁹

The Constitution changed the News into a weekly newspaper and renamed it the News-Review. The weekly included legal publications, wrapups of news from the daily papers, editorials, farm news and business news. G. E. "Scribe" Thompson, a veteran newspaperman who had edited Lawton papers during the 1910's, was named editor of the new weekly. The Constitution continued to publish the weekly for many years, chiefly as a means to thwart the start of rival weeklies.⁴⁰

³⁹Constitution, February 22, 1923, p. 1.

⁴⁰News-Review, December 27, 1923, pp. 1-6; Rice said two weekly newspapers, both which supported the Klan, made brief appearances in Lawton during the twenties. One, a church-related paper, the Lawton Baptist Herald, edited by George W. Wilburn, was published for a few months starting in January, 1926. The other was the Lawton Chieftain, which openly worked for the Klan and against Al Smith, the Democratic presidential nominee, who was a Catholic. It was launched in 1928 and continued in operation for more than a year.

Newspaper Content, Business

The Constitution added few improvements to its mechanical department during the 1920's. Following the newspaper merger in 1923, the Constitution did not retain any of the typesetting machinery from the News' back shop. Otherwise the newspaper continued to publish its paper on the eight-page Duplex press it had purchased in 1919. The Constitution also continued to offer commercial printing through its job printing department. Its job shop also was used to print forms for the city and county printing contracts, but the income from this political patronage printing was far less than in earlier years.⁴¹

Advertising rates in both newspapers were increased from thirty cents per column inch to thirty-five cents in 1920. Both newspapers said that huge increases in the cost of newsprint following the war necessitated the boost. And after the two papers merged in 1923, advertising rates were not increased. Also during this decade the Constitution continued its front-page advertising.⁴²

In the early 1920's, the Constitution continued its dominance over the News in contracts for display advertising. This was one of the factors that enabled the Constitution to win the newspaper fight with the News and buy out its rival. During this period the Constitution's gross display advertising revenue averaged approximately \$52,000 a year. Department store advertising picked up in volume, and this was one of the major reasons for the increase. Despite the

⁴¹Rice interview.

⁴²Constitution, September 29, 1920, p. 1; February 27, 1923, p. 1; News, September 29, 1920, p. 1.

increase in display advertising volume, the Constitution constantly urged Lawton businessmen to advertise even more. Occasionally when the paper published a four-page issue, it would print a front-page editorial saying that Lawton merchants were not advertising enough, or else the paper would be larger.⁴³

Both newspapers had approximately the same circulation during the early twenties. The Constitution maintained a small majority of subscribers over the News, except for 1922. That year the News reported 2,782 subscribers compared to the Constitution's 2,743. However, the Constitution gained only a few subscribers following the 1923 merger, increasing its circulation that year to 2,893. Possibly this suggests many subscribers bought both papers before 1923. For the rest of the decade, the Constitution showed a small but steady increase in subscribers, reporting a total of 3,528 in 1929. Subscription prices continued at fifteen cents per week for home deliveries.⁴⁴

The News under Willetts' editorship published a far more attractive newspaper than the Constitution in layout and appearance. However, both papers adopted the practice of using banner headlines to play up the major story on page one. Also both papers eliminated many of the sub-deck headlines which had been in widespread use in the 1910's. After the merger in 1923, the Constitution reverted to a more conservative makeup and published many front pages with tombstoned, one-column headlines. It reserved banner headlines for only the more sensational local, state and national news. In 1926 the Constitution made a major

⁴³Constitution, September 27, 1921, p. 1; Rice interview.

⁴⁴Ayer's Newspaper Directory, 1922, p. 815; 1923, p. 838; 1929, p. 876.

change in its format from seven columns to eight columns. Nationwide the eight-column paper was coming more into general use as a method for economizing on newsprint. The use of matted photos continued in the twenties. Few local photographs were printed.

Both papers added many features during the 1920's, especially the comics and single cartoons. The Constitution by 1929 had become departmentalized, with special pages set aside for society and sports. The society section included a daily column on Lawton club news, parties, and church club events. Local sports events by 1929 recieved heavy coverage. In football season, daily stories covered the activities of the Lawton High School team, the Cameron Junior College "Aggies," and the Fort Sill football team. The activities of local baseball teams were also covered on the sports page.

In 1922 the Constitution published its first Sunday morning edition. At the time it was obvious the paper was putting more punch into its rivalry with the morning News, which had published a Sunday edition for years. The Constitution had regularly published a Saturday evening edition.⁴⁵

Reporting in the Lawton papers during the decade of the 1920's continued to follow the libertarian theory of one-sided partisanship. There were no thoughts of attempting to be fair and objective by reporting all sides of an issue. During the newspaper war, both papers ignored the national trends of leaving biases and one-sided treatment out of the news columns. Especially in the fights on politics and

⁴⁵Constitution, January 1, 1922, p. 1.

utilities, both papers printed stories that were nothing more than one-sided editorials.

The Klan Rules Lawton

The Ku Klux Klan started donning bedsheets and cutting holes in pillow cases in Lawton in 1921. But it was a different Klan from the one in Reconstruction days whose hooded nightriders sought to return Negroes to the fields and carpetbaggers to the north. Negroes were just one of the many enemies of this new Klan. It also aimed its organization at Catholics, Jews, criminals, bootleggers, moral offenders, and assorted other types. It had for its slogan "native, white, Protestant supremacy." Although the Klan had no formal ties to any religious denomination, fundamentalism was the central thread of the Klan program. In many ways its rituals, titles, and charity work made it similar to other fraternal orders and lodges. It differed from the respectable lodges in that its membership was secret. It had been reorganized in 1915 in Atlanta, Georgia, and it gradually spread across the nation, reaching Lawton some six years later.⁴⁶

The new Klan was different in Lawton and the rest of Oklahoma in

⁴⁶The best account of the Klan's activities in Oklahoma in the 1920's can be found in Charles C. Alexander's The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966). The formation of the Klan is discussed in pp. 1-35. Another excellent study of the Klan in Oklahoma is a master's thesis by Inez Club, "A History of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma from 1920 to the Present" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1941), chapter 1. (This is on microfilm at the University of Oklahoma library and the page numbers were not photographed.) Also see Kenneth T. Jackson, The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 3-27, and David M. Chalmers, Hooded Americanism, The First Century of the Ku Klux Klan, 1865-1965 (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1965), pp. 28-38.

its goals. Racial bias and anti-Catholicism were not major factors in Oklahoma's Klan ranks. Rather, Oklahomans who joined the "Invisible Empire," many of them prominent business, professional, and political leaders, did so in the conviction that such an organization was needed to bring law and order and to enforce high moral standards.⁴⁷

Upon the Klan's arrival in Lawton and Comanche County it met little resistance. It first appeared as a reform group and won widespread support. Neither of the city's two daily newspapers opposed it. They were too busy fighting a war over public utilities. And after the Constitution won supremacy in that war in 1923, the Klan was so entrenched it was too late for the newspaper to attempt to stem its growth. An anti-Klan group, the "Constitutional Americans," eventually was organized to block the spread of the Klan. It was unsuccessful at first as the Klan turned from reform to politics and took over the city and county governments. Later the anti-Klan movement gained steam and ousted the Klan both at city hall and at the courthouse. But the results split Lawton into two warring factions. The Constitution urged an end to the factionalism which had almost brought the town to a standstill. The newspaper's stand was too lukewarm to have much effect, but several factors were in motion then that caused the Klan to go downhill in influence.

By the spring of 1921, a thriving Klan chapter was furthering Americanism and morality in Lawton. Yet it was not until late in the year that the Constitution first carried accounts of the Klan's presence

⁴⁷Alexander, pp. 36-54; Club, Chapter two; Jackson, pp. 84-86; Chalmers, pp. 49-55.

in Lawton. A story in December reported that a "known Mexican police character" left town on the midnight train after he received an anonymous Klan letter advising him to leave. A few days later a story appeared which reported a meeting of the Klan the night before in Lawton attended by more than 200 men. The report added that the Klan boasted a membership of at least 500 in Lawton. There had been rumors early in the year, the paper said, that the Klan was going to organize Lawton.⁴⁸

In mid-December the Lawton Klansmen came out of hiding, donned their ghostly trappings, and boldly paraded through downtown Lawton at the late hour of 10 p.m. The Constitution dramatically reported:

The fiery cross of the 'Empire Invisible' blazed in Lawton last night for the first time.

Twenty-one cars, carrying the white robed figures of the order of the Ku Klux Klan paraded through the streets bearing banners warning the lawless to beware. Crowds drawn from their Christmas shopping cheered as the white robed figures silently passed. It was the first definite intimation to the public that the organization had been established in Lawton.

Banners on the cars warned the lawless to beware and declared that the Ku Klux Klan was 500 strong in Lawton.

There were rumors on the street during the evening that a parade was to be held. No one seemed to know who, how, or where, but there was a feeling of expectancy among the crowds. Shortly before 10 o'clock the first cars of the procession came into view. The procession paraded west on D Avenue and then east on C Avenue.

The pilot car carried an American flag, and bore aloft a flaring cross, while others had banners with different inscriptions. One said: 'Lawton K.K.K., 500 Strong.' Another warned bootleggers and prostitutes to leave Lawton. A third read: 'Jitney drivers we know you, watch your steps.' Still another declared: 'We Stand for Law and Order.' . . .

There were approximately 150 men in the procession, it was estimated. Two of the white robed figures stood on the running board of some machines, while four stood up on the others. The license number plates on the cars were covered, making identification impossible.

After parading up and down the streets twice, the mysterious procession turned down Fourth Street to South Boundary and

⁴⁸Constitution, December 2, 1921, p. 1; December 9, 1921, p. 1.

disappeared. None of the cars or occupants could be recognized.

The parade last night evidently confirmed the rumor of several days ago to the effect that such an organization had been established in Lawton. No one, however, seemed to know anything definite about the organization, which has evidently been kept well under cover.

From newspaper reports the organization extends pretty well over this section of the state. Parades have been held within the last three or four weeks at Marlow, Duncan, Comanche, and Chickasha. Several charitable acts by the Klan have been recorded in the newspapers of those cities as well as warnings to undesirable characters to mend their ways.⁴⁹

The December parade was the first of many Klan processions that would wind through the streets of downtown Lawton in months and years to come. But no move was made editorially by either the Constitution or the News to meet the threat of the growing Klan in Lawton. The newspapers' silence on the Klan issue was partly understandable. Many of the editors' friends and the town's "better class" of citizens reportedly belonged to the white-robed movement. The word was out that the Lawton Klan was not made up of the ragtag and bobtail of the city but included some of the most prominent lawyers, bankers, doctors, and businessmen.⁵⁰

It was not until July of 1922 that the Klan again staged a parade in Lawton. More than 300 men garbed in white robes and masks rode cars through the downtown section. The procession halted at Fourth and C Avenue, and one of the Klansmen doffed his mask and addressed the crowd. He warned that bootleggers, prostitutes, and other undesirable elements should be cleaned from Lawton before the arrival of hundreds of young men at Fort Sill for the Civilian Military Training Corps summer camp.

⁴⁹ Ibid., December 15, 1921, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Ibid., July 20, 1922, p. 1; Rice interview.

The speaker talked about "patriotism and loyalty to the country," declaring that "true patriotism was needed now more than ever." The Klan's appearance that night in Lawton had one immediate effect. Lawton police raided two bootlegging joints in the red light district and filed charges on the two operators.⁵¹

The Lawton Klan received favorable publicity through acts of kindness, support of civic groups, and appearances at local churches. The appearance at church services especially was a favorite way of the Lawton Klan to get publicity, gain support of the church group, and advertise its influence. For example, fifty robed and hooded Klansmen made a dramatic entrance at the First Baptist Church revival services. The leader of the Klansmen made a gift of a gold fountain pen to the minister. The Klansmen then knelt before the altar, where the leader gave a prayer. Following the ceremony the body marched off.⁵²

At several other times the Klansmen appeared at churches during Sunday services. They filed silently down the aisle, lined up before the pulpit in a double row, and at a signal knelt a moment. A leader publicly made a donation and then gave a short talk that the Lawton Klan, 500 strong, was behind the minister in his fight against immorality and for law and order. It was announced that Lawton's Invisible Empire was prepared to support an entire cleanup of the city against bootleggers, prostitutes, professional loafers, homebreakers, and other undesirables. At a signal the Klansmen turned and marched from the church. The newspapers reported other instances in which the

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., July 13, 1923, p. 1.

Lawton Klan provided groceries and other assistance to families in distress. The Klan also received favorable publicity when it publicly endorsed the Lawton Rotary Club's acts of charity for underprivileged, poverty-stricken, and crippled children.⁵³

The Klan was rolling in Lawton, and it seemed that nothing could stop it. In 1922, 1923, and 1924, the increase in the number of parades, public initiations, and other public appearances of the Klan testified to the growing membership and power. The height of all the Lawton's Klan activities was reached in May, 1923, when a crowd of 40,000 watched a parade and initiation at a farm six miles south of Lawton. Some 2,000 Klansmen from Southwest Oklahoma and North Texas took part in the ceremonies. The spectacle was extensively advertised and drew spectators from hundreds of miles. A huge, electrically lighted cross surrounded by fifteen smaller lighted crosses marked the site of the initiation at the farm field. Klansmen in cars, on horses, and on foot, accompanied by the music of a Klan band, paraded to the location of the huge cross. Approximately 1,000 were initiated into the Klan during the ceremonies, which were followed by speeches from several leading Klan officials.⁵⁴

The Klan's growing influence in Lawton was also apparent in the pages of the Constitution, which printed page one display advertisements notifying Klan members of weekly meetings or other upcoming events. The Constitution also gave page one treatment to most of the Klan activities, even minor social events. This deference on news coverage

⁵³Ibid., March 16, 1922, p. 1; March 20, 1922, p. 1; April 6, 1922, p. 1.

⁵⁴Ibid., May 20, 1923, p. 1.

and advertisements gave an impression of covert approval of the Klan by the newspaper. When Governor Jack Walton placed the entire state under martial law because of alleged widespread Klan violence in September of 1923, the Constitution took a middle-of-the-road stand. Whether you are pro-Klan or anti-Klan, the newspaper urged, the people of Lawton and Comanche County should end the internal strife and work for a "greater harmony and constructive community."⁵⁵

With a large membership and obvious approval of much of its activities, the Lawton Klan entered politics. It first went after control of the city government and later the county government. It used the machinery of the Democratic party to accomplish its goals. Possibly the Klan could not have taken over the city reins, except that by 1923 Lawton's government had switched from a charter-commission form back to the state statutory, mayor-council type. The charter-commission form had been voted in by Lawtonians in 1911 chiefly to rid the city government of party politics and to operate the city under its own laws instead of by state statutes. Under the charter and commission form, three commissioners ran for office on an independent basis with no alliance to party politics. Before Lawton changed back in 1923 to a mayor and council, the city had switched from a government of three commissioners to one of five commissioners and a city manager. This change was approved by Lawton voters on March 15, 1921. It was argued by this time, particularly by the Lawton Chamber of Commerce, that a city manager with five commissioners as policy makers would give

⁵⁵Ibid., October 3, 1923, p. 4; October 25, 1923, p. 1.

Lawton an even more business-like operation.⁵⁶

In November of 1922, city voters approved repeal of the charter and a return to the aldermanic or mayor-council setup with councilmen elected to office through allegiance to political parties. Pro-charter forces had argued that a return to the aldermanic government would end self-government for Lawton and would see the return of partisan politics. Those favoring a return to the aldermanic government argued that the change would return representative government to city politics and let the people have more of a say in running Lawton's affairs. Neither the Constitution nor the News took a stand at the time on the issue. However, the Constitution editorialized in January of 1923 that it was possible that both opposing camps could be satisfied if the mayor functioned as a city manager under the aldermanic setup.⁵⁷

Klan-supported candidates won election to the mayor's job and five of ten councilmen's positions in the 1923 election for the changeover to the aldermanic system. John D. Kennard was named mayor. The Constitution did not openly state in its news stories that Lawton was than a Ku Klux town. But Kennard and the pro-Klan councilmen made few bones about hiding their allegiance. In April of 1924 Kennard and the five councilmen led the biggest Klan parade and demonstration ever held in Lawton. A crowd that was called the largest since the Armistice Day parade watched some 2,000 Comanche County Klansmen and Klanswomen

⁵⁶ Ibid., January 15, 1921, p. 1; February 3, 1921, p. 1; March 16, 1921, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Ibid., November 3, 1922, p. 3; November 5, 1922, pp. 4A, 8B; November 8, 1922, p. 1; January 31, 1923, p. 4; News, November 5, 1922, p. 4.

bearing torches parade through downtown Lawton, marching to the tempo of two large Klan bands. To cap the Klan extravaganza, a huge airplane with a fiery, luminous cross painted beneath its wings flew back and forth across downtown Lawton. The plane constantly dropped detonation bombs which showered vari-colored lights in all directions. Later Kennard and the councilmen were guests at a Klan banquet honoring Oklahoma Grand Dragon N. C. Jewett.⁵⁸

By 1924 an anti-Klan group calling itself the Constitutional Americans began to make itself heard in Lawton and Comanche County. Its chairman was L. P. Ross, Lawton's first mayor. The Constitutional Americans brought several out-of-town speakers to Lawton to discuss and talk against the Klan. It also began an active campaign to endorse anti-Klan candidates and oppose Klan candidates for city and county offices.⁵⁹

The rise of the anti-Klan forces and the discussion of the Klan's abuses and powers soon divided Lawton into two opposing camps. The Constitution in a front page editorial noted that the Klan forces and the Constitutional Americans had caused dissension, bitterness, hatred, and economic boycotts of businesses in Lawton. Under an editorial signed by Ned Shepler and headlined, "The Future, What of It?", the Constitution spoke:

. . . [Lawton's] brilliant future is being placed in jeopardy by the slowly but surely mounting tides of hatred, of malice, and of division that are being nurtured and fostered within our midst. . . .

⁵⁸Constitution, April 4, 1923, p. 1; May 7, 1923, p. 1; April 13, 1924, p. 1.

⁵⁹Ibid., July 27, 1924, p. 1.

It does no good to beat about the bush. Plain talk is the need of the hour and most of those who would express an opinion are held back by indirect threat of injury in business or otherwise. With us we have the Ku Klux Klan and the Constitutional Americans. We have no criticism to offer to any man for joining any that he sees fit. That is his right. Nor have we any objections to offer any kind of organizations that seek to build rather than destroy.

But we believe that an objection is justified when the destroying bitterness and hatred engendered by these organizations enter into business, into social relationships, into the lodges of our city, and into political affairs. We believe these two organizations are turning neighbor against neighbor, are building up a bitterness of spirit that will outlive both organizations and do irreparable injury to the community as well as to individuals. Instead of pitching 'the fight' upon issues, it is degenerating into commercial and personal warfare that can do no one any good and will do great harm. . . .

You can't boycott each other and expect prosperity. You can't speak ill of your neighbor and expect him to feel kindly toward you. A boycott, regardless under what name it is waged, is indefensible. It is morally wrong and economically unsound, and can only work to the detriment of the entire community. . . .

Let every man be strong for his own organization, but at the same time put the welfare of your community above the organization. Let us try to work out of this condition of factionalism and pull with the old-time spirit for Lawton. When that time comes a brighter day will have dawned for all who have cast their lot in the 'Queen City of the Southwest.'⁶⁰

But the Constitutional Americans paid little heed to Shepler's plea to curb factionalism. Klan-endorsed candidates swept the Democratic primary for Comanche County offices in August of 1924. The Constitutional Americans then launched an all-out campaign to seek victory for anti-Klan Republican candidates in the November general elections. The efforts paid off handsomely when the Republicans won seven county positions, a majority of the county offices.⁶¹

⁶⁰Ibid., June 22, 1924, p. 1.

⁶¹Ibid., August 6, 1924, p. 1; November 5, 1924, p. 1; November 6, 1924, p. 1.

Flushed with that victory, the Constitutional Americans focused on their next target, the municipal elections in 1925. They were successful in that election, too, when Charles S. Powell was elected Lawton's first Republican mayor. Four anti-Klan Republicans also were elected, which made an anti-Klan majority on the city council.⁶²

Constitution editor Ned Shepler was elated by the anti-Klan victory. An editorial declared that "Factionalism in city affairs was dealt a death blow in Tuesday's election." He said the results could only be interpreted that the people of Lawton were going to eliminate "the disturbing elements that have wrought havoc here during the past two or three years." He said the past struggle had wrecked the Democratic party and had threatened for a time to destroy business and community progress. He added this plea:

. . . Let us lay aside this factionalism. Let us put any bitter feeling that may exist behind us and unite under the new administration. . . . Until both sides lay down and get back to the old basis of common understanding and good will, there can be no peace and harmony. . . .⁶³

Strong feelings against the Klan lingered for several more years in Lawton and Comanche County politics. Anti-Klan Republicans again swept a majority of county offices in the 1926 elections. And Mayor Powell won reelection in 1927, although the council was reduced to only two anti-Klan Republicans. By 1928, however, the Klan issue had almost become a dead one in county politics. Only a Republican sheriff managed to win election that year. Ironically, in 1929 the charter-city manager form of government came up for a vote again. The Constitution

⁶²Ibid., April 8, 1925, p. 1.

⁶³Ibid., April 8, 1925, pp. 1, 4.

this time campaigned strongly for the plan, which it said a growing Lawton needed to effectively manage the city's business. However, it was defeated by a vote of 1,451 to 922. The paper attributed its defeat to the fact that Lawton had enjoyed an unusually successful city administration for the past four years.⁶⁴

During the last half of the 1920's the Klan fell apart in Lawton and Comanche County and nearly everywhere else. There were many reasons for this collapse. For most of Oklahoma, dissension and general loss of interest caused the Klan to deteriorate. It had lost much of its appeal of pageantry and picturesqueness when Oklahoma approved an anti-masking bill in 1924. As far as Lawton was concerned, though, it was through attacks of the Constitutional Americans that the Klan had speedily fallen into disrepute. For a time the blow had severely divided and crippled Lawton and had resulted in boycotts of many businesses. But by 1928 the Klan in Lawton and elsewhere in the Southwest was only a hollow and unfrighting shell of the once-powerful body.⁶⁵

Lawton's "Jazz Journalism"

While the Klan and the utilities were the most important news stories of the 1920's in Lawton, other events helped keep life exciting both for newspapermen and for Lawton residents. Most of this news could come under the label of "jazz journalism," the sensationalized diet of sex, crime, and entertainment stories that usually kept readers

⁶⁴Ibid., April 6, 1927, p. 1; November 6, 1928, p. 1; February 24, 1929, p. 2; March 20, 1929, p. 1.

⁶⁵Alexander, pp. 209-232; Club, Chapter Three.

of the big city newspapers breathless with excitement and anticipation. But Lawton had more than its share of sensational sex and crime stories in this jazz age decade, with an occasional "love nest" escapade or two tossed in for spice.⁶⁶

The most sensational story of the 1920's was the fatal shooting of former Lawtonian Jake Hamon, a millionaire oilman and Republican national committeeman from Oklahoma, and the trial of his young and pretty mistress, Clara Smith Hamon, for his murder. The Hamon story had it all--sex, scandal, love nest, murder, prominence. Hamon had come to Lawton at the 1901 opening and had served as the first city attorney. He was promoter of the Ardmore to Lawton railway that never reached Lawton but stopped at Healdton. He made a fortune in oil and real estate and rose to prominence in Republican politics. Hamon, who was married and had several children, met Clara Smith while she was clerking in a Lawton department store. When Hamon left Lawton after 1910 for Ardmore, she went with him as his secretary, and they continued intimate for years. She got her last name of Hamon through a convenient quick marriage to and divorce from a nephew of Jake Hamon. In November of 1920, Hamon was fatally wounded in an Ardmore hotel "love nest." He died a few days later, and Clara Smith Hamon fled to Mexico under a charge of murder. She later surrendered and was placed on trial at Ardmore, where she was acquitted by a jury which ruled that she shot Hamon in self defense during a vicious fight between the two lovers.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ News, March 10, 1921, p. 1; Constitution, March 10, 1921, p. 1; Bessie, pp. 229-240.

⁶⁷ News, March 10, 1921, p. 1; March 18, 1921, p. 1; Constitution, March 18, 1921, p. 1; Hamon's "smoke-filled room" role in the 1920 Republican convention that nominated Harding is told in Harry M. Daugherty, The Inside Story of the Harding Tragedy (Churchill Company, New York, 1932), pp. 32-40.

The story of the shooting, Hamon's death, the flight of Clara, and the dramatic, week-long trial made banner headlines for months in the Lawton papers. During the trial the Lawton News sent a reporter to Ardmore to cover the events, so that Lawton readers would get more of the juicy details than the wire service would send. The News and the Constitution both published series of background stories. And Clara Smith Hamon continued to make hot, page one copy for Lawton papers following her acquittal. She went to Hollywood and personally starred in a motion picture of her life with Jake Hamon. When the movie, which was entitled "Fate," came to Lawton, several ministers asked and received a permanent injunction banning the showing on the grounds that the film violated public decency. But the injunction applied only to the county limits, and Lawtonians thronged to theaters in towns just outside Comanche County's borders to see the film.⁶⁸

The Constitution editorialized that the public's growing demand for the sensational was the reason that the newspapers printed all of the lurid details of the Hamon case and that the movie houses showed the Clara Smith Hamon film. Back of it all, the newspaper said, was the sensational life Clara Smith and Jake Hamon had led. But, the newspaper maintained, the motion picture show owners and newspaper editors could not be censured solely for their appeal to the sensational and lurid. "They have to do it in order to attract the people whom they want to attract," the paper said. However, better days were ahead, the newspaper hopefully predicted: "Happily this unmoral spree appears to be drawing to a close. People are becoming more settled, the high

⁶⁸News, February 14, 1922, p. 1.

tension of war days is almost forgotten. This big jamboree the world has been on will die of its own volition. . . ."69

The newspaper's forecast of an end to sensationalism--particularly on the Lawton scene--proved far from accurate. In fact, one of the lesser figures in the Hamon case soon became the center of a Lawton church controversy and highly publicized scandal. The Reverend Thomas J. Irwin, founder and for twenty years pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Lawton, had been a close friend of Jake Hamon. The Reverend Mr. Irwin's troubles began when he testified during the trial that he visited Hamon after he was shot and that Hamon "accepted Christ and repented of his sins" before his death. The Lawton minister also had preached a flowery and eulogistic sermon at Hamon's funeral, which received wide coverage in the press. Following the trial, Irwin continued to praise Hamon as a "model husband and father" and "one of God's noblemen." Irwin's adulation of Hamon proved too much for the Lawton News' Joe Willetts to stomach. In an unusual Sunday morning front-page editorial, Willetts denounced the Presbyterian pastor as a "fawning sycophant whose ministerial talons have dug deep into the Hamon coffers" and as one who continued to extol the dead Hamon from the pulpit in hopes for further "gold and favors." The editorial also charged that the minister's favoritism toward Hamon and his "life of debauchery" had caused membership in the Lawton church to dwindle considerably.⁷⁰

A few months later in August of 1921, the minister made national

⁶⁹Constitution, February 14, 1922, p. 4.

⁷⁰Ibid., March 12, 1921, p. 1; News, March 20, 1921, p. 1.

headlines when he took part in a wedding ceremony which came to be known as Lawton's "bathing pool marriage." After a summer party at Medicine Park just north of Lawton, a seventeen-year-old Atlanta, Georgia, girl was married to a Dallas, Texas, oil man. The couple, witnesses, and attendants wore bathing suits and stood waist-deep in the Medicine Park swimming pool. The Reverend Mr. Irwin performed the rites. He wore a bathing suit, too, and read the services by moonlight. The couple spent a thirty-day honeymoon at the Medicine Park resort. The girl later returned to her Atlanta home and started action to have her marriage annulled. She charged in her petition that the wedding took place in a spirit of revelry in the bathing pool, that her bridegroom was far older than she and had been married twice before, once to her elder sister, and that she had married as a minor without her parents' permission. The Atlanta girl won the annulment in April of 1922, and the "Lawton bathing suit marriage" was dissolved.⁷¹

The Reverend Mr. Irwin's life thereafter made banner headlines in Lawton and the rest of the nation. What was termed in the press as "Oklahoma's strangest wedding ceremony," subsequently split the Presbyterian clergy and laity of the whole state into two warring factions. The controversy also divided the Lawton Presbyterian church membership into opposite camps over whether the minister should be retained or dismissed as pastor. The El Reno Presbytery, which had jurisdictional control over the church, filed charges in April of 1922 against the Lawton minister, charging conduct "unbecoming a minister of the Presbyterian Church." The minister was ordered to stand trial

⁷¹Constitution, April 30, 1922, p. 1.

before a church judiciary commission on the charges.⁷²

Then followed a bizarre chain of events. On April 22, 1922, a fire occurred at the First Presbyterian Church, being extinguished before causing extensive damage. A few days later the Reverend Mr. Irwin reported that he was attacked and beaten by a group of men in Lawton who bound and gagged him and forced him into their car. He said his abductors took him in the car to the Medicine Park road, where they left him for three hours before he was able to free himself. During a court of inquiry hearing into the church fire, Comanche County Attorney Fletcher Riley planted a recording device, a dictagraph, in the witness room where the Reverend Mr. Irwin and H. C. Lewis, an elder of the Presbyterian Church, were waiting to testify. Riley said the record of the conversation between the minister and church elder implicated them in the church fire. The county prosecutor filed charges of arson against the pair, who later were ordered to stand trial.⁷³

The day after the dictagraph record was disclosed to the press and the filing of the charges, the Reverend Mr. Irwin announced his resignation as church pastor. He was found guilty of the charges brought against him in the El Reno Presbytery church court and was "defrocked" by being indefinitely suspended as a minister of the Presbyterian church. The presbytery also reorganized the Lawton church, and a new minister and church officials were installed. Ironically, a year later the judiciary committee of the Presbyterian General Assembly reversed

⁷²Ibid., April 26, 1922, p. 1; May 8, 1922, p. 1.

⁷³Ibid., April 24, 1922, p. 1; April 26, 1922, p. 1; May 1, 1922, p. 1; May 5, 1922, p. 1; June 11, 1922, p. 1; News, April 24, 1922, p. 1; April 26, 1922, p. 1; May 6, 1922, p. 1; June 11, 1922, p. 1.

the ruling of the Oklahoma Presbytery, cleared the Lawton minister of the church charges, and ordered that Irwin be given letters to any church where he might seek to fill the pulpit. Also, the arson charges against him and Lewis, the former church elder, were dropped when it was ruled the dictagraph recording was improper evidence.⁷⁴

Both newspapers, following the jazz journalism style set by their big brothers in the metropolitan field, printed every word they could get their hands on regarding the running church feud and scandal. All of the conversation between the Reverend Mr. Irwin and Lewis was transcribed from the dictagraph planted in the witness room was carried in the papers, and all of the testimony in the hearings was printed. The Constitution commented that the dictagraph evidently disclosed that the church fire was deliberately set and that the minister faked his abduction to create sympathy for himself. The Constitution added that "Lawton's 'church war,' which has been given wide notice in metropolitan papers throughout the country, threatened to become the biggest hoax to which Comanche County has ever fallen heir."⁷⁵

If the First Presbyterian minister's escapades were not enough to titillate Lawtonians in the age of jazz journalism, readers also could feast on a heady diet of murder cases. The most sensational case was the murder in March of 1921 of a Lawton taxicab driver, twenty-two-year-old Russell Sprague. Cleo Gobin, a Lawton resident, and William Tait, a recently discharged Fort Sill soldier, confessed when captured that

⁷⁴Constitution, May 5, 1922, p. 1; May 9, 1922, p. 1; July 28, 1922, p. 1; May 24, 1923, p. 1; News, May 4, 1922, p. 1; May 10, 1922, p. 1; July 29, 1922, p. 1.

⁷⁵Constitution, May 5, 1922, p. 1; May 7, 1922, p. 1.

they had lured Sprague to a farm house east of Lawton in order to kill him and to steal his car. They said they knocked Sprague unconscious and carried his body to a nearby creek, when Tait shot him in the head and rolled the body into the creek's waters.⁷⁶

In their confessions, Gobin and Tait said that theft of the taxicab was the only motive for the crime. They said their own car had broken down and that they sought the taxi to go on a cross-country spree with two women prostitutes who had been recently released from the Lawton detention home, a state-run institution which treated prostitutes suffering venereal diseases. The two women were Eva Hewiett of Elk City, Oklahoma, and L. "Jack" Duff of Santa Ana, California, who told officers they came regularly to Lawton from Oklahoma City during soldier pay day periods. The four, headed for Colorado, were captured in the Texas Panhandle town of Perryton.⁷⁷

Every minute detail in the Sprague case was printed in both the News and the Constitution, which editorialized heavily in their news accounts in calling for a quick trial for the confessed slayers. Feeling was running high then in Lawton against what was considered a wave of violence and vice. It was also the time that the super-moralistic Klan got its start in Lawton. Two recent killings in Lawton's east end already had caused much comment. The Sprague murder, the flight of the four fugitives, and the sensational capture and confessions added fuel to the fire about sentiments on crime conditions in Lawton. In order to forestall possible mob violence, District Judge

⁷⁶Ibid., March 29, 1921, p. 1; March 30, 1921, p. 1; News, March 29, 1921, p. 1; March 30, 1921, p. 1.

⁷⁷Constitution, March 31, 1921, p. 1; News, March 31, 1921, p. 1.

A. S. Wells called a special term of court to try the cases within ten days.⁷⁸

The day the two suspects were expected to be brought back to Lawton, a mob of 500 stormed the county courthouse seeking the pair. But Comanche County Sheriff George Frampton convinced the mob that the two men had not been brought back. Later it was learned that Gobin and Tait were being held prisoners in the county jail in Oklahoma City for safekeeping until their trial. The mob's action was touched off when the two women suspects in the Sprague murder were returned earlier that night to the Comanche County Courthouse. A small crowd of thirty or more men had attempted to seize the two women, but sheriff's deputies drew their pistols and halted the threat.⁷⁹

Four days later the Lawton Detention Home, where the two women had been given treatment for venereal disease, was set afire by unknown persons and was completely destroyed. The detention home had been established by Lawton during World War I in response to a request from the federal government and Fort Sill authorities to take care of a large number of diseased prostitutes who had flooded into the area. After the war the State of Oklahoma had taken over its maintenance, and diseased women from over the state were sent to the home.⁸⁰

Under a page one editorial headlined, "Futility of Mob Rule," the Constitution urged Lawton citizens to quit taking the law into their own hands. The editorial cautioned:

⁷⁸Constitution, March 31, 1921, p. 1; News, March 31, 1921, p. 1.

⁷⁹News, April 2, 1921, p. 1; Constitution, April 2, 1921, p. 1.

⁸⁰News, April 6, 1921, p. 1; Constitution, April 6, 1921, p. 1.

... While the provocation has been great, any attempt to interrupt the regular procedure of the law and courts is a blow at organized government. It can be productive of no lasting good. The spirit of the flaming torch and the angry mob can only work harm to the community in which it lives....

Conditions in certain quarters of the particular section of the city ... are generally known to be bad. But there are a great many people in the particular section who are not of the undesirable element. Mob rule does not discriminate. Harmless individuals are as likely to be injured as those who probably deserve attention.

Officers say they will clean up any existing corruption as fast as they can. It has been festering a long time and cannot be cleaned up in a day. First give the lawfully constituted authorities an opportunity to right conditions. Any other method will be not only harmful to the individual but to the community.⁸¹

A few days later Tait entered a plea of guilty to the murder charge. Gobin was tried and found guilty by a jury. Both were sentenced to be executed in the electric chair in the Oklahoma prison at McAlester. Murder charges against the two women companions were dropped when it was agreed they would be prosecuted on a robbery charge pending against them in another county in Oklahoma.⁸²

No other murder case in Lawton's history was to receive such blanket news coverage. Every possible story angle involving the two men and the two women prior to the trial, during the trial, and after the trial appeared in the Lawton papers. It was as if the News and the Constitution had taken a leaf from the pages of the big city newspaper sob sisters. Backgrounds of all four suspects were thoroughly explored. Stories were carried on reactions of the families to the murder-- especially the mothers. Day-to-day stories described the behavior of

⁸¹ Constitution, April 7, 1921, p. 1.

⁸² Ibid., April 12, 1921, p. 1; April 13, 1921, p. 1; April 14, 1921, p. 1; News, April 13, 1921, p. 1; April 14, 1921, p. 1; April 15, 1921, p. 1.

the four in their jail cells. Column after column of type on the trial testimony was printed. After the trial, teary scenes of departure from the Lawton train station for the journey to prison were intimately described. Stories then were carried on how Gobin and Tait were bearing up under the pressure on McAlester's death row as the June dates for their execution neared.⁸³

Editorial congratulations were extended the court for its swift handling of the murder trials. The Constitution commented that four convictions for murder and eight pleas of guilty within a week's time was a record for courts in Comanche County. And the Constitution patted itself editorially on the back for its coverage:

The Constitution takes pride in the fact that it has been able to give the people of Lawton and Comanche County a detailed report of the Sprague murder case. Two reporters, one of whom is Scribe Thompson, the veteran newspaper writer, have worked in relays, reporting every angle of the case.

Hundreds of people, who clamored for admittance to the courtroom and arrived too late to get in, missed no part of the testimony, due to the careful manner in which it has been reported by the members of the editorial staff of the paper. Few cases have attracted more interest than the trial of Cleo Gobin for the murder of Russell Sprague and evidence of this is shown by the fact that 550 extra copies of last night's Constitution were sold on Lawton streets. . . .

The Constitution enjoys the distinction of being the only paper printing all of the news about Lawton and vicinity.⁸⁴

Stays of execution for Gobin and Tait were granted pending appeals. In October of 1921 Gobin was granted a new trial on the grounds that his defense attorney was given only one day of preparation for the quick

⁸³Constitution, April 4, 1921, p. 1; April 8, 1921, p. 1; April 13, 1921, p. 1; April 14, 1921, p. 1; April 21, 1921, p. 1; April 23, 1921, p. 1; News, April 13, 1921, p. 1; April 14, 1921, p. 1; April 15, 1921, p. 1.

⁸⁴Constitution, April 14, 1921, p. 4; April 15, 1921, p. 4; April 19, 1921, p. 4.

trial which followed his arrest. The Oklahoma Criminal Court of Appeals also heavily censured the trial judge, A. S. Wells, for his handling of Gobin's and Tait's cases. The appeals court commented that it was as if mob law was in command during the Lawton proceedings.⁸⁵

Gobin was granted a change of venue for his second trial on the grounds that highly prejudicial newspaper coverage in Lawton prevented him from receiving a fair trial. He was tried the second time at the Cotton County Court in Walters. Again he was convicted and sentenced to death in the electric chair. In 1923 Governor Jack Walton, an opponent of capital punishment who pledged that he would not permit an execution during his term, commuted Tait's death sentence to life imprisonment. Gobin also escaped the electric chair when his appeal for commutation of the death sentence to life imprisonment was approved by the Criminal Court of Appeals in 1925. The Constitution commented in both cases that justice was severely cheated.⁸⁶

Although the Sprague case would be referred to for many years as the most infamous and brutal murder in the history of Comanche County, other murder cases during the 1920's also received much notoriety and heavy newspaper coverage. Sharing headlines with the Sprague case in 1921 was the trial of Mrs. Dera Korthaus in the strychnine poisoning deaths of three Korthaus family children. Mrs. Korthaus, a twenty-four-year-old housewife, was tried for the murder of Clarence Korthaus, a three-year-old nephew, who died of strychnine placed in some grapes he had eaten. She also was accused of fatally poisoning her five-year-old

⁸⁵Ibid., October 8, 1921, p. 1; News, October 9, 1921, p. 1.

⁸⁶Constitution, April 6, 1922, p. 1; May 16, 1923, p. 1; May 18, 1925, p. 1; News, April 7, 1922, p. 1.

son, Walter, who died after eating watermelon, and Leonard Doye, a thirteen-month-old nephew, who died after eating breakfast cereal. The trial in February of 1921 resulted in a hung jury. Later that year the murder charge against Mrs. Korthaus was dropped on the grounds of insufficient evidence.⁸⁷

Another murder case that gripped Lawton readers for days was the April, 1922, slaying of Army Lieutenant Colonel Paul Ward Beck, commandant of Fort Sill's Post Field. Beck was shot to death by Jean P. Day, a millionaire Oklahoma City oilman and attorney, who said he came home and found the army pilot making improper advances toward his wife. Day was exonerated in the slaying by a coroner's jury which ruled that he was justified in defending his wife when the aviator "attempted Mrs. Day's honor." Mrs. Day, described as a statuesque beauty and a popular Oklahoma City social leader, dramatically testified at the inquest that Colonel Beck struggled with her "for her honor" after friends had departed from a bridge game. "Girl, girl, you have swept me off my feet," she quoted Beck as saying; then, she said, he suddenly seized her and started the struggle which led to his death when her husband came home and saw him.⁸⁸

Other sensational stories of crime were commonplace among the front pages of Lawton newspapers during the 1920's. Several Southwest Oklahoma

⁸⁷Constitution, February 5, 1921, p. 1; February 7, 1921, p. 1; February 8, 1921, p. 1; February 9, 1921, p. 1; February 10, 1921, p. 1; February 11, 1921, p. 1; February 12, 1921, p. 1; February 15, 1921, p. 1; October 17, 1921, p. 1; News, February 6, 1921, p. 1; February 8, 1921, p. 1; February 9, 1921, p. 1; February 12, 1921, p. 1; February 15, 1921, p. 1.

⁸⁸Constitution, April 4, 1922, p. 1; April 5, 1922, p. 1; April 10, 1922, p. 1; April 19, 1922, p. 1; News, April 5, 1922, p. 1; April 6, 1922, p. 1; April 20, 1922, p. 1.

bank robberies and trials of the suspects occupied many columns. And a running story which received much coverage during the 1920's was the attempted enforcement of the prohibition amendment which had been passed in 1919. Prohibition, of course, was nothing new for Oklahomans, who had been legally dry since statehood in 1907. But enforcement of the prohibition law through the Volstead Enforcement Act had largely passed into the hands of federal officers, who made raids across Southwest Oklahoma, confiscating stills and charging the owners when they could catch them. As a result the federal court for the Western District of Oklahoma, which came to Lawton to hear Southwest Oklahoma cases, was deluged with prohibition cases. It was such a problem, the Constitution commented, that the county and district courts should take over much of this burden. Evidence of the flourishing moonshine business could be seen on the lawn of the Comanche County Courthouse, where confiscated stills were stacked until the wood was cut up and sold at auction.⁸⁹

Sob-sister or feature stories describing all sorts of human foibles, indiscretions, and downfalls appeared in the Lawton papers during this feverish decade. The following story about an abandoned baby was typical of those written in this vein:

A tawdry wisp of an 18-year-old girl, in castoff finery, sat in the office of the sheriff this afternoon, her pinched face paling and flushing with the fear of the charge which is to be placed against her, that of abandoning her baby son two months ago at Cache. She was the bride of six months of W. E. Roberts who was also being held at the jail but behind the steel bars.

A gaily check skirt, a matted tangle of curls slipping from under a defiantly tilted hat, trimmed with one bedraggled red feather; a carnival cane with a bow of red, white and blue ribbon on it, all were belied by the big blue eyes filled with

⁸⁹Constitution, December 23, 1923, p. 1; December 24, 1923, p. 1; December 31, 1923, p. 1; October 11, 1925, p. 4.

a mist of tears; the soft gold of errant curls and the features, dimmed with experience, of a Harrison Fischer girl.

Roberts himself a man of 33 years of age had admitted, according to the sheriff, the desertion of the baby on the steps at Cache early in December. He stated, according to Sheriff Frampton, that he waited hidden until the baby was found some ten minutes later before he left the scene. He also stated that he and his wife were married in September.

Roberts was arrested at Dillard and his wife was found at 10 C Avenue. Charles will be filed against them late this afternoon, county authorities said.⁹⁰

Practically every divorce suit filed in the county received an extensive writeup and was usually carried on page one. If the divorce suit contained some unusual occurrence or "feature" angle, then that "twist" was emphasized in the story. The following page one account illustrates how these stories were handled:

Alleging that she found long blonde hair in her husband's comb and brush upon his return from an automobile trip which had lasted several days, Mrs. Wanda Simpson filed suit in the district court of Comanche County for divorce, \$50 a week alimony, \$1,000 attorney's fees, a restraining order against property owned by her husband, Charles M. Simpson, and a receivership for the property.

In the petition for the divorce Mrs. Simpson states they were married April 2, 1921, at Wichita Falls, Texas. She states that her husband is employed at present as an engineer with quarters furnished and a salary of \$300 a month and that besides this income he has oil and interests which are worth between \$5,000 and \$15,000. Besides these interests Mrs. Simpson claims that he has money on deposit, real estate and cash to the amount of \$50,000. . . .

Besides the long blonde hairs mentioned in the petition, Mrs. Simpson states that her life has been threatened and that she has been the victim of extreme cruelty and cursing both in public and private. . . .⁹¹

Occasionally Constitution editor Ned Shepler would print front-page stories on sermons delivered in Lawton churches. It was a journalistic practice peculiar to the 1920's for the Constitution editor, who

⁹⁰ Ibid., January 24, 1922, p. 1.

⁹¹ Ibid., February 23, 1922, p. 1.

apparently gave prominence to such front-page preaching in an effort to counter the licentiousness of the jazz age. Several of the sermons covered in the Constitution were delivered by the minister of the Centenary Methodist Church, of which Shepler was a member. A good example of this type of newspaper coverage was a sermon on dancing, which was printed under the headline: "We Are Dancing More and Dancing Worse, Says Minister in Condemnation of Dance." After an introductory lead the sermon then was printed in its entirety. The sermon story started on page one under a two-column headline and was continued inside, filling five full columns of type. Highlights of the sermon noted:

Rev. Clarence Hightower, pastor of Centenary Methodist Church, said in a Sunday night sermon that we are dancing more and dancing worse than we ever have in the history of America. . . .

The modern dance is very fascinating. . . . It is the most popular form of amusement in the world today. The dance grips vast numbers, and it holds them as with hoops of steel. . . . Church loyalty, loyalty to Christ ought to be the supreme consideration in the life of a man or woman. . . . but we dance to raise funds for charity. . . .

Why do I oppose the dance? The first reason is that the modern dance is a SIN AGAINST THE BODY. . . . Modern dance as practiced is not a recreation. . . . It is a dissipation. . . . Why a dissipation? Because of the hours it is practiced. . . . It is a creature of the dark. . . .

Second: because of the place under which it is practiced. . . .

Third: because it generally is overdone. . . . The dancers, especially the girls, undergo a physical strain to which they are not equal. . . . A girl that is popular enough to dance through a whole program would, as an English statistician tells us, dance a distance of some ten or 12 miles. . . .

Also: it is a sign against the mind. . . . There is no pasttime that I know that is no conducive to mental inanity and vacuity as is the dance. . . . Many are intelligent people, but . . . here is a pasttime in which the very finest performers are trained monkeys. . . .

The dance is wrong emphasis. It educates the feet instead of the head. . . . The dance is selfish. . . . There is little regard for the feelings of those who object to it. . . . Also,

the tendency of the dance is toward immorality. . . . The round dance originated in a brothel in Paris. . . . The dance was born of the basest of passions. . . .⁹²

Lawton's jazz journalism stories involving sex, crime, and violence occurred mostly during the early years of the 1920's. This type of local news coverage waned in the latter part of the 1920's chiefly because few sensational stories occurred in the Lawton area during these years. However, the Constitution through its wire service carried sensational instances of sex, crime, violence, and entertainment as they occurred in the nation. And it should be noted that the Lawton press preoccupation with local and national sensationalism in the 1920's reflected the spirit of the times. Similar to most other newspapers in the nation which were aping the tabloids, the Lawton press went with the tide in this news coverage.

Boosterism Amid Depression

The Constitution continued during the 1920's as an unflagging booster of Lawton. Ned Shepler's editorials constantly exhorted the city's businessmen to pursue all sorts of avenues which might transform the small Southwest Oklahoma town into a booming city. In fact, a survey of editorials written during the 1920's shows that this was Shepler's most consuming and persistent interest as editor. Even during the Constitution's fight with the Keys' utilities and newspaper and the crisis with the Klan, Shepler continued to beat the editorial drum for building Lawton's prosperity. And his role as Lawton's leading promoter was similar to many other newspaper editor-publishers in small towns and

⁹²Ibid., January 5, 1921, p. 1.

cities. His newspaper obviously would prosper if Lawton would gain in population, acquire new industries, and continue to grow as a trade and agricultural center for Southwest Oklahoma.

Through front-page editorials, the Constitution annually promoted Lawton business booster trips across Southwest Oklahoma. On one such typical journey, some 65 automobiles carried 200 Lawton businessmen on a day-long, 151-mile visit to towns in Southwest Oklahoma. All of the boosters wore Palm Beach trousers, light shirts, white duck hats, and badges listing their names and businesses. Cars carrying a band were at the head of the caravan, preceded by an airplane which in each town dropped packages of special booster editions of the Constitution and handbills proclaiming: "Howdy folks! We're the Lawton boosters. Look for them below and a little behind us. They'll be here soon."⁹³ A front-page editorial the day following the trip urged Lawtonians to "keep boosting" and added:

. . . Lawtonians yesterday went into the highways and byways, saw and learned of the great opportunities this city has to be the real metropolis of this whole section of the state and their aim now should be to make Lawton a bigger and better city in every way.⁹⁴

Yet starting in 1920 most of Oklahoma fared badly in the major post-war depression which jarred the nation. Similar to many other western and southern states, Oklahoma during this period principally was a supplier of food, raw materials, and minerals to the industrial East and North. The state's economy based on oil, cattle, and agriculture was highly sensitive to national and world markets. When oil, cotton

⁹³Ibid., May 12, 1921, p. 1.

⁹⁴Ibid., May 13, 1921, p. 1.

and wheat, and beef prices plunged, Oklahoma suffered widespread ruin, unemployment, and suffering. The impact of the 1920 depression was so severe that its effects were still being felt in Oklahoma when the economic crash of 1929 occurred.⁹⁵

Lawton and Comanche County were not as severely affected by the 1920 depression as the rest of Oklahoma. Chiefly this was because of the nearby presence of Fort Sill. Pointing out its economic benefits to Lawton, the Constitution editorially commented:

Fort Sill is probably one of the city's biggest assets for like a huge industrial plant, where there is peace and harmony and strikes never occur, Uncle Sam's big war school just four miles north, furnishes a stable foundation for the city with its large and its extensive purchase of supplies from local business houses.⁹⁶

The Constitution continually reminded Lawton readers and businessmen that without the adjacent army post it was doubtful Lawton would be much larger than many surrounding small towns in Southwest Oklahoma. Editorials also repeatedly warned of the constant danger of losing the Field Artillery School unless a program of permanent building construction was started. And there were grounds for this fear. Although all branches of the Field Artillery School program had been located at Fort Sill, the War Department had made no decision as to the school's permanent location.⁹⁷

Adding to the problem, fires believed to be the work of a pyromaniac began leveling the temporary buildings which had been built

⁹⁵Arrell M. Gibson, Oklahoma: A History of Five Centuries (Norman: Harlow Publishing Co., 1965), p. 439.

⁹⁶Constitution, July 14, 1921, p. 4.

⁹⁷Ibid., May 22, 1923, p. 4.

in 1917 during the buildup of Fort Sill and the contonment area. The fires started in December of 1923, and several occurred in 1924. In April and June of 1925, fires destroyed two warehouses containing household furnishings belonging to student artillery officers and the Artillery School staff and seven large apartment buildings. Most of the instructors and all of the students lost their furnishings and living quarters on post in the fire.⁹⁸

Page one editorials in the Constitution pleaded for Lawtonians to be quick in finding quarters for the displaced artillery officers and their families, warning that Fort Sill could lose the Artillery School overnight if housing were not located. In only a few days, enough housing was found. From 1925 until 1934, all artillery students and their families were forced to live in Lawton and commute to the post.⁹⁹

The destructive fires continued well into 1926. Working under cover with the help of a Department of Justice detective, the Fort Sill military police located and arrested the pyromaniacs, who were working in the Fort Sill Fire Department. The investigation disclosed that members of the "fire ring" were all young soldiers who were setting the fires merely for a thrill. Thirteen were convicted in United States District Court trials and four others were found guilty in trial by courts-martial.¹⁰⁰

Lawtonians' fears of losing their big military industry reached a climax on April 16, 1928, when they read a banner headline in the

⁹⁸Ibid., May 1, 1925, p. 1; June 18, 1925, p. 1.

⁹⁹Ibid., August 13, 1925, p. 1; August 14, 1925, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., October 11, 1926, p. 1.

Constitution: "FORT SILL TO LOSE ARTILLERY SCHOOL?" The story said that the War Department was considering moving the Artillery School to Camp Bragg, North Carolina. It also was revealed that the Army Chief of Staff, Major General Charles P. Summerall, favored the move because it would locate artillery training far closer to Army Department headquarters in Washington.¹⁰¹

Constitution editorials warned that Lawton's future would be bleak if the Army carried out its plans to move the Artillery School. The entire Oklahoma Congressional delegation went to work in an attempt to keep the Artillery School at Fort Sill. Lawton Chamber of Commerce officials and members of the city administration traveled to Washington to lobby for retention. Constitution editor Ned Shepler enlisted the editorial assistance of several Oklahoma City newspapers, which pleaded that Fort Sill should be retained as an Army post because of its value as a training ground for National Guard units in Oklahoma and all surrounding states.¹⁰²

Oklahoma Congressmen and Senators toured Camp Bragg with Army officials and told the Constitution that the North Carolina post had many major drawbacks. It was reported the Army camp had only dilapidated temporary wooden buildings which were constructed during World War I. They said Camp Bragg's terrain mostly was swampy and ill suited for artillery training. They said further that the North Carolina area had far greater rainfall than the Southwest Oklahoma area. The touring delegation also said that no roads had been constructed in and around

¹⁰¹Ibid., April 16, 1928, p. 1.

¹⁰²Ibid., April 17, 1928, p. 1; April 18, 1928, p. 4.

the swampy camp terrain. In short, they concluded that as far as climate and terrain were concerned, everything was in favor of keeping the Artillery School at Fort Sill, where conditions were far more favorable to training artillery troops. A few days later a Constitution story reported United States Senator Elmer Thomas (from Lawton) as believing that efforts to move the school temporarily had been blocked. The story also revealed a curious personal reason that General Summerall had against keeping the Artillery School at Fort Sill. Senator Thomas said the general was considerably irritated by the fact that no Pullman railroad service existed between St. Louis and Lawton. Thomas then announced that Frisco railroad officials had agreed to establish permanent Pullman service on the route. A few weeks later it was announced that General Summerall would visit Fort Sill and review its qualifications for keeping the Artillery School. In an attempt to soothe the ruffled general's feelings, the Frisco Railroad placed its president's private car at Summerall's disposal for the visit.¹⁰³

The War Department then announced that the Field Artillery School would be kept at Fort Sill for the time being. Although Lawtonians could breathe easier for awhile, the Constitution editorially warned that Lawton should prepare for a long campaign to save the school. It was pointed out that Fort Sill would be in grave danger as long as the unfriendly General Summerall continued as Army Chief of Staff, an appointment he was scheduled to hold for three more years. The Constitution editorials noted that the fight to retain the Field Artillery School should focus on efforts to secure Congressional

¹⁰³Ibid., April 20, 1928, p. 1; May 18, 1928, p. 1.

appropriations for permanent on-post housing for all Army soldiers at Fort Sill and their families.¹⁰⁴

Although Fort Sill's economic benefits helped Lawton to weather the 1920 depression better than most other areas in Oklahoma, Lawton did suffer several economic setbacks. Lawton businesses by 1921 felt the effects of the slowdown, especially from the slump in the cotton market. And in the last two months of 1921, two of Lawton's four banks were forced to suspend business. The Security National Bank and the First National Bank said the failures were caused by runs on their deposits. However, hundreds who did not withdraw their accounts during the runs were left without a cent to show for their deposits.¹⁰⁵

Although the shutdown of the two banks was a stunning financial blow, a Constitution front-page editorial urged Lawton businesses to show no fear and to carry on business as usual. The editorial pointed proudly to Lawton's two remaining banks, the Citizens State Bank and the City National Bank, and said these two institutions would be amply able to meet any demand placed upon them. The editorial concluded:

Confidence is the mainstay of business and industrial life. Business is built upon faith in men and in institutions. One or two failures should not, and has not, shaken that confidence. Business in Lawton should go ahead as usual. Let every person put his shoulder to the wheel and pull together for the common good. This is no time for pessimism. Lawton is going ahead unflinching.¹⁰⁶

In order to establish a stronger financial footing, the Citizens State

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., April 22, 1928, p. 2; April 23, 1928, p. 1; April 24, 1928, p. 1; May 18, 1928, p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., January 21, 1921, p. 4; July 11, 1921, p. 1; November 10, 1921, p. 1; December 8, 1921, p. 1; News, December 9, 1921, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ Constitution, December 9, 1921, p. 1.

Bank shortly thereafter became a part of the federal reserve system, doubled its capital stock, and changed its name to the American National Bank.¹⁰⁷

Lawton's bleak financial picture turned brighter in 1922 when both the Security National Bank and the First National Bank reopened after reorganization under the supervision of national bank examiners. Both the News and the Constitution were exultant and proclaimed that Lawton had passed successfully through a financial crisis unequaled in the city's history. Editorials bragged that not a single depositor would lose a dollar as a result. Yet only six months after its reopening, the First National Bank was closed permanently because of unsound mortgage notes and placed in receivership. The following summer a federal receiver was able to pay off nearly all of the depositors' accounts. After the crisis, Lawton was left with three banks seemingly on a sound financial footing.¹⁰⁸

Also in the 1920's, Lawton experienced two oil booms, and the Constitution frantically promoted both as the city's opportunities to become a major oil center. The "black gold" excitement was not a new thing by any means for Lawton. There had been several flurries of activity since Lawton's founding in 1901, the latest one occurring in 1919. The first boom for the 1920's decade occurred in 1921 when a major oil field was discovered some twenty to thirty miles east and south of Lawton in Stephens and Cotton counties. Ned Shepler's page

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., December 22, 1921, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ News, March 19, 1922, pp. 1, 4; May 21, 1922, p. 1; Constitution, March 22, 1922, p. 1; May 18, 1922, p. 1; May 21, 1922, p. 1; November 8, 1922, p. 1; November 21, 1922, p. 1; August 19, 1923, p. 1.

one editorials said that Duncan, closest town to the oil fields, was too small to handle and to supply the needs for the new operations. The editorials urged Lawton's retail and wholesale businessmen to go after business in the oil fields and offer inducements to oil field workers and operators to come to Lawton. Said one such editorial:

. . . Lawton's only handicap is its distance from the field. Duncan, less than half the size of Lawton, is the only city of consequence within fifty miles of the new pool and Duncan is sold out. Freight congestion, poor facilities for handling the big business, lack of amusement and entertainment for the oil men off duty, et cetera, are against the Stephens County seat.

Lawton has a great opportunity to get this business, which is even bigger than the cantonment. With eight wholesale houses and hundreds of retail establishments, well stocked with the best merchandise obtainable, in a city where operating costs are lower than those in Duncan, Lawton is in a fair way to offer inducements to the oil men, which will mean big business for years to come.

Lawton with five theaters, Medicine Park, Mineral Wells, the big lake for fishing and hunting, a good ball team and classy boxing bouts, offers more entertainment to oil men than could be found in a city six times the size of this.

All Lawton businessmen must do to get the business is to show what they have to offer. A well organized trade trip through the oil fields would turn the trick. . . .¹⁰⁹

In other editorials, Shepler said that if Lawton could secure the oil field business it would mean busy streets, a telegraph office working night and day, big financial deals, stores filled with customers, and industrial plants working overtime. Shepler continually advised Lawton businessmen that in order to get the oil field business they must visit the fields, get acquainted with the operators and workers, and present them a clear and comprehensive picture of what Lawton could

¹⁰⁹Constitution, April 22, 1921, p. 1.

offer in the way of supplies, merchandise, and financial, educational and recreational facilities.¹¹⁰

Lawton business boosters took Shepler's advice, made a trade trip to the oil fields, and attempted to prove that it was easier to get to Lawton for supplies than other towns adjacent to the field. However, the depression stopped any further Lawton efforts to attract the oil field business. The summer of 1921 saw the prices of crude oil plummet. Low prices quickly forced the new oil fields to shut down production and dashed Lawton's hopes for becoming the petroleum capital of Southwest Oklahoma.¹¹¹

Lawton's second oil boom of the 1920's started in August of 1925 when the Hanbury well was brought in thirteen miles east of the city. "LAWTON OIL BOOM ASSURED," proclaimed a page-one banner headline in the Constitution. Beneath the story was an editorial urging businessmen to advertise Lawton as the center of this new oil discovery. "Warehouses must be located somewhere, a center of operations must be established, and now is the time to convince oil men of the state that Lawton is that center," the editorial said.¹¹²

New stories told how hundreds of thousands of dollars were changing hands as oil companies swarmed into the area buying up leases. A feature story described how William Price, a poor farmer who had struggled to make a living on his east Lawton farm with his wife and three sons, had accepted a \$40,000 royalty check as owner of the land

¹¹⁰Ibid., April 23, 1921, p. 1; April 25, 1921, p. 1; April 26, 1921, p. 1, April 27, 1921, p. 1.

¹¹¹Ibid., May 13, 1921; July 12, 1921, p. 4; July 14, 1921, p. 4.

¹¹²Ibid., August 16, 1925, p. 1.

upon which the Hanbury oil well was located. Editorials repeatedly urged Lawton businessmen to publicize the new oil field by buying advertisements in the larger state newspapers. "... let's see that Lawton has what is rightfully hers and that she is recognized as the center of the new Hanbury oil field," said one page-one editorial.¹¹³

But the Lawton oil field did not live up to expectations. The Hanbury well itself produced less than a hundred barrels of oil a day. By December of 1925, approximately thirty rigs were drilling in eastern Comanche County. Yet the search for the "mother pool" which would yield big producing wells proved elusive. Despite the lack of discovery, Constitution news stories and editorials continued to label the new field as "the greatest wildcat field in Oklahoma and possibly other states."¹¹⁴

Only five or six deep wells produced oil in paying quantities. Continued drilling and exploration in 1926 indicated the east Comanche County area was only a shallow oil field. Most of the drilling found oil at the unbelievable depth of only 250 feet. These wells produced no more than five to ten barrels per day. After the summer of 1926 most of the oil companies abandoned the search, and Lawton's dreams of becoming an oil center vanished.¹¹⁵

Also during the 1920's the Constitution continually boosted the Wichita National Forest Reserve and the nearby Medicine Park resort

¹¹³Ibid., August 17, 1925, p. 1; August 20, 1925, p. 1.

¹¹⁴Ibid., November 4, 1925, p. 1; November 17, 1925, p. 1; December 9, 1925, p. 2; December 13, 1925, p. 1.

¹¹⁵Ibid., March 17, 1926, p. 4; June 26, 1926, p. 1; July 11, 1926, p. 2.

area as the "Playground of the Southwest." Shepler constantly urged building up the Wichita Mountains area in order to attract more tourists, which would contribute to Lawton's prosperity during the lax summer months.

Medicine Park, a popular summer resort area on the edge of the Wichita Mountains, had long attracted tourists from surrounding areas. The 1,000-acre resort had been established by United States Senator Elmer Thomas after he homesteaded in that area in 1906 and began buying up surrounding land. He added improvements over the years, such as resort cabins, a large swimming pool formed by a dam on Medicine Creek, a skating rink, a large hotel and dance hall, and other attractions.¹¹⁶

Senator Thomas sold the park and land in 1926 to a company of stockholders for \$175,000. Shortly afterward the new owners announced that the whole Medicine Park resort area had been turned into a private club that would be closed to the public and would be open only to some 1,000 members. Alarmed at Lawton's prospects of losing thousands of tourist dollars, the Constitution then urged that several lakes be impounded in the Wichita National Forest Reserve. The paper said the 58,000-acre National Forest Reserve could be turned into one of the finest vacation spots in the country, that is if several lakes could be provided to attract campers, swimmers, and fishermen.¹¹⁷

With Shepler's constant editorial prodding, the Lawton Chamber of Commerce raised more than \$7,000 in 1926 in a public contribution drive for funds to build a dam for a recreation lake in the Wichitas. The dam

¹¹⁶Ibid., January 10, 1926, p. 1.

¹¹⁷Ibid., February 3, 1926, pp. 3, 4.

was constructed the same year and the 35-acre lake which it impounded was named Lost Lake. Citizens of Cache in western Comanche County also raised funds for a dam which was constructed across Panther Creek in the Wichitas. The National Forest Reserve then had two lakes open for recreation and camping in the summer of 1926. Another new recreation area on the southwestern border of the Wichitas also was opened that summer. It was Craterville Park, which offered skating, baseball playgrounds, camping, and swimming. Also booklets proclaiming the Wichitas as the "Playground of the Southwest" were distributed by the Lawton chamber to attract summer vacationers.¹¹⁸

Later that same summer the new Medicine Park owners reversed their policy and announced that their property would be open to the public after all. However, the new owners said that a private club would be maintained in the park's hotel as originally planned. The new management also announced that the revised policy of keeping most of the park open to the public would be advertised throughout the state so tourists would still be attracted to the area.¹¹⁹

Pleased with the offerings then available, the Constitution basked in the prospect of thousands of tourists and their dollars pouring into the Lawton area during the summers. Lake Lawtonka, Medicine Park, the Wichita National Forest and its two new lakes, and Craterville Park were dubbed a vacationer's paradise for camping, recreation, and fishing. An editorial noted that the Wichita Mountains area also added much to the desirability of Lawton as a place of residence: "The mountains

¹¹⁸Ibid., February 5, 1926, pp. 1, 4; April 9, 1926, p. 1; April 18, 1926, p. 2; May 30, 1926, p. 1.

¹¹⁹Ibid., May 18, 1926, p. 1.

offer residents here the opportunity of summer recreation and outdoor sports at little expense. . . . It is one of the many things that make Lawton a better place in which to live."¹²⁰

Year of the Big Crash

Nineteen-hundred twenty-nine was the year of the Big Crash--the start of the Great Depression--but the black days of October on the stock market seemed to have little immediate effect on the Lawton area. Early in October as the prices of stocks began to take a nosedive, the Constitution felt obliged to deprecate talk of a major economic disaster. Only the stock market gamblers will get hurt, an editorial said, "but general business should not be materially affected." The stock market news went back to the inside pages a few days after "Black Tuesday" of October 29, and the front page soon returned to normal. The Christmas season was approaching, and the Constitution reflected the good business times in Lawton.¹²¹

Roundup stories in the Sunday, December 29, 1929, edition glowed with reports of Lawton's growth and prosperity during the past year. Building permits showed that construction in the Lawton area during 1929 totaled nearly half a million dollars. City revenue from its water supply showed a slight increase over the past year. Farmers in the Lawton area especially had a good year, and their increased

¹²⁰Ibid., June 6, 1926, p. 4.

¹²¹Ibid., October 6, 1924, p. 8; October 29, 1929, p. 1; November 1, 1929, p. 1; John D. Hicks, Republican Ascendancy: 1921-1933 (New York: Harper, 1960), pp. 223-234; Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen Twenties (New York: Harper, 1957), pp. 290-338.

earnings stimulated trade. Cotton--the county's leading crop--produced ginnings of 27,242 bales, an increase of some 8,000 bales over last year's crop. A survey showed that virtually every Lawton business house would show a larger amount of earnings for 1929 than a year ago. Fewer business buildings were vacant at the end of 1929 than the previous year, and several new business buildings had been completed. With all these factors of a modest prosperity in mind, Ray Babbitt, president of the Lawton Chamber of Commerce, envisioned that 1920 would be even a greater business year for the Southwest Oklahoma community.¹²²

For the decade of the twenties, Lawton's population showed a modest rise. From a population of 8,930 in 1920, the city increased in size to 12,121 in 1930. Circulation of the Lawton Constitution also kept pace with the growth in population. The newspaper showed 2,743 subscribers in 1921, and circulation enjoyed a small but steady increase to 3,588 by 1930.¹²³

Although the catastrophic stock market collapse had heralded an oncoming business depression, there were few signs in the closing days of the decade that Lawton, Comanche County, and the Constitution were much concerned. Similar to the rest of the nation, they had no idea of the misery and gloom that lay ahead in the 1930's.

¹²²Constitution, December 29, 1929, p. 1.

¹²³U. S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920: Population, I, 884; U. S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Population: III, 590; American Newspaper Annual and Directory, 1921, p. 799; 1930, p. 812.

CHAPTER IV

THE GREAT DEPRESSION YEARS

Hard Times Begin

The full force of the depression began to be felt in Lawton late in 1930. Yet there were a few signs early in the year of what was to come. The Constitution reported that Lawton's first breadline formed for food handouts in January. The food lines resulted after a severe winter storm prevented many of the men of transient families from working, mostly on construction jobs. Some of the poor huddled in tents near the city limits during the blizzard while others were housed at the city fair grounds. Without jobs and money, they quickly ran out of food. Several individuals and business firms purchased 700 loaves of bread at cost from a Lawton bakery. The poor stood in line at a Lawton tire shop to receive the bread loaves. Later the Salvation Army set up a soup kitchen to feed them until the men of the families located work.¹

Through the early part of 1930 as the news columns recorded the increasing extent of the depression over the nation, the Constitution's editorial page alternated between cheery hope and sober appraisal. The front page carried stories of breadlines, of soup kitchens, of men selling apples on the streets in other parts of the nation. But in

¹Constitution, January 26, 1930, p. 1; John D. Hicks, Republican Ascendancy (New York: Harper, 1960), pp. 260-270.

Lawton unemployment had not reached the crisis stage. Heartened by the census report that Lawton had a population of 12,115, an increase of 35.6 per cent since 1920, the newspaper proclaimed that Lawton then was among the larger cities in Oklahoma and that it would develop even more rapidly as the outstanding city in population, education, amusements, and trade in Southwest Oklahoma. But the growing number of people who wanted to work yet could not get jobs was cause for serious concern. The editorial urged Lawton businessmen to make a special effort to give the unemployed work, even if on a part-time basis.²

Early in the year before the depression became the dominant local news story, the Constitution threw all of its influence behind a \$600,000 water works improvement bond issue designed to solve Lawton's and Fort Sill's water problems. It was pointed out that no major waterworks expansion had been made since World War I when the Lake Lawtonka dam was raised, a new filter plant was constructed, and pipe lines laid to the city and Fort Sill. News stories and editorials explained that since World War I, the population in the city and adjacent suburbs had nearly doubled.³

And then the clinching argument was made by the newspaper. A decision was to be made soon by a board of generals on whether or not Fort Sill would be the permanent home of the Field Artillery School. If the Artillery School were to be moved, the Constitution noted, Fort Sill would be closed and Lawton would lose its major industry. Therefore, the newspaper maintained, Lawton's entire water system--the filter

²Constitution, May 4, 1930, pp. 1-2; June 23, 1930, p. 6.

³Ibid., February 23, 1930, pp. 1-2; February 25, 1930, p. 1.

plant, pipe lines, and distribution system--must be enlarged through the bond issue. Only if an ample water supply system were available, the paper said, could Lawton itself grow and provide water for future growth of its major industry, the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill.⁴

In the March 18, 1930, election, Lawton voters approved the water system improvement bonds by a five-to-one majority. The approval of the water bonds was hailed as the starting of a new era of progress for the city. The newspaper commented that the assurance of an adequate supply of water for Fort Sill would remove any formidable objection to the post as the permanent location of the Field Artillery School, and at the same time it would assure Lawton of a plentiful supply of water.⁵

The Constitution's prophecy came true. On August 14, 1930, a banner headline shouted: "SILL APPROVED AS LOCATION OF FIELD ARTILLERY SCHOOL." The generals' board appointed by President Hoover to determine the most suitable location for the school announced that it had recommended Fort Sill as its choice. It was stated that Lawton's pledge to insure Fort Sill an adequate supply of water figured heavily in the decision naming Fort Sill as the "most suitable" location for the Artillery School. Final designation of Fort Sill as the permanent home for the Artillery School was made on December 13, 1930, by Secretary of War Patrick J. Hurley, himself a native Oklahoman.⁶

The final settlement of the Artillery School problem ended some twenty years of indecision. The Constitution noted that the Army's

⁴Ibid., March 9, 1930, p. 4; March 17, 1930, p. 1.

⁵Ibid., March 19, 1930, p. 1.

⁶Ibid., August 14, 1930, pp. 1, 6; August 20, 1930, p. 1; December 13, 1930, p. 1.

vacillation had kept Lawton citizens in a state of uneasiness for many years. The newspaper believed that the favorable decision would serve to stabilize Lawton property values and business conditions. And it was expected that it would result in the start of many construction projects, both in Lawton and on the military post. Many Lawton residents had hesitated to invest in homes because of the uncertainty of the Artillery School location, the Constitution asserted, and business firms had hesitated to expand because of the serious effect the removal of the school would have.⁷

It was believed that replacement of the temporary wartime buildings with permanent structures would soon be started at Fort Sill. The numerous fires of the 1920's had left the Artillery School with only two frame buildings and a row of dilapidated shacks constructed for the School of Fire in 1915. In fact, the Artillery School almost had been reduced to conditions which existed at the time of its origin by Captain Dan T. Moore in 1911. But the broadening depression was to delay the sorely needed new construction at Fort Sill until 1933 and 1934, when federal projects were authorized as a means of putting the unemployed to work.⁸

As if the man-made depression were not enough, a severe drought scorched the Great Plains and Mississippi Valley in the summer of 1930. A fiery blast of furnace heat during August, which saw temperatures soar over the 100-degree mark for days on end in Comanche County, scorched and destroyed crops and dried up ponds for watering livestock.

⁷Ibid., August 15, 1930, p. 1.

⁸Ibid.

Incredibly, Lawton recorded twenty-nine straight days of 100-plus temperatures.⁹

In an effort to assist the needy farmers of Southwest Oklahoma whose feed crops had been seared and destroyed by the heat, Secretary of War Patrick Hurley agreed to let them graze their cattle on the Fort Sill reservation and cut hay for winter use. Several thousand head of cattle were placed on the reservation by farmers in Comanche and surrounding counties.¹⁰

Alarmed, the Constitution observed in September, 1930, that it was possible that sheer want and destitution would be the lot of many Southwest Oklahoma residents during the coming fall and winter months. The editorial added:

. . . In the farming sections, as well as in the towns, a rather serious situation is in prospect. Extended drought has virtually destroyed crops over a wide area. Low prices for livestock virtually make stock unsalable. In one section of Comanche County, many farmers have been literally 'wiped out' by hail.

If it rains in time the condition will be relieved to a certain extent, but the citizens of Southwestern Oklahoma cannot escape one of the most serious problems that have confronted them in several years. It is a foregone conclusion that want and actual starvation will be the lot of many people.

It is useless to look to Washington or to Oklahoma City for help in meeting a situation of this kind. The federal government can and will help to a certain extent, and the state at large may be of some assistance, but the responsibility of caring for the situation, in the main, will rest upon the local community.

Conditions right now are not as bad in Comanche County as they are to the west. But as winter approaches they will become worse. The city of Lawton and every community in the

⁹Ibid., August 15, 1930, p. 1; August 17, 1930, p. 1; Hicks, p. 266.

¹⁰Constitution, August 18, 1930, p. 1.

county, farmers as well as city folks, have a grave responsibility confronting them.¹¹

By November, the Constitution's dire prediction had come true.

The newspaper then spearheaded a local relief drive. Under the headline, "Help! There Is Distress," a Constitution page-one editorial asserted that Lawton and Comanche County had felt the sting of general depression and had suffered under the longest and most destructive drought that had ever visited that section of the country. "The Four Horsemen are abroad in the land," the newspaper boldly proclaimed. The editorial noted that there were plenty in Lawton who had good jobs and could afford to donate to a Lawton fund drive to help the distressed. "There are those who have had to humiliate themselves in a plea for food; people who in past years have been the donors, people whose pride is as great as yours."¹²

With the Constitution in the lead, Lawton civic, commercial, religious, and welfare organizations organized a Community Relief Committee to aid the city's unemployed and needy during the winter months. Contributions were solicited from employees of all business firms in Lawton. Harry Stroud, Lawton Chamber of Commerce executive secretary, was named secretary of the relief committee, which adopted a constitution and by-laws.¹³

Under the relief committee's rules, persons in need of food and clothing would appear before Stroud and outline their general condition. They would be asked many questions, such as the amount of food and

¹¹Ibid., September 8, 1930, p. 4.

¹²Ibid., November 26, 1930, p. 1.

¹³Ibid., December 7, 1930, p. 1.

clothing in their home, when they last worked, and how many children were in the family. An investigation would then be made at their homes by relief workers to determine the truth of their statements. Many of the unemployed men volunteered their services to the city in return for the food and clothing given to their families. They were put to work on the city's streets and alleys under supervision of the street commissioner's office.¹⁴

By Christmastime, approximately 400 families in Lawton had received assistance of some kind from the relief committee. Also, the Community Relief Committee voted funds for the Goodfellows to carry out their annual Christmas program of helping the needy. The Goodfellows, organized in 1911, were an anonymous organization of citizens who saw to it that every family in need at Christmas was provided with food and the children with toys.¹⁵

The deepening depression continued to be the major news story in the Constitution during the 1930's. The situation in the Lawton area and Comanche County worsened, especially the plight of the farmers. No federal relief program of any consequence had as yet been developed. However, Oklahoma Governor William H. (Alfalfa Bill) Murray obtained a \$600,000 appropriation from the state legislature to provide free seed and emergency commodities to help the needy. Comanche County received \$3,000 of the state relief money, which was spent for seed, food, fuel, clothing and shelter of the county's needy. Also early in 1931, the

¹⁴Ibid., December 21, 1930, p. 1.

¹⁵Ibid., December 21, 1930, p. 1.

National Red Cross began extending relief to destitute families in Comanche County.¹⁶

The Constitution continually supported charity drives to raise money for the needy. In one such drive, the Constitution succeeded in getting Will Rogers, Oklahoma's famed humorist, to appear at a Lawton theater during his charity tour of the Southwest. Rogers' appearance in February of 1931 raised \$2,100, all of which he donated to charity to help the needy.¹⁷

Constitution editorials predicted that with the abundant winter moisture crop conditions should improve during 1931 and that farmers should have a better year. "In the meantime," an editorial noted, "those who suffered most from the drought are being provided for so that they will be able to carry on their work for another season." The Constitution observed that in March of 1931, approximately 1,125 Comanche County families were receiving relief assistance from all sources, mostly from Red Cross relief funds. And by March, 1931, the Community Relief Committee funds, used to care for the unemployed within Lawton, were exhausted. The Constitution expressed the hope that all of the unemployed within the city would be able to care for themselves by the first of April, 1931.¹⁸

But economic conditions worsened in Lawton and Comanche County, and many persons remained out of work. A Constitution survey of Lawton and

¹⁶Ibid., January 21, 1931, p. 1; January 25, 1931, p. 1; February 8, 1931, p. 1; February 9, 1931, p. 1; February 27, 1931, p. 1; A. M. Gibson, Oklahoma: A History of Five Centuries (Norman: Harlow, 1965), p. 373.

¹⁷Constitution, February 4, 1931, p. 1.

¹⁸Ibid., February 9, 1931, p. 4; March 18, 1931, p. 1.

the county showed that the unemployment problem was even more acute in the winter of 1931 than during the previous year. The destitute who were assisted in 1931 by Community Relief Committee funds again were looking for help from that same source, the newspaper's survey showed. The newspaper study also revealed that not one of the Lawton families aided the previous winter would be able to clothe and send their children to the public schools during the winter of 1931. The Salvation Army and other county relief agencies then adopted a stricter policy on aid during the winter of 1931. "No work, no relief assistance," was the rule posted by the agencies. All relief cases were strictly investigated before food and clothing were given out. And a "black-list" of able-bodied men who refused to work when the opportunity was offered was kept by the relief agencies.¹⁹

As if the misery of the depression were not enough, Lawton and Southwest Oklahoma were struck in January, 1932, by one of the worst winter storms in history. For fifteen days four blizzards heaped sleet and snow on the Lawton area and dropped the mercury to below-zero readings. When the sun finally came out again, snow drifts were as high as fifteen feet. During the fifteen-day period, more than 2,800 pounds of food were spread by plane over a 250-mile area for migrating birds, and more than 5,000 pounds of cattle feed were dropped on the Wichita Refuge and on cattle ranges, all with the federal government's help. Business and schools came to a standstill, and travel on highways was impossible. Lake Lawtonka became a solid sheet of ice, the first time in its history for the lake to freeze. The series of storms was

¹⁹Ibid., May 1, 1931, p. 1; August 17, 1931, p. 1; September 27, 1931, p. 1.

recorded as the worst to hit the region since the famous blizzard of the 1886-1887 winter. And at least sixty transient and jobless families camping in tents near the city limits were caught without sufficient food and clothing. Lawton policemen and the Salvation Army picked them up and quartered and fed them in Lawton until warmer weather arrived.²⁰

Early in 1932 relief efforts in Lawton began to falter. Swamped with too many families to care for, the various relief agencies ran out of funds. The Constitution editorially supported a "United Action for Employment Campaign" which was soon being carried on in many parts of the nation. A Constitution editorial said the need for jobs was apparent in Lawton with approximately 500 men, most of them with dependents, estimated to be out of work. "And it is generally recognized," the editorial observed, "that it is far better for those in need and for the community that work be provided rather than charity." The editorial noted that the greatest opportunity for work was in providing odd jobs around the home or store which were ordinarily done by common labor. A canvass of the entire city was then made to find jobs for the men who needed them.²¹

The Constitution fully supported Lawton's "Create a Job" campaign. The newspaper ran a list of names of men who had registered with local relief agencies in search of work. The paper printed the initials of the men and the kind of work they sought. Also, the newspaper assisted various civic groups in their canvass of the town for any and all kinds of jobs. Headquarters of the "Create a Job" campaign were set up on the

²⁰ Ibid., January 17, 1932, p. 1.

²¹ Ibid., February 24, 1932, pp. 1, 4.

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Ibid., February 11, 1932, p. 1.

Ibid., November 11, 1932, p. 1; Ibid., November 26, 1932, p. 2.

broadcast over a public address system. When it became apparent that Roosevelt had swept the Democratic ticket to an overwhelming victory, the crowd left around midnight. The Constitution news staff and printers then worked into the early hours of morning to publish an extra on the election. Copies of the extra were delivered to subscribers that morning free of cost.²⁴

Comanche County joined in the national landslide for Roosevelt which swept Hoover out of office. It was the largest vote ever recorded in Comanche County election history, with Roosevelt taking 7,580 votes to Hoover's 2,044. Roosevelt carried all thirty-one precincts in the county, as did every other Democratic candidate. In the United States Senate race, incumbent Elmer Thomas from Lawton won a second term by soundly defeating his Republican opponent, Ardmore oil man Wirt Franklin.²⁵

The Constitution was elated at the outcome of the election. It saluted the results with an editorial, "An Historical Election":

The tremendous sweep of the Democratic victory on last Tuesday marks a high spot in the history of elections in the United States. Not since the establishment of the Republican Party has a Democratic candidate for president been able to sweep the nation as did Governor Roosevelt on last Tuesday.

. . . The complete victory achieved by the Democratic forces carries with it a great responsibility. The tremendous vote given is a measure of the protest which is felt throughout the country against prevailing conditions. The task of guiding the government and people in such a way that more normal conditions can be restored is an awe inspiring one. No president, in peace times, will assume a more difficult task than will Governor Roosevelt when he enters the White House on March 4.

. . . While the Democratic administration faces tremendous responsibilities, it is likewise confronted by a great

²⁴Ibid., November 9, 1932, p. 1.

²⁵Ibid.

opportunity. The grasp which the opposition party has held for years upon national affairs has been broken. The gains or a part of them which Democracy has made can be held only in one way. That is by giving the country such an administration that the people will continue to recognize its right to administer the affairs of the nation.

The people of the nation are looking to Governor Roosevelt with confidence and hope. We firmly believe that confidence is well founded. . . .²⁶

These were optimistic words, and these were days when optimism was needed. Actually, the worst was yet to come. The election which was to bring on a change of administration plunged the nation--and Lawton--into an interregnum of uncertainty. A new president had been elected, but it would be four months before he could put into effect the shining promises he had made during the campaign. In the meantime President Hoover saw conditions worsen. And conditions also were going downhill in Lawton and Comanche County. The various relief agencies had again run out of funds.²⁷

The only relief program then able to come to the aid of the unemployed in Comanche County was the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a government lending bank which Congress had approved at Hoover's reluctant request. Through the "make work" plan financed by the RFC, the State of Oklahoma received loans which were allotted to the counties for putting the needy to work on public works projects.²⁸

A total of \$3,511 was the first RFC allotment received by Comanche

²⁶ Ibid., November 10, 1932, p. 4.

²⁷ Ibid., November 27, 1931, p. 1; William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940 (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 18-40; Hicks, pp. 260-280; Arthur M. Schlesinger, The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), pp. 440-485.

²⁸ Constitution, November 29, 1932, p. 1; December 12, 1932, p. 1; Hicks, pp. 271-274.

County, which put some 500 men to work at thirty cents an hour. Nine county road projects were begun, as was the relaying of 17,200 feet of water pipelines to improve the water distribution system in three Lawton housing additions. RFC funds also were used to establish two community sewing rooms to aid needy women and their families in which there were no men to earn a livelihood. Also earning thirty cents an hour, the women used material furnished by the Red Cross and made clothing to be distributed by local relief agencies. The two sewing rooms were set up at the Lincoln Elementary School and the Salvation Army headquarters.²⁹

Christmas of 1932 was a bleak one for the Lawton area. The Constitution reported that the Goodfellows visited approximately 1,600 needy families in Lawton on Christmas Day, a new record. The Goodfellows delivered food baskets, sacks of fruit and candies, and toys for the children. Of the total visited, the Constitution noted that 337 families were black.³⁰

Yet in a New Year editorial on January 1, 1933, the Constitution optimistically forecast that Lawton and Comanche County faced the prospect of better things ahead. However, the newspaper said there could be no genuine prosperity until farm conditions improve. "As long as one-third of our population or more cannot secure a living price for the products of their efforts," the editorial said, "the rest of the people cannot enjoy a really prosperous condition." But aside from the agricultural situation, the newspaper said that there was prospect of

²⁹Constitution, November 29, 1932, p. 1; December 12, 1932, p. 1.

³⁰Ibid., December 25, 1932, p. 1.

carrying on comfortably and making progress as a community.³¹

Holding the biggest hope for improved employment conditions in Lawton was the federal government's approval of \$1,502,000 for construction of barracks for the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill. The editorial said that by early spring approximately 1,000 men would be employed on the construction projects at Fort Sill. "This alone will provide employment for everyone within a sizeable radius of Lawton," the paper said. "It will put considerable money in circulation, enable those who have been ekeing out a mere existence to live comfortably, and pay their immediate obligations." The Constitution proudly pointed to the fact that there were hardly any closed stores in Lawton, and that all city banks had weathered the depression in sound condition.³²

Although the future appeared brighter for the months to come, the Salvation Army in mid-February termed Lawton's relief problem as critical. A Constitution article reported that 2,800 persons in Lawton were in need of assistance. Only 500 of this group would be able to receive aid through the county's RFC make-work plan, leaving 2,300 others without aid. A \$2,500 emergency fund drive to aid those in need was then staged by Lawton relief forces. Compounding the relief problem, an intensely cold winter storm dropped the mercury to zero that month.³³

³¹Ibid., January 1, 1933, p. 6.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., February 13, 1933, p. 1.

Under The New Deal

The nation sank deeper into despair, and business, especially banking activities, slowed to a virtual halt. In the interim between the November election and the March inauguration, banks began to fail in all parts of the country. Frightened depositors surged in to withdraw their accounts. In Michigan the governor declared a bank holiday. Other governors followed suit. On March 2 Oklahoma Governor Murray ordered all banks closed in the state in an effort to stop runs and bank failures.³⁴

Surprised by the action, Lawton's three banks joined others in the state in the holiday. The Constitution quoted Lawton bankers as saying they saw no need for the bank holiday in Lawton because the banks were exceptionally strong, had few loans, and possessed large reserves of cash and convertible securities. And the Lawton community especially was fortunate when the Federal Reserve Banking System permitted Lawton's banks to cash government workers' checks. This permitted money to circulate in Lawton business channels.³⁵

On the day Roosevelt took office few banks were open. The nation was almost completely prostrate. There were nearly thirteen million jobless in the country, and many of them were desperate. Roosevelt's answer to all of this in his inaugural speech was played up across the front page of the Sunday morning edition of the Constitution, with other stories telling of various reactions.³⁶

³⁴Ibid., March 2, 1933, p. 1; Hicks, pp. 277-278.

³⁵Constitution, March 5, 1933, p. 1.

³⁶Ibid.; Schlesinger, pp. 1-3.

The President called a special session of Congress and also proclaimed a national bank holiday. Then followed the relief and recovery measures of the "Hundred Days," the special session of Congress which saw New Deal measure after New Deal measure rushed through the legislative hopper. Constitution editorials fully supported all of the President's recovery measures on the grounds of national emergency. Replying to charges that Congress had turned President Roosevelt into a dictator by granting him extraordinary powers, the Constitution commented editorially:

. . . What is actually taking place is not a denial of true democracy but a culmination of it. An effort is being made in Washington to make leadership effective, to have done with petty delays and a multitude of conflicting counsels. We, the people, put Mr. Roosevelt where he is; we can put him out again if we choose. Congress can checkmate him if it wishes. His power is a loan, and the loan can be called if it seems advisable.

Democracy today is in a crisis, and to get out of it; it has to give to its chosen leader extraordinary powers. But to say that democracy has abdicated its functions and given place to a dictatorship is simply absurd.³⁷

These editorial comments set the tone of the Constitution's approach to Roosevelt policies for many years in the future. And through the One Hundred Days the Constitution stood with the new President in all of his requests. The Constitution editorial page was positive and optimistic in its approach to all of the Roosevelt programs.

President Roosevelt endorsed a proposal by Senator Elmer Thomas of Lawton to revive the economy by enlarging the currency through the printing of paper money. The Thomas plan, actually an amendment tacked

³⁷Constitution, March 9, 1933, p. 4; March 12, 1933, p. 6; March 20, 1933, p. 4; Leuchtenburg, pp. 42-43.

on to the Agricultural Adjustment Bill, authorized the President to bring about inflation through remonetizing silver, printing greenbacks, and altering the gold content of the dollar. The Constitution called Roosevelt's selection of Thomas to promote the legislation "a splendid recognition of the Oklahoma senior Senator," and added:

. . . We are confident that President Roosevelt's program will be successful and that he will go down in history as one of the greatest peace time presidents and world leaders this nation has produced. It should be a source of pride to all Oklahomans that upon Senator Thomas has been conferred the mantle of leadership in putting into effect this history making national program. It makes him one of the leading figures in the Roosevelt administration and reflects credit upon the state which sent him to the halls of Congress.³⁸

The day the President permitted Lawton's banks to reopen, a Constitution editorial reminded its readers that newspapers at considerable sacrifice had performed a vital public service during the moratorium:

The country has demonstrated that it could get along without banks for a week, but we shudder at what would happen if all the newspapers in the nation were asked to cease publication for a fortnight. . . . (Lawton's banks were closed for two weeks.)

In times of national crises, an extra burden of tremendous weight is thrown upon the newspaper. The demand for developing facts in the moving situation is much greater than in normal times.

Although advertising almost disappeared from the newspapers during the week, the press moved forward without any consideration of the big losses in daily operation, because the press recognized its duty of giving to the public full information in a dress of confidence.

During the recent hectic days I have heard it suggested a dozen times that the newspapers were the only ones getting by with ordinary business during the moratorium. These thoughtless persons looked only at the public interest in the news columns, forgetting entirely the vanished

³⁸ Constitution, April 30, 1933, p. 6; Leuchtenburg, pp. 50-51; Schlesinger, pp. 41-42.

advertising, which provides the revenue that makes the publication of a newspaper possible.

No business was harder hit by the moratorium than was the newspaper business. Nor did any group meet the demands of the hour throughout the country any more inspiringly than did newspaper publishers. Everywhere the tone of the press was reassuring and confident behind the bold voice of the New Deal at Washington.³⁹

Editor Ned Shepler's notice to Constitution readers that the newspaper had continued publishing without any advertising revenue was true. For more than two weeks the Constitution carried hardly any display advertising. And the display advertising was slow in returning to the paper. The day after the Lawton banks were opened, the paper displayed little advertising, except for one full-page advertisement from most of Lawton's large stores saying "It's Safe To Come Out Now!" The advertisement discussed the banking crisis, but told readers that it was safe for their dollars to come out into the sunshine again. The advertisement also congratulated Lawton's banks which opened unrestricted from any federal government qualifications. However, by the following Sunday display advertising volume was almost back to normal.⁴⁰

In some ways things were still grim in the Lawton area immediately after Roosevelt took office. Comanche County ran out of funds to pay for operating its own courthouse. So county officials had to make do without gas and electricity. County Assessor E. D. "Ras" Sullivan, whose office was located in a dark area of the courthouse containing only one window, worked by the lights of old-fashioned coal oil lamps. Prisoners in the county jail had to cook their own beans for dinner on

³⁹ Constitution, March 15, 1933, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid., March 16, 1933, p. 3; March 19, 1933.

a coal stove inside the jail.⁴¹

A glance at the Constitution in 1933 reveals a picture of depression days in Lawton. Safeway Store was selling U.S. No. 1 Colorado potatoes for a penny a pound. Coffee was twenty-four cents a pound. Pork roast sold for eight cents a pound. The Dixie Dry Goods Store advertised Kuppenheimer suits "with two pairs of trousers, \$35." A Chevrolet coupe could be bought for \$445, f.o.b. Flint, Michigan. With rumble seat it cost \$475. A permanent wave cost a dollar. One could buy a special Sunday dinner with dessert for twenty cents. And for entertainment one could attend the Lawton Theatre showing of Today We Live, starring Lawton's own Joan Crawford (she grew up in Lawton) and Gary Cooper. It was a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer picture produced by Howard Hawks with story and dialogue written by William Faulkner. Price of admission: ten cents for children and fifteen cents for adults.⁴²

One manner in which President Roosevelt sought to put the young jobless men to work was through reforestation and conservation work in national forests. This "forest army," as it was first called, was the Civilian Conservation Corps, or the CCC. It was created by the Hundred Days Congress. This law provided employment in government camps for uniformed young men. Regular army officers helped to train to condition these young men for the grueling forest and conservation jobs, for which they were paid \$1 a day. These young men were required to help their families by sending home most of their pay. The Labor Department was

⁴¹Ibid., April 5, 1933, p. 1; April 7, 1933, p. 1.

⁴²Ibid., April 28, 1933, pp. 1-10; April 30, 1933, pp. 1-10.

responsible for processing the selectees and the Agriculture Department decided where the men would work.⁴³

Constitution editorials quickly urged that CCC men be put to work in the Wichita National Forest. It had been suggested for several years that lakes, camping grounds, and roads be constructed in the Wichitas to develop the area as a public recreation center. At first the forestry service division of the Agriculture Department announced that no reforestation camps would be established in the Wichitas because there was insufficient work to justify the employment of \$1-a-day men there. Constitution editorials and Lawton Chamber of Commerce officials clamored for CCC work to be done in the Wichitas. After pressure from Oklahoma's Congressional delegation, especially Sixth District Congressman Jed Johnson, several CCC work camps were established in the Wichita National Forest.⁴⁴

In the summer of 1933, the course work in the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill was cut short so that the school's officers could train Fort Sill's quota of CCC men. Fort Sill was allocated the training of 3,429 Oklahoma youths and 4,000 Texas youths for the CCC.⁴⁵

CCC labor in the Wichitas made a long-time dream of turning the Wichitas into a public recreation area come true. CCC workers constructed ten lakes, built most of the roads, erected fences around and in the refuge, completed numerous buildings, cleared and improved

⁴³Ibid., March 22, 1933, p. 4; Leuchtenburg, pp. 53, 174; Schlesinger, pp. 337-341.

⁴⁴Constitution, April 30, 1933, p. 6; May 9, 1933, p. 1; May 30, 1933, p. 1.

⁴⁵Ibid., May 1, 1933; May 15, 1933, p. 1; May 28, 1933, p. 5; June 16, 1933, p. 1.

grounds for public camping, constructed several dwellings for refuge workers, planted thousands of trees, seeded and planted cover for wildlife, and made numerous other improvements. By the end of 1938, all three CCC camps in the Wichitas had been transferred to other forest areas in the United States. A Negro CCC camp at Fort Sill, from which workers had made various improvements on the post, was disbanded in 1937.⁴⁶

On the matter of jobs, however, things were looking up. By April, 1933, more than 1,000 men were employed at Fort Sill in preliminary phases of the military post's first big permanent building program--the construction of barracks for enlisted men. The barracks had received Congressional approval in 1932, but funds were delayed until 1933. Eight-hundred and forty of the 1,000-man work force were from Oklahoma. Only sixteen per cent were out-of-state residents. Approximately 400 of the 1,000 were Comanche County residents. Some of the construction companies worked two shifts daily, each man working five hours a shift. This permitted a man on each shift to work the maximum of thirty hours per week--the then accepted federal standard set as a means to spread available jobs to more persons.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Ibid., May 27, 1934, p. 2A; March 31, 1937, p. 1; May 29, 1937, p. 1; December 15, 1937, p. 1; October 4, 1938, p. 1. Since 1901 when President McKinley created the Wichita Forest Reserve out of the Kiowa-Comanche Reservation, Lawtonians and the city's newspapers have promoted the idea of improving the Wichitas for public use. The Wichitas became a national game preserve in 1905, and in 1907, the area became the Wichita National Forest and Game Preserve. In 1935 the Wichita Forest was transferred to the Bureau of Biological Survey and was named the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, the name under which it is known today. The Bureau of Biological Survey was a predecessor agency of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, which now administers the refuge. See Sunday Constitution-Morning Press, October 10, 1971, p. 4D.

⁴⁷Constitution, April 30, 1933, p. 1.

But an even bigger dent against unemployment in the Lawton area came in May, 1933, with the announcement that Congress also had approved a \$4.4 million postwide building program at Fort Sill. Since the approval of Fort Sill as the permanent home of the Field Artillery School in 1930, the sorely needed construction had been programmed for the entire military post. However, the deepening depression had delayed Congressional approval of the funds. Congress at first approved funds for the barracks. Finally, money for the entire construction program was included in a gigantic public works bill approved by the Hundred Days Congress.⁴⁸

The War Department said the construction would include conversion of old post stone barracks into tool shops, non-commissioned officers' quarters, telephone building, veterinary hospital, officers' mess, quartermaster's warehouse, and headquarters and administration buildings. Other property included an ordnance warehouse, magazines, chapel, hangar, paved aprons, storage quarters, gasoline storage system, grading of landing field and building areas, dispensary and fire station, garages, reconditioning of roads, electric systems, and repair to buildings and utilities.⁴⁹

This job windfall for Lawton stirred envious remarks from other cities in Oklahoma. Constitution editorials took exception to the critical comments. Editorials pointed out that not all of the government projects and payrolls in the Lawton area were due to luck. Rather, the Constitution said, they were due to the hard work of many Lawtonians

⁴⁸Ibid., May 21, 1933, p. 7; September 20, 1933, p. 1; September 21, 1933, p. 6.

⁴⁹Ibid.

who went after these projects.⁵⁰ Particularly this was true, the newspaper said, of the many Lawtonians who had served for years on the various committees of the Lawton Chamber of Commerce. These key committees included the Military Affairs Committee, the Committee for the Improvement of the Wichita National Forest and Game Preserve, the Indian Affairs Committee, the Cameron College Committee, and the Water Committee. Also cited in the editorials were Lawton's permanent citizens, who willingly voted \$600,000 in bonds for the improvement of the water system and \$400,000 in road bonds to improve the highways leading into Lawton. The Constitution concluded:

. . . All of these projects and many others have taken time and a great deal of money. Men, who have started work on some of them have died, but others have carried on. Nothing ever happens--it's made to happen. If Lawton has been a little better off economically during a depressing period in the nation's economic life, it has not been due to luck. It's due to the willingness of Lawtonians to work and to spend their money for the things they believe worth acquiring and keeping. It's a big job and it's never finished.⁵¹

Despite the expressions of envy, the Constitution was highly elated about the future economic impact of the Fort Sill building program. It commented that the construction project "should largely solve the unemployment problem in Southwestern Oklahoma for the next year or two." An editorial added, "It will materially increase purchasing power and should be a material factor in bringing more normal conditions to this territory." The newspaper also observed that the big project "should

⁵⁰Ibid., May 21, 1933, p. 7; September 24, 1933, p. 7.

⁵¹Ibid.

finally set at rest any fears as to the permanency of the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill."⁵²

Another Roosevelt program designed to stimulate business and to increase jobs--the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and its accompanying National Recovery Administration (NRA)--was welcomed in the Lawton area during the summer of 1933. Under this plan approved by the emergency Congress, businesses were to work out codes of fair competition under which hours of labor would be reduced so that employment could be spread among more men. A ceiling was placed on the maximum hours of labor, and a floor was placed under wages to establish minimum levels.⁵³

Lawton businessmen from various kinds of firms, such as clothing stores, jewelers, and shoe stores, met and agreed to the various NRA codes, such as the setting of new opening and closing hours. Perhaps the most important code provision was the shortening of employees work weeks to provide more jobs. Union groups also met in Lawton and approved various codes. Individual employees who pledged their support to the federal plan signed postcards in agreement. Approximately 400 Lawton firms agreed to abide by the NRA "blanket code" and displayed the Blue Eagle emblem of the NRA on their windows with the slogan, "We Do Our Part."⁵⁴

A specific code applying to the nation's press was drafted by the

⁵²Ibid., September 21, 1933, p. 6.

⁵³Ibid., July 28, 1933, p. 1; Leuchtenburg, pp. 64-70.

⁵⁴Constitution, July 30, 1933, p. 1; August 2, 1933, p. 1; August 14, 1933, p. 1; September 17, 1933, p. 1; September 19, 1933, p. 1; September 22, 1933, p. 1; Schlesinger, pp. 112-118.

NRA. However, the American Newspaper Publishers Association counseled its members not to enter into the agreement for fear of endangering freedom of the press. Although a few newspapers said that freedom of the press was not involved and agreed to the NRA codes, the Constitution did not. Editorially, however, the Lawton paper said the NRA program was "necessary to bring the country out of the depression" and that its success depended upon the helpful cooperation of every element of society. "There can be no turning back, and as has been so often stated, the recovery program must be made to work," an editorial stated.⁵⁵

Through Roosevelt's prodding, another area of business--the liquor industry--helped to raise federal revenue and to provide more employment. Congress had approved a repeal amendment and had sent it to the states for ratification in 1933. In December, 1933, Utah became the thirty-sixth state to ratify the Twenty-First Amendment, which ended prohibition. Oklahoma, which did not act on the amendment, remained dry. Yet earlier in 1933 Oklahomans compromised this status by approving, by a referendum vote of 224,598 to 129,582, the sale and consumption of 3.2 beer. This action on bringing beer to Oklahoma was made possible by the Hundred Days Congress, which legalized light wine and beer with an alcoholic content (presumably non-intoxicating) not exceeding 3.2 percent by weight. The Congress also levied a tax of \$5

⁵⁵Constitution, August 22, 1933, p. 6; Wilbur Rice interview, Lawton, Oklahoma, October 2, 1971; Frank Luther Mott, American Journalism, a History, 1690-1960 (3rd ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 676.

on every barrel of beer.⁵⁶

Before Oklahomans voted on the beer bill in July, 1933, the wet forces had waged an effective campaign for acceptance of the beverage. The need for revenue during the depression was their most potent argument. The Constitution observed prior to the election that the general opinion seemed to be that Comanche County and the state would vote for legalization. An editorial noted that the proposed law had been carefully drawn, that it contained numerous restrictions pertaining to the issuance of permits, and that the county judge was given broad powers by which he could revoke permits of those who violate the law. Legalized beer would be a good source of revenue, the editorial pointed out. Most of the taxes would go to support schools, the paper said, and as such this should reduce ad valorem (property) taxes. And too, the Constitution noted, "Most people recognize . . . that we have had beer and liquor in almost unlimited quantities practically all of the time under prohibition." Legalized beer would help to eliminate some of the bootlegging and attendant crime, the editorial argued.⁵⁷

With all these factors in mind, the Constitution somewhat hesitatingly favored approval of the beer referendum: "While some of the idealism which prompted the prohibition experiment may be lost there is a possibility that the proposed changes may prove the more practical way of handling the situation."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Jimmie Lewis Franklin, Born Sober: Prohibition in Oklahoma, 1907-1959 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), pp. 106-132; Leuchtenburg, pp. 46-47; Schlesinger, p. 11.

⁵⁷ Constitution, July 9, 1933, p. 7.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

On the day of the election, July 11, 1933, Lawton's heat record was broken when the mercury shot up to 109 degrees. The intense heat may have had something to do with the outcome of the election. Comanche County approved the beer bill by the vote of 2,672 to 1,550. Every one of Lawton's thirteen precincts approved the bill. Only five of the thirty-nine precincts in Comanche County voted dry. Yet interest appeared light in the election. Only 4,222 ballots were cast in comparison with almost 8,000 in the record presidential election the previous November.⁵⁹

The Constitution then chronicled the "run of 1933," the mad rush by brewers and retailers to supply Oklahomans, whose throat had been legally dry since 1907. On the day of the election, ~~five~~ carloads of 3.2 beer were in the city, ready for distribution to wholesalers. Wednesday, the day after the election, a big rush for wholesale and retail permits was staged at the Oklahoma Tax Commission offices in Oklahoma City. And beer went on sale in Lawton that very day. A Constitution reporter took a stroll downtown and reported the following:

For the first time in more than a quarter of a century, beer is being publicly advertised in Lawton business places. Newly painted beer signs appear on windows of drug stores, cafes, lunch stands and other places of business. A stroll through the Lawton district revealed a count of more than 30 beer ads. The majority of brands advertised were Old Heidelberg, Busch Lager and Country Club.⁶⁰

By October of 1933, with the Fort Sill construction program going full steam, it seemed that prosperous times had returned to Lawton. "HAPPY DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN," sang a banner page-one headline. The

⁵⁹Ibid., July 12, 1933, p. 1.

⁶⁰Ibid.

Monday story reported Lawton merchants had exulted over the largest volume of sales Saturday of any single day of the past five years. Not since the fall of 1928 had Lawton businesses enjoyed such a gigantic trading day. The story added:

. . . The business streets presented a picture similar to a crowded circus ground. Traffic was jammed and customers rushed from business house to business house.

All three city banks reported a rush throughout the day. Payment of debts and notes was reported extremely heavy. Change became scarce.

Several factors contributed to this mammoth trading day. It so happened that the monthly pay day at Fort Sill was Saturday and about \$135,000 was released, approximately \$70,000 of this in cash.

More than \$60,000 had been paid to county cotton farmers in the past week by the federal government for acreage reduction this fall.⁶¹

The story said that heavy trading continued on Monday. The banks again were crowded, as were businesses. Also on that Monday front page was a story describing how federal relief work had been suspended indefinitely in the Lawton area. J. Hale Edwards, the Comanche County Relief Director, announced that cotton fields in Comanche County were white and just waiting to be picked. For the next few weeks, he said, work could be provided for every needy family.⁶²

Although business had taken a turn upward, many remained unemployed in Lawton and Comanche County. But another federal agency was about to come to their rescue. On November 8, 1933, the Civil Works Administration was established in Washington as an emergency unemployment relief program with the purpose of putting millions to work on local, state, and federal make-work projects. On November 21, the CWA reached

⁶¹Ibid., October 2, 1933, p. 1.

⁶²Ibid.

Lawton when the Constitution ran an eight-column banner headline shouting, "JOBS CREATED FOR 2,500 IN COUNTY."⁶³

The Constitution story reported workers would receive up to \$52 a month in wages, and that they would work thirty hours a week on a full-time schedule. The army of unemployed would be put to work in Comanche County on approximately 240 projects which received federal approval. The list included nearly 200 gravel and road projects in every city and community of the county, a large Wichita Mountain lake project on Little Medicine Creek, twenty Fort Sill military reservation projects, two projects of cutting wood, a census of Comanche County cattle, a lily pond project at Cache, nine county cemetery projects, and clearing of timber and debris in Tourist Park in Lawton.⁶⁴

Optimistic statements from civic leaders predicted that the work program should virtually end the rest of unemployment in Comanche County. The Constitution commented that it was hoped the projects would spell the end to the depression in the county. However, 7,000 men registered for CWA work in Comanche County, far more than expected. Also, it was not possible to fill all the 2,500 jobs available in the county at once because many of the larger projects were in the preliminary planning stages. By year's end, approximately 1,700 men were working on CWA projects in the county.⁶⁵

During the remainder of the 1930's, Lawton and Comanche County were to benefit greatly from the many projects constructed through the

⁶³Ibid., November 21, 1933, p. 1; Leuchtenburg, pp. 121-124.

⁶⁴Constitution, November 21, 1933, p. 1.

⁶⁵Ibid., November 26, 1933, p. 1; December 24, 1933, p. 1; December 29, 1933, p. 1.

Works Project Administration, which was created in 1935. And the number of unemployed working on these various WPA projects varied from approximately 1,000 to more than 2,000 each month. The employment of these men who could not find work elsewhere meant much to Lawton's economy because of the impact of the monthly payroll. Also, Ron Stephens, a Lawton businessman, became state administrator of the WPA in 1937 after serving as Comanche County administrator and district administrator.⁶⁶

The major WPA projects in Lawton and Comanche County added permanent worthwhile improvements. Lake Elmer Thomas, 472 acres, the largest of the man-made bodies of water in the wildlife refuge, proved highly valuable. In addition to its recreational uses, Lake Elmer Thomas later was used several times as an auxiliary water supply for Lawton and Fort Sill. One of the major tourist attractions in the wildlife refuge is the winding scenic road to the top of Mt. Scott. WPA crews spent three years constructing the three-mile road, which climbs 1,000 feet above the valley below and winds to an elevation of 2,467 feet above sea level. The WPA workers also constructed a 200-car parking space on the top of the mountain, from which visitors can see the entire Wichita Mountains range and surrounding lands.⁶⁷

Roosevelt Stadium in Lawton was completed in 1937 through the efforts of WPA labor. The structure of native stone cost \$125,000. It contained seating for 5,000 spectators and included dressing rooms for players and rest rooms for spectators. In 1939, WPA labor constructed a new courthouse for Comanche County at a cost of \$168,000. Numerous

⁶⁶ Ibid., August 30, 1937, p. 1; Leuchtenburg, pp. 124-129.

⁶⁷ Constitution, February 11, 1934, p. 1; December 31, 1936, p. 1; August 12, 1938, p. 1.

other smaller projects and buildings were also constructed by the WPA in the Lawton area.⁶⁸

By the end of the 1930's, the WPA could account for a staggering list of achievements in Lawton and Comanche County. And the Constitution from time to time paid homage to President Roosevelt and this phase of his recovery program. An editorial in 1936 headlined, "WPA Accomplishes Much," was typical of the tributes:

While criticism of the WPA and all other phases of President Roosevelt's recovery program will be heard more frequently as election day nears, unbiased observers agree that the plan under which the WPA is operated is more effective than the dole system which other countries have adopted.

It is evident to President Roosevelt as well as to the rest of the country that such extensive spending cannot continue indefinitely, but while the need exists, it is better that men be employed at useful tasks than to merely be given a handout or engaged in jobs that are of no value to the community. In a survey of the WPA throughout the country recently a writer for the Oklahoma News found that the program was accomplishing more in taking care of the unemployed and giving more worthwhile improvements to the local communities than previous relief agencies had been able to accomplish.

In our own district of which Ron Stephens is administrator, several thousand men have been employed at steady jobs and the great majority of projects undertaken have been of permanent value to the various communities.

At the same time the money released in the various communities has done much to improve business. More than \$20,000 a month is being released in this county alone through the Works Progress Administration.

Mr. Stephens has made an enviable record as district administrator. He has been commended frequently by state and national officials of the WPA for his untiring efforts to put all the men possible at work as quickly as possible and to secure permanent improvements for the money expended. No doubt there has been some waste and lost motion. This was inevitable in a program surrounded by so many restrictions. But the primary objective has been attained by a large degree, that of putting men to work at worthwhile jobs.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ibid., September 3, 1937, p. 1; October 7, 1937, p. 1; March 3, 1938, p. 1.

⁶⁹ Ibid., March 1, 1936, p. 1B.

Indeed, Ned Shepler as editor of the Constitution remained a faithful Democrat and editorially supported all of Roosevelt's programs. Only once did the Constitution remain silent on a Roosevelt issue. That occurred in 1935 when the New Deal got its first setback. The United States Supreme Court ruled that the NRA was unconstitutional, and the 557 recovery codes were thrown out. In January, 1936, the Supreme Court invalidated the AAA. To this blow Roosevelt responded by directing Agricultural Secretary Henry Wallace to work out a substitute law based on soil conservation, and the farm program went ahead--all with the Constitution's blessings.⁷⁰

In the 1936 election Roosevelt was a candidate for a second term. The Republicans nominated Governor Alfred M. Landon of Kansas, with Colonel Frank Knox, editor of the Chicago Daily News, as his running mate. As was to be expected, the Constitution declared for Roosevelt, rejecting Landon on the grounds that the Republican platform, if carried out, would take the country back to 1929.⁷¹

Also stirring considerable interest in the election that year was the United States Senate race, in which Senator Thomas P. Gore was up for reelection. The Constitution backed Congressman Josh Lee, a favorite of President Roosevelt. Lee defeated Gore in the primary and won the Senate seat in the November election. Comanche County, again voting in record numbers, tallied 7,026 votes for Roosevelt and 3,039 for Landon. A proposal for repeal of prohibition also was up for consideration in the general election. The Constitution sided with the

⁷⁰Ibid., March 6, 1935, p. 6; March 8, 1936, p. 5B; September 13, 1936, p. 1B; Leuchtenburg, pp. 145-146, 170-171.

⁷¹Constitution, November 1, 1936, p. 1B.

drys, who speculated that money from distillers could ensure the election of a governor partial to their interests. The repeal plan was defeated. Comanche County sided with the drys, tallying 3,120 "yes" votes to 5,672 "no" votes.⁷²

Dust Bowl Years

The dust began blowing in Western Oklahoma in 1932. It resumed and intensified in 1933 with the March winds as a prolonged drought gripped the Great Plains states. Rainless days stretched into weeks and then months. The land throughout what became known as the Dust Bowl was in just the right condition to blow away. Much of it had been ploughed, awaiting rains that never came. Frozen hard throughout the rainless winter, it had then thawed out and had pulverized, fine as face powder. Fifty-mile-an-hour gales then carried millions of tons of the powdery topsoil into the skies in the form of huge, black clouds. It was the beginning of the Dust Bowl horror, and it was a story that made front-page headlines for years.⁷³

A Constitution wire story from the United Press in April, 1933, described one of the early dust bowl storms:

ELK CITY, Okla., April 29--(UP)--Dust and sand storms which have prevailed with only brief interruption since January over drought-stricken western Oklahoma plains broke out again Saturday with renewed fury.

A 50-mile-an-hour gale from the south swept upward from the Red River plains between Oklahoma and Texas. Its velocity undiminished by a choking load of dust and sand, it raged over

⁷²Ibid., July 12, 1936, p. 4B; November 1, 1936, p. 1B; November 4, 1936, p. 1.

⁷³Ibid., March 15, 1936, p. 1; Leuchtenburg, pp. 172-173; Schlesinger, pp. 68-70; Paul B. Sears, Deserts on the March (2d ed., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947), pp. 112-120.

western Oklahoma and the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandle into Kansas.

Electric lights were turned on at noon in Panhandle cities of Guymon, Buffalo and Beaver. At mid-afternoon, darkness settled over the stricken area.

At Liberal and Meade, Kan., lights also were turned on at noon.

The renewed blast caused tremendous damage to wheat and gardens. The succession of dust storms already had ruined an estimated 75 per cent of the wheat crop in the Panhandle.

Reports to the United Press showed the storm extended from below the Red River, west beyond Amarillo, east almost to Tulsa and north beyond Dodge City, Kan.⁷⁴

Lawton and Comanche County were on the fringes of the Dust Bowl.

Generally conditions were the worst where Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas came together, centering about the Panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas. The boundary of this area formed an area shaped somewhat like an elongated bowl--hence the name "Dust Bowl." Although the severe droughts of the 1930's covered vast sections of the Great Plains and Western states, most of the dirt that formed the awesome dust storms of the 1930's came from this core area of the Dust Bowl. Droughts and dust storms had occurred in this area before. But this disaster was greater in the 1930's because it coincided with the Great Depression.⁷⁵

Comanche County farmers and ranchers suffered through a bad drought during the summer and fall of 1930, when lack of rain and searing heat destroyed crops over a wide area. But it was not until the summer of 1934 that a blistering, prolonged drought left scores of farmers and ranchers destitute in Southwest Oklahoma. The Lawton area drought that year was part of what was labeled the nation's worst catastrophe for

⁷⁴Constitution, April 30, 1933, p. 1.

⁷⁵Ibid., August 24, 1934, p. 6A; March 15, 1936, p. 1; Schlesinger, pp. 68-70.

farmers and ranchers. A total of 1,076 counties in twenty-two states, including all counties in Kansas, Nevada, the Dakotas, Oklahoma, and Utah were designated for emergency drought relief. Three hundred and forty-one other counties were scheduled for secondary drought relief. All together they comprised nearly half the counties in the United States.⁷⁶

By August, 1934, the Lawton area had experienced forty days of heat exceeding 100 degrees temperature, plus countless dust storms. Crops were destroyed, and cattle began dying for lack of grass and water. The federal government through the Agricultural Adjustment Administration began buying cattle in Comanche County to aid ranchers who had run out of water. The meat was to be used for direct relief purposes. Most of the cattle were shipped to Oklahoma City, where they were butchered and canned. Some of the cattle were given by the government to Indians in the Faxon community. By December, 1934, federal farm and cattle assistance in the county totaled approximately \$412,000. The federal government under the relief program purchased 11,710 head of cattle for a price of \$212,360. Cotton allotment payments totaled \$111,941, wheat adjustments brought \$48,563, and corn-hog contracts brought \$50,069.⁷⁷

The dust storms continued in 1935. A Constitution story in April reported that a dust pall hung over eight states and appeared to be thinning with maddening slowness. Visibility from central Missouri to New Mexico was zero. And the dust from Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and

⁷⁶Constitution, September 8, 1930, p. 4; August 21, 1934, p. 1; Leuchtenburg, p. 172.

⁷⁷Constitution, July 31, 1934, p. 1; August 21, 1934, p. 1; August 24, 1934, p. 6A; December 30, 1934, p. 1.

Texas spread over Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, and New Mexico. Many farm families in the Dust Bowl were reported leaving. More than 100 families had left the Oklahoma Panhandle since the first of the year as a result of the storms.⁷⁸

A Constitution feature story described how one enterprising Lawton businessman attempted to measure the dust falling on Comanche County. Andy Wolverton told Kiwanis Club members he made an estimate of the dust that fell from the skies from late one afternoon until 7:30 a.m. the next day. He said he selected a square yard area on his porch where the wind would not blow the dust into a drift. He said he swept it up and weighed it. The dust weighed three-fourths ounce. Calculating that Comanche County contained over 1,084 square miles, he roughly figured that 26,000 tons of dust fell on the county during that short period.⁷⁹

Constitution editorials on the storms carefully pointed out that the dust was not coming from Comanche County but from the dust bowl. One such editorial headlined, "Dust and More Dust," commented:

While citizens of this section of Oklahoma (and particularly housewives) are suffering personal discomfort from the prevailing dust storms we may be thankful that the devastation that is going on in the northwest is not extending to this territory. Thus far, this section has suffered little actual economic damage from the dust storms.

In our experience of some twenty-five years in Southwestern Oklahoma, we have never seen dust storms quite like these. They do not arise, apparently, from local ground wind and the blowing of the dust from the immediate surroundings as have most severe dust storms of the past. On the contrary, the dust-laden air appears to have come from afar and descends like a heavy fog from air currents higher up. It was most unusual, during a recent dust storm, to have the air on the ground perfectly still and yet the sun obscured by a pall of dust settling down from the sky.

⁷⁸ Ibid., April 11, 1935, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

The wind erosion which is driving farmers from their homes in northwestern Oklahoma and sections of Kansas and Colorado has not occurred in southwestern Oklahoma. Presumably the different type of soil, a little more moisture, and milder winds, have prevented the serious erosion which is literally turning certain sections into a desert.⁸⁰

Again in 1936 the dust storms struck. But that year a prolonged drought accompanied the "black dusters." Crops of all kinds began to wither and die. Adding to farmers' woes, hordes of grasshoppers swept across Southwest Oklahoma fields. The federal government distributed a poison mixed with bran to the farmers in all sections of Comanche County.⁸¹ By August, 1936, the drought and the searing dust-laden winds had destroyed nearly all of the crops in Comanche County, and the cattle were seriously endangered. In the earlier part of the year, the Constitution observed, it had been hoped that federal relief would be curtailed. "But that hope has gone glimmering in many areas of the country," the newspaper said, adding, "Here in Oklahoma there is no possibility of curtailment."⁸²

Conditions became so bad that 114 Comanche County farmers, their crops wiped out by the drought, had to go on relief. They were put to work on county WPA projects. Delegations throughout Oklahoma appealed to Senator Elmer Thomas for federal aid. The Lawton Senator appealed directly to President Roosevelt for an emergency allocation of funds to relieve "existing suffering" in Oklahoma. Thomas was immediately advised that the federal government had approved of \$1 million for

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸¹ Ibid., April 11, 1935, p. 6.

⁸² Ibid., March 23, 1936, p. 1; May 8, 1936, p. 1; July 6, 1936, p. 1; July 19, 1936, p. 1; July 20, 1936, p. 1; August 11, 1936, p. 4.

drilling water wells in the state, with the work to be handled through the WPA.⁸³

With the crisis growing steadily worse, Senator Thomas flew directly from Lawton to visit President Roosevelt. Joe Reed, Lawton postmaster and a veteran pilot, flew Senator Thomas and his party to Des Moines, Iowa, where a conference was arranged with the President, then on a tour of drought-stricken areas. Senator Thomas told the President the situation was desperate in Oklahoma. He asked that red tape be eliminated to give immediate relief to 77,000 Oklahoma farm families who Thomas said had been impoverished by the drought. Roosevelt did not promise any specific sum but assured Senator Thomas the federal government would extend immediate and ample relief.⁸⁴

Increased aid began to flow into Oklahoma to assist the farmers, but relief from the drought also came with heavy rains and cloudbursts in September of 1936. The Constitution noted that stock ponds in Comanche County were filled by the cloudbursts for the first time in many months. Although the rains provided temporary relief, Comanche County rainfall for all of 1936 totaled only 22.15 inches, or 8.7 inches shy of the average rainfall of 30.85 inches. Also, 1936 was the twelfth year in the last twenty-one years showing below average rainfall. The year 1934 was the only other year in the 1930's to show below average rainfall. Rain that year totaled 20.31 inches.⁸⁵

⁸³Ibid., August 13, 1936, p. 1; August 28, 1936, p. 1; August 30, 1936, p. 1.

⁸⁴Ibid., September 2, 1936, p. 1; September 4, 1936, p. 1.

⁸⁵Ibid., September 17, 1936, p. 1; September 18, 1936, p. 1; September 22, 1936, p. 1; December 31, 1936, p. 1.

By February of 1937 dust storms again were raging. A Constitution story carried a warning that the dust storms, then sweeping sections of the Dust Bowl, were a serious threat to human life. Doctors said that persons suffering pneumonia and influenza could fall easy victims to the dust because it made breathing difficult. In Hugoton, Kansas, nearly a dozen deaths were reported. Doctors said dust did not cause disease but that it added a serious hazard in all illnesses. Hugoton officials asked for medical aid from the Red Cross, and two nurses were sent from St. Louis, Missouri, to aid overburdened doctors. The basement of two churches at Hugoton were utilized as emergency hospitals for influenza and pneumonia patients.⁸⁶

The Constitution story advised using one of several ways to combat the dust. Persons could wear a dust mask to make breathing easier and to keep the minute particles out of their throats and lungs. Wet sheets could be hung over doors, and the sills and door jams of houses could be stuffed with cloth. Even these precautions, the story warned, would not keep out the fine silt.⁸⁷

Although the dust storms did not let up in 1937, Comanche County did record more rain that year, and farmers enjoyed good crops. At the close of 1937, Comanche County recorded 26.40 inches. It was still a sub-normal year, or 4.45 inches below the average rainfall of 30.85 inches. Farming income in Comanche County did appear to be on the rise by 1937. For example, in March of that year 1,535 farmers in Comanche County received \$237,925 in soil conservation checks, an average of

⁸⁶ Ibid., February 18, 1937, p. 1.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

\$155. In 1938 soil conservation payments totaled \$225,000 for county farmers' participation in the conservation program for the previous year.⁸⁸

However, a federal survey taken in 1937 indicated that sixty-two per cent of all farmers in Comanche County were tenants. The Resettlement Administration, a federal relief agency, announced in a Constitution story that it was carrying out a program to improve the conditions of the tenant farmers in Southwest Oklahoma and to help them eventually own the land they were farming.⁸⁹

The Constitution vigorously supported all of the New Deal agricultural programs. After the Supreme Court killed the AAA, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, in 1936, the newspaper loudly applauded its successor, the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936. Editorials praised the idea that the withdrawal of acreage from production was now achieved by paying the farmer to plant soil-conserving crops, or to let his land lie fallow. Commented the Constitution:

. . . Few can visualize the great long-range benefits that will accrue not only to the individual farmer but to the nation by the proper conservation of the soil on every farm in the country. If every quarter-section of land in Comanche County were only terraced the effects would be of inestimable value. The proper rotation of crops would serve to maintain the fertility of the soil and save it for posterity.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Ibid., March 7, 1937, p. 1; December 31, 1937, p. 1; April 25, 1938, p. 1.

⁸⁹ Ibid., March 8, 1937, p. 2.

⁹⁰ Ibid., March 8, 1936, p. 5B; Leuchtenburg, p. 173.

Another Water Crisis

By 1939 a severe drought again gripped Southwest Oklahoma. But this time instead of the farmers, it was the City of Lawton which was facing a severe water shortage--an old, recurring problem. Ironically, Lawton's water crisis had its beginning with a project to increase the supply. Lawton had sought federal assistance in raising the Lake Lawtonka dam ten feet, from a height of sixty feet to seventy feet. The increased height would increase the water supply from nine to nearly fifteen billion gallons. The WPA approved the project in 1937, but \$289,254 in funds were not allocated until 1939. Lawton voters in 1938 approved a \$60,000 bond issue as the city's share of the dam raising. When work got under way in 1939, it was necessary to drain almost three-fourths of Lake Lawtonka's water. It was hoped that after sufficient work had been done on the dam, rains would come and again increase the water supply. But 1939 was an extremely dry year, and what water remained in the lake dropped to a dangerous level. Through editorials, the Constitution spearheaded a plan by which Lawton would draw its water from wells, which had been used in the past, leaving what was left in Lake Lawtonka and other Wichita Mountain lakes for the use of Fort Sill. Under a headline of "A Duty and an Obligation," an editorial spelled out the details of the situation:

. . . Lawton uses approximately twice as much water as Fort Sill. With the possibility that the drought may continue for an indefinite period, the heavy drain upon the lakes caused by consumption of both communities creates the likelihood of a dangerous water shortage within a very short time. By withdrawing Lawton consumption it is estimated the lakes (Lawtonka and Elmer Thomas) will supply Fort Sill for a year or longer even though the garrison should be materially increased.

There is no question that there is ample water available in existing wells to supply all of Lawton's needs. The only

difficulty in making use of this natural resource is the expense of tying the wells into the water system. This difficulty can be overcome only through a bond issue. Steps already taken to alleviate the water emergency have pretty well drained city finances. Sufficient funds can now be obtained only through favorable action of Lawton voters.

Lawton people owe a duty to themselves and an obligation to the War Department to approve this action. Self-interest alone dictates a favorable vote upon the proposed bond issue. The economic welfare of Lawton is inseparably linked with the development of the artillery post. The development of Fort Sill obviously cannot continue without an ASSURED water supply every minute of every twenty-four hours. Neither can Lawton afford to gamble with the possibility of a water shortage for any period of time. Aside from all this, the city long ago obligated itself to furnish an adequate supply to Fort Sill. That is an obligation that cannot be ignored or evaded and there is no disposition on the part of anyone to do so.

. . . The fortunate part of the present situation is that it is only temporary. While some may have lost faith, we know from experience that it will rain again and that in due course of time the lakes in the mountains will be lapping at the spillways. When that happens Lawton and Fort Sill will again have an inexhaustible supply of water and one of the best in the entire southwest. In the meantime, however, we must realize that any one or two ordinary rains will not accomplish this desired result. It may take a considerable length of time to impound sufficient water so that unlimited use may again be enjoyed. . . .⁹¹

Heeding the Constitution's advice, the Lawton City Council called a \$60,000 bond issue election on tying the old water well system into the city water lines. Tests also were run on the old city water wells to determine how much water could be drawn from them. The results showed that Cameron deep well west of Lawton had a plentiful supply, and that it was adequately fed by a large spring. The city also completed the laying and welding of 20,000 feet of pipe connecting Lake Jed Johnson to Lake Elmer Thomas in the Wichitas. Water from Lake Jed Johnson would be pumped to Lake Elmer Thomas and then flow by

⁹¹Constitution, November 29, 1937, p. 1; June 15, 1938, p. 1; January 27, 1939, p. 1; March 12, 1939, p. 1; November 16, 1939, p. 6B.

gravity through a ditch into Lake Lawtonka.⁹²

Constitution editorials warned Lawton voters that they should realize the seriousness of the situation and approve the \$60,000 bond issue. "That the situation is serious and demands action is agreed upon by everyone conversant with it," said one editorial. "It requires only a visit to the lakes which are now supplying water for one to realize how near Lawton is to being without any water," the editorial added. The newspaper pointed out that United States Army authorities had been following the situation with concern for several months. The Constitution warned that empty water mains for even a day might have more serious consequences than many could visualize. "It might readily result in the stagnation of business, empty houses and most serious economic difficulties for the entire community," the editorial warned. "It is something which the people of Lawton cannot afford to do and must not chance," the editorial concluded.⁹³

On December 26, 1939, ad valorem taxpaying voters approved the \$60,000 emergency water bond issue by a margin of three to one. City officials predicted that two old wells in the Flatiron District of northeast Lawton, located between Dearborn and Euclid avenues just west of the Frisco railroad tracks in the Vernon Addition, also would be developed in addition to the Cameron well. It was planned to flow water from these two wells into two concrete settling basins for chlorination, thus killing the bacteria. The water would then be pumped into the city mains. Other shallow wells would be drilled as they were

⁹²Ibid., November 29, 1939, p. 1.

⁹³Ibid., December 24, 1939, p. 3B.

needed. It was a tense situation. Shepler and Lawton officials kept their fingers crossed with the hopes that the wells would supply enough water until heavy rains would relieve the crisis.⁹⁴

A Two-Newspaper Town Again

Lawton became a two-newspaper town again in 1934 when the Lawton Morning Press, a new daily morning newspaper, made its appearance. Eleven years had passed since the Constitution bought out its last rival, the Lawton News, following a lively newspaper war. Although the Press and the Constitution were to be competing for the same advertising dollars and the same readers, there would be no fierce confrontation during the 1930's. Instead it was to be a relatively peaceful coexistence.⁹⁵

The Press was a stepchild of another publication which had been started in Lawton in 1933. That publication was the Lawton Free Press, a weekly "shopper" which was delivered free to Lawton homes by carriers. Although similar to most "shoppers" in that it carried nearly all advertising, the Free Press did contain a few brief news items.⁹⁶

Owners and publishers of Lawton's new morning daily newspaper were Mr. and Mrs. Homer H. Hedges. Homer Hedges was introduced to newspapering through his father, who was also a Methodist minister. The elder Hedges owned a weekly newspaper at Skiatook, Oklahoma, but sold

⁹⁴Ibid., December 27, 1939, p. 1.

⁹⁵Mr. and Mrs. Homer H. Hedges, private interview held at Hedges home, Tahlequah, Oklahoma, December 21, 1971. Unfortunately, no file copies of the Lawton Morning Press are available from the start of the Press in 1934 until March of 1944.

⁹⁶Hedges interview.

it when the family moved to Boynton, a small town near Muskogee. Hedges was graduated from high school at Boynton, and he briefly attended the University of Tulsa. He learned the printing trade and worked as a printer for the Oklahoma Methodist, a church newspaper.⁹⁷

Hedges later purchased a weekly newspaper in south central Oklahoma, the Healdton Herald. At Healdton in 1928 he met and married his wife, Doris. After operating the weekly for four years, they moved to Pampa in the Texas Panhandle, where they published a weekly "shopper." The Hedgeses then looked around for a newspaper to buy. County seat weekly newspapers were highly profitable operations at that time, and Hedges would have preferred to purchase such a paper. But none was available, so he moved to Lawton in 1933 and started the weekly "shopper."⁹⁸

Despite the depression, the Hedgeses found Lawton a lively growing town of approximately 12,000 population, one that was benefiting from the government payrolls at Fort Sill and the large construction projects under way at the post. After operating the "shopper" for a year, they believed that a second daily newspaper could be operated successfully in the town. So in 1934 they launched the Lawton Morning Press.⁹⁹

Hedges purchased a lot in downtown Lawton at 217 D Avenue and constructed a building for his new morning newspaper. Backshop equipment for printing the paper included three linotypes and an eight-page flatbed press. Primarily a printer, Hedges ran the backshop while Mrs.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid.

Hedges was in charge of the news and business side. The Press, a standard, eight-column newspaper, was published six days a week, Tuesday through Sunday mornings. Home delivery price of the paper was ten cents a week, the same price as the Constitution. The display advertising rate was forty-two cents an inch, or three cents a line. The paper also had a small job printing department. Both printers and employees on the news and business sides were paid \$1.00 an hour.¹⁰⁰

Mrs. Hedges employed several army wives to assist her on the news side. Others, such as Ted Ralston, worked part-time in reporting the news, also running the press. After World War II, Ralston returned to Lawton and worked for the Constitution, where he became managing editor. Mrs. Hedges wrote a daily about-town column entitled, "This Day," in which she said she attempted to include as much humor as possible and some comment at times in the column. Hedges said the Press was independent Democrat in politics, but published very few locally written editorials.¹⁰¹

The Press was a member of the Associated Press and received wire reports by bus from the Oklahoma City bureau and also by telephone. The Press also boasted its own engraving plant for processing local news pictures. Hedges recalled that his newspaper featured local pictures long before the Constitution did.¹⁰²

Hedges, with the Press, attempted to put out a better newspaper than the Constitution. Being a morning paper, the Press had a big

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

advantage over the Constitution in coverage of afternoon and nighttime sports and nighttime news stories, such as the Lawton City Council meetings. Hedges claimed the Press was far superior to its rival in the features which were offered to readers. In particular, Hedges contended that the Press had the best comics that money could buy.¹⁰³

Hedges declined to reveal how much advertising revenue the Press earned annually during the 1930's. Nor would he disclose profits or losses of the Press in that decade. Hedges asserted that the Press was "not a big, profitable operation." Rather, he said, "Doris and I just made a living at it. When we had good display advertising managers and good circulation managers, we showed a good revenue. If not, the revenue was not so good."¹⁰⁴

Meanwhile, the Constitution reacted to the establishment of the rival daily newspaper. In September, 1935, an editorial announced that "This newspaper is inaugurating a program of expansion that will make the Constitution a better newspaper. Two additional members have been added to the news staff recently in order to increase the local news coverage." The announcement also said that five new comic features were being added, making a total of ten comics.¹⁰⁵

A few days later, in a page-one editorial headlined, "Another Step Forward," the Constitution announced it was improving its news service to its readers through the installation of the printer telegraph service of the United Press. The editorial said that this service "places the

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Constitution, September 9, 1935, p. 4.

Constitution in the ranks of metropolitan newspapers from the standpoint of state and world news coverage." The editorial explained that heretofore the Constitution had depended upon a limited telephone service for its outside news reports (commonly called the "Pony Wire"). Explaining the operation of the new system, the editorial added:

. . . Under this sytem, a wire circuit, leased from the A.T.&T., is set up between Oklahoma City and Lawton and is connected with other points in the country. . . . The Constitution will receive the full eight-hour report. The Lawton circuit opens early in the morning and continues until 3 p.m. The printer-telegraph machine operates at the rate of 60 words a minute and will bring this office daily nearly 30,000 words of up-to-the-minute world news, markets, and sports. It is the ultimate in news service.

. . . Naturally such a service adds materially to operating costs but we have always had the utmost confidence in Lawton and our faith in its future is stronger today than ever before. . . . The publishers and the entire staff of the Constitution appreciate the many fine compliments we have received on the newspaper we are publishing. It has always been our policy, over a period of many years, to publish the best newspaper our patronage would permit and one that would merit the confidence of and render the greatest service to the public. That will continue to be our goal.¹⁰⁶

Only two weeks later the Constitution announced in a page-one story yet another news service, this one a morning mail edition for rural route subscribers. The publishing of a morning edition of the Constitution was a direct effort to cut into or block circulation of the Morning Press. The announcement said the rural edition would be published at 7:45 a.m., daily, and it would carry all of the previous day's news, the overnight local and wire news, and the early morning news of the day.¹⁰⁷

The Constitution's rural edition would start on its trip to rural

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., September 30, 1935, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., October 16, 1935, p. 1.

route patrons within a short time after it came off the press. It would be issued on every morning except Monday when the regular Sunday morning edition would be delivered on the routes. And the announcement added: "With this edition the Constitution rural subscribers will receive later news than in any other newspaper published." The newspaper declared the extra edition would require additional hours of labor and additional facilities, but that "we believe it is a service that will be appreciated by our rural subscribers."¹⁰⁸

After the installation of the United Press printer telegraph service, the Constitution from time to time would brag in a page-one story that its news service was superior to that of any other newspaper in Southwest Oklahoma. Under the headline, "News Coverage Again Revealed," this was one of the slaps at the Morning Press:

The Lawton Constitution is the only newspaper distributed to Lawton homes Wednesday which carried the story of the tragic McAlester penitentiary rioting.

This is just another example of the complete news coverage of the Lawton Constitution made possible by the full leased wire services of the United Press association.

The Lawton Constitution is the only newspaper in Southwestern Oklahoma having full leased wire services of any press association.¹⁰⁹

By the 1930's, the Constitution was departmentalized in its coverage of the news. The sports section had a separate page with the sports editor usually writing a sports column each day. So did the society section, with the society editor usually writing a daily column on Lawton society notes. Also added to the newspaper during the 1930's

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., May 13, 1936, p. 1.

was a full page on county farm news, which appeared once a week. During both the 1932 and 1936 Democratic national conventions, the Constitution sent a reporter who covered sidelights at the convention related to the Oklahoma delegation and to Lawtonians and Comanche Countians in particular.¹¹⁰

Reporting in the Constitution in the 1930's was far more sophisticated, objective, and fair than in the 1920's. No longer did stories contain editorial comment in the personalized form of journalism as found in the 1920's. Constitution stories often contained the "why" along with the traditional "who, what, where, when, and how." And in many instances, Constitution stories were more interpretive in that they gave the reader the background of news events and placed them in the proper context. Also, the editorial page became more interpretive and carried analyses of the news by various syndicated commentators. The Constitution carried Will Rogers's daily column, which was always printed on the front page.

In format and makeup, the Constitution largely continued its use of banner headlines on page one to play up the "big story," or "top story," of that day's news package. Much use was made of syndicated, matted pictures throughout the paper. Unlike the Morning Press, the Constitution did not have its own engraving plant and could not process its own pictures. When the Constitution did run local pictures, the engravings had to be made in Oklahoma City and mailed back to the paper. And during the 1930's the Constitution did not make any major mechanical additions to its newspaper.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., July 26, 1931, p. 4; June 29, 1932, p. 1.

Generally, the Constitution published larger newspapers in respect to number of pages than did the Morning Press. Usually the Constitution printed ten to twelve page papers during the week and a twelve-page paper on Sunday. Often Friday's paper would be just as large as Sunday's in that Saturday was the biggest shopping day of the week and most Lawton stores stayed open until 9 p.m. that day. The Morning Press usually was six to eight pages during the week with possibly ten pages on Sunday.

Several honors and tributes were paid to Ned Shepler and the Constitution during the 1930's. In 1931 he served as president of the Oklahoma Press Association, the organization of Oklahoma newspaper editors and publishers. The Constitution was awarded first place in general excellence in 1932 in the general newspaper contest conducted annually by the Oklahoma Press Association. The Lawton paper placed first in the contest for daily newspapers having a circulation over 3,500. Points considered in the contest were mechanical excellence, general and departmental news coverage, literary excellence, promotion of community interests, editorial page quality, and advertising enterprise. The press association noted that "being awarded first place in the general excellence contest is recognition of the Constitution as one of the outstanding dailies in Oklahoma . . ." In 1935 Oklahoma Governor Ernest W. Marland offered Shepler a position on a proposed state housing and subsistence homestead commission. The commission was proposed to provide low-cost homes to wage earners or part-time workers in Oklahoma. Shepler declined the offer, saying that he felt he could

be of greater service to Oklahoma by remaining as editor of the Constitution.¹¹¹

Another major development in the 1930's occurred when the Constitution sold its commercial printing shop. Ted Warkentin, a former salesman for a paper company and an employee of the Constitution's job printing plant, purchased the newspaper's job printing machinery and business. Warkentin set up the new commercial printing company at a separate business location. The Constitution had operated a commercial printing department in conjunction with the newspaper since its establishment in the early days. The Constitution announced that it felt that better service could be rendered to the public in this manner.¹¹²

The Constitution's divorcement of its job printing plant from the newspaper reflected a significant change in the over-all philosophy of newspapering. In the frontier days when the Constitution and other newspapers were established, they were set up as personal organs for a political party. The owners and publishers of the newspapers literally were "paid off" for their political party allegiance through city and county printing contracts. Through their job printing plants, these early-day newspapers turned out this patronage printing, which for most of them represented their chief profits, and in many cases their only profits.

However, as times changed and display advertising became the major source of revenue, political ties with the newspapers faded. Gone were

¹¹¹ Ibid., August 12, 1931, p. 1; September 13, 1932, p. 1.

¹¹² Ibid., March 15, 1934, p. 1.

the days when a newspaper boasted of adhering to a particular political doctrine which it espoused both in its news columns and on its editorial pages. Advertisers paid the bills, and newspapers then became a product offering something to everyone. Journalism moved away from the partisan press practice toward what many in the press termed objectivity, or fairness for everyone in its news columns. During the 1910's, the 1920's, and the 1930's, then, the relationships between press and government and between press and the political parties underwent far-reaching changes. Indeed, the press has become an observer rather than a participant in the political processes of the country. Such was the significance of the sale by the Constitution of its job printing plant.

Although the Constitution did not address itself to the meaning behind the sale of its job printing plant, certainly editor Ned Shepler was aware of it. His editorial comment on the failure of a newspaper at Walters indicated this understanding:

Another ill-starred venture in journalism failed recently when the Cotton County News, published for the last year or so at Walters, was sold at foreclosure sale.

Its demise was no surprise to those who have witnessed other efforts to launch strictly political journals, tied to the kite of some ambitious individual or to some temporary issue. At the same time there was no place in Walters for a second newspaper. The city is ably served by the Walters Herald, an old established and reliable newspaper ably edited by State Senator Jim Nance.

Newspapers must depend largely upon the advertising of merchants for their support. Costs of producing a newspaper have risen to such an extent in recent years that there is little more than enough patronage in the average small city to support one good newspaper. Advertisers also realize that they can reach their trade territory more cheaply and more effectively through one established medium, which, through

the years, has built up a reputation for fair dealing and honesty of purpose. . . .¹¹³

An Assessment of the 1930's

Throughout the depression period, most newspapers in the country were able to keep up their levels of circulation. Even though many were on relief, people it seemed had to have their newspapers to read about what was happening in the nation and in their own communities. The Constitution's circulation reflected this remarkable occurrence. This is how the Constitution's circulation stood during the 1930's: 1930--3,588; 1933--3,669; 1936--3,872; 1938--4,609; 1940--4,849. Lawton Morning Press circulation was first reported in 1937 at 3,486. Other years and figures included: 1938--3,856; 1939--3,985; 1940--4,326. Both newspapers enjoyed small but steady increases.¹¹⁴

But the advertising story was different. Prior to the economic collapse at the end of 1929, the Constitution's local display advertising grossed an estimated \$52,000 a year. This dropped to around \$30,000 a year from 1930 through 1933. After 1933, the display advertising gross started uphill again. By the late 1930's, it was running approximately \$100,000 a year. By 1940, it was up to \$150,000. Estimates of the Morning Press advertising revenues were not available.¹¹⁵

Growth in display advertising revenue reflected the changing times.

¹¹³Ibid., September 17, 1933, p. 6.

¹¹⁴Mott, pp. 674-675; Directory Newspapers and Periodicals, 1930, p. 812; 1940, p. 759.

¹¹⁵Rice interview.

The display advertising spurt in the 1920's and the 1930's started as the chain stores made their appearance. Stores such as J. C. Penney, C. R. Anthony Company, Montgomery Ward, Sears Roebuck, and Oklahoma Tire & Supply Company were advertising consciously. In turn their increase in advertising forced locally owned stores to advertise more. And the large volume of grocery store advertising started in the 1930's with the arrival of the supermarkets. Also, all of the chain stores and supermarkets believed in signing advertising contracts, which not only increased over-all advertising volume but also provided attractive discounts offered by the newspaper.¹¹⁶

And the Lawton newspapers' increased circulation and advertising were reflected in Lawton's population, which by the end of the thirties showed a sizeable gain. From 12,121 in 1930, the population rose to 18,055 in 1940. And during the 1930's, the Lawton area greatly benefited from President Roosevelt's relief programs, which put the unemployed to work on local, state, and federal projects. The vast construction program of permanent buildings and facilities at Fort Sill would prove immensely valuable in the next decade.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Population, II, p. 134.

CHAPTER V

OFF TO WAR AGAIN

Pre-War Boom

The years prior to Pearl Harbor were ones of tremendous growth for Lawton's main industry, Fort Sill. And as Fort Sill expanded, so did Lawton and its newspapers, especially the Constitution. At the time, World War II was raging in Europe, and it seemed possible that the United States might become involved. Consequently the Army and its various arms, such as the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, expanded rapidly. The number of officers and enlisted men taking courses at the Artillery School was greatly expanded as were additional facilities at the post. Fort Sill also opened its old cantonment area in order to house and to train Oklahoma's 45th National Guard Division after it had been mobilized. Even the military reservation was enlarged with the addition of large tracts of land on the north and southwest boundaries, which then placed the military post adjacent to the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge.

With Fort Sill about to burst its seams, the Constitution became increasingly concerned over whether Lawton would be able to supply water both to the growing military post and to city residents. The past year had been one of the driest in Lawton's history. Only 17.23 inches fell during 1939, some 13.08 inches under the 68-year average of 30.31 inches. By 1940 WPA construction workers had completed the \$450,000

project which raised the height of Lake Lawtonka Dam ten feet and increased its capacity sixty per cent. However, in 1939 most of Lake Lawtonka was drained to allow construction on the dam raising. By 1940 the drought continued, and the water which remained in Lake Lawtonka dwindled until there was only enough left for the city to supply Fort Sill's needs. Lawton passed a \$60,000 bond issue to connect water wells in Lawton into the city water lines so that Lawton residents would have a water supply. Part of the bond money also was used to connect a pipeline from Lake Jed Johnson in the refuge to Lake Elmer Thomas. Water from Lake Elmer Thomas then fed into Lake Lawtonka through a drainage ditch. In this manner enough water would be kept in Lake Lawtonka to supply Fort Sill's needs.¹

However, city officials hesitated as the drought continued, and Lawtonka's level dropped. The Constitution pleaded with the Lawton City Council not to delay any further, to turn over the remaining water supply in the lakes to Fort Sill, and to let Lawton get its water from the wells. Further depletion of the lakes, the Constitution argued, could lead to drastic reduction in personnel at Fort Sill, with serious economic consequences to the entire community. The council at first acted to put Lawton on the deep wells system. But analysis of water from three deep wells showed a heavy fluoride content. Fears were raised when the United States Public Health Service indicated after an analysis of the deep well water that the fluoride content should have no harmful effects on persons more than ten years old. However, it was announced the fluoride would damage the tooth structure of children ten

¹Constitution, December 31, 1939, p. 1; January 7, 1940, p. 1.

and under. The council rejected the deep well supply and ordered the city connected with three shallow wells in the old Flatiron addition of Lawton.²

The Constitution urged that the city dig more wells and use the deep well water despite its fluoride content. Heeding the newspaper appeal, the council ordered the digging of eleven shallow wells on the Fort Sill Indian School property, which were soon connected to the city lines. The city also connected its lines with the three deep wells. In order to provide treated drinking water for students, the Lawton Board of Education placed 500 gallon tanks at each of the city schools. To provide filtered drinking water for other residents, the city installed 500-gallon tanks at parks in north and south Lawton.³

It was announced in August, 1940, that the 45th National Guard Division, composed of Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona troops, would be mobilized at Fort Sill for a year's training. The Constitution asked that the city council take immediate action to drill deep water wells to add to the available supply both for Lawton residents and for the increased needs at Fort Sill. "The time to take such action is now," an editorial said, "rather than wait until an actual emergency occurs." The newspaper warned that the War Department was not going to rely on promises that water could be secured. "The department will want to know that the water is available and ready when needed," the editorial said.⁴

²Ibid., February 4, 1940, p. 1; February 7, 1940, p. 1; February 15, 1940, p. 1.

³Ibid., March 17, 1940, p. 1.

⁴Ibid., August 14, 1940, pp. 1, 4.

Moving with haste, the city council ordered one deep well to be drilled in Harmon Park near Roosevelt Stadium and another in the Flatiron tract. Shortly afterward, the War Department announced plans for construction of utilities and a huge tent camp at Fort Sill to house nearly 21,000 men of the recently mobilized 45th National Guard Division. It had been believed in Lawton that the 45th would number 10,000 troops; but with the increase to 21,000 troops, the city council decided that water from the new deep wells would be reserved exclusively for 45th Division use.⁵

When the 45th assembled at the Fort Sill cantonment area in late September, after being inducted into federal service, Lawton began supplying it with water from the deep well supply. The Fort Sill Artillery School was still being furnished water from Lake Lawtonka. Because of the fluoride content, the city provided drinking water tanks throughout the 45th's training areas.⁶

As luck would have it, the Lawtonka watershed received heavy rains in November. A Constitution story declared that "the army's water problem for the Fort Sill area was believed solved" after more than four inches of rain increased the Lawtonka storage supply by 77 per cent. The Constitution asserted that the abnormal winter rains brought the estimated total to 2,352,000,000 gallons of water in lakes available for Fort Sill and the 45th Division training center, "the most encouraging water picture here in two years." It also was pointed out that the Lawton wells had a proven capacity of about 3,750,000 gallons of water

⁵Ibid., August 24, 1940, p. 1; September 4, 1940, p. 1.

⁶Ibid., September 24, 1940, p. 1.

daily, and the city was using only about 2,000,000 gallons daily. The more than adequate well supply combined with the increased lake supply thus promised more water than was needed for Fort Sill and Lawton.⁷

Just as it appeared that everything was proceeding well, the War Department suddenly ordered the 45th Division to move to a cantonment under construction near Abilene, Texas. The initial news story said that "an inadequate water supply was given as the reason for the order to move." The surprise announcement struck Lawton civic officials and the Constitution like a thunderbolt as they weighed the impending economic disaster.⁸

Howls of protest sent the surprised Oklahoma Congressional delegation clamoring to the War Department to see if there was any way to keep the 45th at Fort Sill. Senator Elmer Thomas, Representative Mike Monroney, Representative Jed Johnson, and the Constitution were advised that it was all a misunderstanding. General George C. Marshall, United States Army chief of staff, asserted the first announcement that the 45th was being moved because of an inadequate water supply at Lawton was in error. He said he was not concerned over water supplies at Fort Sill, and he added that the water issue was not involved in the reasons for moving the 45th.⁹

General Marshall explained there were many reasons the 45th was being moved from Fort Sill to Texas. First, the move was necessary in order to permit expansion of the Artillery Replacement Center and the

⁷Ibid., November 26, 1940, p. 1.

⁸Ibid., December 6, 1940, p. 1.

⁹Ibid., December 8, 1940, p. 1.

Fort Sill Artillery School. Second, it was necessary that the 45th be stationed closer to other divisions of the Eighth Corps area to facilitate war games planned for the next spring. Also, General Marshall observed that he felt Army troops become too stale if kept at one post too long. He added that the 45th would not be moved out of Oklahoma before early March, but that protests against his decision to move would be futile.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the protests continued from the Oklahoma Congressional delegation and other concerned Oklahomans. General Marshall then announced that Fort Sill would remain an important military training center and the present manpower of about 24,000 would be maintained after the transfer of the 45th Division to Abilene, Texas, in March. An 8,000-man field artillery replacement center for training enlisted men would be established at Fort Sill by March 15, the estimated time when the 45th will have departed. In addition, a 1,000-man reception center was under construction for induction of draftees. And, he added, the regular Field Artillery School officer and enlisted men's courses were planned to be greatly expanded. The planned building program at Fort Sill would continue unslackened. The \$5 million permanent tent cantonment, intended for the 45th, would be completed, said General Marshall, and would be utilized by the field artillery replacement center.¹¹

With General Marshall's assurance that Fort Sill would remain an important training center for 24,000 men, the protests subsided. The Constitution editorially sighed relief that the 45th move was not due

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

to an inadequate water supply. Said an editorial:

. . . While the departure of the 45th Division will be regretted by the state at large and by local people who have had most friendly relations with the officers and men of the division, the move can be accepted as an expected development in the National Defense training program. It is gratifying to Lawton people to know, however, that the move is based primarily on training plans and not due to an inadequate water supply as the original departmental release announcing the order indicated.

The transfer of the division will have no effect upon the continued development of Fort Sill as a great field artillery training center. The Field Artillery School is being greatly expanded and the Artillery Replacement Center is designed to take care of 8,000 men. Other units will bring the garrison to its present strength, and as the national defense program is enlarged the personnel of Fort Sill will no doubt be increased accordingly.

Fort Sill is primarily an artillery training center and it is only to be expected that the facilities there will be devoted largely to that purpose. The Field Artillery School, one of the army's great service schools, is a permanent institution that will undoubtedly continue to expand to meet the needs of an enlarged defense system.¹²

In February of 1941, approximately 19,000 men of the 45th Division marched through freezing rain in a farewell review parade through downtown Lawton. They had been in training at Fort Sill for five months. They left by motor convoy for their new station in Abilene, Texas. After their departure, the Constitution noted that it would be only a few weeks until the strength of the post would be returned to what it was when the 45th was in training. With that in mind, the newspaper cautioned Lawton residents to "discard the boom psychology that has tended to develop along with the rapid expansion of Fort Sill." A long-time view of the situation should be taken, the newspaper said, and plans laid accordingly, both for the physical development of the

¹²Ibid., p. 10.

community and its attitude toward newcomers.¹³

The Constitution pleaded with Lawton businessmen and residents to retain its established reputation even though there was "an opportunity for a temporary harvest of dollars." And the editorial added:

. . . Lawton has always been an army town and always will be. The army, and the expenditures that stem from army activities, have always been the most important element in the economic existence of the community. We should recognize that fact and maintain our relationships upon a fair and reasonable basis.¹⁴

By the time of the United States entry into World War II in December of 1941, a mammoth construction program had been mostly completed at Fort Sill. Keeping pace with the post, Lawton itself chalked up the largest building expansion in its history during the same period. In a special edition, the Constitution saluted these accomplishments. At Fort Sill, a \$14 million expansion program had added many improvements, including 1,150 new buildings. Prior to the expansion, there were 549 buildings on the post. In Lawton, 241 new homes were constructed in 1940. Then in 1941, 650 new residences and 36 new business houses costing over \$2 million were erected. The vast construction program in the Lawton-Fort Sill area also helped end the economic pinch and produced full employment for the first time since the 1920's. By December, 1942, war work had reached the point where a national work relief program was no longer necessary, and President Roosevelt ordered the liquidation of the WPA. Oklahoma WPA administrator Ron Stephens ordered the WPA in the state to close its rolls by December 31, 1942.

¹³Ibid., February 23, 1941, p. 1; March 2, 1941, p. 12.

¹⁴Ibid., March 2, 1941, p. 12.

However, he warned that with the abandonment of the WPA, local communities would have to handle their own relief problems.¹⁵

With the annexation of one housing addition and several more planned, the Constitution editorially supported a \$300,000 bond issue for sewer, water, and fire department improvements to handle this expansion. Lawton voters approved the bond issue by a margin of six to one, allowing the city limits to be expanded by 43 per cent. In February, 1942, the city council responded by annexing six housing additions, expanding Lawton's size from 1,820 acres to 2,384 acres. It was the largest expansion in the city's history and added approximately 8,000 persons to the city population.¹⁶

Fort Sill also expanded its boundaries to provide needed lands for artillery firing and maneuvers. The Constitution noted that the land acquisition would inconvenience several Comanche County residents but was necessary as part of the war effort. Over a three-year period, the War Department purchased a total of 20,615 acres. In addition, 340 acres of military land were traded to the Wichita Mountain Wildlife Refuge for 2,300 acres of mountain terrain, boosting the military reservation size to 69,375 acres.¹⁷

Newspapers Also Expand

Realizing that its mechanical plant must keep pace with the growth

¹⁵Ibid., December 21, 1941, pp. 4-5; December 4, 1942, p. 1; December 13, 1942, p. 1; A. Russell Buchanan, The United States and World War II (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), II, 321.

¹⁶Constitution, January 9, 1942, p. 1; February 26, 1942, p. 1.

¹⁷Ibid., July 24, 1942, p. 1.

of Lawton and Fort Sill, the Constitution in the early 1940's began expanding its capacities to publish a bigger and better newspaper. The Constitution in 1940 basically was still being published with the same press and typesetting equipment installed during World War I. The first equipment added early in 1940 was a photoengraving plant. For years the Constitution had used matted news pictures sent by news syndicates or the wire service. Very few local pictures were run in the paper because engravings had to be made by specialty firms outside of Lawton. The Constitution explained to its readers that photoengraving was the process of transferring picture images to metal plates so that they could be reproduced on a printing press.¹⁸

To illustrate the usefulness of having its own photoengraving plant, the Constitution referred to a page-one picture taken the previous Saturday while the ruins of the Apache Inn, formerly the Editors' Club House, at Medicine Park were still smouldering from a large fire. The newspaper said that from then on pictures could be run at the same time a news story broke.¹⁹

In September of 1940, the Constitution installed a new sixteen-page

¹⁸Ibid., January 14, 1940, p. 1.

¹⁹Ibid. The Editors' Club House referred to was a building erected in 1915 by the Oklahoma Press Association. Frank V. Wright, himself a former editor-publisher of the Lawton News, had purchased the building in 1930 and had remodeled it for a night club. The idea for the club house was partially conceived by John N. Shepler, editor-publisher of the Constitution. Elmer Thomas, then actively engaged in promoting Medicine Park as a resort, donated the site for the club house. Funds for the building were raised by approximately 100 editors donating advertising space in their newspapers. This space was sold to the Rock Island Railroad for approximately \$12,000, and this money was used to erect the building. However, the club house was used only about three years. After the start of World War I, interest dwindled, and in 1930 the building was sold by the press association to Wright.

Duplex Standard Tubular press, capable of printing 30,000 newspapers an hour. Proud of the new addition to its mechanical plant, the Constitution described the press to its readers in a long page-one story with a five-column picture. The new press, which was capable of printing color, would enable subscribers to get their newspapers an hour earlier each afternoon. Further, the paper would be much better printed and easier to read. The principal reason the new press would improve the printing of the newspaper was that it utilized stereotyped tubular plates. The old press, with a capacity of 4,800 papers an hour, was an eight-page flatbed press which printed the newspaper directly from the page forms. For the new press, a stereotype mat was made of each page. A tubular-shaped metal page was cast from each mat and placed on the high-speed press. And, bragged the Constitution:

. . . The acquisition of the Constitution's mammoth press, and the many machines that are necessary in a modern newspaper plant, makes the Lawton Constitution one of the leading industries in Lawton and Comanche County, both from the standpoint of equipment and number of employes on the payroll.

The Constitution is the only paper in the Lawton area equipped with press facilities of this type. . . .²⁰

The Constitution also modernized and spruced up its appearance by adding a new type face, "Vogue," for its headlines, which could now be set in capitals and lower case rather than in all capitals. "This is said to make for easier reading and is becoming the accepted practice of most newspapers," the announcement stated. The new type replaced the gothic, all-capital headlines which had been used for forty years. With this "new face," the Constitution adopted the same typographical format it was to retain through 1973. Also during this expansion

²⁰Constitution, September 15, 1940, p. 1.

period, the Constitution purchased two additional typesetting machines, making its total seven by 1943. Included was a \$14,000 "mixer" which could set a line of type with four different type faces. Also modernizing the backshop was the addition of a \$2,000 Elrod which cast spacing material and column rules and an \$8,000 Ludlow which was used to set lines of large type for advertising and headlines. Another improvement announced was the addition of a Sunday comic section printed in four colors.²¹

Started in 1940 by the Constitution, and continuing throughout the war, was a daily page of Fort Sill news, including features and pictures about events on the military reservation. One reason for devoting a full page each day to Fort Sill news was the competition that developed from several weekly newspapers. One of the first was a weekly four-page tabloid, with no advertising, voluntarily written and edited by men of the 45th Division Training Center. Lt. Col. Walter M. Harrison, a former managing editor of the Daily Oklahoman, was in charge of the 45th Division News, which began publication October 4, 1940. A famous alumnus of the News was Bill Mauldin. An army private from Phoenix, Arizona, Mauldin served as cartoonist for the News. He later became famous for his "Willie and Joe" cartoons when he joined the European edition of Stars and Stripes.

Carl J. Bergman, former circulation manager of the Lawton Morning Press, established a weekly tabloid newspaper, the Fort Sill Army News in 1940. Bergman set up a printing shop in a basement location in

²¹Ibid., October 19, 1941, p. 10; Wilbur Rice interview, Lawton, Oklahoma, October 2, 1971.

²²Constitution, September 24, 1940, p. 1; January 6, 1941, p. 2.

downtown Lawton. He was given permission by the army to contact various groups at Fort Sill for news. The army units in turn appointed soldiers to furnish news for their organizations. Later an army public information section furnished news to the paper. Bergman gathered and edited the news for his paper, and his wife Rosa Bergman, sold advertising. After the war started, the army had to assume control of the editorial content for security reasons. The army then negotiated a contract in which Bergman would only print the newspaper, and the army would have complete control over the writing and editing. No advertising was included in the army version. The newspaper also was changed to a full page, eight-column size. Approximately 15,000 free circulation papers were distributed weekly at Fort Sill. The paper ceased publishing at the end of the war in 1945.²³

Lawton newspapers first faced competition from a broadcast medium when the city's first radio station went on the air May 12, 1941. Station KSWO, representing an investment of \$25,000, occupied an entire block at 17th and E Avenue. It was owned by Byrne Ross, son of L. P. Ross, Lawton's first mayor, and Dr. Willard Carver, Oklahoma City. Ross, an insurance man, managed the 250-watt station which was on the air from sunup to sundown. Application for the station had been on file with the Federal Communications Commission for two years, Ross said, but had been delayed because it was impossible to find a local frequency. Ross said the station's license required that twenty per cent of the station's time be devoted to religious, educational, and

²³Carl J. Bergman interview, Lawton, Oklahoma, January 18, 1972.

agricultural programs.²⁴

Because it was a small-town newspaper, the Constitution had been written and edited for years with a small news staff. Ned Shepler himself served as city editor from the time of his father's death in 1918 until 1928, when Frank Hall took over control of the news room and served until 1932. Several then served as Constitution city editor including J. D. Deason, 1934-1939, and Emmett L. Keough, 1939-1940. During these years the title of city editor was a misnomer, with "news editor" perhaps more appropriate. The city editor usually oversaw the gathering and editing of the local and area news, and was also responsible for the wire, or telegraph, news that went into the paper. It was a position that kept a newsman constantly busy. Others on the news staff usually included two to three reporters and a society editor. One of the reporters also handled sports.²⁵

In 1941 during the pre-war expansion period, the Constitution named its first managing editor, Carter Waid. He was a reporter with many years of experience on the paper. Waid had originated the Constitution's first sports column and had also served as the paper's political reporter. In addition to covering local politics, he was sent by the Constitution to cover the national Democratic conventions from 1932 through 1940. Also in 1941, J. O. Tuton was named city editor, replacing Keough, who left to join the Daily Oklahoman.²⁶

In the presidential election of 1940, the Constitution remained

²⁴Constitution, April 16, 1941, p. 1; May 11, 1941, p. 1.

²⁵Ibid., December 24, 1940, p. 10; December 24, 1941, p. 12

²⁶Ibid., December 24, 1941, p. 12.

ever faithful to the Democratic party and supported Roosevelt for a third term. The Constitution observed that the Republican nominee, Wendell L. Willkie, was a good American and an able man but had little to offer the American people in experience. And because Willkie supported the New Deal programs, the Constitution argued, the only offer that he could make would be a change of administration.

Roosevelt's experience was needed, especially in foreign affairs where, an editorial claimed, he had a distinct advantage over Willkie. "The United States should continue to avail itself of President Roosevelt's experience and ability during the emergency with which this nation is confronted at this time," the Constitution maintained. Roosevelt won Comanche County by a vote of 6,796 to 3,703.²⁷

The Constitution's display advertising revenue in 1940 reflected Lawton's new prosperity by soaring to an all-time high of approximately \$150,000, well above the record volume of approximately \$100,000 set in the late 1930's. Advertising manager Wilbur Rice said he later lost his two ablest advertising salesmen to the draft. "It was rough going during the war for display advertising," Rice asserted. "Merchants didn't need to advertise because nearly all merchandise was scarce." Rice added he had to do nearly all of the display advertising selling and writing of ad copy himself, although he later was able to hire

²⁷Ibid., November 3, 1940, p. 4; November 6, 1940, p. 1. A Constitution story noted that Wendell L. Willkie, the Republican presidential nominee, attended the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill during World War I and was married while in Lawton. He was a first lieutenant in the 325th Field Artillery when he was graduated from the 14th war course, conducted May 3 to June 16, 1918. He married his fiancée, Miss Edith Wilk, of Rushville, Indiana, a few days after they obtained a marriage license in Comanche County on June 28, 1918. See Constitution, June 11, 1940, p. 1.

another salesman. Despite the wartime obstacles, the Constitution's display advertising revenue remained approximately \$150,000 a year during the war.²⁸

In circulation, the Constitution almost doubled its subscription list from 1940 to 1945, jumping from 5,445 to 9,235. The Morning Press almost equaled the Constitution's circulation in 1940, reporting 5,358 subscribers. However, the Press circulation by the end of the war in 1945 showed a drop to 4,890.²⁹

The Constitution lost its co-owner and co-publisher, Fred B. Shepler, on March 27, 1942, when he died at his home several days after suffering a heart attack. He was 50 years old. On his doctor's advice, Fred had retired from active work on the newspaper in 1939 because of high blood pressure. He had remained in poor health and was never active in the paper again. Fred was stricken with his heart attack while taking a customary walk from his home at No. 1 Fort Sill Boulevard. He managed to make his way back home unaided but died six days later.³⁰

Fred was born December 7, 1891, at Milan, Missouri, the son of John N. and Georgia Butler Shepler. In 1902 the family moved to Pawnee, Oklahoma, where the father operated a weekly newspaper. Fred and Ned Shepler were brought up in the country newspaper shop and learned all of the odd jobs of the trade, from sweeping out and feeding presses to setting type by hand. They worked at their father's newspaper after

²⁸ Wilbur Rice interview.

²⁹ Directory Newspapers and Periodicals (Philadelphia: N.W. Ayer & Son), 1941, p. 777; 1946, p. 755.

³⁰ Constitution, March 27, 1942, p. 1.

school and during vacations. Fred was graduated from Pawnee High School in 1909. After the family moved to Lawton in 1910, Fred worked on his father's paper, the Constitution. He then attended the University of Oklahoma, graduating in 1915 with an A.B. degree. On August 29, 1916, Fred was married to Miss Gertrude Sale Fain, also of Lawton, and they established their home in Lawton. He became city editor of the Constitution following his college work.³¹

Fred was inducted into the army during the first World War and served for several months. Shortly after his return from the army, the father died in 1919, and Fred, with his only brother, Ned, became publishers of the Constitution. Their mother died November 29, 1938. After the two brothers took over management of the Constitution, Fred became business manager while Ned served as editor. Fred continued his duties as business manager until his illness in 1939.³²

Following Fred's death, Ned Shepler purchased his brother's interest and became sole owner and publisher of the Lawton Constitution. Tall, quiet, and softspoken, Shepler already had years of experience in Southwest Oklahoma journalism. He had been editor during the rough and tumble newspaper war in the 1920's and had successfully guided the newspaper through the long years of the Great Depression. As editor he was firmly dedicated to the development and betterment of Lawton and its major industry, Fort Sill. It was a pursuit he was to continue for many years.³³

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

The War Years

The news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor arrived in Lawton during the afternoon of Sunday, December 7, 1941. The lead story in that Sunday's Constitution dealt with Roosevelt's message to the emperor of Japan in a "desperate attempt to avert war in the Pacific." Monday's edition carried the banner headline about the attack and the beginning of war for the United States. The editorials that day followed a copy of the Pledge of Allegiance, which became standard on the editorial page for the remainder of the war. "Big, soft-hearted America must realize that this is an all-out war and there can be no weakening until the last of the treacherous race has been driven into the ocean," the editorial said. The war "calls for a united nation and a united people," the editorial concluded, adding: "It is high time that the malcontents and the sowers of dissension hold their silence. America must and will stand united in doing the job that lies ahead of us." The Constitution then endorsed Roosevelt's requests for billions of dollars to equip the draftee divisions and get them to battlefields, to expand the navy for a two-ocean war, and to fill the air with fighter and bomber squadrons.³⁴

Although the Constitution maintained a high volume of display advertising during the war, it was a strain to keep all of the departments functioning. It was a period of shifting personnel, of men leaving for military service, of paper shortages, of war restrictions, and of trying to put out a paper with a short staff. City editor

³⁴Ibid., December 7, 1941, p. 1; December 8, 1941, p. 4; Buchanan, pp. 71-80, 120-125.

Emmett Keough, who had already left the Constitution, was replaced by J. O. Tuton, a veteran newspaperman who had edited several papers in Texas and Oklahoma. Then on July 12, 1944, Tuton at age 49 died of a heart attack. The city editor's slot was not to be permanently filled until after the war. Two reporters, Lindsey Whitten and Marshall Moore, went off to war. In 1944 the Constitution lost its managing editor when Carter M. Waid reported for duty with the overseas bureau of the Office of War Information. Waid had served with the newspaper in various positions for almost thirteen years. Before leaving, he also resigned as chairman of the Sixth District Democratic Central Committee, a post he had held since 1942.³⁵

With the war taking many of the men from Lawton, their places in the Constitution newsroom were taken by women, willing workers but short on experience. One of the new women staffers was Mary Goddard, who became an excellent reporter and editor. Toward the end of the war it almost seemed as if only Miss Goddard and Ned Shepler were putting out the newspaper each day.³⁶

The Constitution and Lawton civic leaders continued to see that Fort Sill's needs and requirements to carry out its war-time training duties were well supplied. The problem of supplying the military post with water was solved by the heavy rainfall the Lawton area received during 1941. A total of 43.92 inches fell that year, and, as a result, Lake Lawtonka was filled to the brim with water flowing over the dam. Lawton again was supplied with lake water, and the wells were shut down.

³⁵Constitution, December 24, 1941, p. 10; July 9, 1944, p. 1; July 12, 1944, p. 1.

³⁶Wilbur Rice interview.

Water was not a problem during the war as more than sufficient rain fell in these years.³⁷

The Field Artillery School trained scores of thousands of artillerymen who fought in the war. More than 100,000 officers and enlisted men attended and completed special training courses from December 7, 1941, to September 2, 1945. Graduates from the Field Artillery Officer Candidate School, which was extended midway in the war from thirteen weeks to seventeen weeks, numbered more than 26,000. Specialist courses provided by the Field Artillery School, ranging in subject from advanced liaison pilots' training to radio repair classes, numbered more than 75,000. In addition, scores of thousands of enlisted men passed through the Field Artillery Replacement Training Center, the younger brother of the Field Artillery School, and learned the basics of firing an artillery piece.³⁸

Lawton was taxed to the hilt to provide housing for these soldiers and their families during the war. In news stories and editorials, the Constitution crusaded all through the war in an attempt to see that every soldier and his family had a place to stay in Lawton. After editorial pleas, Lawton received priority for wartime residential construction from the Federal Housing Administration. And largely through Constitution efforts, a voluntary Fair Rent Committee was established in Lawton which attempted to hold down excessive rental charges. However, in July, 1942, Lawton rents were put under federal control of the Office of Price Administration. The OPA rental office

³⁷Constitution, May 18, 1941, p. 1; June 8, 1941, p. 1; January 1, 1943, p. 1.

³⁸Ibid., April 3, 1946, p. 8.

ordered that the highest rent a Lawton landlord could charge was the rent in effect on April 1, 1941. Registration of all rental property and the rents charged was then made in Lawton.³⁹

But Lawton continued to be flooded with servicemen who brought wives and families while they were stationed at Fort Sill. Constitution appeals continued through the war for Lawton residents to rent every spare room they could. "It is your patriotic duty to accommodate these visitors," an editorial noted. After an investigation of rental conditions, the federal OPA office ordered 400 Lawton landlords to reduce their room rates. The Constitution commented that the renting of rooms in private homes was not the most satisfactory arrangement, but that because of the world war, Lawton citizens owed it to the servicemen to open their homes and make rooms available without charging excessively. In 1945, the OPA filed twelve civil lawsuits in federal district court against Lawton landlords for alleged overcharges in rents to army personnel.⁴⁰

Repeating its experience of World War I, Lawton as an Army town had its troubles with vice, prostitution, and bootlegging. Following the arrest of at least 100 persons in a vice raid in April, 1942, the Daily Oklahoman ran a story on Lawton, labeling it as a wide open town where vice and booze ran rampant. Resenting the publicity brickbat, a Constitution editorial replied that the charges were an unjustified reflection upon men in the service "whose conduct is the equal if not

³⁹Ibid., January 11, 1942, p. 8; May 24, 1942, p. 1; June 1, 1942, pp. 1, 4; July 1, 1942, p. 1.

⁴⁰Ibid., July 5, 1942, p. 1; February 18, 1943, p. 1; February 1, 1945, p. 1; February 4, 1945, p. 1.

above that of a like number of persons in civil life." The editorial said the newspaper was not arguing that Lawton was free of all these undesirable things. Neither is any other town or city in the state or nation, the editorial asserted, whether located near any army camp or far removed from war activity. The Constitution claimed that Lawton was just as clean from a moral standpoint or from the standpoint of law violations as any community of like size anywhere. The editorial further argued:

. . . It is estimated that there are at least 75,000 people within the city of Lawton and its environs, triple the number before the beginning of defense activity. During the nearly two years of vastly increased population there have been few major crimes committed. There has been relatively little thievery or other petty offenses. There has been little drunkenness in evidence on the streets. There have been few brawls and little rowdyism. What bootlegging there is, is done in a furtive way. Prostitution is hampered wherever possible. There is a healthy respect for the 'law' in Lawton and Comanche County. . . .⁴¹

But by 1944 the Constitution was ready to admit there was lax law enforcement in Comanche County, at least as far as bootlegging was concerned. Because Comanche County Sheriff George Myers refused to take part in raids against several bootleggers operating at will in the county, Comanche County Attorney Ralph Cline asked Oklahoma Bureau of Investigation officers to raid the well-known liquor dealers. The raids were staged with search warrants obtained with the knowledge of the sheriff's office.⁴²

Incensed, the Constitution in a front-page editorial opposed the renomination of Myers in the upcoming primary election. The editorial

⁴¹Ibid., April 1, 1942, p. 1; June 7, 1942, p. 8.

⁴²Ibid., July 2, 1944, p. 1.

said the records of the court clerk's office, as well as the observation of the ordinary citizen, disclosed "an almost complete indifference on the part of the incumbent sheriff in the enforcement of liquor and gambling laws in the county." The Constitution commented that enforcement conditions in Comanche County would be vastly improved by the nomination and election of a new sheriff. The newspaper suggested that one candidate, Ed Gartrell, who had experience as a sheriff's deputy, would fairly and impartially enforce all the laws. Gartrell easily won the Democratic nomination and was chosen sheriff in the November general election.⁴³

A Constitution in-depth story in 1944 described how the army, working in close cooperation with civic leaders, law enforcement agencies, and government officials, had conducted a drive against venereal disease in Lawton. The army at Fort Sill worked continuously to conduct educational programs on VD among the soldiers. It promoted prophylaxis and urged the need to report the sources of VD infection. To assist the army, a VD committee in Lawton, composed of civic and business leaders, met weekly in the courthouse to discuss conditions within the city that might hamper the army's progress in the matter.⁴⁴

Aiding the army's fight against venereal disease was a new VD control law approved by the Oklahoma Legislature. Author of the bill was State Senator Bill Logan, who had worked for many years as a Constitution reporter. Basically the law provided for examination and compulsory treatment of those found to be infected. The new law proved

⁴³Ibid., July 9, 1944, p. 1; July 12, 1944, p. 1; November 8, 1944, p. 1.

⁴⁴Ibid., September 15, 1944, p. 1.

a big help in controlling the spread of VD in Lawton. After a long study of the problem, the Lawton VD committee found that most VD contacted by Fort Sill soldiers came from women they had met in taverns. The VD committee met with the tavern operators, who agreed not to let unescorted women into their places. As a result, Fort Sill reported that VD contracted from tavern contacts was almost negligible. To aid in enforcement of the new state VD law, the city of Lawton assigned two officers to work on a special vice squad.⁴⁵

Despite the heavy burden of wartime activity, Ned Shepler did not abandon his enthusiasm and editorial support for the Democratic Party during election campaigns. In the 1942 election, the Democratic Party in Oklahoma was split when a growing and powerful faction of the party worked against Roosevelt, the New Deal, and candidates favoring the presidential administration. Shepler was especially interested in supporting Democratic National Committeeman Robert S. (Bob) Kerr, a wealthy oilman and a personal friend, in the governor's race. In the primary and general election, Shepler ran many editorials detailing his arguments as to why Kerr would make a good governor. In particular, the Shepler editorials pointed out that Oklahoma needed a governor who would give unqualified support to the Roosevelt war administration and that Kerr was that man. In both the primary and the general election, Comanche County voters gave their overwhelming support to Kerr, who won the governor's seat.⁴⁶

In the 1944 elections, Shepler waged a bitter editorial battle in

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., June 25, 1942, p. 1; June 28, 1942, p. 12; July 15, 1942, p. 1; November 4, 1942, p. 1.

support of the reelection of United States Senator Elmer Thomas.

Senator Thomas of Medicine Park, a close friend of Shepler's had served in the Senate since his first election in 1926. His campaign for a fourth term was savagely opposed by the Daily Oklahoman, which attacked him in almost daily editorials on the basis of his long-term support of Roosevelt and the New Deal policies. In turn, Shepler ran editorials, many on page one, supporting Thomas's record of eighteen years in the Senate. Said one editorial:

. . . Thomas has been the champion of the farmer, battling through Congress parity price formulas that would insure the farmer a fair return for his products. He has been a leader in providing old age assistance, the promotion of rural electrification, soil conservation legislation, and many of the reform measures which have aided the great mass of the people.

In the next Congress, if Democrats are returned to power, Elmer Thomas will become chairman of the Agricultural Committee of the Senate and be in a position to carry on a constructive program in behalf of farm prosperity. He will continue as chairman of the War Department Appropriations Sub-Committee, which holds vital importance for this and many other localities in the state, and chairman of the Indian Affairs Committee, which is likewise of vast importance to Oklahoma. . . .⁴⁷

Shepler replied at length to one Daily Oklahoman editorial which asserted that there was not one good reason for the reelection of Senator Thomas. Aside from the broad national issues, the Constitution editorial said, there were many direct Oklahoma contributions made by the Senator. Senator Thomas, with the assistance of Democratic state congressmen, the editorial asserted, was largely responsible for all wartime industrial, military, and naval activity developed in Oklahoma. And, the editorial added, Thomas was largely responsible for the establishment of the aircraft plants and air depot at Oklahoma City which

⁴⁷Ibid., October 15, 1944, p. 1.

helped pull that metropolis out of the doldrums. Additionally, the editorial said Thomas almost alone established the numerous airfields, military camps, powder plant at Choteau, naval depot at McAlester, and scores of other installations in Oklahoma. The editorial pointed to many other achievements by Thomas, such as the construction of the Grand River and Denison dams, the Altus irrigation project, and the Wichita Wildlife Refuge lakes and improvements.⁴⁸

And in the heat of the Thomas campaign, Shepler did not ignore the 1944 presidential election. In a front-page editorial prior to the November election, the Constitution commented there was only one genuine issue in this election: "Carry the war to a victorious conclusion and secure the peace." Shepler said the nation had witnessed one of the most vicious campaigns directed at an occupant of the White House since the campaign against Lincoln in 1864. The editorial said:

. . . The United States has been at war for nearly three years. During that time we have witnessed the organization of the largest, the best trained and the best equipped army and navy in our history. We have witnessed a miracle of production. There have been unhappy hindrances, it is true, but we have accomplished results. And our valiant fighting men are winning on every battle front and on every sea on the face of the globe. All of this has been accomplished under the overall direction of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Do we want to change such successful leadership in the midst of war? No bank, no business institution, no organization of any kind would kick out a management which had successfully piloted it halfway through a panic, let alone a life and death crisis such as this nation is in at the moment. . . .

The American people are interested in but one thing this time, the victorious ending of the war, the return of our men and women home and the concluding of a peace that will prevent aggressor nations from setting the world afire in another twenty-five years. These are the things President Roosevelt has set his heart upon; those are the goals toward which he

⁴⁸Ibid., October 27, 1944, p. 1.

is working. He should be permitted to complete the task he has begun. . . .⁴⁹

Roosevelt carried Oklahoma by 401,549 votes to 319,424 for Thomas E. Dewey. The Comanche County vote margin was three to one for the President. In the Senate race, Comanche County gave Thomas 7,439 votes to 3,780 for William J. Otjen, the Enid Republican nominee. Statewide, Thomas lost but 25 counties to his opponent in winning the election, 390,851 to 309,222.⁵⁰

As the war years progressed, the shortage of newsprint began to affect the operation of the newspaper. Newsprint quotas assigned to the nation's newspapers were based on consumption in 1941. The Constitution told its readers that it had been granted an increase in newsprint tonnage because of its increased circulation in a war defense area. But even with the additional tonnage, the Constitution said, the number of pages printed in a week's time would have to be reduced. "For many years," a page-one notice said, "The Constitution has maintained a minimum of eight pages. Rather than limit the number of readers, this newspaper will endeavor to reduce the number of pages on certain days in order to keep total consumption within the assigned quota."⁵¹

Additional newsprint cutbacks later in the war forced the Constitution to curtail subscriptions outside of Comanche County. The

⁴⁹Ibid., November 4, 1944, p. 1.

⁵⁰Ibid., November 8, 1944, p. 1; Directory of Oklahoma 1973 (Oklahoma City; State Election Board, 1973), pp. 383-384.

⁵¹Constitution, November 8, 1944, p. 1.

Constitution said in 1944 it could continue to send newspapers to present subscribers outside the county but could not add any new subscriptions. A page-one announcement said the newspaper was allowed sixty-seven tons of newsprint for the last quarter of 1943. It said the allotment for the current quarter in 1944 had been cut to sixty tons. "This curtailment makes necessary the 'freezing' of published copies of the paper at approximately 10,000," the announcement said.⁵²

One major improvement to the Constitution news service was made in the middle of the war. The Constitution announced in April of 1943 that it was elected to membership in the Associated Press, the worldwide cooperate newsgathering association. With the installation of leased wires and teletypes, the newspaper said it then was receiving the full daytime and Saturday night services of the Associated Press. "This service is being added by the Constitution in keeping with this newspaper's policy of giving the subscribers and the public all possible state, national and worldwide news, in addition to complete coverage of local news," the announcement said. The newspaper noted that it would still have the United Press reports, too. With the installation of the Associated Press news service, the Constitution said it was the only one-edition daily newspaper in Oklahoma protected by leased wires of both wire services.⁵³

Late in 1944, a Constitution story revealed that Ned Shepler was attempting to add a radio station to his enterprises. The story said that Shepler had filed an application with the Federal Communications

⁵²Ibid., February 11, 1944, p. 1.

⁵³Ibid., April 25, 1943, p. 1; May 16, 1943, p. 1.

Commission for a permit to install a frequency modulation, or FM, station in Lawton following the war. According to the story, FM broadcasting was being perfected prior to the war. Among advantages claimed over AM stations were that it was free of noise and static and that there was no interference between stations. The application listed the station at 48.900 kilocycles, covering an area of 4,500 square miles. At that time Lawton had only one radio station, KSWO, an AM outlet which first went on the air in 1941. In 1945 it was announced that KSWO had changed hands. Byrne Ross, Lawton businessman, said he had sold his half interest in the 250-watt station to Robert Scott, Ted Warkentin, and J. Randolph Montgomery, all Lawton businessmen. The price of the sale was not disclosed. The other half interest was owned by another Lawton businessman, R. H. Drewry. He purchased half of the station following the death in 1944 of Dr. Willard Carver, Oklahoma City.⁵⁴

While the war years were frenzied ones for the Constitution and for the men and women who wrote for it and edited it, the newspaper continued to grow. However, because of the paper shortage, the editorial page in late 1944 and in 1945 had almost been turned into a news page. But the paper continued to be well written and well edited. On the business side, Wilbur Rice in charge of display advertising and Mrs. Willie Patton in charge of classified advertising and bookkeeping, fought the battle of wartime shortages and restrictions and kept the Constitution a going concern, financially. And the "back shop" headed by mechanical superintendent Bill Hargraves hurdled most of the war-time

⁵⁴Ibid., October 18, 1944, p. 1; May 20, 1945, p. 1.

obstacles and usually turned out a newspaper that was top-flight in printing quality and typography.

On August 14, 1945, peace returned to the world after the Japanese surrender. That Tuesday afternoon Lawton staged a celebration, the Constitution reported, "that will live forever in the memories of all who witnessed it." President Truman's official announcement of the Japanese surrender set off a tinder box of emotion. Crowds streamed from stores and office buildings, and employees walked out on their jobs without much complaint from the boss as throngs gathered in the streets to shout and weep.⁵⁵

And with the end of gasoline rationing in sight, the Constitution said hundreds jumped into their cars and drove endlessly up and down city streets, honking horns at full blast and shouting the news. In spite of the recent scrap paper drive, there was still enough paper on hand so that shreds and fragments fluttered in a steady stream from the town's taller buildings. The electric utility's weird-sounding "trouble whistle" wailed incessantly, but it had a different sound than it did in heralding the Normandy invasion the year before.⁵⁶

Smiles were on all faces as young and old, civilian and soldier, the people wept or laughed hysterically at the final announcement of the news which had been so long in coming. Two tousled "shine" boys shouted, "Japs surrender. Oh, boy, this will be classy." The memories of many children did not go back to a time when there was no war. Soldiers and their wives stopped and smiled in the midst of the hilarity

⁵⁵Constitution, August 15, 1945, p. 1; Buchanan, pp. 591-594.

⁵⁶Constitution, August 15, 1945, p. 1.

as they began to realize this would mean for them a resumption of normal living. One couple on roller skates managed to weave haltingly in and out of the dense crowd on the sidewalks. Many wore red, white, and blue caps and pounded pie tins with large spoons.⁵⁷

An ambulance moved up and down the streets, its siren adding to the din. War veterans mounted a big fire truck and rode slowly along the streets, flags flying. One old model car bore a sign, "We did it again--1918-1945," while others were emblazoned with "V-J." An effigy of Tojo hung from a window on C Avenue, placarded with the apology, "So sorry, Tojo!"⁵⁸

The unrestrained hilarity in the downtown area lasted until nearly midnight. Most churches remained open throughout the night as many persons offered solemn prayers and thanks for the victory. Fearing rowdyism, virtually every eating place in Lawton closed. At the county attorney's request, the multitude of Lawton's taverns stopped selling beer as soon as the peace announcement came, and shut their doors. Soldiers at Fort Sill carried on their duties as normal after the peace announcement, although Civil Service employees were on a two-day holiday under an order issued by the President. All of it was a picture of joy unconfined as the Southwest Oklahoma army town celebrated the end of the Second World War.⁵⁹

When the newsmen who had gone off to war returned to Lawton, they found the Constitution a bustling, thriving paper. They also found

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

Lawton different from the city they had left. It was bigger and seemed to be more in a hurry. World War II had wrenched and changed Lawton, as it had wrenched and changed America. Yet there was a feeling in the air that Lawton would hold a lot of the growth it had made during the war, when streets were crowded with soldiers and their families.

Another Newspaper War

While the Constitution under Shepler's guidance prospered and grew during the war boom times, its morning daily rival a few blocks distant appeared to be wasting away to a near death. The Lawton Morning Press, published and operated by Homer and Doris Hedges, had barely managed to limp through the war. In 1940 and 1941, the Press had profited some from the pre-war construction boom in the Lawton-Fort Sill area. Circulation had increased and had kept pace with the Constitution. But after the war started, the Press lost this momentum. In particular, the Press lost most of its key help to the war, and it could not keep an advertising manager and a circulation manager. Almost the only ones putting out the newspaper during the war were Doris and Homer Hedges and his brother, Ewing Hedges, a printer. Toward the end of the war, most issues were only six pages. Display advertising--a newspaper's chief source of revenue--was sparse and at many times almost non-existent. What little local and wire news it had was feebly displayed on the front page. Locally written editorials were unheard of. Inside pages were mostly filled with what the trade called "filler" copy--matted pictures and syndicated features. Seemingly the newspaper's only selling point was its features. It had several well known columnists and "the best

comic strips then available."⁶⁰

On November 7, 1945, Mr. and Mrs. Hedges sold the Press to Carl J. Bergman, former circulation manager of the newspaper, who had operated the Army News in Lawton during the war. "It was increasingly difficult to get help," Hedges recalled, in explaining the reason for the sale. "And we lost our advertising manager and our circulation manager," he added. Although Hedges declined to reveal the sale price, Bergman indicated it was in the area of \$30,000. Leaving Lawton in 1946, the Hedgeses purchased a weekly newspaper at Eufaula, Oklahoma, the Indian Journal. In 1948, they moved to Tahlequah, Oklahoma, where they published and operated two weekly newspapers for twenty-two years, the Democrat-Star and the Citizen.⁶¹

Bergman, the new owner-publisher of the Press, was born December 14, 1910, in Oklahoma City. After graduating from Classen High School, he moved to Lawton in 1933, where he was in charge of circulation for the Daily Oklahoman and the Oklahoma City Times. When the Lawton Morning Press was established in 1934, he took over the circulation department on a commission basis. In 1939 he briefly operated a free weekly tabloid newspaper, the Cushing Booster, at Cushing, Oklahoma.

⁶⁰This assessment of the Lawton Morning Press was made by the author from files available at the Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, starting with the March, 1944, issues. Unfortunately Morning Press files from the start of publication in 1934 and until March, 1944, are missing.

⁶¹Lawton Morning Press, November 7, 1945, p. 2. The new owner-publisher, Carl J. Bergman, was listed on the editorial page masthead on this date although formal announcement of the sale was not announced in the Press until the following Sunday, November 11, 1945; Homer H. Hedges and Doris Hedges, private interview held at Tahlequah, Oklahoma, December 21, 1971; Carl J. Bergman, private interview held at Lawton, Oklahoma, January 18, 1972.

When the Cushing paper proved unprofitable, Bergman returned to Lawton in 1940, where he established and operated the Fort Sill Army News until the army halted publication of the newspaper at the end of the war.⁶²

Bergman learned Hedges was "worn out" from putting out the Morning Press almost singlehandedly, and that the Press was being operated on a shoestring basis. "He was ready to sell," said Bergman, who obtained a small business loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to purchase the Press. The RFC loan was made possible, Bergman explained, because he had had a government contract for the printing of the Fort Sill Army News. For businesses whose government contracts were terminated by the end of the war, RFC policy at that time provided loans to reestablish businesses. Bergman recalled that under the RFC loan he obtained to purchase the Press, he reestablished his publishing business by combining his defunct Army News business with that of the Lawton Morning Press. Bergman noted he was lucky he obtained the loan when he did because the federal government soon shut off further RFC loans to any news media, citing possible interference with freedom of the press. Bergman moved his printing equipment and two linotypes from the Army News into the Morning Press backshop. The Press then had a battery of five linotypes for its type composition. Bergman said he also purchased the Hedges' building which housed the Press, but that it was a separate transaction from the RFC loan.⁶³

Under Bergman's direction, the Press was faced immediately with

⁶²Carl J. Bergman interview.

⁶³Ibid.

a severe shortage of newsprint and help. Bergman hired "anyone I could get." He recalled that he employed several good reporters and editors from the eastern section of the United States after running advertisements in national trade publications. Many on the Press staff, especially newsmen, would come and go. "Most were real good newsmen," he said, "but they would find a better job and leave." His wife, Rosa Bergman, served as office manager of the Press.⁶⁴

In the change of ownership announcement, Bergman as publisher proclaimed the Press would "show impartiality in its editorial policy by presenting both sides of any issue that may arise from time to time." Under Bergman the Press did not support any political party, but was independent in its stance toward politics. The staff he introduced included Robert O. Cunningham, Lawton, advertising manager; Albert L. Chappory, Oklahoma City, editor; Clarence Stoneburner, Oklahoma City, circulation manager, and Ralph Griffin, Lawton, rural circulation manager.⁶⁵

The Press added several new columnists and other features, including several new comic strips, Bergman recalled. The paper continued the daily "about town" column, which Bergman asserted was highly popular with readers. Other portions of the newspaper were given new life, such as the start of locally written editorials. Also, Bergman hired a full-time sports editor and society editor to increase local news coverage in those areas.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Press, November 11, 1945, p. 1.

⁶⁶Carl J. Bergman interview.

"The Press had a newspaper war going most of the time with the Constitution," Bergman declared, adding that his newspaper butted heads several times with the Constitution in political races. In one such instance, the Press supported District Judge Toby Morris of Lawton in his race for the Democratic nomination for the Sixth District Congressional seat held by Jed Johnson of Chickasha. The Press in front-page editorials contended that Lawton and Comanche County voters should elect a popular Lawton man to replace Johnson, whom the Press described as the tool and crony of the Constitution-dominated political machine. Johnson, who was rounding out twenty years of service in the House of Representatives, was a close friend of Shepler's and had received Constitution support during all of his years in office. In front-page editorials, the Constitution urged Johnson's return to the House on the grounds that he had been of invaluable service to Lawton and Comanche County with their vast federal interests, and that he would continue to render that service, something that a freshman Congressman could not do. Toby Morris defeated Johnson and went on to win the House seat in the general election.⁶⁷

The Press during Bergman's ownership figured prominently in a Comanche County grand jury investigation into charges of police brutality and misconduct. The grand jury probe was touched off after a twenty-four-year-old World War II veteran, James E. West, was pistol-whipped and shot in the left thigh by Lawton Police Officer Jack Turner. Robert O. Cunningham, advertising manager of the Morning Press and an American Legionnaire, led a move that saw the Lawton American Legion

⁶⁷Ibid.; Press, July 9, 1946, p. 1; Constitution, July 21, 1946, p. 1.

Post request a grand jury investigation into Lawton and Comanche County law enforcement conditions. A grand jury which was convened did not return any indictments in the issue but did request the resignation of Lawton Police Chief A. B. Bowling and the discharge of four policemen and Municipal Judge Lem Foster on the grounds of inefficiency and conditions within the police department. However, when called before the Lawton City Council, the police chief and two other officers named by the grand jury were cleared.⁶⁸

After operating the Morning Press for over two years, Bergman sold it in February, 1948. Of many reasons behind his decision to sell, two were the same ones that Homer Hedges had cited in selling to Bergman. There was still a severe newsprint shortage in 1948, and the price of paper had tripled the last two years. And the Press had lost key people in all departments. Printers especially had been hard to find, and Bergman noted that in the early months of operating the newspaper, he had to depend on a lot of "floaters" who worked only briefly and on a lot of other printers who turned out to be drunks. To combat that problem, Bergman turned his composing room into a union shop in order to get competent help. Still, union printers were hard to find.⁶⁹

Another major reason for selling, Bergman explained, was that the

⁶⁸Press, December 28, 1945, p. 1; January 23, 1946, p. 1; February 13, 1946, p. 1. In a postscript to this issue, Cunningham later left the Morning Press, set up a Lawton advertising agency, and became a candidate for the office of state representative. In May, 1946, Police Chief A. B. Bowling entered a downtown Lawton business where Cunningham was making a purchase. Bowling knocked Cunningham to the floor, then knocked him down again and kicked and beat him. Cunningham was treated by a doctor for bruises about the face and head and chest injuries. See the Constitution, May 17, 1946, p. 1.

⁶⁹Carl J. Bergman interview.

Constitution still had most of Lawton's major advertisers "sewed up" through advertising contracts. He managed to get Montgomery Ward to advertise with the Press, but many other larger advertisers such as the supermarkets were committed to the Constitution through advertising contracts.⁷⁰

However, Bergman did not place his newspaper on the open market for sale. He recalled that one day early in 1948 a tall man who identified himself as Charles E. Marsh walked into his office and announced he would like to buy the Morning Press. "He said he had just attempted to talk to the owner of the other paper in town, the Constitution, and that Shepler had insulted him and would not talk about selling his newspaper," Bergman recalled. Marsh said he owned an interest in the Wichita Falls, Texas, newspapers and several other newspapers.⁷¹

Marsh explained that he was president and manager of General Newspapers Corporation in New York City, which owned a chain of newspapers in the East and at one time owned a chain in Texas. Although the headquarters of the chain was in New York City, Marsh himself lived in Alexandria, Virginia. Bergman made tentative arrangements to sell the Morning Press during several meetings that followed.⁷²

Papers finalizing the sale were drawn up at a meeting in Austin, Texas. Through a complicated arrangement of interlocking holding companies, the sale of the Morning Press was completed. The newspaper chain's principal firm, General Newspapers, Inc., formed a corporative

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.

vehicle, Southwest Newspapers, Inc., to buy the Lawton Morning Press. Southwest Newspapers then organized another corporation, Lawton Newspapers, Inc., through which the actual sale of the Morning Press would take place. Lawton Newspapers, Inc., then issued stock totaling \$22,000 in value. A total of 2,200 shares were issued at \$10 each. Bergman kept 40 per cent of the stock, or \$8,800, as his share of the newspaper. General Newspapers, Inc., retained 60 per cent of the stock, or \$13,200. Southwest Newspapers, Inc., as majority stockholder, then exercised its option to buy Bergman's shares of stock, which completed the sale.⁷³

Under terms of the sale, the newspaper chain agreed to assume all of Bergman's indebtedness. This included Bergman's loan from the RFC, which he had increased from \$25,000 to \$35,000. Bergman then was out as publisher and operator of the newspaper, although he remained with the new group on salary for awhile "to get things rolling." Also under the agreement, Bergman retained ownership of the building and property which housed the newspaper, and he received a monthly rent from the new owners.⁷⁴ Bergman remained in Lawton. In later years he became an oilman, dealing in leases, royalty, and drilling.

George M. Reynolds of the newspaper chain was named president of Southwest Newspapers, Inc., and he was placed in charge of Lawton Newspapers, Inc. He named E. E. (Bob) Kniseley, the managing editor of a Pawhuska, Oklahoma, newspaper, as the new editor and publisher of the Morning Press. Jarrell Jennings was named secretary of Southwest Newspapers, Inc., and he assumed the position of circulation manager on

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

the paper. Other new members of the staff included Hugh Collum as managing editor and E. W. Perryman as advertising manager.⁷⁵

In a simple farewell story on page one, Bergman announced that Kniseley, who had thirty-one years' experience on Oklahoma newspapers, had acquired a majority stock in Lawton Newspapers, Inc., the new owners of the Morning Press, and had assumed management of the paper.

The statement added:

. . . Many names come to mind as we look back over this period, names of those who helped us get the paper out during the paper shortage, the local machinists who got out of bed in the early morning hours to repair a machine, the cafe operators who gave us news tips, the lawyers who answered our legal questions (without a fee), the Fort Sill Public Information Office military news help, the patrolmen at Lake Lawtonka, the federal, county and city offices, the mayor, city and county police, city councilmen, post office employees, the telephone company and many others whose friendship and encouragement have helped us with each day's paper.⁷⁶

An editorial inside that day's issue signed by Bob Kniseley informed readers about the new management's policies:

With this issue of the Lawton Morning Press, an announcement of a change of management of the newspaper is made. The readers of the paper are entitled to know the policies of the paper under this new management, and this is an explanation of those policies.

The first consideration of the Morning Press will be the upbuilding of Lawton and the trade territory of this city. Every effort will be made to assist any organized or individual effort to improve this city and this section of the state in every way possible.

The Lawton Morning Press will print the news.

It will print both sides of controversial affairs, whether they be police court matters or cases before the supreme court whenever such affairs come into the news column of the paper.

No favoritism will be shown in the handling of news stories, and no stories will be left out when they are

⁷⁵Press, February 17, 1948, p. 4.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 1.

available and the facts can be substantiated sufficiently to justify publication.

We want to work with the Chamber of Commerce and with all other organizations whose principal aims are for the improvement of the city--not just in a passive way by accepting publicity which may be handed out, but by assisting as individuals in the work of those organizations when any of our abilities will fit the needs of those groups.

We expect to publish this newspaper for the people who read it, because that is a duty we accept when those readers buy our paper.

In short, it is our plan to give Lawton and the trade territory the best morning newspaper we know how to publish.

For your information, we're the folks.

BOB KNISELEY⁷⁷

The Press soon was waging an all-out newspaper war against the Constitution. New employees were hired in all departments. Improvements were made throughout the paper. Display advertising rates were reduced to attract a larger volume of linage. A constant drive was made to win new readers as the Press made no bones about the fact it planned to beat the Constitution in a circulation fight.

On the news side, the emphasis was on local news coverage. An increased staff of reporters made an effort to cover everything in the community. A state editor was named, which was "journalese" for a reporter-photographer who covered the surrounding towns in the Press circulation area. Several editorials on local issues became the daily diet in the new Press. Two page-one columns appeared daily. "Lawton in Brief" was a personals column with lots of names. "This 'n That" mostly was an about-town chatter type of column. Makeup, however, remained rather conservative.

The number of pages in each issue was stepped up. Sunday's paper often included up to twenty-four pages. The classified advertising

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 4.

section grew in size. Advertising on the bottom of page one was removed to improve appearance. Three new comic strips and two more cartoons appeared. A 16-page Sunday magazine section in color was added. It was pre-printed by a syndicate and included mostly feature stories.

The daily editorials took a stand on every local issue that arose. In city council elections, the Press made surveys around town and attempted to determine who were the best candidates. Press editorials then named the newspaper's choices for the council seats. A series of editorials were run on the need for a county hospital where the "little people" could find a hospital bed when they needed it.⁷⁸

Kniseley then started running daily editorials attacking what he termed as the "old-time power structure, the Big Six Clique" that ran Lawton. He said Constitution editor-publisher Ned Shepler was the long-time head of this power clique. Press editorials claimed that the Big Six had ruled Lawton for years, dictating politics and gathering all the "gravy" that came their way, especially immense profits during the war. Kniseley charged that the Big Six "condoned a lot of crime in both the city and the county" in order to keep their organization powerful, both politically and commercially. "Their hand-picked officials kept the political organization in line by handling the crime situation 'properly,'" an editorial asserted.⁷⁹

Kniseley claimed the Big Six grip on Lawton had been partially shattered by the flood of new businessmen who came to Lawton during the war. The war had turned the little town of Lawton into a city,

⁷⁸ Ibid., March 16, 1948, p. 4; April 18, 1948, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Ibid., May 7, 1948, p. 4; May 8, 1948, p. 4; September 19, 1948, p. 1; September 21, 1948, p. 4.

editorials claimed, and the new businessmen realized they had the balance of power to "clean house." This came about in two elections, Kniseley noted, when the "Big Six puppets" were defeated. One was Congressman Jed Johnson, defeated by Lawton District Judge Toby Morris, the Press claimed, and the other was Lawton Mayor R. E. Glenn, defeated by George Hutchins. Both Morris and Hutchins were backed by a new progressive group of businessmen, Kniseley claimed. The new progressives then dominated a Chamber of Commerce Industrial Committee which sold stock to promote new industry for Lawton, a Press editorial noted. And it was "strange how human nature works," Kniseley said, observing that all of the old Big Six clique joined in and bought stock, "despite the fact they could not figure any angles whereby they could reap rich harvest direct from the project."⁸⁰

As new issues arose, Kniseley printed editorials analyzing how, in his opinion, the Big Six was involved. Lawton's water supply problem again became a severe one in the late 1940's, and engineering surveys were proposed to study an expansion of the water and sewer system. Kniseley editorials charged that a Lawton engineering firm, owned by Wyatt B. Hendrick, was allied with the Big Six Clique. Press editorials pointed out that firms outside Lawton would do the job far cheaper and were better qualified. Kniseley charged that "another round of grabbing the gravy train" was about to take place.⁸¹

A letter to the editor three columns long printed in the Press elaborated on Kniseley's contention that the Big Six Clique had ruled

⁸⁰Ibid., September 21, 1948, p. 4.

⁸¹Ibid., September 19, 1948, p. 1; September 21, 1948, p. 4.

Lawton adversely. The letter was written by Ewing Gafford, a former display advertising salesman for the Constitution. A page-one editorial urged subscribers to read the letter which "specifically points out the fact that the 'Old Clique,' the same group that we have termed the 'Big Six,' has sought to saddle Mayor George L. Hutchins with their very own failures." The editorial also noted:

Apparently in reply to the Morning Press' invitation to the people of Lawton to write about 'What's Wrong With Lawton,' Ewing Gafford, former local newspaperman, wrote a letter which appears under the Forum heading on the editorial page of today's paper.

We wish to concur in the statements appearing in that letter. During the several months we have been in Lawton we have learned that the things told in Mr. Gafford's letter are true, and that Lawton and its citizens and taxpayers have suffered. . . .⁸²

Gafford's letter claimed the election of George Hutchins as Lawton mayor amounted to a "revolution" in that it wrested control of the city from "men like Ned Shepler and the rest of his high-powered 'Old Clique'" and their puppet mayor, R. E. Glenn. The letter also charged that during Lawton's gigantic expansion in the 1940's, "Mr. Shepler and his Old Clique were on the 'in' as far as Lawton's administration was concerned." The letter added:

. . . Supposedly, these men, all generally well-to-do financially and respected as civic leaders, were well aware of this rapid growth. Supposedly, they were well aware of the fact that Lawton must some day 'face the music' and expand its governmental services to meet the needs of the new city. Supposedly, they realized that Lawton long has needed greater and better utility means to service the many new additions.

Despite their knowledge of these matters, however, these men did not see fit to take the initiative in seeing that these things were accomplished. Finally, 18 months ago, the people of Lawton decided to take matters in their own hands and elect an administration that would do something about

⁸²Ibid., September 26, 1948, pp. 1, 4B.

these 'growing pains.'

Mayor Hutchins accepted the people's mandate from the very beginning of his administration. At every opportunity, in every speech, he did his best to get over the fact that Lawton needed more money for increased services and more far-reaching improvements in water, sewage and disposal facilities. . . .

Now the 'Old Clique,' through Mr. Shepler's tainted 'news' columns and in his biased and well-worn editorials, accuses Mayor Hutchins of 'blocking survey of water needs.'

. . . .
I have written this letter after much deliberation and because of my deep and sincere convictions that the people of Lawton want the right thing to prevail. I do not believe that Mr. Ned Shepler and others of his gang 'give a hoot' about the right thing when that thing cuts them out of the private gain and political gravy to which they have so long been accustomed. As a former newspaperman myself, I cannot believe that any newspaper which presents pure editorial matter in its news columns has the right to be respected by its readers. . . .⁸³

On the same editorial page, Kniseley printed an editorial entitled, "Let's Get Un-Yoked." The editorial claimed that for fifteen to twenty years Lawton and Comanche County had been under the collective thumbs of a "half dozen political-power-pressure men" who had dictated the policies of the city and county. After losing out in the congressional election and the mayor's race, the editorial said, the same group of six was trying to stage a comeback in the city of Lawton and in Comanche County. "They have selected their candidates for city offices for next city election," the editorial said, "and are doing their best to smear the people now holding the offices they wish to control after next spring." The editorial concluded that "you no longer have to bend a knee to them for favors. You can un-yoke yourselves now."⁸⁴

Through the rest of 1948 and well into 1949, Kniseley's editorials continued to play variations on the same theme, as he constantly

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid.

attacked Ned Shepler and the Big Six Clique. On any and every issue, the Press editor related it to the Big Six. Interestingly, the only member of the Big Six whom Kniseley named in print was Shepler.

Possibly he was held back from naming the rest because of a fear of a libel lawsuit. Kniseley constantly connected vice, crime, and graft to the Big Six, such as in the following editorial:

. . . Lawton can be a wonderful place, and all those thousands who have talked about the vice, crime, graft and other objectionable things in Lawton can help out in cleaning up this city. Vice, crime and graft are always headed by the big shots--either for profit or for power. The big shots seldom have any direct connection with such things, but any person with average intelligence in Lawton can quickly figure out who heads up the forces that make gambling, prostitution and the liquor business, profitable in this city and nearby areas--and we don't mean the bootleggers or the men who sell the numbers or the solicitors for the scarlet women.

If you discover a bootlegger, trail him. See who he holds court with, trail that guy and see who he does most of his talking with, trail that guy and you'll find the people who are the big shots. They cover up well, but years of operation make them careless and the community finds them out.

If the citizens of Lawton want a progressive and clean city, they must help clean it up themselves. We can only cite the things we find out.⁸⁵

Editorial attacks on the "Big Six" and the vastly improved news coverage were paying off in one area for the Press--its circulation. In December, 1948, the Press boasted that its circulation had soared to 8,321, a dramatic rise from a circulation of 5,173 at the same time one year ago. The 1948 Press circulation figures were just under the Constitution total of 8,572. In a year-end editorial, Kniseley said the Press pledged it would "produce a morning newspaper dominant in circulation and most productive for advertising of any media in Lawton." The editorial also said:

⁸⁵Ibid., October 9, 1948, p. 4.

. . . We would like to guarantee to the merchants of Lawton net paid circulation of 10,000 subscribers, locally audited each month . . . as our average for the year 1949.

If this hope and pledge and guarantee, or whatever you may call it, is not met, this newspaper will make a refund, on January 1, 1950, in proportion to its net paid circulation to its advertisers. If we have only 9,000 average net paid circulation in 1949, we will refund to each local display advertiser one-tenth of all money collected on his advertising account during the year.

If the Morning Press circulation is more than 10,000 average for the year, we won't ask one penny for the excess circulation. . . .⁸⁶

Throughout all of the Kniseley attacks, the Constitution editorial guns remained silent. This newspaper war turned out to be a one-sided show. It was not the slam-bang, no-holds-barred fight that characterized the previous wars, in which both sides went at it tooth and toe nail. Instead, Ned Shepler chose to discuss only the issues. Not one editorial reply was made to the Press charges that Shepler led the "Big Six" clique rulers of Lawton.

Although the Constitution avoided an editorial confrontation, it did "lock horns" with the Press in a circulation war. And much of the Constitution's ability to meet its rival head on in the circulation battle stemmed from expansion made following the war in facilities and in the staff. The newspaper's two buildings and entire plant at 409-11 C Avenue in downtown Lawton were remodeled and expanded. A wall separating the two buildings was removed and the whole interior remodeled, providing larger space for editorial, business and circulation departments. The building was lengthened, providing a large room for carrier boys and more space for the stereotyping department.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Ibid., December 26, 1948, p. 1; December 30, 1948, p. 1; Directory Newspapers and Periodicals, 1948, p. 805.

⁸⁷ Constitution, December 29, 1946, p. 2.

When the war ended, many of the former news staff came home and "shucked off" their uniforms. Emmett L. Keough, managing editor, was a former Iowa newspaperman who first joined the Constitution staff as city editor in 1939, leaving in 1940 to join the Daily Oklahoman; Keough rejoined the Constitution staff in 1946 after four years of army duty. He also wrote a highly popular daily column, "Doc Dopey," about Lawton people and happenings. Lindsey Whitten, a reporter, first joined the newspaper in 1939. He returned to the staff in 1946 after leaving the military service. Ted Ralston, sports editor, who had seven years' experience with the Morning Press, joined the Constitution staff after being separated from military service. Others on the news staff included Mary Goddard, reporter, who joined the Constitution staff in 1943; Frank O. Hall, city editor, a newspaperman of twenty-two years experience who started as a cub reporter on the Constitution, and Cleva Joyner, society editor, who had been with the Constitution for twenty-three years. Also added to the news staff was the newspaper's first full-time photographer. Robin Broun, staff photographer for the Daily Oklahoman, joined the Constitution in 1946.⁸⁸

Several other changes and improvements were made in the Constitution during its circulation battles with the Press. In January, 1946, the Constitution discontinued advertising at the bottom of page one, a practice it had continued since its early-day establishment. The Constitution began a ten-minute daily news broadcast in 1947 over Radio Station KSWO. A summary of local news, together with regional and wire news was given Monday through Friday at 4 p.m. and at 6 p.m. on

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Saturday. The broadcasts were under the direction of Emmett L. Keough, Constitution managing editor, and other members of the news staff participated. To combat the Press magazine section, the Constitution in February, 1949, began a Sunday tabloid magazine section. In contrast to the Press magazine, which was purchased from a syndicate, the Constitution magazine was written by its staff. It contained personality feature stories on Lawton and Southwest Oklahoma residents. And in 1949, the Constitution won first place for general excellence in competition with all daily papers published in cities of more than 7,000 population in Oklahoma.⁸⁹

Meanwhile, the Lawton mayor's race in 1949 provided a field of battle for the two competing newspapers. The Press backed George Hutchins, a furniture store owner and the incumbent mayor seeking a second term. R. E. Glenn, a wholesale gasoline distributor and Lawton's former mayor for six years, was championed by the Constitution. Press editorials said Hutchins should be elected because he stood for Lawton progress and was not the tool of Lawton's Big Six Clique. The Constitution maintained that Lawton made more progress during Glenn's tenure as mayor than in any other period of Lawton history, while in contrast the city had seen only strife and turmoil under Hutchins. Glenn won the election by a razor-thin margin of fifty-eight votes.⁹⁰

It was soon after the mayor's election that the Morning Press began to stumble and to falter in the newspaper fight. Its troubles

⁸⁹ Ibid., January 31, 1946, p. 1; March 30, 1947, p. 1; February 13, 1949, p. 1; September 30, 1949, p. 1.

⁹⁰ Press, March 13, 1949, p. 1; March 16, 1949, p. 1; Constitution, March 13, 1944, p. 12B; March 16, 1949, p. 1.

first began with the purchase of a used sixteen-page press from a Sandusky, Ohio, company. The press had been used to print color comics. After it was installed in the Morning Press shop, the pressmen continually had problems adjusting it to printing a regular-sized newspaper. Continual breakdowns occurred, and it seemed as if the "bugs" could never be worked out of it. In several instances the breakdowns were so serious that the newspaper was not delivered until afternoon. Often the troubles prevented the publishing of a paper more than eight pages in size. To make matters worse, the newspapers turned out on the newly-purchased press were of far worse printing quality than the old eight-page press. Photographic engravings and other illustrations had a muddy, washed-out appearance.⁹¹

But the Press suffered its most devastating blow when Bob Kniseley resigned in March, 1949. The editor-publisher's daily editorials had provided the spark which sent the Press zooming to new circulation heights. A brief announcement said he had resigned as editor-publisher because of a serious illness. He had returned only recently from a vacation trip ordered by his doctor. Kniseley announced he would engage in other newspaper work. He returned to Pawhuska, Oklahoma, his former home. His position as Press editor-publisher was not again filled. The board of directors of Lawton Newspapers, Inc., announced that J. L. Jennings would continue as business manager of the Press, a post he had filled the past two months. Jennings previously had been circulation manager.⁹²

⁹¹Press, November 9, 1948, p. 1; February 23, 1949, p. 1.

⁹²Ibid., March 13, 1949, p. 1.

Meanwhile, Constitution editor-publisher Ned Shepler learned that the Press had lost approximately \$95,000 since its new owners had acquired it in February, 1948. And Shepler also found out that the newspaper chain was eager to sell the Press. Because of the bad feelings and newspaper war that had been waged, Shepler felt the Marsh chain would refuse to sell him the Press, so he arranged a subterfuge. Cliff Bryson, a personal friend and a representative of Southwest Dailies, a Dallas, Texas, firm that handled national advertising for the Constitution, agreed to attempt to purchase the Press for Shepler.⁹³

Bryson went to New York City and made a deal with Marsh to buy the Press for approximately \$40,000. The purchase included all of the Press printing equipment and the assumption of all the newspaper's debts. Shortly afterward Bryson turned the paper over to Shepler. When Marsh later learned that Shepler was the real buyer, it was reported he was "hopping mad." Constitution advertising manager Wilbur Rice noted that it took four to five years before the Press became a paying operation. Display advertising rates for the Press were kept at a low rate, Rice explained, in order to get advertisers to use it. Later when combination advertising rates for both newspapers were offered, Rice said the Press became a profitable paper.⁹⁴

The public announcement of the Press purchase by Shepler appeared May 9, 1949. Under the terms of the merger effective Sunday, May 15, the Constitution had purchased the name, circulation, good will, and franchises of the Morning Press. It added that next Sunday the first

⁹³Wilbur Rice interview.

⁹⁴Ibid.

combined Sunday paper would be published, utilizing facilities of the Constitution plant. Thereafter, both morning and afternoon publications would be published at the Constitution plant. In announcing the merger, Shepler cited the increased costs of publishing a newspaper, which he said had doubled since the war. "The combined operating costs of the two newspapers have been approximately \$50,000 per month for the past year, making it impracticable economically to continue independent operations," Shepler declared. He added that it would be the policy to absorb all employees of the Press who could be utilized in the combined operation.⁹⁵

An editorial in the first combined newspaper that following Sunday under the headline, "Two Good Newspapers," explained Shepler's views on the merger:

. . . so far as the separate morning and evening editions are concerned they will both be major operations. During the past few years both newspapers have expanded considerably. We hope to continue to make them better newspapers and to make them truly representative of Lawton and all of rapidly developing Southwestern Oklahoma.

We believe the general policies of the Constitution have been too well established over a period of many years to need reiteration. Both papers will be under the managerial direction of the Constitution management. It will always be our aim to publish all the news that's fit to print, to deal fairly and impartially with everyone. We will not avoid controversial subjects, but we will not seek to promote controversy. It is always our aim to be constructive and to seek to promote goodwill and harmony for a better and greater Lawton and Southwestern Oklahoma.

This newspaper is a Lawton owned institution. It has no outside connections or other business connections of any kind. It must stand on its own feet and make its own way. This, we believe, the people of this area appreciate.

The economic trends of recent years have forced newspapers throughout the country to merge in order to survive. There aren't two large daily newspaper organizations operating

⁹⁵Constitution, May 9, 1949, p. 1; Press, May 10, 1949, p. 1.

separately in any city in Oklahoma, large or small. The same condition applies in Texas, except for the very large cities, and almost throughout the nation. It has not come about particularly by design but through economic necessity. Mounting costs have made it impossible to find sufficient capital to keep two large, expensive organizations operating.

It may be of interest to readers to know that the two Lawton papers employed well over 100 people with payrolls of close to \$6,000 a week. Combined paper costs alone run in the neighborhood of \$6,000 a month. The numerous other items which go into the making of a newspaper are equally costly and have been mounting steadily, until the combined costs of operating separately have approached the \$50,000 a month mark. By joint operation it is believed this cost can be materially reduced and still give the same high type service. This will be our aim.

We believe Lawton has become large enough that it desires and will support a morning edition. We will endeavor to produce a good morning paper that will be comparable in every respect to the evening edition and be representative of the community and all of Southwestern Oklahoma. The morning edition will be a separate entity and not a mere adjunct of the older evening edition. . . .⁹⁶

Jesse James Resurrected

"JESSE JAMES IS ALIVE! IN LAWTON." That banner headline screamed its fantastic and unbelievable news across the front page of the Constitution on May 19, 1948. Stories told how Constitution reporters had found the infamous Missouri outlaw alive and living in the Lawton area, 100 years old and suffering from a broken hip. The reporters claimed the proof that he was still alive was "indisputable." The stories told an incredible tale of how Jesse James had been living under the assumed name of J. Frank Dalton ever since he was supposedly killed on April 3, 1882, at St. Joseph, Missouri, by Bob Ford, a member of his gang. Dalton claimed the man who was killed that day was Charley Bigelow, also a member of the James' outlaw gang. Dalton also claimed

⁹⁶Constitution-Press, May 15, 1949, p. 10B.

his mother at first refused to go along with the plan and identify Bigelow's body as Jesse's. However, Dalton asserted it took his brother, Frank James, to convince her that she should identify the body as that of her beloved son, Jesse. The body was buried in her front yard.⁹⁷

Dalton claimed in the Constitution stories that he had decided to reveal his identity at this time because of a pact made among the members of the James gang. Dalton and the gang members agreed not to reveal his identity "until all were dead or past the age of 100. Dalton claimed that he had reached the age of 100 on September 5, 1947. He chose Lawton as the place where he would reveal his identity because it was the center of his activities when he was a young man on the "owl hoot" trail. That trail led throughout Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and on up into Montana. But the Wichita Mountains were his first and last love and the scene of many an experience, including the burying of a vast treasure of gold in the Wichitas.⁹⁸

In the Constitution stories, Dalton recalled his exploits with Quantrill's Confederate guerrillas during the Civil War and his later escapades heading the James gang as it robbed trains, stage coaches, and banks. After his "official" death, Dalton, at age thirty-five, went to school and eventually received a degree in law, although he never practiced the profession. After that he lived a varied life of

⁹⁷Constitution, May 19, 1948, p. 1; William A. Settle, Jr., Jesse James Was His Name (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966), pp. 115-119.

⁹⁸Constitution, May 19, 1948, p. 1.

adventure on the Western frontier, changing his name as often as he changed his shirt. Dalton served as a peace officer in many Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas towns. The lure of adventure attracted him to service in the Spanish American War, the Boer War, and World War I.⁹⁹

Dalton, who for years had attached the title of "colonel" to his name, revealed he had been living with a long-time friend, Lee Howk, at Centerville, Texas. Dalton and Howk were attracted to Lawton after the Constitution printed a story on February 29, 1948, telling about the search for the James gang treasure in the Wichita Mountains. The story told how Joe Hunter of Lawton, who had searched fifteen years for the James gold in the Wichitas, had found a brass bucket, two picks, a wedge, a three-legged skillet, and a watch, all believed to have belonged to the James gang. Hunter also had in his possession old treasure maps supposedly stolen a long time ago from Dalton. Howk also was a treasure hunter who had spent many years attempting to track down the James' gold.¹⁰⁰

Hunter and Howk met, compared notes and data, and convinced each other that both had a vast knowledge about clues to the James gold in the Wichitas. Dalton noted that conference caused him to decide once again to "ride" the old trail north and reveal his true identity while in Lawton. Hunter went to Texas and accompanied Dalton and Howk back to Lawton. He and Howk held long talks with the aged man, attempting to find further clues to the mysterious hiding places of the gold concealed long ago. Both Hunter and Howk said Dalton told them that he

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

moved some of the gold he had hidden in the Wichitas and concealed it in another spot in eastern Oklahoma. However, he told them he had left \$500,000 in gold bullion as a "reward" for anyone who was successful in following the trail to the end of the treasure rainbow.¹⁰¹

The two treasure hunters also told Constitution reporters how Dalton, as Jesse James, came into possession of the gold. Dalton told them it was gold brought into this country by the Spaniards. The James gang members found it while they were hiding in the Wichitas, and they "took possession" from others who knew its location. They rehid it, not too far from Lawton, and then prepared their maps that would point to its location. The treasure hunters told the reporters that stories had been told for years that gold was hidden in the Wichitas by the James gang.¹⁰²

Adding some credence to the story of the James gold being hidden in the Wichitas was the fact that Frank James had lived in the Lawton area for several years. He purchased a 160-acre homestead in 1907 following the Big Pasture land opening. He settled on the farm some twenty-five miles northeast of Lawton and two miles north of the Comanche County town of Fletcher. In 1912 he moved away after selling the farm. His neighbors claimed Frank James spent many hours on horseback roaming the Wichitas, supposedly searching for familiar landmarks which would guide him to the hidden treasure.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Lawton News-Republican, December 27, 1906, p. 1; November 18, 1907, p. 1. The Constitution-Press, May 10, 1959, p. 9, carried a story about the old Frank James house and its owners at that time. Also see Settle, pp. 164-165. Stories about Frank James living near Fletcher can

The series of stories in the Constitution about Dalton included four sworn affidavits by persons alive then who had known the original Jesse James. Three Oklahomans and a Texas testified that J. Frank Dalton was the original Jesse James. An editor's note said the Constitution fully realized that a story of such startling proportions that Jesse James was alive in Lawton needed documentary proof.¹⁰⁴

Another article with the overline, "The Story Behind the James Story," described how the Constitution newsmen uncovered their world-wide "scoop":

Rare in the annals of newspapering, an occupation innoculated to the unusual, have reporters had the privilege of recording a story of such historic character as has been the lot of members of the Constitution staff.

The story of Jesse James defies imagination. The fact that the Constitution, in this edition, is "scooping the world" on a story destined to be carried to the far corners of the earth within the next few hours is, in itself, the realization of a newspaperman's dream.

But the fact that the Constitution was able to accomplish this feat is no accident.

It was a strange series of circumstances that led to the story of Jesse James. It started, strangely enough, on "leap day," February 29, when Constitution readers were treated to an exclusive story of a 16-year search for buried treasure by Joe Hunter and party of Lawton.

It was the consensus of the Constitution staff that this story would lead to further developments. But a month passed and no major additional stories developed.

During the heat of a busy Saturday afternoon in early April, Emmett L. Keough, managing editor, received a wire from a Texas newspaper reporting that "an old man, 100, who says he is J. Frank Dalton, is en route to Lawton to ride the old trail again."

Immediately staff members linked the old man to Joe Hunter and his search for treasure. Investigation proved their deductions were correct. Lindsey Whitten, reporter, discovered the whereabouts of Mr. Dalton and soon believed

¹⁰³ (Continued) also be found in the Kansas City Star, July 6 and 16, 1944, and the Kansas City Times, July 7, 1944.

¹⁰⁴ Constitution, May 19, 1948, p. 1.

"there was more to this story than an old man riding an old trail."

Enlisting the advice of Frank O. Hall, city editor, who is a native of Missouri and a student of the post-Civil war era, Whitten soon discovered that "Colonel Dalton" was Jesse James.

Extremely doubtful, but clinging to that thread of possibility that leads newsmen to thorough investigation, Hall and Keough listened to Whitten's story. They visited Colonel Dalton and were taken into the confidence of Mr. Hunter and Lee Howk, Jesse James' most intimate associates. After several hours of checking evidence, they, too, were convinced that the chances of a hoax were indeed remote. Hours of library research, checking facts against legend, revealed that odds were good that Jesse James is still alive today.

But this was more than a month ago. Why have Constitution readers been denied the privilege of reading this story for these many weeks?

Like the outlaws of Jesse James' hey-day, newsmen, too, have a code. No newsman worthy of the name will violate a confidence. All information told Constitution staff members was in strictest confidence, "until Jesse James himself was ready to release it." . . .

Finally Tuesday night all arrangements were completed. Constitution staff members were given the "green light." This action came about 10 p.m.

The stories you are reading today, and the pictures you are viewing were turned out by staff members who worked all last night while other Lawtonians were sleeping.

If you enjoy this Constitution exclusive, the staff members are well repaid.

More important, if the legendary Jesse James reads these reports with a twinkle in his eye, we'll know 'twas a job well done.¹⁰⁵

The Constitution announced that on Saturday afternoon Jesse James would appear in downtown Lawton. A crowd estimated at 30,000 swarmed the downtown area to catch a glimpse of him. The oldtimer with his flowing beard, white hair, and sea blue eyes rode in the front seat of an open-top convertible. Attempts to follow a pre-arranged route failed when the crowd surged out of control and blocked the automobile. After his car drove through the mass of people to the courthouse, he accepted

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 8.

a microphone and made a brief talk. "This country has changed a lot since we rode in the hills of the Wichitas," Dalton said in a voice only slightly above a whisper which few could hear. Not once did he refer to the James family or attempt to deny or confirm that he was Jesse James. Instead he talked about early-day events related to the Southwest. He made appearances first on the north side of the courthouse and later on the south side. Dalton appeared only a few times again in public. His friend, Lee Howk, firmly refused to commercialize the old man in any kind of show.¹⁰⁶

The Constitution story that Jesse James was still alive and in Lawton was flashed throughout the nation over the wire services and was received with considerable doubt. But it was a great story, and it got a big play. Nearly every morning daily in the nation carried headlines quoting the stories carried in the Constitution. And the wire services were flooded with reaction stories carrying comments from relatives, descendants, friends, enemies, historians, and acquaintances of the James family. Most of the stories emphatically denied or were highly skeptical that Dalton was Jesse James. An avalanche of letters, telegrams, and phone calls from all over the world struck the Constitution newsroom, and it became impossible to handle all of them.¹⁰⁷

The Morning Press carried a story saying that "scores of Lawton citizens" protested the special appearance of Dalton because it glorified the outlaw. A Constitution editorial denied the charge, saying that if Jesse James had been glorified, the fact that the Constitution

¹⁰⁶Ibid., May 20, 1948, p. 1; May 21, 1948, p. 1; May 23, 1948, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

reported his story did not make the newspaper guilty of the charge. Rather, the Constitution said, the movies, the authors of many books, the producers of comic magazines, all with the private profit motive, have been guilty of that glorification. The editorial added:

. . . Because the Constitution reported in its columns that the centenarian planned to make a personal appearance, so that the curious could see him--and there were many--does not make this newspaper liable for glorification. In the final analysis, J. Frank Dalton, or Jesse James, if you will, has a perfect right to make that appearance.

If the Constitution has had a part in correcting a phase in American history, it is proud. If time proves it wrong, it will be happy to acknowledge its error.¹⁰⁸

The Constitution story that J. Frank Dalton was Jesse James had repercussions for years to come. Some claimed that Dalton was just another in the long line of pretenders who popped up from time to time. Others claimed Dalton was not Jesse James, but that he might have been a member of the gang. William A. Settle, Jr., perhaps the foremost scholar on Jesse James, asserted in his definitive work that J. Frank Dalton's story "was full of holes and sublimely ridiculous claims."¹⁰⁹

In May, 1970, Dalton's claim to being Jesse James was the subject of a lawsuit in Missouri. Mrs. Stella James of Los Angeles, California, a daughter-in-law of Jesse James, won the suit in a Franklin County Circuit Court trial when a jury concluded that Jesse James was shot in the back by Bob Ford on April 3, 1882. The defendant in the case, Rudy Turilli, manager of the Jesse James Museum near Stanton, Missouri, claimed that James lived until 1951 under the name of J. Frank Dalton, the man the Constitution had claimed was the Missouri outlaw. Turilli

¹⁰⁸ Press, May 22, 1948, p. 1; Constitution, May 23, 1948, p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ Constitution, June 13, 1948, p. 9; Press, June 13, 1948, p. 3; Settle, pp. 170-171.

made the claim on a national television show in February, 1967, and offered \$10,000 to anyone who could prove him wrong. Mrs. James laid claim to the money, but Turilli rejected her evidence, so she sued. Turilli appealed the Franklin County Court decision to the St. Louis Court of Appeals. That court in September, 1971, upheld the lower court decision, ruling that the legendary Missouri badman definitely was killed in 1882.¹¹⁰

Turilli announced he would appeal the ruling of the St. Louis court to the United States Supreme Court. "I've come up with even more evidence now to prove them wrong and me right," he said. The St. Louis Court of Appeals opinion said the man Turilli claimed was James tried at a court hearing in 1950 to have his name changed to Jesse James. The judge in that case, the late R. A. Brauer of Franklin County, was quoted by the appeals court opinion as saying in his decree:

In a decree that probably would have King Solomon's approval, Judge Brauer ruled from the bench: 'This court is called upon to change a man's name when there is nothing to change because he has never changed it, and by law it has never been changed from Jesse James to anything else.

'If he isn't what he professes to be, then he is trying to perpetrate a fraud upon this court. If he is Jesse James . . . then my suggestion would be that he retreat to his rendezvous and ask the good God above to forgive him so he may pass away in peace when his time comes.'¹¹¹

Lindsey Whitten and Frank Hall, the two Constitution reporters who did the principal work in uncovering the Jesse James story, won the Pall Mall award for outstanding achievement in journalism. The story of how the pair produced documentary evidence to indicate that J. Frank

¹¹⁰ St. Louis, Missouri, Associated Press story in the Tulsa Daily World, September 30, 1971, p. 1.

¹¹¹ Ibid.; Constitution, January 21, 1950, p. 1; March 10, 1950, p. 1.

Dalton was Jesse James was dramatized in a Pall Mall nationwide radio broadcast, and the pair split the \$500 cash award. Hall and Whitten also published a booklet, Jesse James Rides Again, which recounted the stories reported in the Constitution.¹¹²

A Decade of Growth

The decade of the forties was a period of fantastic growth for Lawton. The city's population mushroomed from 18,055 in 1940 to 34,757 in 1950. The 92.5 per cent growth was the city's most rapid for any ten-year period in its history. Comanche County also grew, with a total of 55,165 in 1950 compared to 38,988 in 1940. Lawton's growth received its biggest impetus during World War II with the vast expansion of Fort Sill and its training programs. After the war's end, Fort Sill did not shrink back to its pre-war size and functions as it had done after World War I. Instead, the post began a construction program that enabled it to carry on a continued army program of training a large number of artillerymen. Lawton's business and residential sections rapidly expanded in the post-war period. By 1950 construction continued to set new records as Lawton expanded from being a service center for Fort Sill into a retail and trade center for all of Southwest Oklahoma.¹¹³

The growth in Lawton during the 1940's also meant growth for its newspapers. Circulation of the Lawton Constitution doubled in wartime

¹¹²Constitution-Press, December 13, 1953, p. 1; Frank O. Hall and Lindsey Whitten, Jesse James Rides Again (Lawton: Lahoma Publishing Co., 1948), pp. 7-48.

¹¹³U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, Population: II, 40, 134; U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Seventeenth Census of the United States, 1950, Population: II, 28, 29.

from 4,849 in 1940 to 9,325 in 1945. It remained at approximately that level until 1950, when it reached 10,151. The Press which was merged with the Constitution, reported a circulation of 5,055 in 1950.¹¹⁴

After the merger in 1949, the Constitution-Press launched a program to serve a larger circulation area in Southwest Oklahoma. Up to, including, and after the World War II years, Lawton newspapers limited their circulation area largely to Lawton and Comanche County. Under the expanded coverage, the Constitution-Press was offered to twenty-two communities within a fifty-mile radius. In order to cover events in this broad area, the news staff was expanded, and staff reporters and photographers roamed a six-county area.

By the start of the fifties, a greater responsibility went with the monopoly ownership of the two papers serving the Lawton-Fort Sill community and Southwest Oklahoma. The monopoly brought disadvantages and advantages. Competing newspapers had been independent and politically diversified, furnishing different viewpoints and more access among different publics. If the Lawton newspaper monopoly followed the usual trend across the nation, it would become an institutionalized business, more anxious to accumulate profits as a bulletin board than to serve the community. Yet not all was gloom and doom in such a monopoly situation. Some publishers with more finances at their command can see that their papers have a significant and responsible role in raising social, cultural, and political standards in their community. The future would tell which chart the Lawton Constitution and Morning Press would follow.

¹¹⁴Directory Newspapers and Periodicals, 1940, p. 759; 1945, p. 748; 1950, p. 815.

CHAPTER VI

BOOM AMID A NEW WAR

The Constitution-Press Expands

Lawton again experienced a period of spectacular growth during the 1950's. It accompanied the Fort Sill buildup during the Korean War and continued afterward. And growth in Lawton has always meant growth for its newspapers. Circulation continued to climb and so did advertising revenue. The changing times also brought changes in the leadership of the news staff. On May 13, 1951, it was announced that Emmett L. Keough, associate editor of the Constitution-Press, had been ordered to active duty as part of the army reservist callup in the Korean War. Although Keough took a leave of absence from his duties with the newspapers, he did not return to the Constitution-Press. After his release from active duty he entered business in Lawton, later becoming a vice president for a bank. The position of associate editor was not refilled. However, Ted Ralston later was named managing editor, a position that Keough had filled until the merger of the two newspapers in 1949. Ralston had served as sports editor, wire editor, and city editor on the Constitution.¹

The continued growth of the Lawton newspapers resulted in the

¹Constitution-Press, May 13, 1951, p. 1; Press, January 6, 1955, p. 1.

forming of a partnership in 1953. Ned Shepler established the Lawton Publishing Company, taking into the business his only child, Shirley Bentley, and her husband, Bill Bentley. They were married in 1944 while Bentley was serving in the army. As an infantry sergeant, he saw action in Europe. Captured by the Germans during the Ardennes breakthrough in 1944, he managed to escape. In March, 1945, he was wounded in action when his 99th Division stormed across the Rhine River to the Remagen bridgehead. Bentley later attended the University of Oklahoma, graduating with a degree in journalism. He then joined the Lawton newspapers as business manager. The Bentleys have two sons, Donald Shepler Bentley and Stephen Fred Bentley.²

The Constitution-Press in 1951 added one of the most revolutionary changes in typesetting ever made in the composing room. The new system was called a teletypesetter. It was an intricate automated operation in which a punched tape fed into a linotype or intertype machine and produced type ready for printing. The process replaced the far slower method of setting type on the keyboard. Skilled keyboard operators at Associated Press and United Press wire service bureaus in Oklahoma City punched into paper tapes stories assembled, written, and edited there. These perforated tapes were run through a transmitter in Oklahoma City, and the resulting series of electrical impulses reached Lawton on a leased long distance telephone wire. The impulses were received at Lawton by a reperforator machine which reproduced the same tape punched in Oklahoma City. This tape could be automatically fed into the linotype, which set the story into lead type. In effect, the new process

²Constitution, February 27, 1944, p. 9; March 12, 1944, p. 9; March 18, 1945, p. 1; March 27, 1945, p. 1; March 30, 1945, p. 1.

meant that a tape puncher in Oklahoma City was setting type for the Constitution and Press at far greater speed than the old method.³

Also, at the same time the reperforator machine was reproducing the tape from Oklahoma City, a story was coming over the wire service printer machine in the newspaper office. Each wire story transmitted on the printer machine had a number at the top which corresponded to a number on the tape being received. In this manner, a news editor could select a wire story to go into the newspaper, lay it out on a page, write a headline, and send it to the composing room. A printer would select the tape with the number which corresponded to the printer-machine story and feed the tape into the linotype, which automatically would set the story into type. In addition to the wire services' circuits, the newspaper also installed its own system of teletype-setting. Three tape punch operators received local stories from the copy desk in the newsroom and punched a tape. This tape in turn was fed into the linotypes, and the machine set the type automatically.⁴

The Constitution-Press began installation of the teletypesetters shortly after the outbreak of the Korean War. The changeover to automated typesetting was made "in anticipation of a possible manpower shortage, such as occurred during World War II." A newspaper announcement said the new system was not expected to displace any labor but would increase the production of type an estimated one-third to one-half. The changeover necessitated an investment of \$15,000 in teletypesetter equipment and the complete replacement of type "mats," or

³Constitution-Press, July 1, 1951, p. 7B.

⁴Ibid.

matrices, for all seven typesetting machines in the composing room. The newspaper also announced that during the past three years it had invested approximately \$45,000 in new typesetting machines, four of which were replacements for older machines and one an additional machine.⁵

By 1952, it became apparent that the narrow cramped newspaper plant at 409-11 C Avenue was too confining and inefficient for the rapidly expanding operation. The last major change in the newspaper plant had been in 1946 when a wall was removed between the firm's two buildings and the interior was completely remodeled and expanded. The Constitution-Press began to look around for a new home. Finally it was announced early in 1953 that the publishing company had purchased a site at the southeast corner of Third and A Avenue on the north edge of downtown Lawton. The site was 150 by 250 feet and offered a half-block of frontage on Third Avenue. The building would be set back a sufficient distance to provide parking in front. Additional parking and off-street servicing areas for a large loading dock would be provided in the rear. Another lot 150 feet square just across the street north of the new site was purchased for additional parking needs and possible future expansion.⁶

To get ideas for the new building, Shepler and Mechanical Superintendent Bill Hargraves visited recently constructed plants at Amarillo and San Angelo, Texas, and Springfield, Missouri. With their suggestions, Paul Harris, Lawton architect, designed the new building.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., January 3, 1954, p. 1.

Construction began April 29, 1954, and the building was ready for occupancy just a little over a year later on May 16, 1955.⁷

The plant of reinforced concrete and brick had cost \$600,000 to build and several hundred thousand more to equip. The building had a ground floor and a basement, each with 13,201 square feet of space. The ground floor contained news, advertising, business and the publisher's executive offices in the front and the composing room and mailing-circulation room at the rear. In the cavernous basement were a large conference room, an employees' coffee and lunch room, the photography department with darkrooms, a mammoth storage room where twelve freight carloads of newsprint could be stored three rolls deep, stereotyping department, a mechanical employees' locker and wash room with showers, and a gigantic area for the new forty-page press, which was connected to a huge 3,000-gallon tank holding a year's supply of ink.⁸

The new Goss Universal press could print a twenty-page paper in one section at a top speed of 40,000 copies an hour, or a forty-page paper in two sections at a speed of 20,000 copies an hour. It was quite an improvement over the old sixteen-page press and was the pride of the Constitution-Press. It could print three-color and four-color pages. It consisted of five eight-page units and was designed for additional units if needed in the future. A conveyor belt carried papers as they came off the press upstairs into the mail and circulation room. Cost of the new press was \$140,000. New stereotyping equipment and

⁷Ibid., Open House Section, June 19, 1955, p. 2.

⁸Ibid.

installation and freight costs totaled another \$61,000.⁹

Among the many services included in the new plant were an Associated Press twenty-four hour special sports wire and Associated Press wirephoto service. An average of sixty pictures a day from all over the world could be received on the network; an individual picture took only eight minutes time. The Constitution-Press also could send pictures directly on the circuit to other AP members across the nation.¹⁰

The number of personnel was expanded in all of the newspaper departments. Following the move to the new plant, ninety-six full-time employees drawing an annual payroll of \$335,000 were engaged in production of the two newspapers. This compared to 1950, when sixty-eight employees earned \$241,954 annually. The mechanical department continued to be a union shop, with the printers negotiating contracts with the management for pay scales and fringe benefits. The display advertising department typified the expansion in personnel. In the late 1940's before the two newspapers merged, Wilbur Rice and two salesmen made up the department. In the new plant, Rice was assisted by seven display advertising salesmen.¹¹

In the news room, twenty full-time employees kept busy gathering, analyzing, writing, and editing the morning and evening newspapers. Two separate staffs under the direction of managing editor Ralston were engaged in putting out the newspapers, although some worked

⁹Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 5.

¹¹Ibid., p. 3.

interchangeably. Two of the long-time reporters had left. Mary Goddard was then with the Oklahoma Publishing Company, Oklahoma City. Lindsey Whitten entered the service station business after fourteen years with the Constitution. A new crop of editors and reporters, several clutching ink-fresh diplomas, now manned positions at the Lawton newspapers. Many of the newcomers would soon make their bylines familiar in Lawton. Several would achieve fame later in the state when they left for work on the Oklahoma City and Tulsa metropolitan newspapers. John Clabes, city editor, headed the Constitution news room, assisted by Bill Ewald, telegraph editor. News editor Ross Robertson was in charge of the Morning Press news team. The expanded sports department included Lew Johnson, Constitution sports editor; Doyle May, Press sports editor, and Jack Warner, sports writer. In the society department, Mrs. Lucile Potter was editor and Miss Yvonne Jones was assistant. Reporters and feature writers included Bill Hamilton, Bill Crawford, Lawdis Gandy, Mrs. Connie Barton, Mrs. Phyllis Gibson, and Bob Greenberg. Three photographers, Bill Dixon, Lawrence Gee, and Don Warren, served in the news department. Tom Sharrock, who later wrote a popular column for the Press, "Around the Hub," was area news editor-photographer. Proof-readers were Mrs. Perle Coursey, Mrs. Jean Murray, and Mrs. Alma Watkins.¹²

The mammoth moving operation went off without a hitch as the newspapers changed location for the first time in almost forty years. Not a single publication was missed. Open House was held on a Sunday afternoon, June 19. The same day of the public showing the newspapers

¹²Ibid., p. 4.

published a twelve-page open house section. Special stories described the working operations of the newspaper departments in the new building and told details of how a newspaper was published. Stories said the new plant was the third largest one in Oklahoma from the standpoint of size alone and that "its facilities surpass all except those of the Daily Oklahoman and Tulsa World." The Lawton newspapers considered themselves elevated from the small town class into the metropolitan field.¹³

An editorial on the move from the old plant into the new one commented:

. . . It is with pride that we move into our new quarters, pride both in the ever-progressing city of Lawton and pride in our own organization which we feel must have fulfilled its obligations in service to the community to merit its continuing support over the years. Throughout the years this newspaper has always sought to serve the interests of the people who make up this community and it will continue to do so.

We feel these newspapers have played an important part in presenting the affairs of the community to the world at large and taking the lead in support of everything for the betterment of Lawton, Oklahoma, and the nation. We shall continue to emphasize to ourselves that fine quarters do not make a newspaper, it is the brains, the interest and the integrity of the people who produce it that make it of real service to the people.¹⁴

Editorial Postures of the 1950's

The editorial pages of the two newspapers during the 1950's continued to reflect Ned Shepler's "liberal" Democratic Party political stance. The Constitution and Press editorial pages carried such syndicated columnists as the Alsop brothers, Joseph and Stewart; Marquis Childs; Thomas L. Stokes; Walter Lippmann; Roscoe Drummond; Robert C.

¹³Ibid., pp. 1-2.

¹⁴Constitution-Press, May 15, 1955, p. 6B.

Ruark, and Drew Pearson. Yet one major development occurred in the printing of locally written editorials. Editorials written either by Shepler or Ted Ralston, the managing editor, usually appeared only in the Sunday newspaper. This practice began in the late 1940's. On days other than Sunday, "canned" editorials--those purchased from syndicates--appeared in the editorial columns. It may have appeared to the average reader that these editorials were locally written. However, they discussed only national and international issues in the news. Comment on local and state issues was noticeably absent during the weekdays.

Shepler continued his traditional support of Democratic Party candidates during the 1950's. And he took special interest in the 1950 United States Senate race in which his long-time friend from Medicine Park, Elmer Thomas, was seeking reelection. Thomas, seventy-three years old, had served in the Senate since 1927. He was chairman of the Committee on Agriculture and the Military Appropriations Sub-Committee. His opponent for the Democratic nomination was forty-eight-year-old Fifth District Congressman A. S. (Mike) Monroney of Oklahoma City. Shepler not only supported Thomas in a barrage of editorials but also printed several news stories backgrounding Thomas's career and contributions to the state and Southwest Oklahoma. It was a hangover from older days of partisan journalism when a newspaper's candidate would be given news space outside of the editorial page. To the newspapers' discredit, Monroney was not given equal coverage.¹⁵

Thomas had come under fire in 1949 from Columnist Drew Pearson,

¹⁵Ibid., March 5, 1950, p. 1.

who charged Thomas with illegally speculating on farm products while serving as chairman of the Senate Agricultural Committee. The columnist accused the Senator of using inside information on cotton futures to dabble in the market. Thomas replied that his wife once bought 300 bales of cotton on speculation but insisted no law was violated. Thomas also said the columnist may have been responsible for sending other public figures to their deaths "but he hasn't got me yet."¹⁶

In editorials, Shepler cited Senator Thomas's long service to the state and nation and his contributions to the Lawton-Fort Sill community. As chairman of the Agriculture Committee, Shepler said, Thomas had been a leader in the program which had resulted in prosperity for farmers. Shepler argued that Thomas played a big part in furthering the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), which made possible electrical service to the farms of Oklahoma. Also, editorials maintained that Thomas was instrumental in boosting the water and power resources of the state, "thus laying the ground work for future industrial development." The newspaper editorials also contended that Thomas, as chairman of the Senate Sub-Committee on Military Appropriations, piloted through the Senate all of the huge military appropriations necessary for the conduct of World War II.¹⁷

As to advances in Southwest Oklahoma, the Constitution-Press editorials credited the Altus irrigation program to Senator Thomas. "Thousands of acres have thus been brought under irrigation, bringing added wealth and prosperity not only to Altus but to all of Southwestern

¹⁶ Ibid., December 11, 1949, p. 1.

¹⁷ Ibid., May 28, 1950, p. 8A; July 9, 1950, p. 1.

Oklahoma," an editorial said. In the Lawton area, the editorials said, Thomas helped the city of Lawton receive federal aid so it could rebuild Lake Lawtonka Dam "so that Lawton and Fort Sill might be assured of a greater water supply." And, just as important, the editorials said, "This development alone made possible . . . the greatly expanded training program at Fort Sill." Additionally, the newspaper editorials reminded readers that much of the recreational development in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge was made possible by Thomas's active interest and support.¹⁸ When Thomas and Monroney were pitted against each other in the runoff primary, a page-one editorial concluded:

. . . It has been largely through Elmer Thomas's efforts that many of the fine developments in Comanche County and throughout the state have been secured. It would literally take a new man 25 years to attain to the position Thomas now holds in the Senate. It is doubtful that Oklahoma would ever again attain chairmanship of the Senate Agricultural Committee or the chairmanship of the subcommittee for all armed forces appropriations. Oklahoma simply cannot afford to lose Elmer Thomas's services and position in the United States Senate.
 . . .¹⁹

But Monroney was successful. The defeat ended Thomas's political career, and Lawton found itself without a hometown Senator for the first time in twenty-four years. In the general election, Shepler gracefully switched to all-out support for Monroney against his Republican opponent, the Reverend Bill Alexander, world famous evangelist and pastor of Oklahoma City First Christian Church. Said one editorial:

. . . Although Lawton and Southwest Oklahoma feel the loss of its senior Senator, Elmer Thomas, all citizens agree that he was unseated in the Democratic primary by an out-standing legislator. . . .

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., July 9, 1950, p. 1.

Mike Monroney is a gifted leader. His record in the House of Representatives has been exceptional, meriting him the Collier Award as the outstanding Congressman among his 435 colleagues. . . .

He has demonstrated the courage of independent thinking and action. No selfish interest group controls him--he consistently votes his beliefs and the beliefs of his constituents. . . .

He has won the respect and admiration of Washington circles. . . . In other words, Mike Monroney has won his spurs. . . .

He is opposed, on the other hand, by a candidate who has demonstrated by his famous switch from one political party to another, and by his oscillation on matters of paramount importance to this state and this nation, the undesirable trait of instability.

In our opinion, there should be no difficulty whatever in choosing between Mike Monroney and the Rev. Bill Alexander. . . .²⁰

Comanche County was solid for Monroney, 4,628 to 2,289 for Alexander.

Monroney won the race statewide defeating Alexander, 345,953 to 285,224.²¹

In the 1952 presidential race, Shepler continued his support of the Democratic nominee, a practice which reached back to the first years when he became a Lawton editor. A Sunday editorial noted that the Constitution-Press had sought to present a "fair, unslanted, objective and balanced news picture of the two opposing candidates" during the long campaign. When all the froth and malarkey are laid aside, the editorial said, "we believe that nearly every citizen will reach the conclusion that the country has two good and able men running for the presidency." The country would be in good hands regardless of which is elected, the editorial contended. As the campaign progressed, however, the Constitution-Press said that Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson had

²⁰ Ibid., October 22, 1950, p. 1.

²¹ Constitution, November 8, 1950, p. 1; 1973 Directory of Oklahoma (Oklahoma City: State Election Board, 1973), p. 393.

demonstrated "that he is the best equipped to assume the direction of administration and to deal with the complex governmental problems which confront the nation during the next four years." The editorial added:

. . . Everyone, including Republicans and Democrats, has the greatest respect for General Eisenhower as both a military leader and a patriotic citizen. But as the campaign advances the General appears to have gotten out of character. Pulled this way and that by the diverse elements which now make up the Republican party, the General has dropped some of the forthright characteristics which appealed to most people and has yielded to expediency on too many occasions. It leads us to the conclusion that the Republican candidate has got into something which he does not know too much about and that he lacks the knowledge and experience with governmental affairs which are essential to a successful administration.

On the other hand, Governor Stevenson has been trained in political affairs. He has displayed the independence and forthrightness which appeal to most voters. He has been consistent in his position and utterances, whether in Florida, New York or California. He has had experience in politics and in the administration of government on a relatively large scale as governor of Illinois. He cleaned up Illinois and he can be expected to clean up some of the practices which have cast discredit on this administration. In our opinion he will put government administration upon a high plane and keep it there. We believe he will establish a more stable government, economically and otherwise, without trying to turn the clock back like so many Republican leaders would like and which cannot be done without disastrous results to the country. We believe Governor Stevenson has the courage, as he has demonstrated in this campaign, to not yield to partisan blocs for purely political advantage. In other words, we believe he is a well balanced, highly intelligent statesman with the ability to unite the people and his own party to carry on an administration in the interests of all the people. We have the greatest respect for General Eisenhower but we believe Governor Stevenson is best equipped to fill the office of the presidency. . . .²²

Comanche County, traditionally a Democratic bastion, favored Stevenson over Eisenhower by a vote of 9,027 to 8,664, a record turnout of voters. But the slim county margin went against the state trend, as Eisenhower defeated Stevenson 518,045 to 430,939. But in the 1956

²² Constitution-Press, November 2, 1952, p. 6B.

presidential contest, Shepler did not take an editorial stand in support of either candidate, Stevenson or President Eisenhower. For the Constitution, an avowed Democratic newspaper since its start in Lawton in 1904, it was quite a break with tradition. After supporting every Democratic nominee for president, this time the paper kept its editorial page silent on the presidential campaign. However, Comanche County remained in the Democratic column, favoring Stevenson over Eisenhower, 8,756 votes to 7,532, or a margin of 1,224 votes. The victory margin was about three times as large as in 1952, when Stevenson carried Comanche County by 358 votes. But Eisenhower's popularity held up in the state, and he carried Oklahoma, 473,769 to 385,581.²³

A City Brightens Up

Lawton's remarkable feat of almost doubling its population from 1940 to 1950 was analyzed early in the new decade in a series of stories by the Constitution-Press. Reporter Mary Goddard pointed out that it was always easy to say that Fort Sill was the only reason for the area's population increase. Her survey found that fully sixty per cent of the growth was related to Fort Sill. But there were additional factors that accounted for the other forty per cent increase. For one, Lawton had become a district headquarters for a vast number of commercial, non-commercial, and utility firms serving Southwest Oklahoma. It was also found in the survey that hundreds of retired army personnel had chosen Lawton as their permanent home. Nearby Fort Sill offered the privileges of shopping at its post exchanges and commissaries, and the

²³Constitution, November 6, 1952, p. 1; November 6, 1956, p. 1.

use of its medical facilities. Also, many of the retired army had made friends in Lawton, they liked the city and simply regarded it as their permanent home. They found Lawton's cost of living about twenty per cent cheaper than large metropolitan areas, and many liked the comparatively mild climate.²⁴

Another reason for the city's growth was found to be that Lawton attracted a large number of permanent construction workers. The growth promised a steady supply of jobs in construction. To service Lawton's population increases, businesses showed a gain from 307 in 1939 to more than 800 at the end of 1949, a gain of approximately 500. A rundown of the city's wholesale and retail business showed that the city had become a trading and shopping center servicing a large area of Southwest Oklahoma. Finally, the survey found that once the city got its tremendous initial push from the wartime mushrooming of Fort Sill, that it achieved a momentum. There was the cumulative effect of an expanding population on itself, the rolling snowball, especially when the economy was largely a service one to begin with.²⁵

On June 25, 1950, the Korean War began. Fort Sill's troop strength soared to more than 20,000 as the post turned out 14,876 Artillery School graduates annually to meet the war-time demand. The Officer Candidate School reopened in February, 1951, and it produced 12,398 officers during the war. Activity later intensified at Fort Sill in 1953 with the establishment of the Army Aviation School and supporting

²⁴Constitution-Press, January 22, 1950, p. 1; Constitution, January 23, 1950, p. 1; January 24, 1950, p. 1; January 26, 1950, p. 1; January 27, 1950, p. 14.

²⁵Constitution, January 27, 1950, p. 4.

maintenance plant. In August, 1954, the aviation school moved to Fort Rucker, Alabama. However, its place was taken by several other Army helicopter units which trained with the artillery. Fort Sill went through a king-size building boom to handle the new Korean War training. Congress approved a \$19 million expansion program. A sixty-eight acre patch of prairie on the western edge of the military reservation was converted into a barracks area containing twenty-one three-storied living quarters, the latest thing in army barracks. It was a \$6,782,546 project. Another major construction project at the post was the \$2.5 million Snow Hall. It was the first centralized academic and office building for the Artillery School. By far the largest building at Fort Sill, it boasted 190,000 square feet of floor space which would accommodate some 2,500 students in its 50 classrooms.²⁶

And then almost overnight with the start of the war, Lawton was a boom town again. Lawton had been caught short on housing during World War II. This time, however, Lawton civic leaders and Shepler through numerous newspaper editorials led a drive to ease the housing shortage. Constitution-Press editorials sounded the need to designate Lawton as a "critical defense housing area." On October 26, 1951, President Truman ordered that Lawton be included in the critical defense housing category. The designation relaxed credit restrictions for housing developers, made critical materials available to developers, assigned specific quotas of housing for rent and for sale, and set rent control machinery in motion. Lawton was one of the first cities in the nation

²⁶Constitution-Press, January 2, 1955, p. 1; Eric F. Goldman, The Crucial Decade: America, 1945-1955 (New York: Knopf, 1956), pp. 145-156.

to get the critical designation at its own request.²⁷

Soon Lawton was blossoming out in new housing additions to take care of the bulge. During 1951 and 1952, Lawton experienced its two greatest building years in its history. Construction during both years totaled over \$12 million. An estimated 1,300 housing units were completed, among them an enormous 500-unit Wherry Housing project near the post. Because the huge defense housing projects provided enough dwellings for civilian and military personnel, the federal government lifted rent controls on September 1, 1952.²⁸

Also in the fifties, Lawton experienced the greatest civic development in its history. With the bustling, sprawling military installation in its backyard, Shepler and other civic leaders were keenly aware that the post's economic welfare and survival were wrapped up in the job of keeping its army population reasonably happy. With the housing problem solved temporarily at least, the city's leaders suggested and supported other plans for improving Lawton and making it a better place in which to live.

Already completed was a new modern airport which made it far easier for travelers, visitors, and newcomers to reach Lawton. The city suffered in its early days because it was left off the main line of the railroads. Consequently the city's leaders decided it would be a fatal mistake if the same error occurred in aviation. So the dream was realized for making Lawton a hub for air travel in Southwest Oklahoma.

²⁷Ibid., July 25, 1951; Constitution, October 26, 1951, p. 1.

²⁸Constitution-Press, December 30, 1951, p. 1; December 28, 1952, p. 1.

On September 3, 1950, a \$1,005,602 airport, served by two airlines, had been dedicated.²⁹

A major project in the civic development program was the acquisition of a 320-acre park in the north section of Lawton. The land, later named Elmer Thomas Park, was purchased from the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache tribes. It was a long sought goal for Shepler and the subject of countless editorials in the Constitution-Press. A \$2.5 million high school complex accommodating 1,500 students was completed on the park grounds in the summer of 1954. The new high school highlighted a multi-million dollar school building program launched to find enough classrooms for mushrooming student enrollment. Nearby on the same municipal tract, the McMahon Foundation's new fine arts auditorium also was completed in 1955. The half-million dollar structure, seating 1,500 persons, was donated to the city by Mrs. E. P. McMahon. Since 1949 Shepler had served as president of the McMahon Foundation, a philanthropic organization which derived its income from oil royalties established in Lawton by the McMahon family. Under Shepler's guidance, the foundation was to contribute funds for the construction of many other civic improvements. Also constructed on the Elmer Thomas Park grounds was a \$300,000 National Guard Armory, an army reserve center, and numerous park facilities, including baseball, softball, and football diamonds and fields.³⁰

The pride and joy of the Constitution-Press and the city's civic leaders was the \$1.6 million Hotel Lawtonian in downtown Lawton, a major

²⁹Constitution, September 3, 1950, p. 1.

³⁰Constitution-Press, January 3, 1954, p. 1; January 2, 1955, p. 1.

community project. A hotel had long been at the top of the list for needed civic improvements. Suitable hotel accommodations simply were not available for visitors, especially when Lawton sought convention business. The 10-story, 151-room hotel was financed by 1,800 persons who dug in their pockets to purchase \$800,000 worth of stock. This was supplemented by a \$700,000 Reconstruction Finance Corporation loan with Lawton banks participating to the extent of \$100,000. Formal opening of the hotel was held in January, 1955. In later years it was vastly expanded, adding on motel-type buildings, an outdoor swimming pool, and motel cabanas. Shepler wrote scores of editorials on the need of such a community hotel, and he was among the most prominent stockholders. He served on the hotel's board of directors from its inception. The publisher felt so strongly about the Hotel Lawtonian that he and Mrs. Shepler sold their large family home at 102 Fort Sill Boulevard and moved into the hotel.³¹

Championed by Constitution-Press editorials, other improvements which helped to make Lawton a better place to live included a new county hospital and roads in and around the city. The 100-bed Comanche County Hospital opened August 26, 1951, after several years of planning and construction. It was the first public-owned hospital for the city and county, and it was to be expanded several times in the future. The state's first three-level traffic interchange was completed on the northeast edge of Lawton in 1955, helping to ease the traffic crunch from Fort Sill into Lawton. Yet Lawton lacked a major four-lane highway artery connecting it and other Southwest Oklahoma towns with Oklahoma

³¹Press, January 21, 1955, p. 13C.

City to the northeast and principal Texas cities to the south. Shepler editorials pointed out that Lawton and Southwest Oklahoma lacked sufficient support in the Oklahoma Legislature to obtain funds to match federal money for constructing a four-lane highway. Shepler said that Southwest Oklahoma's "best bet for a modern traffic artery . . . rests under the toll road program." He continued to beat the editorial drum for several years for a turnpike system in Southwest Oklahoma.³²

And during the fifties there remained Lawton's chief problem, one which it had been unable to solve since its earliest years. That was water, or rather a lack of it. As Lawton's population continued to mushroom and new housing sections were added to the city, more water lines were needed to supply them. Constitution-Press editorials supported the need for repeated bond issues as they arose during the fifties. The first bond issue was passed in 1950. Voters approved \$2,217,000 in bonds for new water and sewer lines, improved drainage, and an expanded disposal plant. Increased water usage and drought in 1952 led to the calling of another bond issue for further expansion of the city's water facilities. Voters approved \$1,720,000 for the laying of a thirty-inch water main from Lake Lawtonka to the city, expansion of the filtration plant, and the raising of the height of the dam another ten feet.³³

Starting in 1951, a six-year drought struck Southwest Oklahoma. Stock ponds dried up, crops burned in the fields, and cattle were sold

³²Constitution-Press, August 26, 1951, p. 1; January 1, 1956, p. 8; December 30, 1956, p. 4.

³³Constitution, December 29, 1950, p. 1; Constitution-Press, December 28, 1952, p. 1.

for one-third of their value. Conditions became so bad that the federal government distributed free food commodities to the needy. And the drought dropped the water supply in Lake Lawtonka to a dangerously low level, forcing strict rationing of water for Lawton and Fort Sill. Torrential rains fell for three days in May of 1955, flooding lowland areas, but did not really break the long drought. The level of Lake Lawtonka was boosted only slightly.³⁴

By 1956 Lake Lawtonka was at its lowest level in fifteen years. Through front-page editorials Shepler argued for the passage of a \$6,182,000 bond issue for the construction of a new water reservoir on East Cache Creek, designed to more than double the water supply for Lawton and Fort Sill. One such editorial said the bond election was a life or death issue for the Lawton-Fort Sill community. The editorial contended:

Water is as essential to life as air or food. Without an adequate supply of water no city or community can exist. An additional source of water must be obtained for Lawton and Fort Sill to maintain their present position. It is absolutely essential that more water be obtained if both Lawton and Fort Sill are to continue their growth. The problem confronting Lawton today is just that simple.

There are some who look upon the \$6,182,000 bond issue to be voted on next Tuesday as something this community cannot afford. The simple fact is that we cannot afford not to vote this bond issue and provide an additional source of water. To not do so is to cripple the future growth of Lawton and to jeopardize the continuing expansion of Fort Sill. We might as well face the fact that the federal government is not going to continue building up Fort Sill and bringing in more personnel unless ample water can be provided.

Lawton is in a semi-arid region. We have periods of extended drouth like that we have experienced over the last five years. The only way to overcome this handicap is to provide sufficient storage capacity to outlast any drouth period. Lake Lawtonka hasn't been full (to the old spillway)

³⁴Constitution-Press, January 2, 1955, p. 1; January 1, 1956, p. 1.

since 1951. In the meantime the demand for water has doubled and tripled. It is even doubtful that with a good season of heavy rains Lawtonka will fill due to the heavy drain a growing Lawton and Fort Sill place upon the lake, plus the fact that per capita consumption is constantly increasing.

The logic of a reservoir on East Cache Creek should be apparent to everyone. Cache Creek is the only stream in this area that has a consistent annual flow of water in such quantity that a lake would be replenished each year. The watershed, approximately three times that of Lake Lawtonka, is of sufficient size to practically insure a reserve supply that would carry Lawton and Fort Sill through any anticipated drouth. . . .

Let it be said for the record that no civic problem is ever permanently solved. Lawton's water problem will never be permanently solved. Growth and change will require a new appraisal of water needs periodically as long as there is a Lawton. . . .³⁵

The editorial also pointed to opposition raised to the bond issue. Opposition centered around objections to the consulting engineers for the project, the Wyatt Hendrick company of Lawton. Hendrick had been the city's consulting engineer for years. Opponents questioned the ability of the Lawton firm to handle engineering for the new reservoir and urged that out-of-town engineering firms with long experience in constructing and designing reservoirs be hired. Other opponents contended that no additional lake was needed if water meters were installed at all Lawton residences.³⁶

For the first time in Lawton history, voters turned down a major water improvement program. Only ad valorem tax paying voters could take part in the election on October 30, 1956, in which the bonds were defeated, 3,693 to 2,907. But the defeat of the bond issue left unanswered the city's increasingly serious water supply problem. The Constitution-Press and Lawton civic leaders proposed calling another

³⁵ Ibid., October 28, 1956, p. 1.

³⁶ Ibid.

bond election. The Lawton City Council responded by setting the election for December 18, 1956.³⁷

In the meantime, Shepler and other civic leaders confronted opposition to the bonds by airing the dispute over the engineering of the new reservoir. Officials of the federal Bureau of Reclamation were called in to assess the Hendrick firm's engineering for the new reservoir. The federal engineers said Hendrick's engineering for the new reservoir was "perfect as far as the bureau is concerned." The federal engineers said the new reservoir program was "definitely a feasible plan" and that the only alternative for a major Lawton water supply was the proposed Waurika federal flood control project, which was many years away.³⁸

M. G. Barclay, Oklahoma City director of the Bureau of Reclamation, contended that the Cache Creek and Waurika projects were the best possibilities and most desirable for Lawton water supply. "It is only a matter of timing," Barclay noted in an interview. "You must have water now and eventually will need some from Waurika if you continue to grow. We concur that you have already reached the time when you must get a new supply. You are lucky you haven't run out of water before."

Barclay also said that the Bureau of Reclamation has studied all possible water sources in the Lawton area as part of its overall search for suitable reservoir sites. He noted that the Cache Creek site was the only desirable location found in the immediate Lawton area. Barclay added that the bureau had ruled out the Wichita Mountains and

³⁷Ibid., November 11, 1956, p. 1.

³⁸Ibid.

underground wells as possible productive water supplies for Lawton. He said the Wichita Mountains had too small a drainage area and that most of it was already controlled by small lakes. He said the Lawton area did not have much deep ground water because of unfavorable geological formations.³⁹

With this federal support of the Lawton engineering firm's plans, Shepler campaigned extensively through editorials for approval of the water bonds in the second election. A front-page editorial prior to the election highlighted his arguments:

. . . This is the most important issue with which the city has been faced in many years or will be confronted in the years to come. The very future of the city and of its individual citizens depends upon the outcome of Tuesday's vote. It should bring a soul-searching effort on the part of every citizen to make the right decision.

This newspaper has always pursued a conservative course. It tries never to be an alarmist. But the consequence of failure to understand the needs of the city and of Fort Sill and the failure to make a favorable decision for more water will not only be alarming, it may well be disastrous to every property owner, every landlord, everyone in business and everyone who works for a living in Lawton or Fort Sill.

Fort Sill authorities have let it be known how vital the problem of water supply is to the Army post. Activities at Fort Sill are in a transitional stage, with the adoption of new concepts and new weapons born of the technical advances of recent years. The post is on the verge of a permanent and considerable program of expansion. It should be borne in mind that Army planners look not only to the present but five, 10 and 25 years ahead in planning for the future. It should be quite obvious that no one in authority, with the responsibility for the welfare of troops and for the expenditure of multiplied millions of dollars, is going to recommend expanding at a place where water, one of the basic essentials of life, is not available or will not be made available.

Lawton years ago gladly assumed the responsibility for providing a water supply for the army post. It has been a mutually profitable arrangement. It is a responsibility which Lawton cannot in good conscience evade now. . . .

We have emphasized the importance of providing adequate water for Fort Sill because, in the final analysis, Fort Sill

³⁹Ibid.

is the basis for Lawton's growth and prosperity. Any decline in personnel or activities at Fort Sill is reflected immediately in Lawton with vacant houses, fewer jobs and less business generally. But the additional water supply is no less important for the city itself. Lawton cannot grow and prosper or invite additional industry without an adequate, visible supply of water. . . .

No community can stand still for long. It either goes forward or it goes backward. Lawton has grown and expanded in all directions in recent years. If our present growth is to be maintained additional water must be provided. Failure to do so may well have disastrous results on the economy of the whole community and upon every individual citizen.

Tuesday is the day of decision. We trust that every citizen has informed himself of the issues. We hope that everyone will keep in mind the main issue, the need for water, and vote for the six million dollar bond issue. The future of Lawton and Fort Sill hinges upon its outcome. It is just that serious.⁴⁰

The election showed a major reversal of voters' sentiments since the water bond issue had been defeated seven weeks earlier at the polls. The vote was 4,352 for the new water reservoir to 1,438 against, a majority of more than three to one. Only four of the city's thirty-one voting precincts went against the bonds. Purchase of 8,500 acres of land for the new reservoir site, construction of a 4,000-foot earthen dam across Cache Creek to create the reservoir, and the laying of a 42-inch pipeline from the new lake to carry water to Lake Lawtonka were expected to take from three to five years to complete.⁴¹

The drought continued in 1957 until cloudbursts, accompanied by several killer tornadoes, began in April and lasted six weeks, well into May. The torrential rains filled Lake Lawtonka up to the level of its newly-installed flood gates for the first time since their installation in 1953. Lawton's and Fort Sill's water supply was boosted to fourteen

⁴⁰Ibid., December 16, 1956, p. 1.

⁴¹Press, December 19, 1956, p. 1.

billion gallons of water--the greatest in history. A Constitution-Press editorial noted: "There should be no shortage for the next two to three years, during which time it is expected the additional supply of Cache Creek will become available." The editorial also reminded Lawton citizens that the filling of the lake should not hamper plans for the construction of the Cache Creek reservoir. And the timetable for construction of the new reservoir was met. By the end of 1959, the land had been purchased and construction of the dam itself was well under way.⁴²

Fort Sill Expansion Fights

During the fifties, Fort Sill sought to acquire thousands of acres of land west of the military reservation in order to fire long-range artillery weapons and newly developed rockets and missiles. Most of the land sought was privately owned. A portion was part of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. The expansion programs were announced in two stages. One, started in 1952, sought more than 30,000 acres; the other, in 1957, approximately 300,000 acres in three counties. Both expansion drives stirred a hornets' nest of protest as angry ranchers, farmers, businessmen, and conservationists organized to stop the army from taking the lands. And at each step of the drawn-out battles, Ned Shepler's Constitution-Press editorials defended Fort Sill's need for expansion and attacked the opposition's stands.

Fort Sill first announced in October of 1952 that it was seeking more land for firing ranges. A request had been sent to the Department

⁴²Constitution-Press, May 5, 1957, p. 10; June 2, 1957, p. 21; December 29, 1957, p. 1; January 3, 1960, p. 15.

of Defense for 38,000 acres, all of which adjoined the military reservation. One block of land included 20,000 acres immediately west of the existing range, extending 10 miles west of the current boundary and four miles south of the wildlife refuge. The other block of land sought was about 18,000 acres immediately north of the reservation. Fort Sill listed three reasons for needing the land, including the increased student load at the Artillery School, the larger number of units stationed at the Artillery School, and the longer range of modern artillery weapons. Sill officials pointed out that the post had not been expanded since World War II, when the military reservation was increased to 69,375 acres.⁴³

Only a few days after the initial announcement, approximately 200 ranchers of northwest Comanche County met to map plans to block the expansion. Naming its organization the "Wichita Land Owners Association," the protest group raised approximately \$20,000. They also announced a series of meetings in surrounding Comanche County communities to enlist political support. In reply, the Lawton Chamber of Commerce and Shepler's editorials voiced full support for the Fort Sill land expansion. However, because of the Korean War, the Pentagon did not pass the request to Congress for funds to buy the land, and the proposed expansion was temporarily shelved.⁴⁴

In 1955 the Fort Sill land expansion issue surfaced again. The army again filed an official request with the Pentagon to expand the

⁴³Constitution, July 24, 1942, p. 1; Press, October 16, 1952, p. 1; October 21, 1952, p. 1; November 11, 1952, p. 1.

⁴⁴Press, October 23, 1952, p. 1; Constitution-Press, November 2, 1952, p. 1.

Fort Sill ranges. In turn, the Defense Department asked Congress for \$2,216,000 to purchase the land. The Defense Department said it was imperative that additional land be made available to the Artillery School for troop training with modern artillery weapons such as the 280-millimeter atomic cannon and newly developed rockets and missiles. This time, however, 31,020 acres were asked in the expansion program. The 18,000-acre block of land north of the military post was not included in the request. Instead, 20,320 acres of grazing lands to the west of the military reservation and south of the refuge were sought from private land owners, and 10,700 acres were asked to be taken from the southern edge of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. The strip along the southern border of the Wichitas was rough and rocky hills and was a considerable distance from the principal recreational areas of the refuge used by the public. The privately owned lands did not include the towns of Cache and Indianahoma but did include Craterville Park and Post Oak Mission, an Indian school, church and cemetery. Only about fifty farm and ranch families, totaling 175 persons, would be affected. The army pointed out that Fort Sill had only about 70,000 acres for its activities compared with 107,000 at Fort Knox, 182,000 at Fort Benning, 177,000 at Fort Bliss, and 151,000 at Fort Bragg.⁴⁵

Immediately ranchers and farmers affected by the expansion plans revived their protest group, the Wichita Land Owners Association.

Wayne Rowe, a Comanche County rancher, and Frank Rush, owner of Craterville Park, headed the protesters. The landowners contended that no amount of compensation could repay them for being forced out of their

⁴⁵Press, April 14, 1955, p. 1; April 21, 1955, p. 1; Constitution, April 21, 1955, p. 1.

homes and off the ranches and farms they had operated for years. Conservation forces also joined the protest movement, charging that the military takeover of the southern edge of the wildlife refuge would seriously affect the wildlife program and curtail the public's use of the recreation areas.⁴⁶

The Constitution-Press immediately threw its editorial support behind the expansion, arguing reasons of national defense and prevention of the possible loss of the huge military post and the millions of dollars in income it brought to the state. Also strongly endorsing the land acquisition was the Lawton Chamber of Commerce. Chamber officials charged that principal opposition to the expansion came from a group of "so-called nature lovers" who had tried to make an issue out of the small tract of land involved in the wildlife refuge. The chamber pointed out that the principal mission of the refuge, preserving the herds of buffalo, longhorn cattle, deer, and elk, would not be curtailed in the slightest by the range expansion. Also, the Lawton Chamber officials announced that its members were working with the affected landowners to see that fair prices would be paid for their lands.⁴⁷

Attempting to gain support for the land expansion from towns in Southwest Oklahoma, the Constitution-Press printed a series of stories and editorials arguing how Fort Sill payrolls primed the economic pump of these communities. The detailed stories described how 670 Civil Service workers living in eleven communities ringing Fort Sill brought approximately \$2 million a year into their towns. "There is hardly a

⁴⁶Press, April 15, 1955, p. 1; April 21, 1955, p. 1.

⁴⁷Ibid., May 18, 1955, p. 1.

community within a fifty mile radius of this great Army Post that is not beneficially affected by the government expenditures at Fort Sill," an editorial commented.⁴⁸

Hearings on the request for additional land for Fort Sill began in Senate and House Armed Services committees in Washington during the summer of 1955. In order to provide for more complete and faster news coverage than the wire services offered, the Constitution-Press employed the services of a Washington news bureau, the B. N. Timmons News Agency. The Constitution and Press published lengthy stories on the land expansion developments in the nation's capital, including the testimony of a long line of witnesses. The Lawton Chamber of Commerce sent a delegation to lobby for the Fort Sill issue. Opponents of the expansion also traveled to Washington and protested the proposed enlargement of the post, labeling it as a "Lawton Chamber of Commerce promotion." After lengthy and bitter battles in the armed services and appropriations committees in both houses of Congress, the House and Senate approved an appropriations bill containing the funds for the Fort Sill expansion. President Eisenhower signed the bill on August 4, 1955. The army's next obstacle was appraisal, purchase, and condemnation proceedings toward acquiring the 20,320 acres of land.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay, supported by conservationists, balked at transferring 10,700 acres of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge to Fort Sill. Shepler editorials criticized

⁴⁸Constitution-Press, May 29, 1955, pp. 1, 18.

⁴⁹Ibid., June 12, 1955, p. 24; June 19, 1955, p. 10; July 24, 1955, p. 1; July 31, 1955, p. 1; Press, June 4, 1955, p. 1; June 19, 1955, p. 1; July 2, 1955, p. 1; July 27, 1955, p. 1; August 5, 1955, p. 1.

lobbyists of the National Wildlife Federation who claimed the refuge strip of land sought by the army was a recreational area much used by the public.

Said one such editorial which summed up the newspapers' view:

. . . Conservationists actually have no sound argument against the Sill expansion. The refuge land sought is mostly rough, mountainous terrain and virtually inaccessible to the public. Few recreational and picnic spots would be lost. As for the big game herds, they are generally situated in other portions of the 59,000 acre retreat and the loss of this land would not interfere with this program in any way. Principal recreational areas, major lakes, the Easter Pageant area, Mount Scott and most of the other scenic areas are not involved at all.

As a matter of fact, only a very small fraction of the entire refuge is open to the public. If additional recreational areas are needed in the future, there is more than enough land to the north. Why then, should wildlife lovers over the nation be 'up in arms,' as their professional secretaries contend. We do not believe that anyone who has access to all the facts would oppose the land transfer. This leaves the professional lobbyists as the principal agitators, not the true conservationists.

Expansion of Fort Sill is not a Chamber of Commerce project, as charged by state wildlife leaders. It was inaugurated by the army to provide adequate grounds for training our fighting men with modern weapons. More range land is absolutely essential to carry on the vital national defense work being done at Fort Sill.

Since wildlife and recreational interests would not be damaged, and since the army has fully justified before Congress the necessity for expanding Fort Sill, the opposition had nothing left but an emotional appeal based on false information. We do not believe our national leaders will be swayed by this flood of vicious propaganda which stems almost entirely from the paid lobbyists. National defense still is one of our most pressing problems in an era of science and electronics.⁵⁰

However, Interior Secretary McKay stuck by his guns. The army then attempted to reach a compromise with the Department of the Interior for use of the refuge land, proposing that the Interior

⁵⁰Press, November 3, 1955, p. 1; November 5, 1955, p. 1; Constitution-Press, November 6, 1955, p. 22.

Department retain title to the land while giving the army permission to use the refuge property. McKay rejected the compromise plan. The issue then went to the House in May of 1956 where the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, which had jurisdiction over wildlife refuges, held lengthy hearings on a bill which would transfer the 10,700 acres of refuge land to the army.⁵¹

In one hearing before the House committee, J. Clark Salyer, chief of wildlife refuges, accused Lawton businessmen of "greedy commercialism" in their endorsement of the Fort Sill expansion program. Salyer questioned both the army's and Lawton's motives for seeking the refuge area. Salyer charged that the merchants of Lawton through their chamber of commerce backed the expansion program "for personal monetary gains." He complained bitterly to the committee that this was another example of the army's "land grabs" of refuge acreage across the country which had started during World War II.⁵²

A page-one editorial accompanying the Press Washington Bureau story charged that Salyer's statements were "utter falsehood." The Press editorial contended that the original move for expansion came from the army and not from the Lawton Chamber of Commerce. The Lawton Chamber "has lent its support to the program as a matter of continuing policy of assisting the army in any way possible to carry out its training program at Fort Sill," the editorial maintained. The additional range was being sought, the editorial added, so that the army could carry out

⁵¹Constitution-Press, November 13, 1955, p. 21; Press, November 9, 1955, p. 1; November 19, 1955, p. 1; November 24, 1955, p. 1; December 6, 1955, p. 1; December 9, 1955, p. 1; May 3, 1956, p. 1.

⁵²Press, May 25, 1956, p. 1.

its training mission and in order to protect the \$250 million investment that the government had at Fort Sill. Salyer's testimony was "typical of the entire campaign of misrepresentation which the Interior Department officials and allied civil organizations have waged against the necessary acquisition of additional range land by Fort Sill," the editorial concluded.⁵³

In September, 1957, the refuge land dispute was settled with the announcement of a compromise. Army and Department of Interior officials agreed to a ten-year "use permit" for approximately 4,000 acres of land on the southern border of the wildlife refuge. Under the agreement the army did not receive title to the land. It was granted permission to establish a buffer zone along a wedge-shaped area just north of the 20,300 acres of private land recently purchased from private owners. Army officials were reported to be unhappy with the agreement. However, the Constitution observed that the compromise would at least allow the army some additional land to help carry out its missile program and to perform its vital role in the nation's preparedness program.⁵⁴

Only a little more than a month after the refuge land compromise, the army announced that it was considering a new and far more gigantic expansion of the Fort Sill military reservation. The army maintained additional range land was needed at Fort Sill for national defense in order to carry out the guided missile program which had been added to the traditional artillery training. The army pointed out the "vital mission assigned to Fort Sill in schooling troops in the use of surface

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Constitution, September 10, 1959, p. 1.

to surface missiles." The importance of this mission was stressed "in view of the urgency of the nation's missile program, a situation brought on by Russian advances in science and ballistic missiles."⁵⁵

The army hoped to acquire an additional 275,000 acres of privately owned land in Comanche, Caddo, and Kiowa counties in a two-phase program. In the first phase, ending in 1959, the army planned to purchase 114,000 acres of land west of the military reservation and the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. A further northwest expansion was contemplated by 1963 encompassing an additional 161,000 acres. With the just completed expansion, the Fort Sill reservation of 94,384 acres was approximately thirty miles long and six miles wide. The proposed new expansion would double the reservation in east-to-west length to more than sixty miles and increase the width to twenty miles, considered a sufficient range to fire missiles the army then had or would have in the future. Also, lands acquired in the first phase of the expansion would be used to provide annual maneuver grounds for Oklahoma's 45th National Guard Division. The division had trained for several years at Fort Hood, Texas. In reply to opposition arguments that the army should switch its missile training program from Fort Sill to unused stretches of desert lands, the army argued that it would take up to half a billion dollars at then current prices to replace the \$148 million already invested at Fort Sill.⁵⁶

Army estimates indicated about 600 families were living

⁵⁵Constitution-Press, November 24, 1957, p. 1; December 8, 1957, p. 1; December 15, 1957, p. 1; Constitution, November 28, 1957, p. 1; January 15, 1958, p. 1.

⁵⁶Constitution-Press, December 15, 1957, p. 1.

in the area sought. Only one small community, Cooperton, would be directly in the path of the two-phase expansion. Other towns, such as Snyder, Mountain Park, Roosevelt, Gotebo, and Hobart, were on the fringes of the expansion area. However, a bright economic future was painted for these Kiowa County towns. The army planned to build two sub-posts on the west and north edges of the new reservation. The Kiowa County towns would benefit from new jobs, from new payrolls, and from additional housing required for Civil Service workers and military personnel who would be assigned to these two sub-posts. These people would be needed at the two sub-posts to handle equipment and facilities for the new missile program. The army denied that the range expansion included valuable farm and grazing lands. Army surveys indicated only about twenty-five per cent of the proposed range area was good farm land. The remainder ranged from pasture to sub-marginal land and slick rocks. In the long run, the army argued, "gains will offset the losses" in reducing Kiowa County's tax rolls and trade area.⁵⁷

Shepler immediately came to the defense of Fort Sill in its fight to win approval for the land expansion. The Oklahoma City Times accused Lawton of being the instigator of the Fort Sill land expansion, causing Shepler to lash back in a page-one editorial:

The Oklahoma City Times, for some unaccountable and unknown reason, as it frequently does, attempts to make Lawton the 'whipping boy' in the proposed Fort Sill land acquisition, in an extensive and incorrect editorial Tuesday evening.

Lawton is not the issue in this particular case. The issue is whether, in this rapidly moving, dangerous atomic and 'sputnik' age, the nation's only Artillery and Missile School will be given a sufficient area in which to carry out its mission of training troops in the use of the newest type of weapons.

⁵⁷Ibid.

The question does not involve Lawton's welfare so far as the army is concerned. The army's request devised after long study by United States Army officers of high integrity and dedicated to the defense of the nation is based solely upon the need for more area, brought about by rapid technological advances in modern weapons. Lawton, as it always has been and always will be, is vitally interested in Fort Sill and will support its needs in carrying out its vital role in the national defense program. Knowing the men in charge of the missile program at Fort Sill we know that they would not ask anything that was not necessary to carry out the mission to which they have been assigned.

It is never a pleasant thing when governmental units have to acquire private lands with the ensuing dislocation to landowners, although in recent cases it has been found that most landowners were pleased to sell at the price the government paid. But the Times only weeps its crocodile tears when other communities are involved. It says nothing of the land that was taken off the tax rolls by Oklahoma City for Tinker Field, the Oklahoma City airport, Lake Overholser and Lake Hefner. Nor the dislocated farmers in southeastern Oklahoma who are being moved out to make way for an Oklahoma City water supply 100 to 150 miles away. Or the thousands of acres that Oklahoma City will take to build the canal to bring this water to the consumer.

The Times, in effect, suggests that Fort Sill be moved to some desert area of the west. We can imagine what reaction the Times would have if the suggestion were made that the 100 million dollar a year government payroll at Tinker Field be moved away from Oklahoma City. Of course neither suggestion is practical. The government has a going concern at Fort Sill that would require a half billion dollars to replace at any other point. The missile training program is already well under way. The time lag involved in starting over somewhere else might well be extremely dangerous to the whole surface-to-surface missile program at a time when it is most important that United States defenses be the strongest.

The Times, in its editorial, accepts at face value exaggerated statements which opponents of the Fort Sill program have been using. It is attempting to browbeat Oklahoma's congressional delegation by the threat of massive retaliation. Contrary to the Times statement, there would be relatively few land owners involved, as much of the area is held in large individual tracts. Only one community, Cooperton, would be directly involved. Instead of 30,000 people losing their homes, it has been stated that less than 1,000 people would suffer dislocation. In fact the 1950 census shows only 18,000 people living in all of Kiowa County.

The Times complains vociferously of the loss of tax money. It purposely overlooks the fact that the activity generated by this giant government 'industry' in Southwestern Oklahoma produces more taxable wealth every year, in spite of drouths or floods, than the whole area being discussed, and the benefits do not by any means accrue only to Lawton. They

are widely dispersed in the area and will be more dispersed under the program contemplated by Fort Sill authorities.

The specious statements made by the Times are well beside the point. Lawton is not the issue in the Fort Sill expansion program. The issue is national defense. The sole and only question is whether the well developed artillery and missile training center shall be given the necessary area to fulfill its mission and have the ability to train American troops to defend themselves and the nation against the ever increasing threat of attack from Communist nations.⁵⁸

Other Shepler editorials and stories pointed out that Fort Sill payrolls benefited many communities other than Lawton. Stories described how residents of thirty-nine communities in Southwest Oklahoma shared in the \$10 million civilian payroll at Fort Sill. "While roughly three-fourths of the 2,394 civil service workers at Fort Sill make their homes in Lawton," a Constitution-Press story noted, a total of 660 live in 39 communities surrounding the huge military reservation." The story added that based on the average salary of about \$4,000 a year per employee, this indicated residents of the thirty-nine communities outside Lawton received approximately \$2,640,000 in pay during 1957. An editorial contended that while opponents labeled Lawton as the sole beneficiary of the second largest "industrial" payroll in Oklahoma, the "facts clearly refute this implication." Further, the editorial argued that it would require industrial development beyond the wildest dreams to provide comparable jobs for those employed at Fort Sill. "Those who have suggested this vital military activity be transferred to the western deserts," the editorial stated, "apparently fail to comprehend the economic distress that would result if Fort Sill operations were drastically reduced." Also, it was noted that the military payroll at the post for 1957 totaled more than \$32 million. That figure combined

⁵⁸Constitution, December 26, 1957, p. 1.

with the \$10 million civilian payroll and \$18 million for supplies and construction in 1957 totaled more than \$60 million, second only to Tinker Field in total state payroll and spending.⁵⁹

The specter continually was raised in Constitution and Press stories and editorials that Fort Sill eventually would wither away to a "mere garrison" unless the reservation was expanded. Both United States Senators from Oklahoma, Mike Monroney and Robert Kerr, called the land expansion vital to the national defense and Oklahoma's future, although both acknowledged it would cause hardship in the affected areas. Monroney indicated Fort Sill might be relegated to a standby post with a gigantic investment wasted if the army moved its missile training to desert areas. United States Representative Toby Morris of Lawton warned that unless the expansion was accomplished, the missile training program would go to some other state and, even worse, Oklahoma would lose the entire Artillery and Missile School.⁶⁰

Other prominent public figures also spoke out for the expansion. Army Chief of Staff Maxwell D. Taylor visited Fort Sill. He said the post could not perform its function without more territory and termed the expansion plan "reasonable and sound with a minimum of dislocation" of the local situation. United States Senator Henry M. Jackson, a Democrat from the state of Washington who was a member of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, also toured Fort Sill. He observed missile and rocket training programs and was briefed on expansion plans. Jackson asserted that he opposed moving rocket and missile exercises into desert

⁵⁹ Ibid., January 1, 1958, p. 1; Constitution-Press, December 29, 1957, pp. 1, 18.

⁶⁰ Constitution-Press, December 8, 1957, p. 1.

areas and declared this was no solution. Later in a speech before the Oklahoma Press Association in Oklahoma City, Jackson noted that Fort Sill's terrain was comparable to combat areas in all parts of the world. "Fort Sill meets the needs of providing varied terrain to train troops in firing missiles," he said, adding that "desert land doesn't." Jackson termed the Russian sputnik "the Pearl Harbor that will save America." He declared that in this "age of peril" the defense posture of the United States must be thoroughly reviewed.⁶¹

Although Fort Sill received much impressive support for its proposed expansion, the issue quickly sparked bitter opposition from irate citizens of Kiowa County. They quickly organized a resistance movement under the banner of the "Southwest Oklahoma Survival Association," or SOS, and declared figurative war on the army and Lawton. Retired Major General James C. Styron, former 45th Division National Guard commander, who had become a cotton broker at Hobart, was principal spokesman for the SOS. The Kiowa County opposition group also hired John Currey, an Oklahoma City public relations specialist, to enlist opposition to the Fort Sill expansion. Currey poured out thousands of letters from Hobart urging friends and anyone sympathetic with the landowners to protest the army land move.⁶²

Still others joined the growing forces against the expansion. Former Congressman Victor Wickersham, who lost his House seat in a 1956 race with Morris of Lawton, started making speeches in support of the SOS group. After his defeat, Wickersham returned to his home town of

⁶¹Ibid.; Constitution, January 24, 1958, p. 1.

⁶²Constitution, December 30, 1957, p. 1; Constitution-Press, January 19, 1958, p. 1.

Mangum in Southwest Oklahoma, where he entered the real estate business. While Congressman, he had supported Fort Sill's first expansion drive. But he announced he was solidly opposed to Fort Sill's second expansion drive and that he planned to oppose Morris in the upcoming Congressional election.⁶³

Oklahoma Governor Raymond Gary announced his solid support for the anti-expansion movement. Gary declared that the people of Southwest Oklahoma were justified in their fight to keep their homes and land. He asserted that the army must have new missile ranges, but that it had not presented evidence that Fort Sill was the place to locate them. Gary requested President Eisenhower to furnish public information on the Fort Sill expansion plans. Army Secretary Wilber Brucker replied that the Department of Army had not definitely approved plans for extending Fort Sill's firing ranges although an expansion program had been submitted and was under study. It was emphasized that the expansion plan had to be defended and justified to the Department of the Army. If approved, it would then go to the Defense Department and Bureau of the Budget. It also had to be defended and justified before Congress and would not become a reality until it came out of Congress.⁶⁴

A Texas newspaper and an Illinois Congressman added their weight to the anti-expansion movement. Editorials in the El Paso, Texas, Herald-Post prompted Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson of Texas to ask the Senate Preparedness Subcommittee to investigate the army's proposed expansion of the Oklahoma post. The editorials questioned the

⁶³Constitution, January 15, 1958, p. 1.

⁶⁴Ibid.; Constitution-Press, January 19, 1958, p. 1.

advisability of acquiring more land for the army at Fort Sill while it was claimed there was adequate space for the army missile firings at Fort Bliss near El Paso. The anti-expansion group also gained the powerful support of Representative William Bray, Republican from Illinois. Bray had fought Fort Sill's first expansion movement. "There just isn't enough room for long-distance missile firing near Fort Sill," Bray commented, adding: "You have all the room in the world at White Sands Proving Grounds in New Mexico."⁶⁵

Alarmed at the growing ranks of the opposition movement and at the success of the SOS professional publicist in soliciting support, Shepler spearheaded the organization of the "Oklahoma Defense League" to back the proposed expansion of Fort Sill's ranges. Dave Vandivier, a former Chickasha, Oklahoma, newspaper publisher, was employed to head the organization. Shepler himself served as vice-chairman of the group. Other "leading citizens representative of the entire state" will serve actively in the league, Vandivier announced. He described the defense league as primarily a "research and analysis organization" from which all facts about the needed land adjacent to Fort Sill would be presented to the public in documented form. "It is our view," Vandivier asserted, "that only one side of the Fort Sill expansion program has been made public. We are confident that when people--and the Congress--have all the facts that the resulting decision will be in the state and national interest." Vandivier declared that creation of the league stemmed from fears that opposition to the land expansion might force the army to move

⁶⁵Constitution, January 15, 1958, p. 1.

its artillery and missile training from Fort Sill.⁶⁶

The Oklahoma Defense League issued news releases attempting to show that land owners would benefit more by selling their property to the army for Fort Sill range needs than by keeping it. One series of stories described how approximately half of the land sought in the first phase of the Sill expansion was under the federal government's soil bank program designed to reduce agricultural surpluses. Other stories described how Comanche County was third in population in Oklahoma as a result of the benefits from Fort Sill while Kiowa County with only agriculture to sustain it had lost 2,000 in population the past seven years. Another story reported the results of a tax records survey which showed that only 346 land owners lived on their farms in the area sought for the Fort Sill expansion. Also a survey based on soil conservation studies showed that more than sixty per cent of the acres sought consisted of sub-marginal land. The sixty per cent was said to include either eroded land or rocky areas, or it was part of mountain ranges. The league claimed that Kiowa County was a prime example of the mass migration of rural population to the urban centers "so they can make a living." Kiowa County had suffered a forty per cent loss in population since 1930, with most of the loss coming from farms. Kiowa County had 29,630 people in the 1930 census and 18,926 in the 1950 census. "In the last seven years, population has fallen to 16,987," Vandivier claimed. "More people have left the farms during that time than would be displaced by the proposed acquisition of 275,000 acres of land in

⁶⁶ Ibid., January 30, 1958, p. 1.

Kiowa, Comanche and Caddo counties."⁶⁷

Fearing that it would be more difficult to block the expansion once it had reached Congress, the Southwest Oklahoma Survival Association began an intensive letter-writing and lobbying campaign to Congressmen, Defense Department officials, and sympathizers within Oklahoma. By February of 1958 the SOS had raised \$27,000 of its \$50,000 goal to fight the Fort Sill expansion. Members of the SOS from Kiowa County particularly were active in the anti-Fort Sill drive. Kiowa County stood to lose approximately 210,000 acres of ranch and farm lands if the post expansion were approved. Approximately 350 from Kiowa County jammed the Oklahoma State Senate visitors' chambers and cheered Governor Gary as he spoke during a Legislative Council Executive Committee hearing held to explore Fort Sill's expansion needs. The special committee had no powers to do anything about the expansion. However, both sides looked upon the one-day hearing as an opportunity to make their views known to the public. Gary's speech was preceded by twenty minutes of music by the Hobart High School Band, hand clapping, prayers, and introductions. At least fifty were present from Lawton representing the Fort Sill interests, but they watched in silence as the Kiowa County delegation put on its show before the hearing of witnesses got under way. Incensed by the proceedings, Shepler commented in an editorial:

A citizen-soldier who retired long before the era of missile warfare has become the 'champion' of certain state politicians and Kiowa County opponents of the proposed Fort Sill expansion. In retired Maj. Gen. James C. Styron, they have discovered a man who frankly admits he can readily

⁶⁷Ibid., February 3, 1958, p. 1; February 4, 1958, p. 1; February 27, 1958, p. 1; March 2, 1958, p. 25; March 6, 1958, p. 1.

solve the crucial problems of the national security and is willing to challenge the thinking of the finest professional soldiers in America.

So Styron, now a Hobart cotton buyer, had little trouble in convincing Gov. Gary and hand-picked members of a legislative study committee that he knows more about requirements of missile training than the distinguished commander of the U.S. Army Artillery and Missile Center at Fort Sill.

They were easily convinced, since all previously had voiced opposition to Fort Sill's expansion into Kiowa County. Thus, the Army's case fell on deaf ears. . . .

Maj. Gen. Thomas De Shazo is to be complimented for the cool and factual presentation under the most trying circumstances as Sen. Don Baldwin, Sen. Byron Dacus and Rep. W. W. Metcalf tried desperately . . . to harass and embarrass the general. Their shameful performances, under the gloating eyes of banner-waving constituents, demonstrate the level to which some politicians will sink for the sake of a few votes.

The three-ring circus staged at the capitol came as no surprise. . . . As the five-hour tirade against Lawton and the army unfolded, it was apparent no facts would be presented. . . .

Fortunately the 'study' committee has no authority to decide the fate of Fort Sill or the nation. Decisions of such magnitude must be kept beyond the realm of local politics and purely selfish interests which manifest themselves in the bitter tirade against Lawton.⁶⁸

The Legislative Council Executive Committee later issued a majority resolution opposing the Fort Sill expansion. The resolution recommended keeping the artillery and missile school at Fort Sill but moving the impact area to less populated sections of the country. It was the same recommendation made by Styron during the hearing. Shepler commented that the committee's majority report was engineered by State Senator Don Baldwin of Anadarko, president pro tempore of the Senate. It was "rather tragic so much power was vested in the hands of one man," Shepler observed, "whose irresponsible actions can jeopardize the state's second largest industrial payroll and interfere with what may

⁶⁸ Constitution-Press, February 9, 1958, p. 1; February 23, 1958, p. 1; Constitution, February 19, 1958, p. 1.

well be a military program vital to national security."⁶⁹

The SOS dramatically assumed the offensive on another front in its war against Fort Sill when forty women stormed Washington, D.C., buttonholing influential Congressmen and government officials. The group first met with Assistant Army Secretary Frank H. Higgins and three members of the Senate Armed Services Real Estate Subcommittee. Several members of the Oklahoma Congressional delegation attended the meeting. Six of the women from Hobart called at the White House, where they told Presidential aides that SOS objected to the Fort Sill range expansion on the grounds that 30,000 people in the rich agricultural area would lose their homes and businesses. In another meeting with the group of 40 women, Assistant Army Secretary Dewey Short asserted that no decision had been reached by the army on whether to expand the post or whether the army post would be moved if the expansion were not successful. The women cited their objections to the expansion plan, including the psychological effects of uprooting established families, the adverse effects on businesses in the area dependent on landowners, the loss of agricultural produce and livestock in the area, and the loss of minerals, especially oil.⁷⁰

The expansion war shifted to another scene in the summer of 1958 when the two sides supported opposing candidates in the Democratic primary for the Sixth District Congressional seat. Congressman Toby Morris of Lawton, the incumbent, had sided with the pro-expansion

⁶⁹Constitution, April 11, 1958, p. 1; Constitution-Press, April 13, 1958, p. 8.

⁷⁰Constitution, April 17, 1958, p. 1; April 23, 1958, p. 1; Constitution-Press, April 20, 1958, p. 1.

forces. Victor Wickersham of Mangum, who had held the Sixth District Congressional seat in the past, took up the banner of the SOS opposing the Fort Sill range plan. The election contest was the third meeting for the two men. Hundreds of housewives and children, supported by the SOS, swept across the big Congressional district, pleading with voters to defeat Morris and to "save their homes." Constitution-Press editorials appealed for a big turnout of voters in Comanche County in support of Morris and attacked Wickersham's record:

. . . Wickersham during his recent years as representative incurred the disdain of his colleagues in Washington and on frequent occasions made Oklahoma the laughing stock of the nation by his foolish statements and questionable activities.

. . . Wickersham spent much of his time during later days in Washington commuting to various places seeking to put over real estate deals. . . . He said he could not live on the \$15,000 a year income a Congressman gets . . . and even when the salary was hiked to \$22,500, he still complained. . . . Throughout his career, Wickersham has shown more interest in making money than in performing his duties as a representative.

Because of his foolish antics and his unethical claims as a representative, Wickersham lost the respect and confidence of his fellow members of Congress. . . . This is evidenced by the attitude toward Wickersham by Rep. Carl Vinson, one of the most powerful and respected members of the House. No doubt this attitude was engendered by Wickersham's efforts to use his position on the Armed Services Committee to seek patronage and undeserved favors from military installations.

Wickersham seeks to be all things to all men. He has been on both sides of the Sill expansion program, but in an effort to create an issue he is now going up and down the district lambasting the army and setting himself up as a military expert.

Oklahoma has an excellent Congressional delegation at this time. Toby Morris has high standing in Congress and all are working for the welfare of Oklahoma and the nation.

The Sixth District cannot afford to again bring embarrassment to the state by electing a representative like Wickersham. The voters of Southwest Oklahoma should see that

this does not happen by working and voting for Rep. Toby Morris on July 1. Again, there is no substitute for integrity. . . .⁷¹

Morris barely posted a slim lead in the primary election, winning 34,169 votes to Wickersham's 33,655. The count in Comanche County was 10,964 for Morris to 1,519 for Wickersham. In the runoff campaign, followers of both Wickersham and Morris again worked feverishly to influence the voters. Shepler editorials voiced concern about the poor turnout of voters in Comanche County. He pointed out that many registered voters--approximately 8,000--failed to go to the polls in the primary election. Shepler asserted that the outcome of the Congressional contest could hinge on the number of Comanche County registrants who would cast their votes. "All that we have worked for, much of what we stand for, and all that we hope for in the future," he warned, "could be seriously dissipated in one day's tabulation of the ballots."⁷²

When the official vote was tabulated following the runoff election, Morris held a razor-thin margin of 53 votes. Wickersham cried foul, posted the money for a recount, and charged fraud in the Comanche County vote returns. Wickersham alleged that he had proof that the vote was altered in four Comanche County precincts. "Western Oklahoma's people are boiling over this," Wickersham stated, "boiling worse than they did during the midnight ride of Paul Revere." During the tense days of the recount that followed, Morris steadily gained votes. When

⁷¹Constitution-Press, June 8, 1958, p. 1; June 22, 1958, p. 1; June 30, 1958, p. 30.

⁷²Constitution, July 2, 1958, p. 1; July 21, 1958, p. 1; Constitution-Press, July 6, 1958, p. 10; July 13, 1958, p. 1; July 20, 1958, p. 1.

the new tabulation was finished, Morris won the Democratic renomination by 81 votes. The official vote was Morris 45,513 and Wickersham 45,432. Wickersham dropped the fraud charges after a recount of the Comanche County votes failed to substantiate his allegations. Wickersham then announced that "it looks like Fort Sill has elected itself a Congressman, and that Fort Sill can write its own ticket for the next two years." Morris declared that such a charge was false. He asserted that he would continue to serve all of the people of his district.⁷³

But Morris had not yet won the Congressional seat. He still had to face Republican Fred Coogan of Sayre in the general election. Coogan made the Fort Sill expansion controversy his chief issue. But the "big show" was already over. Morris took the final election round in stride and defeated Coogan by a two-to-one margin. Comanche County voters made sure that the Lawton candidate would have an easy time of it. They gave Morris a whopping ten-to-one majority over his opponent in a record turnout at the voting booths.⁷⁴

Following the November, 1958, general election, the Fort Sill range expansion issue faded from the headlines. Eight months later on September 12, 1959, the Department of Army in a news release announced it has no plans for the expansion of Fort Sill ranges "in the foreseeable future." Fort Sill would not lose any of its training functions nor troops. The Constitution-Press Washington Bureau interpreted the statement as meaning that the army permanently had cancelled all plans to increase the size of the military reservation. The announcement

⁷³Constitution, July 23, 1958, p. 1; July 24, 1958, p. 1; August 1, 1958, p. 1; Constitution-Press, July 25, 1958, p. 1.

⁷⁴Constitution, November 5, 1958, p. 1.

added, however, that the Oklahoma military post would continue "as the principal artillery and surface-to-surface missile center of the U.S. Army."⁷⁵

The army also revealed it planned to train troops in long-range missile firing at Fort Sill, but that the actual firing of missiles would be staged at the Fort Bliss-White Sands Missile Range or at other ranges. It was the same suggestion that had been recommended over and over by the land expansion opponents. The army announced that a new development also figured into the decision to shelve acquisition of more range lands. Rapid development of "in-flight safety controls" had made it possible to fire such missiles as the Little John and Honest John rockets and Lacrosse missiles on the regular Fort Sill ranges.⁷⁶

Surprise and relief were registered at Hobart, Oklahoma, the headquarters of the Southwest Oklahoma Survival Association. Members of SOS had been laying plans for a long and continued battle against the proposal. Major General James C. Styron, former commanding general of the 45th Division and Hobart businessman who had led the SOS attack against the proposal, asserted that he was highly pleased at the decision. He declared he was especially grateful that no activity would be taken from Fort Sill and that Lawton would not suffer. To many in the Hobart area, the announcement meant that they could go ahead with plans which they had suspended for months in fear that their lands would be added to Fort Sill.⁷⁷

⁷⁵Constitution-Press, September 13, 1959, p. 1.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

Thus the proposal which had fueled a bitter, two-year controversy in Southwest Oklahoma was quietly put on the shelf, not to be dusted off again. The army had more than met its match in the public opinion buzzsaw set into motion by opponents of the land expansion. And, although it was never acknowledged, Ned Shepler's editorial campaign supporting the land acquisition also had been gloriously defeated.

Bootlegging, Vice, Corruption

Lawton during the fifties was still an "open town." It had been one since its founding in 1901 as an army town. The problems were similar to other soldier or sailor towns. Gambling, prostitution, bootlegging, marijuana, dope--all were available. There were clubs and gambling houses, some operated in legitimate business places, where one could have his choice of dice, cards, bets on any kind of sports, pool, or dominoes. Prostitution was so flagrant that hustlers would approach prospective customers openly on the streets and ply their trades in nearby houses, cars, and in open lots and alleys. Some prostitutes would even approach slow moving cars and shout offers and bids. Other "ladies of the night" would have their business solicited through pimps working in hotels and cheap rooming houses or walking the streets.⁷⁸

The center of this "red light" district was an area bounded from Third Street in downtown Lawton east toward Railroad Street. Vice had first appeared in this area in Lawton's frontier days, principally along

⁷⁸Ibid., February 19, 1950, p. 1; October 1, 1950, p. 1; April 15, 1951, p. 1; January 29, 1956, p. 1; Constitution, April 1, 1958, p. 1.

"Goo-Goo" Avenue. And it had remained there. Beer taverns, "dives," "joints," sleazy cafes, dance halls, and private clubs made up the red light area. This downtown section also included one of Lawton's two "Little Harlem" districts. The other was Lawton View in the southwest portion of the city. Vice and sin could also be found there in abundance. Marijuana, dope, and liquor were easily found in both areas. Marijuana pushers worked the streets openly. One could buy a "stick" or "lid" of marijuana as easily as purchasing a pack of gum at a grocery store. Liquor could be purchased anytime during the day or night from bootleggers, not only in the "vice areas," but anywhere in Lawton.⁷⁹

Periodically the Constitution and Press published stories exposing flourishing prostitution, gambling, dope, and bootlegging rackets. The "exposes" revealed that well-entrenched rackets were running wide open at specifically named places. Public discussions, pulpit denunciations, and law officers' raids followed during these occasional outbursts of reform. Nevertheless, conditions eventually returned to "normal." During the Korean War, Fort Sill commanders demanded that East Lawton and Lawton View be cleaned up to protect soldier trainees from venereal diseases. Arrests and raids temporarily would clear the streets of prostitutes or send them into hiding. But after the heat died, they came back.⁸⁰

Of all the vice and crime occurring in Lawton and Comanche County, bootlegging appeared to be the one practice which operated openly with law officers' consent and cooperation. "Bootlegging in Comanche County

⁷⁹Constitution-Press, January 29, 1956, p. 1.

⁸⁰Ibid.

. . . is everywhere," declared one Constitution-Press story. "In addition to at least three big wholesale operators, at least 75 joints sell liquor, in addition to several dozen small hip-pocket operators." In the same story several Comanche County bootleggers described how they operated through cooperation with law enforcement officers. Payoffs to officers on both the county and city level were an accepted fact of life. And this liquor conspiracy operation was not confined to Comanche County. Bootlegging and the corruption of law enforcement officers were problems that all of Oklahoma had shared since the state entered the Union in 1907 with prohibition written into its constitution.⁸¹

Some Comanche County bootleggers carefully avoided running afoul of federal liquor laws. They purchased federal liquor stamps at \$50 each at the Lawton Post Office. In effect it was a legal license from the federal government to practice an illegal act in Oklahoma. This federal retail liquor license enabled them to travel across the Red River into Texas to purchase their liquor supplies. Then by paying protection to city and county officers, the bootleggers were safe in running their businesses. However, many others did not go to the trouble of obtaining the federal tax permit. Particularly private club operators sometimes grew lax in buying the federal liquor stamps. On occasion Alcohol Tax Unit agents of the United States Treasury Department who enforced the federal liquor laws raided Lawton and Comanche County clubs and night spots. In one such raid in 1956, all sixteen federal agents operating in Oklahoma descended on the Lawton area. Bootleggers and club owners

⁸¹Constitution-Press, February 19, 1950, p. 1; Jimmie Lewis Franklin, Born Sober: Prohibition in Oklahoma, 1907-1959 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), pp. 168-169.

who were missed in the initial raid stood in line the following day at the post office to buy the federal stamps.⁸²

One story in 1955 involving a Lawton bootlegger and the Oklahoma Highway Patrol captured page one headlines for months. The story began on March 4, 1955, when two Highway Patrol troopers investigated a traffic accident southwest of Lawton involving a Faxon, Oklahoma, farmer and a Lawton bootlegger, Lincoln (Step) Wade. Several Faxon residents who were witnesses at the accident scene claimed that Troopers Bud Williamson and Norman Carroll permitted the bootlegger to transfer a large quantity of liquor from his car to another car after the accident. The troopers charged the Faxon farmer with driving to the left of center and causing the accident. Lieutenant Cullen T. Raley, commander of the Lawton Patrol District, and Captain Norman Holt, who headed two districts in Southwest Oklahoma, spearheaded an investigation into the case. They investigated the Faxon residents' charges that Williamson had made an improper investigation and had allowed the bootlegger to save his liquor haul by transferring it to another car.⁸³

Following the investigation, Raley recommended that the troopers be suspended for thirty days on grounds of gross neglect of duty and of their having made an improper accident report. Carroll accepted his suspension, but Williamson appealed his case and was acquitted by the patrol's review board. Patrol officers then announced a personnel shakeup which swept Raley and Holt from the Lawton district with demotion in rank. Holt was demoted to lieutenant in rank and transferred to

⁸²Constitution-Press, February 19, 1950, p. 1; October 1, 1950, p. 1; Press, February 11, 1955, p. 2; November 8, 1956, p. 1.

⁸³Press, July 7, 1955, p. 1; July 13, 1955, p. 1.

the McAlester district. Raley, who was highly popular in the Lawton area, refused to accept his demotion and transfer on grounds of "inefficiency." He resigned and entered the insurance business in Lawton.⁸⁴

Lawtonians quickly rose to defend Raley and arranged a conference with Governor Raymond Gary and top patrol leaders. A delegation of forty-five from Lawton expressed its belief to the governor that the demotion and transfer were politically inspired moves resulting from the Williamson case. State Safety Commissioner Jim Lookabaugh and other patrol leaders denied the charges, stating that the demotion and transfer were nothing more than a routine matter and stemmed instead from Raley's "inefficiency." Dissatisfied with the results of the conference, members of the delegation and others in Lawton formed the Better Government Organization. The group pledged to press for a full-fledged investigation of the patrol's system of demotions and transfers and possible collusion with bootleggers. A Constitution-Press editorial commented that Lookabaugh's explanation was "rather naive," and that there was no place for political dawdling in the highway patrol. "For when the day comes that a trooper must reckon with the political repercussions which may follow his enforcement of the law," the editorial commented, "the wholesome influence of the patrol organization has withered away and died."⁸⁵

Responding to the Lawton's group plea, a special Oklahoma State Senate Investigating Committee was organized to hear evidence in the

⁸⁴Ibid., August 5, 1955, p. 1; August 17, 1955, p. 1.

⁸⁵Ibid., Constitution-Press, August 7, 1955, p. 12.

charges of political manipulations in the highway patrol. Chaired by State Senator Kirksey Nix of McAlester, the committee held hearings in Lawton and heard a parade of witnesses testify about the bootlegger-farmer accident southeast of Lawton. Following the close of the hearings, Nix and the other two members of the committee agreed that the troopers' handling of the auto accident and the switch of the liquor cargo "smelled to high heaven." They agreed that "some heads should roll" in the highway patrol as a result of the findings in the hearing. Later in another Senate committee hearing, the findings of the Lawton investigation were presented to officials of the Oklahoma Highway Patrol, including Safety Commissioner Jim Lookabaugh. Lookabaugh and other patrol officials testified that they were convinced that Patrolman Williamson was guilty of misconduct in the accident investigation involving the bootlegger. They pointed out, however, there was nothing they could do about the situation because Williamson had been cleared of the charge in a patrol hearing and since had been transferred to another district.⁸⁶

A Constitution-Press editorial commented that it was no longer supposition that "whiskey and politics were involved in the Williamson case," and that the mess extended into the highest level of state politics. The editorial added that it was gratifying that the state senators who heard the testimony in the case concluded that the bootlegger-farmer accident investigation was badly handled by the troopers and that the suspension hearing for Williamson was nothing more than a "political whitewash." The editorial urged that the patrol

⁸⁶ Press, September 24, 1955, p. 1; October 7, 1955, p. 1; Constitution-Press, September 25, 1955, p. 1.

mess "be cleaned up" and "career officers once again given a free hand to act without fear of politicians or the underworld." In spite of the editorial pleas, nothing else was accomplished in clearing the black eye from the Highway Patrol.⁸⁷

Also during the fifties, bootleggers became involved in an internal war in the Lawton area. Leading dealers and haulers stole caches of illegal liquor from each other and staged several hijackings of liquor being brought in from Texas. In one case, Orville Lindsay Chambless, Oklahoma City's notorious "flying bootlegger" and a former convict, was convicted by a Comanche County jury of hijacking \$5,000 worth of liquor on a country road east of Lawton. The jury found him guilty of the armed robbery of Albion Henry Potts, Jr., another Oklahoma City bootlegger.⁸⁸

And by 1957 it appeared as if Lawton and Comanche County had become home for several kingpin bootleggers and underworld figures. Constitution-Press stories reported that Gene Paul Norris, one of the Southwest's most notorious underworld figures, and his personal bodyguard, William Carl Humphrey, had moved to Lawton. In April, 1957, both were killed in a running gun battle with Texas and FBI officers near Fort Worth, Texas. They were killed while taking part in the attempted hijacking of a half-million dollar payroll at the United States Strategic Air Command headquarters at Carswell Air Force Base near Fort Worth. Lawton police detectives commented that their death ended the threat of a gangland war which had existed since Norris moved to Lawton.

⁸⁷Constitution-Press, September 25, 1955, p. 8.

⁸⁸Ibid., January 9, 1955, p. 1; July 24, 1955, p. 1; Press, February 11, 1955, p. 1; October 21, 1955, p. 1; October 22, 1955, p. 1.

Mrs. Rita Louise Norris, widow of the slain gunman, continued to make Lawton her home after her husband's death. She was later arrested in a vice crackdown on Lawton night spots and was held in connection with burglaries in Kansas. Lawton also became the home of Mrs. Lucille Barry Harris, formerly of Oklahoma City, who handled bail bonds for most of the top underworld figures of the state, especially bootleggers. Mrs. Harris handled bail bonds for Chambless, the flying bootlegger whose conviction by a Comanche County jury was mentioned above. Chambless, who was out on bail pending appeal of his case, disappeared from his Oklahoma City home in July of 1956. His decomposed body was found November 7, 1957, in a shallow grave near Oklahoma City. It was believed Gene Paul Norris was connected with Chambless's death.

Perplexed by the underworld invasion and activities, the Constitution-Press commented in an editorial headlined, "What's the Attraction?":

The general public cannot help wonder what attraction is bringing more or less bigtime operators who have been in trouble with the law in Texas, Oklahoma and elsewhere into Lawton. Certainly this community has no aspirations to become the headquarters for those whose past records cast doubt upon their possible future activities.

Lawton already has its share of characters whose activities are open to question. None would deny that bootlegging, gambling and prostitution exist to a degree, but on the whole it is generally kept fairly well under control. But the influx of underworld characters from the bigger cities raises a large question mark.

Lawton wants no part of organized lawbreakers. It wants no part of gangland activities which seem to prevail in some of the larger cities. Those activities cannot thrive and prosper in a favorable climate of political and enforcement protection.

We doubt that such exists here, but the developments of recent months place a great responsibility upon law enforcement agencies to see that organized crime does not get started and that this community is kept free as possible

from becoming headquarters for either local or widespread activities of the criminal underworld.⁸⁹

Whether or not Lawton was the home of kingpin underworld figures, it could not be disputed that Lawton and Comanche County harbored one of the state's largest bootlegging operations--all with the blessing of city and county law officers. A January, 1958, Constitution-Press story revealed that thirty-nine registered federal liquor stamp holders resided in Comanche County. The figure made Comanche County the third highest among the state's sixty counties which had federally licensed liquor peddlers. Only Tulsa County with 103 and Oklahoma County with 88 had more federal stamp holders. The Constitution-Press list of stamp holders showed that all but four operated within Lawton or adjacent to the city limits.⁹⁰

Another story in October, 1958, demonstrated the laxness and permissiveness of the county sheriff's office on bootlegging. The story reported that during a period of nearly fifteen months Comanche County Sheriff Everett Ray Hale had staged only one token raid. In that "raid," Sheriff Hale and one deputy walked into one of the city's most popular night spots and confiscated seven bottles of liquor. The story added that Sheriff Hale had a good record on investigation of major crimes, but his office had shown virtually no activity against bootleggers.⁹¹

⁸⁹Constitution-Press, January 6, 1957, p. 1; February 24, 1957, p. 17; August 11, 1957, p. 1; September 8, 1957, p. 1; December 29, 1957, p. 1; Constitution, February 22, 1957, p. 1; April 30, 1957, p. 1.

⁹⁰Constitution-Press, January 19, 1958, p. 1.

⁹¹Ibid., October 26, 1958, p. 1.

The failure of prohibition--considered by wets as a state disgrace and a national joke--became an issue in the 1958 governor's race in Oklahoma. Actually the liquor issue was pushed into the governor's race by the drys' promotion in 1957 of a vote on a constitutional amendment for county option of 3.2 beer. The Constitution-Press editorially opposed county option because of the huge loss in taxes and jobs and because, it argued, beer would become "another product of the flourishing bootlegging business." Although forty-three of the state's seventy-seven counties voted for the dry petition, the remaining thirty-four counties, which included the big city group, killed the proposal by a vote of 275,528 to 214,012. Comanche County, by a majority of 1,977 votes, preferred the system of beer sales on a statewide basis. Lawton voters went against the proposal 4,408 votes to 2,383, while the Comanche County vote was 5,489 to 3,512. Every Lawton precinct and fourteen in rural areas went against the proposal. The defeat of the dry-sponsored amendment was interpreted by the wets as a springboard for outright repeal. Wet forces said Oklahomans next would have a chance to vote on legal control versus bootleg control.⁹²

In the 1958 governor's race, the Constitution-Press avidly campaigned for the Democratic nomination of J. Howard Edmondson, the thirty-three-year-old Tulsa County attorney who pledged to bring a quick vote on repeal of prohibition if elected. Edmondson asserted it was his belief that Oklahomans were fed up with prohibition as it was written and enforced. He declared that Oklahoma had to tighten enforcement by the use of the proper agencies when local officers failed to

⁹²Franklin, pp. 154-172; Constitution-Press, November 17, 1957, p. 10; Constitution, December 4, 1957, p. 1.

exercise their responsibilities. Shepler particularly liked the young Tulsa politician because of his pledge to inaugurate a constitutional highway commission which would enhance the highway program for Southwest Oklahoma. Comanche County joined the landslide runoff results by voting 10,576 for Edmondson and 3,932 for his opponent, Bill Atkinson, the Midwest City builder. Statewide, Atkinson was crushed 363,742 to 107,616. The Edmondson steamroller easily defeated his Republican opponent, Phil Ferguson, 399,504 to 107,497, in the general election.⁹³

After Edmondson took office on January 12, 1959, he launched his all-out drive against bootleg liquor in order to give Oklahomans a "clear choice" between prohibition enforcement and repeal--legal liquor or none. He appointed Joe Cannon commissioner of public safety. Oklahomans were told the liquor traffic must stop, and sheriffs and city police were told to clear up their areas before the new state administration moved in to enforce the law. Cannon, labeled as the "crew cut commando," then began using the highway patrol in his state-wide war on bootleggers. Cannon's men threw up roadblocks all over Oklahoma's borders to stop the inflow of liquor. Others relentlessly staged raids on known bootleggers, bars and clubs.⁹⁴

Cannon and his "midnight raiders" made several stops in the Lawton area and in Southwest Oklahoma. Directing operations from the Lawton Highway Patrol district office, Cannon had his state officers block all thirteen Red River Bridge crossings from Texas for a three-hour period

⁹³Constitution-Press, July 13, 1958, p. 8; July 20, 1958, p. 28; Constitution, July 9, 1958, p. 1; July 23, 1958, p. 1; November 5, 1958, p. 1; 1973 Directory of Oklahoma, p. 402.

⁹⁴Constitution-Press, November 16, 1958, p. 1; Constitution, November 18, 1958, p. 1; January 18, 1959, p. 1.

on February 20, 1959. Cannon arrived in Lawton at 2:30 a.m. and used thirty-seven officers in an unsuccessful effort to ferret out liquor haulers who bought their goods in Texas. On another visit to Lawton, Cannon personally directed raids against a group of Lawton bootleggers which netted 2,076 bottles of illegal liquor valued at approximately \$5,000. By March 6, Cannon estimated fifty per cent of the liquor flow into the state had been stopped. Cannon never claimed he could dry up the whole state. But his actions did significantly curb the supply of liquor and frightened many club owners and bootleggers into shutting down their operations.⁹⁵

For the first time in his long history as an editor, Ned Shepler's newspapers came out editorially for repeal. In previous referendums on repeal, Shepler, personally a wet, had sided with the drys, a policy he pursued as consonant with the attitudes of the Methodist Church of which he was a member. And in this battle on liquor repeal, Dr. Rufus Walker, pastor of Centenary Methodist Church in Lawton, where Shepler was a member, had been named leader of the drys' campaign in Comanche County. But this time Shepler broke with the drys. In a lengthy editorial the Sunday prior to the Tuesday referendum vote, Shepler set forth his views in an editorial headlined, "Facing Reality":

Whenever the question of prohibition versus repeal is argued, the moral issue invariably is raised. And it is generally conceded the current effort to legalize the sale of liquor would not have attracted widespread support if the moral aspects of drinking were the sole consideration.

Dedicated drys have effectively and successfully used the moral issue to keep prohibition in Oklahoma since statehood. There is no assurance that they will not prevail again in the April 7 election.

⁹⁵ Constitution, February 20, 1959, p. 1; March 2, 1959, p. 1; March 6, 1959, p. 1.

As overwhelming as the moral issue may seem, it is not the only factor which must be considered in choosing between prohibition and repeal. The issue demands a realistic view of the conditions as they prevail today, not as we might like them. The issue is not whether we should or should not have whisky, but whether the whisky we already have in Oklahoma should be sold legally and under strict controls, or left in the hands of bootleggers.

Oklahomans have watched prohibition in action since statehood and once again are considering the possibility that legal controls may eliminate many of the evils of prohibition. It is upon this premise that repeal forces base their whole argument for legalized sale of alcohol.

They contend, and with considerable justification, that it would be better for all concerned if whisky were taken out of the hands of the underworld and turned over to responsible citizens for sale in package stores. There it can be subjected to rigid controls and taxation, a situation which does not exist today. Vice, graft and corruption, which the multi-million dollar illegal industry generates, would be dealt a severe blow.

Millions of dollars in taxes, now claimed by neighboring states for liquor illegally sold and consumed in Oklahoma would go to help build schools, highways and other good things for the benefit of the state. This new revenue, estimated at several million dollars a year, may help solve the financial crises confronting state government. Likewise, cities and towns where liquor is sold legally, would share in the tax revenue.

Whether the volume of liquor consumed would increase or decrease under legal control is a matter of conjecture. The dries say it will increase, whereas repeal forces point to federal surveys showing the opposite.

At least under legal control, liquor would not be readily available to young people, the mentally retarded or the intoxicated, something that cannot be said under the system of bootleg control. Neither could liquor be purchased on a round-the-clock basis, on Sundays, holidays and election days, as is the case today.

Repeal would also spell an all-out war on bootleggers, for there would be no rhyme or reason for their existence. The public would never sympathize with any enforcement agency which tolerated their operations in competition with legitimate business interests. With their chief source of income gone, bootleggers would not be in position to influence the electorate, as they frequently have in the past.

It cannot be denied there are many issues involved in the repeal proposal, although the moral one is among the weightiest. Vice, corruption, juvenile delinquency, disrespect for the law and the simple and undeniable fact that we already have whisky, must be carefully weighed. In view of the long failure of prohibition to prohibit, it is reasonable to assume that repeal offers many advantages over what we have today.

It should be clear to all that we are not voting on the merits of drinking. The question before the people is this: Shall the liquor we already have be sold legally with controls or illegally with no controls?⁹⁶

In the April 7, 1959, vote, Comanche County's wet majority was like an oasis in "dry" Southwest Oklahoma, where nearly all surrounding counties stood fast for prohibition. In Comanche County's 57 voting precincts, repeal received a whopping majority of 3,311 votes. Repeal won 8,805 votes to 5,494 for prohibition. The county option provision, submitted simultaneously with repeal, also suffered a staggering defeat in Comanche County. It was rejected 9,561 to 4,355. Statewide, repeal was approved 396,845 to 314,380. Local option failed 469,503 to 221,404. Comanche and Grady were the only two counties in the southwest section of Oklahoma voting for repeal. Commenting on the impact of the vote which ushered out an entire era in Oklahoma social and political life, Dr. Rufus Walker, chairman of the Comanche County dry forces, stated: "If repeal is the will of the people, it may be for the best. If everyone will work for law enforcement, I'm sure it will work for the good." The chairman of the Comanche County wet forces, Mrs. Dorothy Carter, asserted: "It is gratifying to realize the people have voted to bring this business--which has been controlled by the underworld--under legal control."⁹⁷

Legal liquor sales began on September 1, 1959, after the twenty-seventh Oklahoma Legislature implemented the amendment through the Liquor Control Act. An Alcoholic Beverage Control Board was established,

⁹⁶ Ibid., February 23, 1959, p. 1; Constitution-Press, April 5, 1959, p. 12.

⁹⁷ 1973 Directory of Oklahoma, p. 447; Constitution, April 8, 1959, p. 1.

which authorized licensed privately owned package stores as outlets. Fourteen liquor stores therefore began sales in Lawton on Tuesday, September 1, 1959, ringing down the curtain on fifty-two years of prohibition. A newspaper survey of sales on opening day showed that most of the dealers enjoyed a larger volume than expected. Only one was disappointed, a downtown dealer, who commented that bootleggers' last-minute efforts to get rid of their stocks before the legal opening evidently hampered his sales. Some customers commented that prices were lower in legal stores. For example, a fifth of eighty-six proof blended whisky which sold for \$8.50 from bootleggers sold for \$5.24 in the legal stores. Other customers remarked on one drawback to the new legal stores: they had to get dressed and go to the store to buy liquor, while in the past they could order by phone from their favorite bootleggers and have it delivered.⁹⁸

Only a little more than a month after the repeal vote, a news story exploded like a bombshell in Lawton with the disclosure that a federal grand jury was scheduled to convene May 21, 1959, in Oklahoma City and would investigate possible federal liquor law violations in Comanche County. Forty-five surprised Comanche County residents received subpoenas ordering them to appear and testify before the grand jury. Included among those subpoenaed were at least ten law enforcement officers and several known liquor dealers in the county. At the same time the subpoenas were served, State Crime Bureau agents and agents of the United States Treasury Alcohol Tax Unit carried out widespread raids against county bootleggers and night clubs. In all, fourteen

⁹⁸Constitution, September 1, 1959, p. 1.

persons were arrested during the raids and more than 3,380 bottles of liquor were seized along with eleven slot machines.⁹⁹

A Constitution-Press editorial commented that the federal grand jury investigation of underworld activities in Comanche County was almost certain to produce lasting benefits and should be welcomed by the vast majority of Lawton citizens. The editorial added that if a conspiracy to violate federal liquor laws actually existed, then every law abiding citizen should "fervently hope it can be exposed and violators punished according to the degree of their involvement." The editorial further asserted:

. . . No one can deny that Lawton has its share of vice. Certainly, we are not proud of it. For a number of years there has been a laxity of law enforcement that encouraged the underworld to expand its operations and extend its influence into politics and other facets of community life. How far the underworld's tentacles have extended still remains in the realm of speculation. But the federal grand jury may soon have some of the answers.

Prohibition has been blamed, and with some justification, for the lack of sound law enforcement. But that, apparently is not the overriding factor. There must be other considerations because the public, generally, has not been in sympathy with the increasing tempo of vice activities. Most citizens would be appalled at the scope of the illegal liquor traffic, the related vice activities and the number of people they support.

Repeal will soon replace prohibition and the corruption it may have spawned. The grand jury should make a clean sweep of those who may have aided or abetted the underworld. Therefore, the time has come to turn over a new leaf in law enforcement and rid the community of those who habitually live outside the law.

Vice investigations invariably give the community a 'black eye,' and no public-spirited citizen enjoys seeing this happen. However, this is one investigation which most citizens should welcome with enthusiasm. It is bound to have a wholesome effect upon the community, and over the long haul will work for the common good.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹Ibid., May 13, 1959, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰Constitution-Press, May 24, 1959, p. 10.

After the federal grand jury went into session in Oklahoma City on May 21, 1959, forty-seven witnesses were called behind locked doors for questioning. The witnesses included most of Comanche County's big-time and small-time bootleggers and several city and county law officers and former officers. On June 18, 1959, the grand jury issued its report to Federal Judge W. R. Wallace.¹⁰¹

Comanche County Sheriff Earl L. Simmons, Lawton Police Chief Ronald Wheatley, Police Inspector Jimmy Warren, and four of the biggest bootleg operators in the county were indicted on charges of conspiracy and violation of the federal wholesale liquor laws by engaging in such a business without paying required federal taxes. The bootleggers named in the indictments, a fifteen-page document which outlined fifty-eight alleged overt acts committed by the defendants, included Everett Denton Weaver, Wayne Tisdell, Ralph Allen Hudson, and Lincoln Elmo (Step) Wade. Many other bootleggers were named as co-conspirators, but not as defendants, in the indictments. The grand jury charges painted a sordid picture of a time-worn Oklahoma custom: the practice of "buying" law enforcement officers to keep them from enforcing prohibition laws against bootleggers. In the conspiracy charges, the law officers and bootleggers were accused of charging and collecting \$5 per case of whisky for protection against law enforcement. All seven were ordered to face trial conjointly on the charges.¹⁰²

After a four-day trial in September in United States District Court in Oklahoma City, a jury convicted Sheriff Earl L. Simmons, Police

¹⁰¹Constitution, May 22, 1959, p. 1; June 5, 1959, p. 1.

¹⁰²Ibid., June 19, 1959, p. 1.

Inspector Jimmy Warren, and three bootleggers, Everett Weaver, Wayne Tisdell and Ralph Hudson. Police Chief Ronald Wheatley, who denied on the witness stand that he had ever taken a penny for bootlegger protection, was acquitted. However, the federal grand jury reconvened in Oklahoma City in October, 1959, and indicted Wheatley with lying under oath for claiming that he had never received any protection money. Tried by a federal jury in December, 1959, in Oklahoma City, Wheatley was convicted on the perjury indictment after Warren, Weaver, Tisdell, and others testified Wheatley participated in the bootleg protection racket before the "per-case payment system" was started early in 1959. Testimony was that bootleggers paid from \$50 to \$500 monthly to the police department for protection against proper enforcement of Oklahoma prohibition laws.¹⁰³

A Comanche County grand jury then made a sweeping five-week investigation of Lawton and Comanche County law enforcement officers. Because the federal investigation was limited to violations of federal law, the county jury fell heir to the task of probing into alleged violations of state law. Indicted in December, 1959, were Wheatley, Simmons, former Comanche County Sheriff Everett Ray Hale, former sheriff's deputies Carl Phillips and Arvil Roberson, Justice of the Peace Marvin Cameron, District Court Marshal Fred L. Sullivan, former constable and Lawton Police Chief Newt C. Adair, and George Box, a former ice dock operator who was a brother-in-law of Lawton bootlegger Dean Sills. All were accused of bribery in the bootleg protection

¹⁰³Ibid., September 22, 1959, p. 1; September 23, 1959, p. 1; September 24, 1959, p. 1; September 25, 1959, p. 1; October 13, 1959, p. 1; October 14, 1959, p. 1; December 1, 1959, p. 1; December 2, 1959, p. 1; Constitution-Press, September 27, 1959, p. 1.

racket except Sullivan and Adair, who were charged with perjury before the county grand jury.¹⁰⁴

A Constitution-Press editorial placed a portion of the blame for the graft and corruption on an apathetic public:

Conviction of key law enforcement officers for their part in a county-wide liquor conspiracy can serve a useful purpose if it arouses citizens from a generally apathetic attitude toward both local government and law enforcement.

Revelations of bootleg payoffs for police protection are rather shocking, although not entirely unexpected. There has been a growing tendency in recent years to overlook a lot of so-called minor violations of the law. In turn, lack of public interest has been interpreted by some as an invitation to misuse their powers for personal enrichment. The temptation, particularly under prohibition, has been too great for some.

Testimony in federal court at Oklahoma City revealed, beyond any reasonable doubt, that a sordid conspiracy existed to control the liquor traffic in Comanche County. Above all else, it disclosed a serious failure of public trust, a failure that served to undermine public confidence in the principal law enforcement agencies of the city and county.

The disclosure of graft and corruption and misuse of police powers represent a great personal tragedy for all honest and dedicated enforcement officers. Likewise, it is a tragic moment for the community, but one that may, in the long run, bring about a healthier climate and greater public awareness of the responsibilities of citizenship.

Repeal of prohibition should go a long way in eliminating the opportunity, as well as the temptation, for graft and corruption. Prohibition, combined with public apathy, provided both.

Complacency can be blamed, in part, for the unwholesome situation which has existed, but no excuse can be offered for those who violated public trust as well as the laws they had sworn to uphold. The responsibility of citizenship looms even greater in the wake of the disclosures of graft and corruption. By taking a greater interest in local affairs, the people can insist upon and receive better law enforcement, and the community can overcome what has become a blot on its reputation.¹⁰⁵

Warren, Simmons, and the three former bootleggers, Tisdell, Weaver,

¹⁰⁴Constitution, November 2, 1959, p. 1; December 21, 1959, p. 1.

¹⁰⁵Constitution-Press, September 27, 1959.

and Hudson, all served terms in the federal prison at Seagoville, Texas. Wheatley's conviction on the perjury charge was reversed by the Tenth United States Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver, Colorado, on the grounds that the jury had resolved his innocence in the first trial. In the other cases resulting from the Comanche County grand jury investigation, charges eventually were dropped against all except Cameron, who was tried, convicted, and sentenced to one year in prison. His conviction later was reversed on appeal.¹⁰⁶

The Constitution-Press heaved a loud editorial sigh of relief after the bootleg scandals were over. The year 1959, an editorial commented, was not the brightest in Lawton and Comanche County history. Yet after all the dirty linen had been aired in public, Lawton and Comanche County "should be a far better place to live" in the future, the editorial observed.¹⁰⁷

Another Decade of Growth

Lawton capped another decade of tremendous growth when its population climbed to 61,697 in the 1960 census, a gain of 26,940 over the 1950 census of 34,757. The gain represented a growth of 77.5 per cent during the fifties, and Lawton officially became Oklahoma's number three city in size. And Comanche County surpassed Muskogee as the third largest county in population in the state. The census listed Comanche County with a population of 90,803, an increase of 45,638 over a ten-year period from 55,165 in 1950. The ten-year population spurt also boosted Lawton into

¹⁰⁶ Constitution, December 18, 1959, p. 1; February 22, 1960, p. 1; October 5, 1960, p. 1; October 6, 1960, p. 1; January 23, 1961, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ Constitution-Press, December 20, 1959, p. 14.

a metropolitan status, one of twenty-one new standard metropolitan areas across the nation. The Lawton area's inclusion among the new metropolitan areas was made on the basis of the 1960 census which showed that the area had attained a population of at least 50,000.¹⁰⁸

Much of Lawton's and Comanche County's growth was attributed by the Lawton newspapers to intensive military activities at Fort Sill, the area's major industry. During 1959 for example, Fort Sill expenditures and payrolls pumped \$97 million into the Lawton area economy. During the decade, efforts to triple the size of the post's ranges were blocked, as told above, pp. 332-356. Yet Fort Sill did manage to enlarge its boundaries during the fifties from 69,375 acres to 94,384 acres. And the construction of large training facilities, classrooms, laboratories, and troop and family housing paved the way for stepped up activities at the post and a sizeable increase in personnel.¹⁰⁹

To house the large population increase, Lawton's construction industry set outstanding records in building new residences. In 1959 a tremendous surge in construction of new houses--a record of 970 new single-family residences--boasted Lawton's construction spending to a record \$21,224,544. The 1959 total represented an increase of fifty per cent over the previous record of \$14.7 million set during the 1958 building year. And in a thirteen-year period from 1947 to 1960, 8,672 new single-family houses were constructed to house the expanding

¹⁰⁸ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, United States Census of Population: 1950, Vol. I, Characteristics of the Population, pt. 36, Oklahoma, 28, 29; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, United States Census of Population: 1960, Vol. I, Characteristics of the Population, pt. 36, Oklahoma, 27, 28; Constitution, August 1, 1960, p. 1; November 29, 1960, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Constitution-Press, January 3, 1960, p. 1.

population. The total of construction costs in Lawton during the thirteen-year period was a whopping \$118,515,235. Other major factors in Lawton's building boom during the fifties were the construction of several new shopping centers, many new businesses and the new community hotel in the downtown area, and the expansion of Lawton's city limits by several hundred acres.¹¹⁰

An editorial bragged that during the fifties Lawton also posted several other major achievements which enabled the city and surrounding county area to increase in population. One was the development of an expanded water supply through the approval and construction of Lawton's second reservoir, which was later named Lake Ellsworth. Another major achievement pointed out was the tremendous public school building program to accommodate a student load of more than 13,000. Also cited was the construction of a new high school complex and several civic facilities in Elmer Thomas Park, including a civic auditorium, a county historical society building, and two reserve armories.¹¹¹

Newspaper circulation also kept pace with the booming Lawton metropolitan area. By 1960 the combined circulation of the Constitution and Press reached an all-time high of 22,111. The net paid circulation was 14,245 for the Constitution and 7,866 for the Press. Perhaps the most remarkable expansion during the decade of the fifties was in advertising. By 1960 annual display advertising revenue was running approximately three-quarters of a million dollars. The number of pages published in each daily edition was steadily growing, fattened by

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 4.

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 8.

advertising from the proliferating retail outlets in the expanding shopping centers. The increased circulation and advertising volume during the fifties transformed Shepler's two newspapers into one of Lawton's major business enterprises.¹¹²

The Lawton newspapers enjoyed steady economic growth during the fifties, although they faced increasing competition from the electronic media, radio and television. The television boom came to the Lawton area in 1953. The previous year the Federal Communications Commission, after a three-year ban on the establishment of television stations during which it had perfected a system of channel allocations, began granting licenses again. The FCC in December, 1952, authorized the establishment of station KSWO-TV in Lawton. It was the third television station started in Oklahoma; the other two were located at Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Telecasting operations for the station, an affiliate of the American Broadcasting Company, began in April, 1953. The station owners, who also operated Lawton's first radio station, KSWO, included R. D. Drewry, T. R. Warkentin, R. P. Scott, J. R. Montgomery, and G. G. Downing, all prominent Lawton businessmen. Lawton area residents also received transmissions from two Wichita Falls, Texas, television stations, which were affiliates respectively of the National Broadcasting Company and the Columbia Broadcasting System.¹¹³

Despite the electronic media encroachment in the Lawton area during

¹¹²Directory Newspapers and Periodicals (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son), 1960, p. 852; Wilbur Rice interview, Lawton, Oklahoma, October 2, 1971.

¹¹³Edwin Emery, The Press and America (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 601-602; Constitution, December 24, 1952, p. 1.

the fifties, Shepler's newspapers continued to expand steadily in both circulation and advertising lineage. Obviously one reason was that a very large amount of local retail advertising--and all classified advertising--did not lend itself to electronic reproduction. Also the television stations, especially on network programs, emphasized national advertising of products and brands.

Even with the development of Lawton area radio and television news staffs, Shepler's newspapers continued during the fifties to be first in coverage of local news. Certainly it can be argued that such a policy was good business. The need to promote a large advertising income to pay the high costs of publishing and return a reasonable profit can be accomplished by a thorough coverage of the news in a fair and balanced manner. The end result made for a newspaper which was attractive to readers in both news coverage and advertising.

But to what degree did Shepler's newspapers display a responsible performance in the public interest, providing a "truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning" while also attempting to raise social conflict "from the plane of violence to the plane of discussion"? These were the noble if not highly abstract goals of a responsible press as outlined in the late 1940s by the Commission on Freedom of the Press.¹¹⁴

Of course the idea of social responsibility in the press is relative and nebulous and can be viewed differently from different perspectives. But in the field of day-to-day coverage of the news in

¹¹⁴Commission on Freedom of the Press, A Free and Responsible Press (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), pp. 59-61; William L. Rivers and Wilbur Schramm, Responsibility in Mass Communication (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 45-52.

the Lawton area during the fifties, Shepler's newspapers carefully presented accurate, balanced, and fair accounts, quoting spokesmen for all sides of the question while at the same time presenting background and sufficient interpretation. Sometimes this struggle for responsible performance fell short of the goals. Certainly, though, the over-all effort was a departure from the libertarianism practiced by the Lawton newspapers in the first two decades of the town's existence. Under libertarianism, the early-day Lawton newspapers reflected the world as their owners saw it, distorting, lying, vilifying, all with the idea that rational men could discern truth among the falsehoods in the market-place of ideas.¹¹⁵

Yet there are other aspects in the idea of a socially responsible press. These include the propositions that the press should serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism, give a representative picture of the constituent groups in society, help in the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society, and attempt to assist in the processes of social conflict. It was in these areas of social responsibility that the Lawton newspapers fell short. Shepler as editor and publisher personally listened to complaints, comments, and ideas pertaining to the Lawton area. Yet as editor he avoided promoting an active letters-to-the-editor section in his newspapers. Many forum letters came across his desk, but most of them remained unpublished. In this vital area of feedback from readers, the Constitution and Press were sadly deficient.

The Lawton newspapers also lagged in fostering a better community

¹¹⁵Rivers and Schramm, pp. 45-52.

by exposing and crusading against many social injustices, such as the widespread poverty, poor housing, and poor schools of the city's two black areas. On occasion the newspapers printed stories about the Negro areas, such as several series of articles on the poor facilities and crowded conditions in the black schools. And a few stories described the uneasiness and alarm of the city's black citizens about widespread violence, vice, and lawlessness that existed in the two black areas. Yet editorial campaigns appealing for improved schools, housing, and other social conditions in the black areas were noticeably absent. After the United States Supreme Court decision in 1954 ordered an end to segregated schools, the Lawton papers printed many stories describing how the city schools would go about implementing the orders. But no editorials appeared supporting the decision and appealing for smooth transition.

Over the years the primary goal of Ned Shepler and his editorials had been to support and to keep a close watch over Lawton's main industry, Fort Sill. Shepler felt that Fort Sill was the single key to Lawton's economic well being. That belief explained the all-out support the Lawton newspapers gave to the Fort Sill land expansion proposals during the fifties. Nonetheless, the Lawton papers also supported the economic, social, and political betterment of the city itself. They never failed to campaign for needed water supply expansions, all kinds of civic bond issues, school bond issues and Cameron College improvements, additional area highways and improved city streets, hospital expansions, airport improvements, and community-wide housing programs. Although Shepler's newspapers had shortcomings in the area of social consciousness, they were always on the watch for ways

to improve the city economically.

As Lawton turned the corner into a new decade, a Constitution-Press editorial commented that "even the most optimistic are probably surprised by the accomplishments of the past decade." In looking ahead, the editorial observed that the opportunities of the future appeared even greater. "Our greatest challenge," the editorial went on, "is to build the kind of city that we want and one that will continue to attract those who may want to make Lawton their home. We can realize this goal by planning for the orderly growth and development of our community."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶Constitution-Press, January 3, 1960, p. 8.

CHAPTER VII

A DEVELOPING METROPOLIS

Turnpike Dream Comes True

Lawton newspaper publisher Ned Shepler had long nursed a dream of a toll road in Southwest Oklahoma linking Lawton to a transcontinental highway system. As a vital connection in such a superhighway route, Lawton would enjoy vast new economic and tourist benefits. From the time of its founding in 1901, Lawton had been bypassed by the nation's major transportation systems. Only branch lines of the Rock Island and Frisco railroads served the city. A modern airport was completed in 1950, and it was served by two airlines, Frontier and Continental. Still, Lawton was relatively isolated as far as major highways were concerned. Shepler had envisioned Lawton being on the "Main Street of America," linked directly to a major four-lane highway stretching from coast to coast. Such a Southwest Oklahoma toll road from the Red River on the Texas border would place Lawton as the state's third largest city on a beeline route with Oklahoma City and Tulsa, the state's two other major cities. The old route connecting Lawton with Oklahoma City was U.S. Highway 277, a narrow, tortuous, and dilapidated road that passed through numerous towns. It was ninety-seven miles in length, and drivers usually spent two-and-one-half hours averaging approximately thirty-nine miles an hour to make the trip. The U.S. 277 route also

was highly dangerous, and it annually chalked up one of the highest traffic death and injury rates in the state.¹

Shepler had campaigned editorially since the late forties for a Southwest turnpike as part of a statewide toll road system. He lent his editorial weight to the uphill battle which ended with the construction of the state's first toll road, the Turner Turnpike between Tulsa and Oklahoma City. After the Turner Turnpike was completed in 1953, referendums were submitted to the voters of Oklahoma for approval of Oklahoma portions of other toll roads from Tulsa to Joplin, Missouri; Oklahoma City to Wichita, Kansas, and Oklahoma City to Wichita Falls, Texas, via Lawton. The turnpike system was approved in a special election on January 26, 1954. And traffic surveys indicated the Lawton turnpike would be financially feasible. But hopes to finance and to build the southwest leg of the turnpike system faded under Governor Raymond Gary, who did not approve of turnpikes. Instead during his term of office from 1955 to 1959, Gary promoted construction of interstate highways in Oklahoma through financing made possible by the Federal-Aid Highway Act.²

Shepler editorials pointed out that Lawton and Southwest Oklahoma had no link with this federal interstate highway system which was being financed almost entirely by the federal government. His editorials repeatedly expressed the belief that a turnpike was Lawton's only hope

¹Constitution, June 2, 1959, p. 1; Constitution-Press, March 1, 1964, p. 1. Stories on the opening day of the turnpike, March 1, 1964, recounted the long struggle to win approval for the Southwest Turnpike.

²Constitution, June 2, 1959, p. 1; Sunday Oklahoman, May 6, 1973, p. 21A; Directory of Oklahoma 1973 (Oklahoma City: State Election Board, 1973), p. 443.

for becoming a part of a superhighway linked with the rest of the nation. When J. Howard Edmondson campaigned for governor in 1958, he received Shepler's enthusiastic support, principally because Edmondson pledged to work for a Southwest turnpike and for improved highways in the western portion of the state.³

After Edmondson took office, he made two appointments which revived Lawton's hopes that the proposed Southwest turnpike would eventually be financed and constructed. The new governor named J. C. Kennedy, a Lawton businessman, as one of eight new members to the State Highway Commission. Kennedy, who represented the Sixth District, was the first highway commissioner from Lawton since 1927. Edmondson then appointed Shepler to the Oklahoma Turnpike Authority. The governor asserted he chose Shepler for the turnpike board position because Shepler was one of the original advocates of toll roads in Oklahoma and had long promoted the southwest leg of the turnpike network. In the past Shepler had been offered key positions in state government and had always turned them down because he felt his duties as newspaper publisher came first. But this time it appeared Shepler might have a direct role in gaining Lawton a turnpike. State Senator Fred R. Harris of Lawton and several Lawton civic leaders persuaded Shepler to take the post because of improving prospects for the Southwest toll road. Shepler was selected as secretary-treasurer of the Turnpike Authority after joining the board.⁴

Even though the governor was favorable toward the Southwest

³Constitution, June 2, 1959, p. 1.

⁴Ibid., January 27, 1959, p. 1; June 2, 1959, p. 1.

turnpike, sufficient financial guarantees by the state were required before the turnpike bonds could be sold. This financial responsibility on the state's part was assured through 1959 and 1961 turnpike bills approved by the Oklahoma Legislature and which were written and promoted by Senator Harris. In these laws, the state pledged \$1 million annually in gasoline taxes to guarantee payment of interest on the turnpike bonds and also pledged Turner Turnpike profits after its bonds were retired. The two state legislative bills drew strongest opposition from Chickasha area legislators, who feared the turnpike would dry up business in towns it bypassed.⁵

It was planned to build the 84.6-mile turnpike in two segments. The northern section would start at the Newcastle Bridge southwest of Oklahoma City and extend 60.3 miles southwest past Chickasha to a point north of Lawton. Here the turnpike would end and connect with a four-lane expressway which would extend south through Fort Sill and Lawton, connecting again with the south leg of the toll road south of Lawton. Then the southern leg of the turnpike would continue south 24.3 miles to Randlett, five miles north of the Red River. It would be necessary to build connecting links for the turnpike at the Red River bridge area and from Oklahoma City to the Newcastle Bridge. Other connecting links would be required at both ends of Lawton's expressway.⁶

The State Highway Commission--at Edmondson's urging--agreed to spend state and federal funds to finance construction of all the connecting links and the Lawton expressway at a cost of more than \$17

⁵Constitution-Press, March 1, 1964, p. 1.

⁶Ibid.

million. Also, Lawton voters approved a \$1.4 million bond issue for purchase of the right-of-way and other improvements for the Lawton expressway. Finally, the Oklahoma Legislature earmarked a portion of state gasoline taxes on the turnpike system to back the toll road bonds, and the Oklahoma Supreme Court approved the action. The last obstacle had been hurdled for sale of the toll road bonds.⁷

The Turnpike Authority acted quickly to sell the bonds. The price of building the toll road was set at \$56.5 million. Terms of the bond sale were agreed on in November, 1961. In a Turnpike Authority meeting at Oklahoma City, an Eastern syndicate of bond underwriters agreed to purchase the bonds at 4.75 per cent interest and at a discount rate of four per cent. Under terms of the agreement, the underwriters then sold the bonds on the open market at par value, which earned them approximately \$2.26 million. Shepler, as secretary-treasurer of the Turnpike Authority, made the motion to accept the underwriters' offer. The motion was passed unanimously. Turnpike consulting engineer H. E. Bailey noted that the financing agreement meant that the toll road probably could be completed and open for traffic by June 1, 1964.⁸

It was a momentous and happy occasion for Shepler. Beaming with satisfaction, he remarked: "This is a great day for Southwestern Oklahoma." Governor Edmondson, who was present at the bond sale, predicted the Southwest Turnpike would open a new gateway of travel to the West Coast. "This link is the key to a new national southern route over U.S. 70 to Los Angeles," he declared. "It places Oklahoma City and

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Constitution, November 2, 1961, p. 1.

Tulsa and other communities of our state in a competing position with the Dallas-Fort Worth community for the southwest Texas business." When completed, the governor added, the Southwest Turnpike along with the Turner and Will Rogers turnpikes will provide a 337-mile four-lane superhighway from a point near Joplin, Missouri, to the Southwest Oklahoma border. The sale of the bonds meant so much to Shepler that he had the front page of the Lawton Constitution describing the event reproduced in bronze, mounted on a plaque, and displayed in his private office.⁹

Other events moved swiftly toward completion of the toll road. After letting engineering contracts for the road, the Turnpike Authority awarded the first construction contracts in April, 1962. The following month the first shovelful of dirt was turned in formal groundbreaking ceremonies. Legislation to name the road the H. E. Bailey Turnpike was passed by the Oklahoma Legislature in June, 1963. Shepler and many other Lawtonians expressed dismay and disappointment that the turnpike had been named after a consulting engineer for the Turnpike Authority. The Constitution noted that Bailey's private engineering firm was being paid fees totaling nearly \$1 million for work on the Southwest Turnpike, and that his firm had been paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in engineering fees on other state toll roads.¹⁰

Shepler questioned the ethics of naming the turnpike after an engineer. He noted that it would have been preferable to honor someone connected with promoting the turnpike who had not made vast sums of

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Constitution, June 12, 1963, p. 1; Constitution-Press, March 1, 1964, p. 1.

money out of it. Shepler also suggested that the name, "Southwestern Turnpike," should be retained for the toll road despite the legislative action. An attempt to name the turnpike for the late State Senator Bill Logan of Lawton failed. Senator Harris had promoted a bill to name the road for Logan, who was a principal proponent behind early state legislation which kept the Southwest turnpike issue alive. Bailey was chief highway engineer in Governor Robert S. Kerr's administration and the first highway director in Governor Roy J. Turner's administration. Bailey then became general manager of the Turnpike Authority, and W. D. Hoback moved over from the highway department to become his chief engineer. Bailey left the authority in 1955, but he had remained its consulting engineer. Hoback then took over the Turnpike Authority position with the title of chief engineer-manager.¹¹

On Sunday, March 1, 1964, at 7 a.m. the northern leg of the new turnpike was officially opened to traffic, three months ahead of the original completion date. The southern leg to Randlett was opened shortly afterward in April, 1964. Toll collection plazas for the northern leg were located near Chickasha and Newcastle. The toll for passenger cars was sixty cents at each gate, making a trip from Lawton to Oklahoma City cost \$1.20. The southern leg had one toll collection plaza near Walters, where motorists paid a toll of fifty cents. To the south, newly constructed free four-lane highways connected the Red River bridge area with Wichita Falls, Texas. The entire H. E. Bailey Turnpike was constructed of Portland cement, considered superior to

¹¹Constitution, June 12, 1963, p. 1; Constitution-Press, March 1, 1964, p. 1; Sunday Oklahoman, May 6, 1973, p. 21A; After the turnpike officially was named for Bailey, the Lawton newspapers continued to refer to it as the Southwestern Turnpike for several years.

asphalt used on the Turner Turnpike. Other improvements included automatic toll collection lanes for drivers who had the correct change.¹²

The H. E. Bailey Turnpike beat all expectations from the day it was opened. Drivers accustomed to spending a weary three hours traveling the old two-lane U.S. 277 at about forty miles or less an hour marveled at the new superhighway where one could drive seventy miles an hour for over sixty miles with stops only at the two toll gates. And it took only an hour to make the Lawton-to-Oklahoma City trip.¹³

In a story rounding up comment on the turnpike opening, Edmondson, who then was serving as United States Senator from Oklahoma following the death of Senator Bob Kerr, reminded his readers that it was a "long hard fight" to obtain the toll road, and that many people were involved. "Those who drive on the turnpike," Edmondson noted, "will readily recognize its great contribution to the convenience and safety of Oklahomans and others using it, as well as its great contribution to the growth of Southwest Oklahoma." State Senator Fred R. Harris of Lawton, whose legislative bills made the turnpike financially feasible, observed that it had been a continual fight to keep the new turnpike project alive. He pointed out that a turnpike system now spanned Oklahoma from the Northeast to the Southwest and completed "the longest stretch of four-lane highway in the United States." By placing Lawton on a transcontinental highway system, Harris declared: "It will mean

¹²Constitution-Press, March 1, 1964, pp. 1, 12A.

¹³Ibid.

new jobs, new industry, new tourism for the entire area served by the road."¹⁴

Shapler especially was happy about the toll road opening--it was a dream come true. He had served on the Turnpike Authority from 1959 until 1963, resigning when he saw that the toll road would be finished. "At last," he commented. "Today Lawton, Fort Sill and all of Southwest Oklahoma attain the long sought objective of being on a mainline transportation system." He added that yesterday's "mainline" would have been a major railway system. "But today's 'mainline' is the Southwestern Oklahoma Turnpike." Shepler observed that with the airlines, the long sought turnpike gave Fort Sill and Lawton the finest in modern passenger, and to a great extent, freight, traffic system. He said the railways were still an essential part of transportation, "but so are the complementary airplanes, trucks, buses and passenger cars. Without all of them no community can prosper." Shepler recalled that at one time Fort Sill was called "isolated" because of lack of good transportation facilities. "That was used as an argument by those who sought to move the Artillery School to the Eastern seaboard," Shepler noted. "It was almost effective." However, Shepler declared that argument no longer holds. "Lawton, Fort Sill and all of Southwest Oklahoma are now in close touch with the entire nation--the world--through the airlines, railroads and at last this magnificent highway which will connect with all the major road systems of the country," he asserted. He added that probably the first effect would be to bring more trucking activity, central warehousing, regional distribution

¹⁴Ibid.

depots, wholesaling and possibly some industry. "In the end," he concluded, "it is almost certain to mean the gradual buildup of this area as a major business center of the Southwest."¹⁵

An editorial headlined, "It's A Reality," made other comments on the toll road opening:

Formal opening of the northern section of the Southwestern Turnpike today provides a moment of almost unparalleled jubilation for those who have struggled for years to make this dream become a reality. And when the southern section is opened to traffic shortly, Lawton most certainly will occupy its rightful place on 'Main Street, U.S.A.'

And for that we mean that Lawton, Fort Sill and Southwest Oklahoma will be linked to the transcontinental highway system serving all major metropolitan areas of the country. Lawton, third city of Oklahoma, no longer will be partially isolated by an inadequate transportation system.

New traffic will be generated by the turnpike, of course, and the improved transportation system will encourage greater growth and economic development of this area. But the long term benefits cannot be forecast with any degree of accuracy. Obviously they will be substantial. Tourism alone should make an impression on our economy.

Among those rejoicing today will be the long suffering motorists who have been driving the tortuous 100 miles between Lawton and Oklahoma City over a dangerous and grossly inadequate highway for many years.

Over the new turnpike this will be a much more pleasant trip, as well as a safer and shorter one. If you have an opportunity, we would suggest trying out the new superhighway today.¹⁶

The Continued Fight For Water

Lawton is a semi-desert city. Located in the Short Grass country of the Great Plains, it has weathered many cycles of drought, which in turn are broken by periods of gully-washing rains. It has been effectively argued that the Great Plains west of the ninety-eighth

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 14A.

meridian is a desert-like land distinguished by its treelessness, levelness, and aridity. Southwest Oklahoma is a part of this desert-like country. The ninety-eighth meridian, which approximately follows Interstate Highway 35, divides Oklahoma in half and places all of Western Oklahoma in this desert region. Aridity is the overriding geographic feature of this section of the Great Plains. Consequently the economy of the region is based on the limited availability of water and the constant fight to secure more of it.¹⁷

Lawton and Southwest Oklahoma during the Sixties continued to experience this familiar pattern of droughts broken by heavy rains. Publisher Ned Shepler and other Lawton civic leaders had long been aware of the need for large reservoirs to store water during the droughts. A second reservoir for Lawton and Fort Sill--Lake Ellsworth on East Cache Creek--was completed in March, 1961. By June, 1961, Southwest Oklahoma had recorded a dry, five-month period. However, on June 5, 1961, Lake Lawtonka's watershed was hit by a six-inch rainfall. The torrential rains quickly filled Lawtonka, and soon water was spilling over the dam's floodgates. For the first time since the flood gates were built, they had to be opened to relieve pressure on the dam. The rains continued to fall, and within seven months after completion, the city's new reservoir, Lake Ellsworth, was filled to capacity. By December 4, 1961, water was flowing over the Lake Ellsworth Dam. Construction of the new lake and pipeline to Lake Lawtonka was part of

¹⁷Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1931), pp. 3-9; Odie B. Faulk, Land of Many Frontiers: A History of the American Southwest (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 3-4.

a \$6,182,840 waterworks bond issue approved by Lawton voters in 1956.¹⁸

Even though water was lapping over both city dams, Lawton and Fort Sill were on strict water rationing programs by the summer of 1962. Although water was plentiful, the expanding Lawton and Fort Sill population had outgrown its filtration and distribution system. Even with strict rationing, the water pressure was critically low in many Lawton housing areas during the peak summer-use hours. Some homes were without water altogether. Not only was it terribly inconvenient not to have sufficient water for ordinary household use, but also the hazard of not having sufficient pressure to fight fires was alarming.¹⁹

A Constitution-Press editorial pointed out that the situation would grow worse in the Lawton area as new homes were constructed and occupied, and as Fort Sill expanded its facilities and personnel. The newspaper warned that Lawton must act as quickly as possible to solve these problems. It called for a bond election to expand the filter plant near Lake Lawtonka, construction of a new supply line to Lawton, installation of larger distribution water mains, and construction of more water storage tanks within the city. "We should not delay," the editorial concluded.²⁰

The Lawton City Council on September 4, 1962, called a \$5 million bond election on the needed waterworks improvement program. Three weeks later, to the dismay of civic leaders, the bond issue was turned down by a 624-vote margin. Shepler, Chamber of Commerce leaders, and other

¹⁸Constitution-Press, December 31, 1961, p. 1; Constitution, January 3, 1962, p. 1.

¹⁹Constitution-Press, August 19, 1962, p. 1.

²⁰Ibid., p. 19.

supporters of the program urged councilmen to call the election again and to schedule a separate election on the question of installing water meters for every home, an issue which had been defeated many times in the past. However, city councilmen voted to have a complete study of the entire waterworks system made by an Oklahoma City engineering firm before considering another bond election.²¹

On April 2, 1963, the city councilmen approved a contract with the Oklahoma City firm for the study of Lawton's water problems. The survey was completed and presented to the city in September. Meanwhile, the Lawton newspapers, a citizens' committee named by the city council, and the Chamber of Commerce Water Committee were mapping programs for the much needed water bond vote. Water meters entered the early studies, and were recommended by the engineering consultants as necessary to solve the water problems. It was reasoned that water meters would drastically reduce consumption in comparison to the then-present policy of each householder paying a flat monthly rate for unlimited water use.²²

Lawton residents went through another summer of strict water rationing and insufficient water pressure, with many sections of the city having to do without water during peak usage hours. The water problems plagued Lawton and Fort Sill despite a still-adequate supply of water in the two city reservoirs. Another drought gripped Southwest Oklahoma, and the water level in both reservoirs had dropped. However, beginning in June, water from Lake Ellsworth was transferred to Lake Lawtonka by means of pumps and a pipeline which linked the two

²¹Ibid., December 30, 1962, p. 1.

²²Ibid., December 29, 1963, p. 1.

reservoirs. Officials pointed out the Lake Lawtonka filter plant with its daily capacity of approximately twenty-five million gallons daily was wholly inadequate, the three delivery lines to take approximately twenty-six million gallons of water daily from the plant to Lawton and Fort Sill could not supply the demand, and distribution lines and storage facilities within the city were inadequate to serve the growing population.²³

On November 5, 1963, the city council called a waterworks bond election for December 10. The bond election was a two-part proposal, including \$7 million for waterworks improvement and expansion and a separate \$1 million issue calling for purchase and installation of water meters at each household.²⁴

Many Constitution-Press news stories explained the city's desperate need for an expanded filter plant, more water lines and storage tanks, and water meters. "Water, water everywhere, but not enough in town," explained one story. There was plenty of water in the two reservoirs, but the filter plant was overtaxed and the distribution lines were inadequate. During the past summer, the story said: "Some housewives couldn't get enough water from their faucets to wash the dishes. Toilets wouldn't flush many hours of the day. Pressure was so low in some areas that fire protection was limited." The reason for the vexing problem was simple: growth. Lawton literally had outgrown its facilities to process, transmit and distribute enough water for its residents. During peak summer periods, Lawton and Fort Sill used all

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

of the twenty-five million gallons of water the filter plant would produce in a twenty-four-hour period.²⁵

Constitution-Press editorials campaigned extensively for passage of the bond issues. Unless the bonds were approved, warned one editorial, "The time will not be too far away until equally serious water difficulties arise." The editorial added:

. . . Almost every citizen is well acquainted with water rationing and low pressure even though we have ample water supplies at Lake Ellsworth and Lawtonka in the midst of a drought. These problems stem directly from the heavy demands placed on the filter plant and the distribution system. Actually, we are processing more water during the summer months than the plant is designed for, and our mains are inadequate to carry more water to the users even if we could process it. Thus, we are faced with major expansion of both the treatment and distribution systems.

Under the proposed \$7 million bond program, the filter plant would be enlarged to double its present capacity to about 48 million gallons daily, enough to treat all the water the two lakes can supply. A new 42-inch main would be installed to bring the treated water from the plant to Lawton. Large, new distribution mains would be installed over the city to get more water to the homes and boost pressure throughout the city. Additional water storage tanks would be constructed to assure a constant supply.

These represent facilities that we must have, not only to provide adequate water for normal household purposes, but to encourage continued growth of the community. Growth is desirable because the construction of new homes and business and industrial plants means more jobs and payrolls for the community. If we should allow our water situation to deteriorate to the point where construction would have to be curtailed, Lawton would suffer a severe economic blow.

Because of our persistent water problems, sentiment for meters has been on the increase. The city council is to be commended for bringing this long debated issue to a vote, and it is hoped the taxpaying public will recognize their value in delaying the time when Lawton must find another source of water and build another expensive reservoir.

If it means a savings in tax dollars in the future, plus fair and equal distribution of water, we should be willing to accept some type of restriction. Meters offer the best method of encouraging conservation. They provide the only fair method of selling water since the consumer pays only for what

²⁵Ibid., December 1, 1963, p. 15A.

he uses. Small users could benefit, and large users and water wasters would pay for what they consume.

The \$7 million construction program is an absolute must if we are to provide adequate water service to all citizens. The meter proposal is an essential part of the total effort to bring immediate and long range relief. Together they will provide the facilities we need and encourage conservation of a vital commodity. . . .²⁶

On December 10, 1963, property tax-paying voters turned out in large numbers and approved the \$7 million waterworks improvement bond issue by a vote of 4,095 for and 2,771 against. However, they defeated the \$1 million water meter issue by a margin of 498 votes, with 3,191 for and 3,689 against. The waterworks construction program was carried out over a four-year period. Sale of the bonds and work on the improvements got under way during 1964. The construction was completed in the summer of 1967.²⁷

Ironically, while Lawton was increasing its filtration, distribution, and storage capacities, a long and severe drought dropped the water supply in the two reservoirs to a critically low level. The drought started in 1963, when the Lawton area received only 19.19 inches of rain, 12.12 inches below the 92-year average of 31.31 inches. It was the driest year in Lawton since 1939. The drought continued and reached its gravest point by the summer of 1967. Only 25.26 inches fell in 1964, 23.22 inches in 1965, and 20.28 inches in 1966. In the five-year period, 1963 through 1967, a total of 114.19 inches fell in the Lawton area, which was 42.36 inches below normal and the driest five-year

²⁶ Ibid., November 10, 1963, p. 10.

²⁷ Ibid., December 29, 1963, p. 1; December 31, 1967, p. 1.

period since 1870.²⁸

Faced with the possibility that Lawton and Fort Sill might run out of water, the city council took action on two fronts in the summer of 1967 to conserve the supply. All lawn watering was banned, and shrub watering was limited to one hour per week. In previous years during strict rationing, residents had been allowed to water lawns and shrubs from eight to sixteen hours per week. In September, 1967, the city council hired a rainmaker. The weather modification firm of Dr. Irving Krick of Palm Springs, California, was hired for one year at a fee of \$20,000. Sixteen ground-based generators which fired silver iodide crystals into storm clouds were scattered across Southwest Oklahoma and northern Texas in an attempt to produce additional rainfall in the watershed area of the two Lawton reservoirs. Constitution-Press editorials enthusiastically backed both actions of the city council.²⁹

Editorials also called for passage of a one-cent city sales tax which in part would be used for installation of water meters at all Lawton residences. The editorials pointed out that meters would play a big role in conserving water and would eliminate unlimited consumption at a flat monthly rate under the then-present policy. Lawton voters on August 29, 1967, approved the sales tax by a vote of 5,227 to 2,384.³⁰

At the beginning of 1968, Lawton had less than a year's supply of water in the two city reservoirs. Lake Lawtonka was 23.34 feet below

²⁸Constitution, January 6, 1964, p. 1; Constitution-Press, January 1, 1967, p. 14; March 5, 1967, p. 1; December 31, 1967, p. 1.

²⁹Constitution, June 23, 1967, p. 1; September 18, 1967, p. 1.

³⁰Constitution-Press, August 27, 1967, p. 1; Constitution, August 30, 1967, p. 1.

its floodgates, and Lake Ellsworth was down 17.09 feet. Combined, the two lakes held approximately 27,000 acre feet of water, considered well under a year's supply, taking into account harsh rationing, evaporation, and other factors.³¹

Constitution-Press editorials urged that the city council take immediate action to obtain water from some reservoir in the southern Oklahoma area, even if on a temporary basis. Lawton was then offered up to eleven million gallons daily from the Lake of the Arbuckles in south-central Oklahoma, eighty miles to the east. Still the council hesitated, and the Constitution in a page-one editorial warned that Lawton's and Fort Sill's future depended on the immediate calling of an election to decide the issue. The council set the election for May 28, 1968. Lawton voters approved a contract to purchase storage rights in the Lake of the Arbuckles for eleven million gallons of water daily over a fifty-year period and to borrow approximately \$25 million to finance the laying of an eight-mile pipeline from the lake to Lawton.³²

The day following the election, the Constitution in a page-one editorial pleaded with the council to take action as quickly as possible and to sign a contract for the water with the Arbuckle Master Conservancy District. While the council wrangled for three weeks over provisions of the trust to finance the program, several Ardmore residents obtained a court restraining order prohibiting the Arbuckle Master Conservancy officials from signing the contract. The Ardmore citizens

³¹Constitution-Press, December 31, 1967, p. 1.

³²Ibid., January 7, 1968, p. 8B; February 25, 1968, p. 8A; May 19, 1968, p. 1; Constitution, May 9, 1968, p. 1.

argued in their request for the injunction that Lake of the Arbuckles water should not be sold to cities other than those located in the immediate area around the lake. Ardmore previously had twice voted against buying Arbuckle water and taking part in the construction of the lake through the conservancy district. However, while the court injunction was in force, Ardmore held a third election, and this time its citizens voted to buy the water. Later the injunction prohibiting the sale of water to Lawton was made permanent. The city of Lawton appealed the decision to the Oklahoma Supreme Court. However, Lawton's hopes to secure water from the lake were dashed in 1970 when the court ruled in favor of Ardmore.³³

During 1968 the drought somewhat relaxed its grip on Southwest Oklahoma. A total of 35.59 inches of rain fell during the year, well over the average rainfall of 31.91 inches. Prodded by Constitution-Press editorials, the city council continued to conserve what water was on hand. The council pressed for completion of the installation of water meters at all Lawton homes, a project started in 1967. Installation of flood gates at Lake Ellsworth was ordered in order to impound up to five additional feet of water in the lake. With the above average rainfall during 1968, the levels of the two city reservoirs began to rise.³⁴

As 1969 began, there was still much cause for worry in the water crisis. Both lakes were less than half full. Lawtonka was down 15.23

³³Constitution, May 29, 1968, p. 1; June 18, 1968, p. 1; July 8, 1968, p. 1; Constitution-Press, December 24, 1968, p. 1; January 4, 1970, p. 12C, January 3, 1971, p. 4D.

³⁴Constitution-Press, December 29, 1968, p. 1.

feet, and Ellsworth was down 9.35 feet. Heavy spring rains, however, nearly doubled this supply, from a total of 53,000 acre feet to about 95,000 acre feet. Strict water rationing was continued during the summer months. Rainfall tapered off in the fall and winter of 1969, but the year wound up with a near normal total of 29.37 inches. As 1969 closed, Lawtonka was down 4.62 feet and Ellsworth 6.41 feet.³⁵

Lawton closed out the decade of the sixties still in the grips of a water crisis, a situation it had endured since its 1901 founding. Indeed, of all its problems, an adequate water supply undoubtedly was at the top of Lawton's list and would remain there in the future. And throughout Lawton's history, its newspapers--principally the Constitution--had been in the forefront with editorials on ways to cope with the droughts and to secure a sufficient supply. During the sixties, the Lawton newspapers took the lead in urging that the city must acquire water from several other sources in addition to its two existing reservoirs. After the Lake of the Arbuckles project fell through, the Constitution-Press pointed to the proposed Waurika Reservoir project, located southeast of Lawton. The project was authorized by Congress in 1963, but no funds had yet been allocated. The Lawton newspapers expressed the hope that Congress would soon approve funds to start the project, and that Lawton could hold out long enough during the ever-present droughts until it could secure water from this reservoir.³⁶

³⁵ Ibid., January 4, 1970, p. 12C.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 6C.

A Face-Lifting For Lawton

Over the years one of the primary goals of Constitution-Press editorial campaigns has been to foster a better community. One program which held out high hopes for a better community by improving blighted neighborhoods and rundown business areas and replacing them with modern houses and new shopping centers was the federal urban renewal projects of the sixties. The beginnings of urban renewal can be traced to the Housing Act of 1937, which started the public housing program and laid the groundwork for slum clearance. National efforts to cure blight continued with the 1949 Housing Act, which set forth as its goal a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family. Oklahoma adopted the 1959 Urban Redevelopment Act to enable state cities to join in urban renewal activities.³⁷

From its very beginning in Lawton, urban renewal had the editorial support of the Constitution-Press. A proposal to establish an Urban Renewal Authority in Lawton came up for a vote in March, 1962. An editorial pointed out the widespread benefits that such a program would mean to Lawton. For years Shepler and other Lawton civic leaders had dreamed of reviving and revitalizing the deteriorated downtown area. Rundown buildings and insufficient parking had hampered efforts to create a modern business district. Many businesses had fled the problems of the downtown district and had moved to outlying shopping centers that were flourishing along Cache Road, Sheridan Road, Gore Boulevard, and Lee Boulevard. In many instances, beer taverns and

³⁷Housing Act of 1937, Statutes at Large, L, sec. 1, 896 (1937); Housing Act of 1949, Statutes at Large, LXIII, sec. 1, 338 (1949); Oklahoma Statutes 1971, I, sec. 11, 870-891.

private clubs took their places, which meant that the east end "red light" district was expanding and encroaching on the old, established business places. And just as important, civic leaders had envisioned redeveloping several blighted residential areas of the city. Especially in need of improvement was the southwest Lawton View Addition. Overcrowded, dilapidated homes, many of which were nothing but shacks, blighted the area. The Constitution-Press editorial emphasized that all these improvements would be possible under an urban renewal program. On March 20, 1962, property tax-paying voters approved the establishment of an Urban Renewal Authority for Lawton.³⁸

The Lawton Urban Renewal Authority and its five-member board were appointed by the mayor and city council in May of 1962. Since that time, the renewal authority and the City of Lawton have planned programs for stopping blight in residential areas and the downtown area. However, the residential urban renewal projects would not have been possible without the establishment of public housing projects for the relocation of low-income families displaced by the land clearance. Authority for public housing was given for the first time in the state by the 1965 Oklahoma Legislature and was signed into law by Governor Henry Bellmon in June, 1965. Within a month the city council established the Lawton Public Housing Authority. It was soon at work planning the city's first public housing project. Urban renewal in Lawton was being financed with two-thirds of the project costs paid by the federal government. The other third was paid by the city, chiefly through non-cash credits for such improvements as street paving, utility

³⁸Constitution-Press, March 18, 1962, p. 12A; Constitution, March 21, 1962, p. 1.

improvements, sewer and drainage improvements, and construction of parks, fire stations, police stations, or other public facilities.³⁹

The Civic Center Project adjoining downtown Lawton on the north was the first urban renewal project in Lawton. Started in 1964, it formerly was a residential neighborhood that was gradually being encroached upon by businesses. Six years of work in the Civic Center resulted in a modernized area with municipal and commercial buildings replacing the outdated homes. Three parking lots were constructed around the remodeled Lawton City Hall. A municipal park was constructed on the project land and named in honor of Ned Shepler. A large Lawton Police station and a YMCA building were built on land purchased and cleared through urban renewal. Many new commercial structures were built on privately purchased land, including a large Southwestern Bell Telephone building. Other major buildings planned for the area included an Arkla Gas building, a Public Service Company building, and a new city library. Streets were repaved and sidewalks constructed in the center. More redevelopment was planned in the future, including the continued razing and clearing of several old structures to allow for construction of new ones. By 1969, project costs for the Civic Center reached approximately \$2.5 million.⁴⁰

A second major urban renewal project was the eventual total improvement of the Lawton View Addition in southwest Lawton. The Pleasant Valley Project, the first of several planned for the area, received federal approval in July, 1968, after several years of

³⁹Constitution-Press, January 2, 1966, p. 1; Oklahoma Statutes 1971, I, sec. 11, 895-907.

⁴⁰Ibid., January 5, 1969, p. 19G; January 4, 1970, p. 12C.

planning. The Lawton Urban Renewal Authority drew up plans which would clear dilapidated structures, rebuild the area with better homes, provide public housing for low-income families, and provide a business and commercial section. The Lawton Public Housing Authority would handle the public housing, while private firms would construct the shopping center. A four-block shopping center was set aside for the land fronting Lee Boulevard from 11th Street to 15th Street. A fifty-unit public housing complex was to be included for low-income elderly people. The Lawton Board of Education mapped plans to build a school in the area. Approximately twenty-seven houses in the area were to be rehabilitated rather than demolished. Federal monies for the Lawton View Addition urban renewal totaled \$3.2 million.⁴¹

By far the largest and most ambitious of the urban renewal projects in Lawton was the \$21.5 million Downtown Project. After nearly five years of planning, the project was sent to the federal Housing and Urban Development office, receiving its approval on Christmas Eve, 1969. To be developed over a ten-year period, the project includes 115 acres in the heart of downtown Lawton. Central features of the future Downtown Project will be an enclosed, heated, and air-conditioned 300,000-square-foot shopping mall with a major department store and a smaller department store at opposite ends. Smaller stores will extend from the primary department stores to offer a variety of shopping needs. Large parking lots will surround the mall. A search has been launched for a development and financier of the shopping mall. Another major feature of the Downtown Project will include construction of an attractive

⁴¹Ibid.

"entertainment district" a considerable distance from the shopping mall area. The one and one-half block entertainment district will be located east of Second Street between D and E Avenues. The separate adult entertainment district was planned to rid Lawton of its notorious "red light" district. Forty-six taverns and clubs were located in the old downtown area. It is hoped to relocate these taverns and clubs in this new area. It also is hoped to locate movie theaters, restaurants, and "related" businesses in this separate area. Plans were mapped for other major stores to locate on the periphery of the shopping mall area. Some major buildings, such as the Hotel Lawtonian complex and the Security Bank and Trust Building, will remain in the downtown area. The Lawton Public Housing Authority in December, 1969, completed an eleven-story high-rise apartment complex containing 100 units on the southwest edge of the downtown area. This high-rise complex at Sixth Street and E Avenue, Lawton's highest building, was dedicated in January, 1970. It was made available to low-income elderly persons. The building was named after Lieutenant General Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., the first black person in the United States Army to reach the rank of general.⁴²

A fourth major urban renewal project was the Cameron College Project. Originally the project was planned as a rehabilitation program to upgrade deteriorated buildings across the street east from the Cameron campus. However, in 1966 the Oklahoma Regents for Higher Education approved changing Cameron from a junior college to a four-year college. Shepler and other civic leaders then led a drive to expand the Cameron College urban renewal project. It was decided to clear a

⁴²Ibid.

large area to the east of the college to provide the school with expansion space. After a hearing held by the city council, the clearance project was approved. It got under way in 1968. The land cleared would provide sites for classroom buildings, dormitories, parking areas, and other college facilities. A 3.5-acre public park also was planned in the area. The federal funding would cost \$1.9 million.⁴³

Shepler had campaigned editorially for many years to change Cameron to a four-year college. At the same time the announcement of the change to a four-year college was made, Shepler as president of the Lawton McMahon Foundation revealed a pledge of \$600,000 toward a Fine Arts and Music Building for Cameron. Construction of several other new buildings on the Cameron campus occurred to accommodate the expected increased enrollment. Completed by the end of the sixties were a Business and Home Economics Building, a military technology building, an administration building, and a \$6.3 million twin ten-story dormitory complex with a connecting cafeteria. The dormitory complex was named the Shepler Center in honor of the Lawton publisher. A record enrollment of 3,500 was reached during 1969 at Cameron, which graduated its first senior class in May, 1970.⁴⁴

Vietnam War Impact on Lawton, Fort Sill

Constitution-Press editorials gave all-out support to President Johnson's decision in 1965 to commit American combat troops to the

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Constitution, September 26, 1966, p. 1; Constitution-Press, December 29, 1968, p. 1; January 4, 1970, p. 12C.

Vietnam War. And as American involvement steadily mounted in the following months and years, the Lawton newspapers continued their "hawkish" backing. The type of war waged in the mountainous jungles, plains, and rice paddies of South Vietnam depended heavily on the use of artillery. Consequently the war had a far-reaching impact on Fort Sill and Lawton. The pouring of American troops into South Vietnam in 1965 caused a mass exodus of men and equipment from Fort Sill. By the end of 1965, nearly 3,000 men in six artillery units and many more on individual orders had left Fort Sill for duty in Vietnam. Troop strength at the post dropped from approximately 23,000 to 20,000 by December, 1965.⁴⁵

The Fort Sill buildup to train more artillerymen for the war began in 1966, the largest increase in personnel at the post since World War II. Troop strength climbed to 32,000 in December, 1966, and peaked at 41,600 in May, 1967. A large portion of the troop buildup resulted from increased activities at the Artillery Training Center. The Officer Candidate School program was expanded to turn out an estimated 9,600 graduates during 1967, compared to 2,700 in 1966. During 1967, OCS classes of from seventy to more than 200 students were graduated each week. The number of enlisted trainees at the Artillery Training Center was greatly increased. In the peak year of the training program, 1967, approximately 43,000 trainees were graduated. An \$8.7 million crash building program was launched to handle the mushrooming training requirements. Constructed were nineteen barracks buildings, thirteen

⁴⁵U.S., President, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States (Washington, D.C.; Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1953-), Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965, pp. 494-498, 794-803.

for OCS and six for the Artillery Training Center, and thirty-one classrooms and miscellaneous facilities. Also, some 137 existing buildings were rehabilitated.⁴⁶

Lawton almost assumed a war footing as a result of the training buildup at Fort Sill. An extreme housing shortage occurred as the influx of new soldiers and their families filled up all city rental property. Many Artillery Training Center trainees and OCS students, as well as men arriving for duty with other Fort Sill units, had to send their wives and children back home for lack of suitable housing in Lawton.⁴⁷

Fort Sill also experienced anti-war demonstrations, which received nationwide news coverage. The demonstrations first occurred during the court-martial of a twenty-three-year-old army private from New York City, Andrew Stapp. Private Stapp was tried by a summary court-martial at Fort Sill in June, 1967, on a charge that he failed to obey a lawful order given by a superior officer to open a foot locker. The locker reportedly contained literature which Stapp allegedly was using in anti-Vietnam War activities. In an interview with a Constitution reporter, Stapp asserted he was a Communist sympathizer and a draft-card burner who succeeded in getting into the army to carry out anti-Vietnam War work. Seven persons from New York City calling themselves members of the "Youth Against War and Fascism" movement demonstrated at the court-martial. Stapp was convicted of the charge, reduced to the lowest army enlisted rank, private E-1, and ordered to forfeit \$67 in pay. In

⁴⁶Constitution-Press, January 1, 1967, p. 1; December 31, 1967, p. 1.

⁴⁷Ibid.

July, 1967, he was again court-martialed for breaking restrictions, but the charges were dropped for lack of evidence. Several New York City demonstrators attempted to attend the second Stapp trial but were arrested. Two of the demonstrators who had been barred from entering the post after the first court-martial subsequently were convicted in federal court in Oklahoma City of trespassing on a military post. The convictions of twenty-nine-year-old Mrs. Maryann Weissman and twenty-four-year-old Key Martin were upheld on appeal. The two later served out their sentences of six months imprisonment and paid \$500 fines each. Stapp then faced a third court-martial to determine if he would be dismissed from the army for security reasons. In January, 1968, he stood trial on charges of maintaining a close, sympathetic, and continuing association with the Communist Party and also keeping a close friendship with Mrs. Weissman, identified as a leader and member of the Workers World Party. Five anti-war demonstrators attended the three-day trial at Fort Sill, but remained quiet. Stapp testified during the trial that he was fighting the dismissal action in order to remain in the army and establish a labor union for soldiers. Stapp was convicted of the charges and given a dishonorable discharge from the army.⁴⁸

President Johnson's de-escalation of the war in Vietnam in 1968, President Nixon's reduction of troops in the armed services in 1969, and reduced draft calls were reflected at Fort Sill by a gradual decline in troop training and troop strength. Beginning with 35,700 men in January, 1969, the military population at the post dropped to 32,700 in June and 31,500 in September. By December, 1969, the number of troops

⁴⁸ Ibid., December 31, 1967, p. 1; December 29, 1968, p. 1.

stood at 29,800. Despite the decrease in troops, the post's payroll for 1969 reached an all-time high of \$159 million. The decline in war activity also eased Lawton's housing pinch in 1969. Continuing their "hawkish" posture toward the Indochina war, the Lawton newspapers editorially supported President Nixon's policies in Vietnam. After Nixon announced his policy in 1969 to "Vietnamize" the war by gradually turning it over to South Vietnam, Lawton newspaper editorials then asked the public to back the President's supportive policies in the war--aerial, naval, financial, and advisory.⁴⁹

Blacks Seek Equality in Lawton

During the sixties Lawton blacks, disgruntled over slow-motion desegregation efforts in public accommodations, staged sit-ins and lie-ins, picketed, demonstrated, and marched. The Lawton movement was part of the nationwide revolution by aroused blacks to secure equal rights. By 1960 the black population in Lawton had grown to 5,817 or more than nine per cent of the population. Integration efforts in Lawton since the fifties had proceeded at an agonizingly slow pace. Segregation of blacks in the armed forces was officially abandoned in 1951. Since that time, army officials had worked with Lawton civic leaders in an attempt to erase many other barriers to social equality. Following the 1954 Supreme Court decision which outlawed separate schools for the races, Lawton officially integrated its public school system. In spite of reform measures and outward attempts by officials to erase other segregation barriers, blacks in Lawton in the early years

⁴⁹Public Papers of the Presidents, Johnson, 1968, pp. 469-476; Richard Nixon, 1969, pp. 369-375, 365-369, 901-909, 1,025-1,028.

of the 1960's still could not walk into Lawton cafes and restaurants and be served, nor could they buy or rent housing in the city "white" areas or rent a room in the "white" hotels and motels. Blacks for the most part were still limited to Lawton's two "little Harlem" areas in the slum-ridden Lawton View Addition and the northeast edge of downtown Lawton.⁵⁰

Through the guidance of the Oklahoma chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Lawton blacks began picketing and demonstrating in downtown Lawton in the summer of 1962. The protests for equal treatment were staged in front of cafes, restaurants, drug stores with lunch counters, and the Hotel Lawtonian. Peaceful picketing had been staged for several weeks when clashes erupted among the demonstrators and three drug store owners and employees. The disturbances occurred when the blacks forced their way past persons blocking the drug store doors and staged sit-ins at the lunch counters. Complaints and counter-complaints of assault were filed at the Lawton Police Station. Dr. E. C. Moon, Jr. of Oklahoma City, president of the Oklahoma chapter of the NAACP, officially requested Governor Edmondson to prevent "further disturbances against peaceful Negro demonstrators in Lawton." His complaint further charged that "citizens of Lawton had complained of abusive treatment while peacefully demonstrating for full equality."⁵¹

⁵⁰Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (I), 347, U.S. 483; 74 Sup. Ct. 686; 198 L. Ed. 873 (1954); Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (II), 349 U.S. 294; 75 Sup. Ct. 753; and 99 L. Ed. 1083 (1955); U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, United States Census of Population: 1960, Characteristics of the Population, pt. 38, Oklahoma, pp. 38-62.

⁵¹Constitution-Press, May 13, 1962, p. 1.

The story that appeared in the Sunday Constitution-Press on the forceful sit-in demonstration was the first that had been published in the Lawton newspapers about the black protests, even though they had been going on for several weeks. Publisher Ned Shepler took a highly conservative, and at times patronizing, position on the race question. He disliked the black tactics of staging protests principally for publicity to gain sympathy for their movement. He believed strongly in behind-the-scenes negotiations between black and white leaders to iron out differences and to achieve integration. Consequently he had quietly and firmly ordered news editors on both the Press and Constitution to avoid printing stories and pictures on the peaceful picketing. However, the minor violence that occurred forced the first publication about the black protest movement in Lawton. Too, the Daily Oklahoman had the story, and that clinched Shepler's decision to print the first article in the Lawton papers about the black movement. An editorial in the same issue on the racial incidents was written by Managing Editor Ted Ralston. Although Shepler personally wrote many of the Sunday editorials, he had a policy of reviewing editorials written by Ralston to see that they conformed to his opinions. Consequently, the editorial headlined, "Making a Mistake," in essence set forth Shepler's viewpoint on the subject:

Lawton has prided itself on the friendly and cooperative inter-racial relationship which for the most part has existed in this community. The schools have been integrated without incident, and marked progress has been made in other areas toward improving racial relations on a friendly and peaceable basis. True, total integration, as some insist upon, has not been accomplished, but the educational processes have been working to eliminate discrimination in many areas.

Unfortunately, several incidents which occurred Friday and Saturday will not contribute to better understanding. Various business places have been picketed by Negro groups from time to time without interference or objection from the

business establishments. But pickets Saturday, presumably under the direction of misguided leaders, apparently abandoned peaceful picketing for a resort to force. Several incidents were reported where pickets sought to force their way into establishments which denied them entrance, blocking traffic and generally acting discourteously. This could hardly be called peaceful or legal picketing and most certainly will not advance the cause of the protesting group. So far as we have been able to learn, none of the pickets has been "shoved around" as a telegram from an Oklahoma City leader to the governor is reported to have said.

Lawton is making great progress in all directions, even toward the elimination of discriminatory practices. Though the question of integration is a touchy and explosive one, we should not let it become a divisive and disruptive force in the community. No question is finally settled by force. It must come through understanding and cooperative efforts. It is up to the responsible leaders of both races to seek a common working agreement by which both can live peaceably and with respect for the rights of others. We hope that there will be no more violent demonstrations such as occurred Friday and Saturday.⁵²

Shepler vigorously supported the formation and work of the Lawton Bi-Racial Committee, which attempted to break down Lawton's racial barriers. Even while the picketing and demonstrating was going on, the committee was working quietly to persuade all Lawton businesses to open their doors to everyone regardless of race. Two months after the racial incidents broke into the news, it was announced in an editorial that some progress had been made in integrating public places in Lawton. On the other hand, the newspaper in this and subsequent editorials was often critical of what it saw as efforts to move too far and too fast. It condemned the actions of civil rights groups, and it also denounced what it termed giving excessive power to the central government. Said the editorial, in part:

. . . While the integration movement has not accomplished all its aims, it has taken giant steps in breaking down the

⁵²Ibid., pp. 1, 27. The writer of this demonstration was a news editor on the Constitution at the time these black protests took place.

barriers of separation in most of the country. Take the situation in Lawton, for instance. Thanks to sensible Negro leadership and a cooperative attitude on the part of the leading citizens and city officials, a great many barriers have been removed quietly and peaceably. Among other things, a leading hotel has been opened to Negro citizens, most restaurants and lunch counters accept Negro customers, certain major theaters are now open to Negroes, schools and churches are integrated and the color barrier has been eliminated in most public facilities. This is happening in most parts of the country.

Admittedly demonstrations have played a part in advancing integration, but it must also be realized that much of it has been accomplished through the realization of most white citizens that discrimination should be abolished. This is a type of thing that cannot be crammed down people's throats. It has got to be accepted on a voluntary basis to be effective. It cannot be done through the force of law or centralization of power in Washington. The centralized government in Washington has no moral or constitutional right to attempt to dictate to private business or to tell businessmen whom they must hire or fire. Political action of this sort is likely to boomerang against those politicians who seek it.

Again we say that the elimination of racial barriers can be effective only as individuals are willing to accept the idea of integration. Any mass effort to force the issue will only lead to greater resistance and conflict which none of us want. We commend the Negro leaders and citizenship of Lawton and the business concerns and white leadership of this city for the quiet and sensible way in which this problem has been met and the considerable strides that have been made in eliminating racial discrimination. . . .⁵³

In other editorials Shepler continued to point to the work of the Lawton Bi-Racial Committee. He noted that the group headed by Dr. O. L. Parsons and the Reverend O. B. Davis deserved the support of the entire community for its efforts to solve the city's integration problems.

"The committee has sought to bring about an understanding through persuasion and negotiation," an editorial observed, adding: "It has accomplished a great deal along this line although some few proprietors reportedly have not entirely lived up to their agreements. Time will tend to iron out these differences." Although Shepler believed racial

⁵³Constitution-Press, July 7, 1963, p. 8.

problems could be settled by local groups, his editorials continued to deplore "interference from Washington." When it was evident the 1964 Civil Rights Bill would become law, an editorial criticized it as going "too far in attempting to regulate the individual and his business." The bill was especially denounced where it would "encroach upon the rights of the individual citizen in the conduct of his private business, and in the matter of employing or not employing whom he pleases, regardless of race, religion or sex."⁵⁴

The Lawton newspapers themselves attempted to live up to the spirit of the Civil Rights Act provision for equality in job opportunity. Attempts were made to recruit black employees in the news and advertising departments but these were unsuccessful. However, in the treatment of blacks in the news, they were accorded that accolade of middle-class respectability, the publication of an engagement or wedding picture.⁵⁵

Lawton's racial troubles surfaced again in the summer of 1966 when demonstrators staged several marches at a privately owned amusement park where the owner refused to admit blacks to his swimming pool. The demonstrations started after negotiations between the park owner, Ben Hutchins, and members of the Lawton chapter of the NAACP, fell through. Many sympathetic whites, including several Lawton ministers, joined the demonstrations. Marches to the park became almost an "every Saturday" occasion. Several members of the Oklahoma City chapter of the NAACP joined one protest, walking and riding from Oklahoma City to Lawton,

⁵⁴Ibid., August 11, 1963, p. 12; June 21, 1964, p. 12.

⁵⁵Ted Ralston, Lawton, Oklahoma, private interview, December 30, 1972.

then joining several hundred others in a protest march through downtown Lawton to the amusement park. On two occasions demonstrators attempted to force their way into the swimming pool. Approximately eighty were arrested by Lawton police on charges of trespassing lodged by Hutchins. Stories and pictures about the protests, particularly the arrests, were picked up and carried worldwide by the wire services.⁵⁶

When the first demonstration occurred at the park, Shepler advised the news editors to "play down" the story and put it inside the paper. He still opposed such overt actions as demonstrations to achieve integration goals, preferring that the bi-racial group act on the matter without any fanfare. However, this "management of the news" backfired on the Lawton newspapers. The Daily Oklahoman played up a long story on the demonstration on page one, and both major wire services carried lengthy stories. Also, Lawton radio stations and the three Lawton area television stations gave much prominence to the story. Subsequent stories, however, were given page one treatment with pictures in the Lawton papers.⁵⁷

The demonstrators also carried their fight to the Lawton City Hall, where they asked the City Council to approve a public accommodations ordinance which would force the opening of the private swimming pool to all races. Instead the City Council eventually approved a public accommodations ordinance which specifically excluded privately owned parks and swimming pools. The council declared that it had no power to

⁵⁶ Sunday Oklahoman, June 5, 1966, p. 1; Daily Oklahoman, July 5, 1966, p. 1; Constitution-Press, June 5, 1966, p. 2; June 12, 1966, p. 1; June 19, 1966, p. 1; Constitution, July 5, 1966, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Sunday Oklahoman, June 5, 1966, p. 1; Constitution-Press, June 5, 1966, p. 2.

force privately owned parks and swimming pools to open their doors to the public, especially after the Justice Department in Washington, D.C., had ruled that the amusement park did not come under the interstate commerce provisions of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The demonstrators also sought unsuccessfully to have the pool declared off-limits to military personnel. Finally the civil rights group filed a lawsuit in United States District Court for the Western District of Oklahoma to force the Lawton park owner to integrate the pool.⁵⁸

Through editorials Shepler objected to demonstrators' statements given wide play in wire service stories which charged that blacks and black servicemen were barred from public places in Lawton. Shepler editorials asserted that to all intents and purposes everything in Lawton was completely integrated. "The schools, hotels, motels, churches, eating places, theaters, and housing to a considerable extent have all been thrown open to people of all races," one editorial said. "More jobs," the editorial added, "constantly are becoming available to minorities, at least to those who can qualify." Shepler also thundered: "Theaters, bowling alleys, taverns, a golf course and other recreational facilities are available to all who can pay the price and conduct themselves in the proper manner." In due time, he added, a publicly owned swimming pool or pools will be provided. However, he pointed out, everyone's patience was wearing thin with the demonstrators' tactics:

. . . There is growing indication that a majority of the Negro population of Lawton is not in sympathy with the untrue statements and extreme methods used by some of these outside so-called leaders, aided and abetted by a few local leaders. Most responsible Negroes realize that their goals cannot be

⁵⁸Constitution-Press, June 19, 1966, p. 1; Constitution, June 13, 1966, p. 1; June 21, 1966, p. 1; July 5, 1966, p. 1.

attained by rough-shod methods and near-mob action. It is only by cooperative effort and the meeting of minds by reasonable people that progress can be made.

There are several aspects of the exhibitionist demonstrations recently staged in Lawton that are indeed regrettable. With all of the progress Lawton leaders have made to satisfy the reasonable aspirations of the Negro population for equal opportunity in all community life, there is no reason for the course that is being pursued by some. One regrettable phase of the needless marches recently made is the use of children to attract attention. Besides the possibility of some of them getting injured, it tends to instill a prejudice and possible hatred in impressionable minds that will stay with them through life.

Another regrettable aspect of these demonstrations is that it tends to harden the feeling of resentment which the general population feels toward such activity. The sympathy of those who have helped bring about peaceful solutions of integration problems is wearing thin. When these outside agitators have gone on to greener pastures, the local people, black and white, will be left to patch up the differences and attempt to restore a feeling of respect and goodwill.

The major aims of integration have been attained in Lawton. There is nothing further to be gained by unjustified agitation. In fact, much can be lost by its continuation.⁵⁹

In answer to Shepler's appeal to end the demonstrations, Dr. E. A. Owens, president of the Lawton chapter of the NAACP, announced that a truce would be called in the park protests. The Lawton City Council agreed to take another look at a proposed civil rights ordinance which would be more in line with the wishes of the Lawton NAACP chapter. Both sides declared they believed a "cooling off" period was needed to head off possible violence if demonstrations continued at the amusement park. Dr. Owens asserted that outside demonstrators were not welcome in Lawton, and if any came to town, "We will ask the police to handle them." Although the city council considered passing a new ordinance, it finally declined, again citing the Justice Department ruling that the privately-owned amusement park did not come under the interstate

⁵⁹Constitution-Press, June 12, 1966, p. 12A; June 26, 1966, p. 12A; July 3, 1966, p. 10A; July 10, 1966, p. 12A.

commerce provision of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.⁶⁰

Shepler and his newspapers came in for heavy criticism for insisting that the demonstrations halt while the protest over the swimming pool be worked out through negotiation. Two directors of the Oklahoma Human Rights Commission, William Y. Rose of Oklahoma City and Dr. B. Frank Belvin of Okmulgee, charged that Shepler's attempt at conciliation had blocked passage of a City of Lawton civil rights ordinance which would have solved the swimming pool dispute. Rose accused the Lawton Constitution of "failing to get to the core of the problem."⁶¹

Seeing that the swimming pool controversy had reached an impasse and fearing that violent confrontations might break out, Shepler quietly went to work personally in an attempt to solve the problem. As chairman of the McMahon Foundation, the Lawton-based philanthropic organization, Shepler proposed that the foundation finance construction of a city-owned pool. The foundation donated \$75,000 for the pool, which was constructed and in use the summer of 1967. It was located on the west side of Mattie Beal Park in south Lawton.⁶²

On July 30, 1967, Ben Hutchins temporarily closed the swimming pool at his amusement park. The private pool was forced to close because business had fallen off badly during the summer. Hutchins blamed the racial demonstrations during the previous summer for the

⁶⁰ Constitution, July 15, 1966, p. 1; July 26, 1966, p. 1; Constitution-Press, January 1, 1967, p. 1.

⁶¹ Constitution, July 20, 1966, p. 1.

⁶² Constitution-Press, January 1, 1967, p. 1; December 31, 1967, p. 1; Constitution, February 14, 1967, p. 1.

closing. Also, Lawton's new municipally owned pool at Mattie Beal Park had captured much of his former business.⁶³

"A Towering Loss"

Ned Shepler awoke early on Sunday morning, June 5, 1967, at his apartment home in the Hotel Lawtonian, suffering severe chest pains. He told his wife May that he had better go to the hospital for treatment. Mrs. Shepler attempted to call an ambulance, but Shepler insisted on driving his own car to the hospital. He was admitted to the intensive care unit of Comanche County Memorial Hospital and suffered a fatal heart attack at 8:20 a.m. The sudden death of the seventy-year-old publisher shocked the Lawton-Fort Sill community. Never seriously ill, he had been constantly active in publication of his two Lawton dailies. He had been at his office Saturday afternoon and night handling editorial direction of the two newspapers.⁶⁴

Shepler had guided the destiny of the Lawton Constitution for forty-eight years since his father's death in 1919. Destined to be associated with newspaper work throughout his life, Shepler was born November 4, 1896, in Milan, Sullivan County, Missouri, where his father was publisher of a weekly newspaper. At an early age, Shepler moved with his family to Pawnee, Oklahoma, where he learned to set type by hand and do other newspaper shop jobs on his father's weekly paper. In 1910 the family moved to Lawton, where his father had purchased the Constitution. After graduating from Lawton High School in 1915, Shepler

⁶³Constitution, July 31, 1967, p. 1.

⁶⁴Ibid., June 5, 1967, p. 1.

enrolled in the University of Oklahoma that fall, majoring in journalism. At the university, he became a member of Sigma Chi social fraternity and Sigma Delta Chi, journalistic society. He also served as managing editor of the Oklahoma Daily, the university student newspaper. Always interested in the news side of journalism, Shepler worked as a reporter during vacations and holidays on his father's newspaper. He continued his university work until the summer of 1918, when he entered the army. Upon his discharge following the armistice, he went to work on the city desk of the Constitution. He was married in 1922 to May Barnes, of Sycamore, Illinois. On the death of his father, he and his brother, Fred Shepler, became co-publishers of the Constitution. Ned served as editor in charge of the news side, and Fred took charge of the business area as business manager. Upon the death of his brother in 1942, Ned became the sole publisher and owner of the newspaper.⁶⁵

From a small cramped newspaper shop in downtown Lawton and an original capital investment of approximately \$12,000, Shepler led the Constitution through two vicious newspaper wars, the depression of the early 1920's, the Ku Klux Klan control of Lawton, the Great Depression, and World War II, until it became a major voice of opinion in Southwest Oklahoma and a multi-million dollar newspaper serving Oklahoma's third largest city. Under Shepler's guidance, the Lawton Constitution, and the Lawton Morning Press after its acquisition in 1949, had grown through the years from a small circulation to approximately 30,000. And Shepler had seen the Constitution change from a political party newspaper with a dependence on city and county printing contracts into

⁶⁵Ibid.

a modern-day newspaper with economic independence derived from its large volume of display advertising. And as the newspaper moved away from political patronage connections, its news columns evolved from a biased, partisan, and subjective treatment into modern-day reporting with a commitment to fair and equal coverage.⁶⁶

Shepler's newspapers have never been great in the sense that a huge metropolitan newspaper, with its far larger reservoirs of talent and a much longer heritage of achievement, is spoken of almost reverently as a "great" member of the profession. Yet, using the criteria of recognition by the Oklahoma daily press, of awards by press groups, and comments by other newspapers, it must be acknowledged that the Constitution and Press under Shepler's guidance deserved--and had deserved through the years--ranking among the best of Oklahoma's newspapers. Shepler insisted that his newspapers thoroughly cover the Lawton-Fort Sill scene in the news. And over the years his newspapers did just that. Perhaps the routine and commonplace received too much coverage in the news, and not enough attention was focused on an interpretive coverage of Lawton's pressing social issues. But that was a fault many, if not all, newspapers displayed.

Shepler's news staff, a critical group of judges, considered him an excellent editor. Some disagreed with his editorial policies, not an uncommon situation on any newspaper, but few questioned his ability as a newspaperman. A few of his staff thought he was overly attentive to the welfare and needs of Fort Sill, Lawton's major industry. But this "sacred cow" treatment of the military post had paid off for the

⁶⁶ Ibid.

newspapers and Lawton. Their growth had paralleled that of Fort Sill's over the years. His news staff also criticized Shepler's treatment of the editorial pages in the Constitution and Press. In the early years of the Constitution, the editorial page had been a highly vocal and outspoken section of the newspaper. Locally written editorials appeared daily on any and every topic. After World War II and the merger with the Press, the editorial pages went into a decline. "Canned" editorials, purchased from news syndicates, appeared in all issues except Sunday. And the writing of much of these Sunday editorials was turned over to the managing editor, Ted Ralston. Shepler did insist on looking over and approving the editorials before they were set into type. As such, they generally reflected Shepler's posture toward an editorial subject. Yet Ralston was highly conservative--in the terminology of the fifties and sixties--and his stands on social and political issues had made their mark felt on the editorial pages for years. Generally, the over-all quality of the Lawton newspapers suffered because of this lack of locally written editorials. Most other newspapers of the same size and circulation as Lawton's employ one or more full time editorial writers to handle the editorial pages.

Undoubtedly Shepler played a highly instrumental role in the tremendous growth and welfare of Lawton and Fort Sill through his long service as a newspaper editor and publisher. He also served countless civic responsibilities and public positions which benefited the Lawton-Fort Sill community. He had been chairman of the McMahon Foundation Board of Trustees since 1949. Through his recommendation as chairman, the philanthropic foundation established an annual fund for journalism scholarships at the University of Oklahoma. It also was through his

foresight that the foundation provided funds for construction of many civic buildings and other facilities in Lawton. Buildings in Lawton bearing the imprint of the foundation, either through partial or total financing, included the McMahon Auditorium, McMahon-Tomlinson Nursing Center, Museum of the Great Plains, YMCA, Boys Club Building, and the Mattie Beal Park swimming pool. The foundation also committed some \$600,000 in funds toward a future Cameron College Fine Arts Building.⁶⁷

Shepler was a driving force behind many other Lawton projects. He helped to direct the organizational activities of the Lawton Community Hotel, Inc., the organization which built the Hotel Lawtonian. Partly because of his comprehensive editorials on the need of such a community hotel, the Lawtonian was built through the sale of stock, with Shepler being among the most prominent stockholders. He also had served on the hotel's board of directors since its inception. In education areas, Shepler served as a member of the University of Oklahoma Board of Regents from 1945 to 1952. He was president of the board the last year. A close friend, Governor Robert S. Kerr, appointed him to the board. The university honored Shepler in April, 1960, when the H. H. Herbert School of Journalism presented him with a Benefactor Award for his outstanding contributions through the years to the journalism school. Perhaps his most ardent dream that came true was the construction of the Southwestern Turnpike from Oklahoma City through Lawton to the Texas border. Shepler was appointed by Governor J. Howard Edmondson in 1959 to serve on the Oklahoma Turnpike Authority. During his four-year term as secretary of the authority, he helped to make the H. E. Bailey

⁶⁷Ibid.

Turnpike a reality. A high point in Shepler's life came November 17, 1960, when he was inducted into Oklahoma's Hall of Fame in recognition of his outstanding contributions to Lawton and the state. Shepler was active in several organizations which promoted the interests of Fort Sill, such as the Association of the United States Army. He served on the Lawton Chamber of Commerce Military Affairs Committee and also served several terms on the Chamber Board of Directors. In newspaper circles, Shepler served as president of the Oklahoma Press Association in 1931 and hosted several conventions of that organization. He was a past member of the board of directors of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association and served a term as president of the Associated Press Editors of Oklahoma. He also was a member of the Lawton Kiwanis Club, an honorary member of the Lawton Rotary Club, Lawton Centenary Methodist Church, Masons, Shriners, American Legion, and Comanche County Historical Society. He was a director of Lawton Goodwill Industries and a director of the Home Savings and Loan Association of Lawton.⁶⁸

A page-one editorial headlined "A Towering Loss" paid tribute to Shepler:

The Lawton-Fort Sill community and this newspaper suffered a towering loss Sunday in the death of Mr. Ned Shepler, newspaper editor and publisher, civic leader and gentleman.

In his own quiet way, he possessed the rare qualities of greatness.

During the 57 years he lived here, his name became synonymous with the development of the Lawton-Fort Sill community.

He was involved in state and national affairs.

All his activities grew out of and were centered in his editorship of the Lawton Constitution and Lawton Morning Press.

He was widely recognized for the excellence of his

⁶⁸Ibid.

newspapers and his dedication to the principle that a newspaper must be the voice and conscience of the community it serves.

Although quiet and softspoken, Ned Shepler was a man of great courage and strong convictions. He never hesitated to speak out through newspaper editorials when he believed the vital interests of the community were involved. He committed his life to making Lawton a better place in which to live.

He recognized the power of the printed word and the influence of the press. He used this power with restraint and insisted that others on his staff do the same.

Above all, he was fair minded and believed in giving others the benefit of the doubt. His concern for the rights of others and his sympathy for less fortunate individuals were characteristic of his life.

He was a newspaperman of the old school who believed power involves responsibility and work.

He spent more time at The Lawton Constitution and Morning Press than any other staff member. Several years ago, he toured Europe but could hardly wait to get back to his desk.

. . . .

During business hours, he was almost always in his office, and his door was open to everyone.

He met and talked with all the visitors, from nationally known figures to beggars. To community leaders and builders, Ned Shepler represented strength and fair play. His knowledge, his judgment and his unselfish commitment to the public interest caused many to seek his views on vital issues.

Several years ago, soon after the newspapers moved to their present building, he employed a secretary. She quit, she said, despite his protests, because she sensed that he believed a secretary constituted a barrier between a newspaper editor and the people who wanted to see him.

Until his death, he continued handling his own voluminous correspondence and writing his own letters.

He read widely. The shelves in his office are lined with books, and his desk is still piled high with the newspapers from over the nation and with the magazines which he read every day. . . .

Any active publisher's editorial campaigns and policies through the years are bound to arouse controversy and some anger.

But even those who disagreed with his policies liked the man, and they would agree that whatever Ned Shepler did, he acted in what he believed were the best interests, not for Ned Shepler, but for the community as a whole. . . .

Always softspoken and conciliatory, he was like a father to many, including army officers, public officials and newspapermen who were fortunate to have been associated with him.

Although he is not at his desk today, his influence will remain, and the institutions and personalities he helped to build will continue.⁶⁹

Shepler's funeral services on the Tuesday following his death were attended by a host of newspaper friends and many state and national dignitaries. United States Senator Fred R. Harris and Mrs. Harris flew from Washington to attend the funeral. Newspaper operations were suspended temporarily Tuesday morning to allow employees to attend the last rites. And as a tribute from the city, Lawton Mayor Wayne Gilley proclaimed that flags be flown at half-staff Tuesday in memory of Shepler.⁷⁰

Newspaper Changes, Stances in the Sixties

Following Ned Shepler's death, his son-in-law, Bill F. Bentley, who had been serving as business manager of the newspapers, became the new editor-publisher of the Lawton Constitution and Lawton Morning Press. The Lawton Publishing Company only recently had been incorporated, and the editorial masthead listed the new officers of the publishing firm. Mrs. Shirley Shepler Bentley was president, and Mrs. May B. Shepler was vice president. The two Shepler grandsons, who had made plans to continue the family tradition in newspapering, also were listed as officers. Donald S. Bentley was treasurer, and Stephen F. Bentley was secretary. Both later joined the newspapers following their graduation from the University of Oklahoma School of Journalism. Shepler's executive office suite was remodeled into three offices for

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid., June 6, 1967, p. 1.

Bill Bentley and his two sons.⁷¹

Shepler at the time of his death was busy planning for another physical expansion of the newspaper plant. Within a year's time, the newsroom was greatly expanded, which allowed separate spaces for the sports department and the women's department. Also enlarged was the space for the composing room. The expansion allowed more room to house additional linotypes and larger page makeup and advertising composition sections. The press was enlarged from forty to sixty-four pages. This press expansion relieved the necessity of additional press runs which had become commonplace as the page sizes of the paper grew from year to year.⁷²

In the newsroom, several key changes in personnel and additions of new services occurred during the sixties. John Clabes, who had been city editor of the Constitution since the early fifties, left to become managing editor of the new Oklahoma City newspaper, the Oklahoma Journal, established by Midwest City developer W. P. (Bill) Atkinson. His place was taken by Ed Carter, who had served several years as wire editor and news editor of the Constitution. After Carter left the Constitution in August, 1968, to join the journalism faculty at Oklahoma State University, his place as city editor was taken by George Rhoades, a news editor, who served in the position for one year. Rhoades left in 1969, also to join the OSU journalism faculty. He was replaced by Jim DeSilver, a news editor and reporter, who served as city editor until 1972. After DeSilver left to join the Oklahoma Journal, Virgil

⁷¹Constitution-Press, December 31, 1967, p. 1.

⁷²Ibid., December 29, 1968, p. 1.

Gaither, also a news editor and reporter, was named city editor. Joining the news staff in 1963 was Paul McClung, a former Lawton reporter who had been free lancing in Texas for thirteen years. McClung later was appointed assistant managing editor for the newspapers, a newly created position. A separate entertainment section for the Sunday paper was created in 1966, with Bill Crawford, a long-time reporter for the papers as editor. The new Sunday section included features, opinions, interviews, reviews, and news relating to the world of fine arts and entertainment, plus Crawford's column on the entertainment scene, which had been started twelve years earlier. The announcement of the new section declared that growth of Lawton's fine arts groups and an increased interest by readers in coverage of entertainment prompted the addition of the new section.⁷³

Other additions on the news side included a complete market page as a daily feature of the Morning Press. Added in 1960, the new section (actually two pages in size) carried complete reports of transactions on the New York Stock Exchange as well as commodity and livestock transactions on the American Stock Exchange, bonds and investing companies. The new service necessitated the installation of an Associated Press wire printer service. The market service furnished tapes transmitted by telephone wire direct from Associated Press offices in New York City which automatically set the market reports in type in the composing room. "The Lawton Morning Press will be the only newspaper in Oklahoma, outside of Tulsa and Oklahoma City, carrying complete daily market reports," the newspapers announced. A separate wire service, the

⁷³Ibid., September 8, 1963, p. 1; August 2, 1964, p. 13A; August 21, 1966, p. 1; August 25, 1968, p. 18A; February 6, 1972, p. 2A.

Washington Post-Los Angeles Times News Service, was added for both the Press and Constitution in 1968. The additional service gave news editors on both papers a broader selection of wire news. Also added to the news room in 1969 was the "A" wire of the Associated Press. This principal wire of the AP brought the major national and international news of the day approximately two hours faster to the Lawton newspapers.⁷⁴

In politics during the 1960's, the Constitution-Press took a stand in only one presidential election. The newspapers endorsed the Kennedy-Johnson Democratic party ticket in the 1960 campaign. Lyndon B. Johnson as vice-presidential candidate was particularly favored because of his long-standing friendship with many Oklahomans. In the 1964 and 1968 elections, the Lawton newspapers declined to take a stand. A stand was avoided in the 1964 campaign because the Constitution-Press thought President Johnson was moving the nation "too far and too fast" after he had pushed the 1964 Civil Rights Act through Congress. A stand was avoided in 1968 because the traditionally Democratic Lawton papers regarded Hubert Humphrey as "too radical."⁷⁵

Fred R. Harris of Lawton, a young Democratic attorney who represented Comanche County in the Oklahoma Senate, received the Lawton newspapers' enthusiastic endorsement when he ran unsuccessfully for governor in 1962. He was endorsed again in his successful race for the United States Senate seat in 1964, in which he became the third Senator

⁷⁴Constitution, May 26, 1960, p. 1; Constitution-Press, June 28, 1964, p. 1; December 28, 1969, p. 11C.

⁷⁵Constitution-Press, July 17, 1960, p. 22; October 25, 1964, p. 1; November 3, 1968, p. 1.

with a residence in Lawton. Harris continued to receive the Lawton papers' unqualified support for his service in the United States Senate, especially his hawkish stand on the Vietnam War. The newspapers' ardor for the Senator quickly cooled by 1968 after Harris radically altered his views on the war, turned "dovish," and urged United States withdrawal from Vietnam. Harris also became an outspoken advocate of civil rights after serving as a member of the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders. He began championing a "new populism" which sought political and economic improvement for the elderly, blacks, American Indians, Chicanos, farmers, women, and workers. When Harris served as the Democratic Party National Chairman in 1969, the Constitution-Press blamed him "for further fragmenting the party by his determined swing to the left." The Lawton newspapers editorially washed their hands of their hometown Senator with the charge that he had "cast his political lot with the liberal-radical elements in the country." In the words of Constitution-Press columnist Paul McClung, "Our Fred has left the Oklahoma rednecks and has joined the beautiful people of the ultra-liberal establishment."⁷⁶

The Sixties in Perspective

Lawton during the sixties showed a gain in population from 61,697 in 1960 to 74,470 by 1970, a modest 19.1 per cent growth. Comanche

⁷⁶Constitution, February 16, 1962, p. 1; May 17, 1964, p. 10; July 11, 1968, p. 1; September 30, 1968, p. 1; March 6, 1969, p. 1; Constitution-Press, March 4, 1962, p. 12; April 22, 1962, p. 1; October 25, 1964, p. 1; November 1, 1964, p. 1; January 9, 1966, p. 1; June 2, 1968, p. 5A; December 21, 1969, p. 5D; Harris's views on his "new populism" were set forth in his first book: Fred R. Harris, Alarms and Hopes, A Personal Journey, A Personal View (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 1-40, 143-173.

County population rose from 90,803 in 1960 to 108,144 in 1970. The 19.1 per cent population gain for Lawton did not come up to the expectations of city officials, but it was enough to keep Lawton comfortably in its place as the third largest city in Oklahoma.⁷⁷

The sixties also saw the two Lawton newspapers grow in circulation, from a 22,111 combined daily press run in 1960 to 28,675 in 1970. Display advertising lineage gained steadily during the period, and annual revenue from this principal source of income for the newspapers neared the \$1.5 million mark by 1970. The classified advertising columns also showed a steady growth, and this source of income totaled approximately half a million dollars annually by 1970. And by 1970, the Lawton Publishing Company had more than 135 employees working full time on its two newspapers.⁷⁸

On Sunday, January 5, 1969, the Lawton Constitution-Morning Press saluted Fort Sill on the occasion of the army post's 100th birthday, which officially was Wednesday, January 8, 1969. The Sunday edition that day published the largest newspaper in the history of Lawton. It included 158 pages in eight sections, plus a sixteen-page insert of the Fort Sill newspaper, the Cannoneer. Each paper weighed slightly more than two pounds, and approximately twenty-eight tons of newsprint were used in the 30,000 copies printed. The special edition told the story of the growth and development of Fort Sill and its companion city,

⁷⁷U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, United States Census of Population: 1970, Vol. I, Characteristics of the Population, pt. 36, Oklahoma, p. 44.

⁷⁸Directory Newspapers and Periodicals (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son), 1970, p. 894; Wilbur Rice interview, Lawton, Oklahoma, October 2, 1971.

Lawton. An editorial reminisced how Fort Sill and Lawton had been partners in history:

One hundred years ago next Wednesday, Gen. Philip Sheridan planted a stake in the ground near Medicine Bluffs to signify the establishment of a frontier outpost to control the hostile Southern Plains Indian tribes.

What future he might have envisioned for this Army camp is not known, but he could not have foreseen the magnificent military installation that now is Fort Sill, nor the teeming metropolis to the south that spreads over the same wind-whipped prairie.

Today, the base he founded is the artillery university of the nation and free world. Its companion city of Lawton, born 32 years later, is Oklahoma's third-largest with 80,000 persons and visions of greatness.

Success of this civilian-military combination can be attributed to many things. Not the least is the fact that Lawton and Fort Sill have become inseparable partners in building a great American defense bastion. Working closely together, they have developed a relationship that is warm, friendly, cooperative and productive. . . .

Lawton and Fort Sill have grown and prospered together. As inseparable partners, they have worked hand-in-hand to convert the one-time frontier outpost into a base of world-wide significance, and its sister city into a thriving regional center. Neither could have done as well without the other.

As the Lawton-Fort Sill community launches its Centennial celebration, we look upon the past with great pride and to the future with hope, knowing that talented and ambitious people can accomplish anything they desire.⁷⁹

The Lawton newspapers could have done a little reminiscing about themselves, too, if they had so chosen. It could have been pointed out that the newspapers, the Constitution in particular, had a major hand in guiding the destinies of Fort Sill and Lawton in the twentieth century. And readers also could have been reminded that much of this constructive guidance came under Ned Shepler, who was at the head of Lawton's newspapers longer than any other man or group of men. In his forty-eight years as publisher and editor, the newspapers had shown a

⁷⁹Constitution-Press, January 5, 1969, pp. 1, 6C.

growth in circulation and influence that hardly anyone would have thought possible. The growth of the Constitution and Press bears witness that Lawton and Fort Sill properly appreciated the kind of newspaper published by Ned Shepler and his associates.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSIONS

In the history of the Lawton Constitution, we see the development of a pattern of journalism very similar to that of other towns in Oklahoma and in all of the West. During Lawton's first two decades, twenty newspapers competed in a battle for survival. In the desperate struggle to stay alive, competition so limited income that newspapers found their only profits came through an alliance with the politicians in power. This dependence on city and county printing contracts obligated newspapers to be thoroughly partisan in their coverage of the news and in their editorial policies.

Competition is not inherently bad. So it would appear that this journalistic rivalry might lead to lower subscription and advertising prices, better reporting, more extensive news coverage, and serve as the means of presenting a wide range of contrasting views to the public. On the whole, however, the newspaper rivalry did not produce substantially lower subscription prices and advertising costs. And income was so sparse that publishers could ill afford to hire more and better reporters, to improve news coverage, and to publish larger paper necessary to print the news. In sum, Lawton journalists more often produced worse rather than better newspapers as a result of rivalry.

In fact squabbles over the printing patronage led to a long period of personal journalism. Rival party editors fought each other in

back-alley language on their editorial pages. Nonetheless, these pioneer editors maintained active editorial pages which watched over all kinds of issues and conditions in Lawton. Historically this era was the muckraking period, and these activist Lawton editors raked a lot of muck.

Another prominent feature of this early period of Lawton journalism was the "booster spirit," a trait common to the Western press. The Lawton newspapermen avidly promoted their town in hopes of increasing its population, securing new industries, and becoming the commercial and trade center of Southwest Oklahoma. As businessmen the editors had a vital interest in the economic growth of Lawton. If the town grew and prospered, so would they. The editors labored conscientiously to make the most of their community's prospects, defending it against critics, unabashedly recommending Lawton to prospective newcomers, advocating programs for local improvement, constantly urging citizens to patronize businesses at home rather than out of town, playing down economic misfortunes, and quietly suppressing news harmful to Lawton's interests. All of their boosterism endeavors were a matter of promotional routine.

In the second and third decades of the twentieth century, a new type of journalism practiced by the metropolitan newspapers entered Lawton. Newspapers copied the techniques of the "new journalism" in all areas--advertising, circulation, equipment, treatment of the news, and business practices. Retail merchants, following new merchandising concepts, began to buy more and larger advertisements. The new display advertising revenue encouraged Lawton publishers--still nominally affiliated with one of the parties--to break the umbilical cord which tied them to political parties and to patronage printing. Thus to

underwrite this significant change in Lawton journalism, business, through advertising, replaced politicians as the supporting agent.

The change in the financial dependence had other far-reaching effects. News in a political newspaper was interpreted for the reader from a particular philosophical basis. Happenings were reported in terms of meaning to a particular political party. Once these political philosophies were removed, the criterion for selection of political news, and other news for that matter, became unclear. Wire services were forced to serve those of all political persuasions and report the news in a fair and balanced manner. The Lawton papers, similar to others in the nation, copied this wire service approach to the news. They moved toward what the press termed objectivity. It was a strategy of offending no one, a commitment by necessity to no philosophy. With this change in role also came an enormous change in content. Sports, crossword puzzles, women's pages, lovelorn columns, and comics replaced the diet of political news which editors previously had published for their subscribers.

With the improved techniques of the new journalism came a trend toward newspaper monopoly. It became far more costly to publish a paper, and, as a result, there were many consolidations and failures. Following a bitter, personal journalism war, Lawton's two newspapers were reduced to one, the Constitution, in 1923. During the thirties, a rival newspaper, the Morning Press, was launched. After another bitter journalism war in the late forties, Ned Shepler owned both the Press and the Constitution.

As Lawton grew, so did its newspapers, in circulation, in number of pages, and in revenue. With the one-man monopoly newspaper operation

came a decline in the editorial page. Canned editorials were run on the editorial page during the week. Only on Sunday were locally written editorials printed. The Lawton newspapers became a large-scale business themselves, and they took on the characteristics of an institution, changing from a previous liberal posture toward a highly conservative, status quo stance. The economic welfare of the Lawton-Fort Sill community was the overriding concern of the Lawton newspapers. The newspapers especially watched over the interests of the city's major industry, Fort Sill.

In perspective, then, the history of Lawton's newspapers typifies the evolvement of journalism in the West: the transition from political propaganda, boosterism, and personal journalism to the conservative, objective newspapermaking of a new generation of businessmen publishers. And as a process, this evolvement is continuing. Where newspaper chains have not stepped in, the trend today continues to be toward a one-man dominance of the press in many towns and cities. Another tendency seems to be that liberal newsmen make up most of the staffs of newspapers owned by conservative publishers. Nonetheless, publishers today exert their influences on newsrooms and make their philosophies apparent to readers through the over-all tone of editing and reporting in their newspapers. There are few instances in which publishers directly "manage the news," such as I reported in this study when Ned Shepler directed his news editors to play down the story about blacks picketing Lawton businesses. Most newsmen truthfully assert they have never been told by their publishers how to report a story or how to edit and display a story. Yet through "newsroom influence," a publisher's particular philosophy--be it liberal or conservative--slants a

newspaper's coverage and editing of the news. For example, examine the tenor of the New York Times and the Washington Post. Then compare those papers with E. K. Gaylord's Daily Oklahoman and Oklahoma City Times and Bill F. Bentley's Lawton Constitution and Morning Press. Could it be that reporting has come full circle, from biased to objective and back to biased today? It is a possibility that needs examining in many more studies.

Some journalism historians have pointed out that newspapers today are living in a period of transition which is at once agonizing and exciting. Scientific polls have shown repeatedly that the public today gets most of its news coverage from television and has more believability in that medium. In losing their primary news function to television, newspapers should be aware that they must devise new purposes and new usefulnesses. Yet an examination of many small-city dailies such as published in Lawton shows this threat is being ignored. On an average day, the Lawton papers' pages are filled with wire feature material, much of which exhibits a triviality and generally junky character. Apparently as long as the pages remain fat with advertising, no one is worried. Some newspapers, confronted by the fact that television has robbed them of their hard news function, have turned toward intensive background, interpretative reporting of the local news. The basic diet of wire news is supplemented with the kind of local news coverage the reader will not find on television. Only in this kind of radical change in form and function will newspapers be able to survive in American society.

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