

... Coke County's Colorful History

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As the population grew, the 3-5 day trip to conduct business at the courthouse in San Angelo was now considered onerous and a county of their own with a local county seat was deemed necessary.

Approximately sixty men gathered for a barbecue and strategy session in a grove of trees near the Colorado River in early 1889. Following this initial gathering, Ennis Adams carried a petition throughout this area to be presented to the Texas Legislature. Once all requirements were met, the legislature created Coke County on March 13, 1889. An election for county officials had to be held within 30 days for the new 931 square mile county named for Richard Coke, a former Texas Governor.

Coke served as governor of Texas from January 15, 1874, until December 1, 1876, and was the first governor after the end of reconstruction. His term ended after two years so he could go to Washington DC to represent Texas as a US Senator. While governor of Texas, Coke was tasked with writing a new Texas Constitution. The Indian "trouble" also came to an end during his time as governor.

The Texas Legislature named D.T. Fairley, Z.W. Withers and T.A. Collier to a committee to supervise the first Coke County election held April 23, 1889, at Hayrick. Hayrick, located near the mountain of the same name, was Coke County's first county seat.

Elected during this first Coke County election were: G.W. Perryman, Judge and ex-officio Superintendent of Schools; T.A. Collier, County and District Clerk; W. F. Buchanan, Sheriff and Tax Collector; D.F. Fairley, Tax Assessor; George Williamson, Treasurer; Captain Patteson, Surveyor; Greenleaf, Attorney; R.E. Douglas, Commissioner, Precinct 1; J.R. Farmer, Commissioner, Precinct 2; P.H. Youngblood, Commissioner, Precinct 3; and J.P. Henderson, Commissioner, Precinct 4.

Not long after this election, a controversy developed over the location of the county seat that some attribute as being the birthplace of the strife that still can be occasionally seen in Coke County. Eugene Cartledge, cattleman L.B. Harris' son-in-law, contested the election on the grounds that Hayrick was more than nine miles from the center of the county. The land on which Robert Lee is located was in the center of the Harris Ranch.

Although a two-story courthouse had been constructed at Hayrick, plans were made for a removal election by those who favored moving the county seat to Robert Lee. These people cited a water shortage at Hayrick as the reason for the move. Harris and Cartledge offered to donate the townsite and give every citizen of Hayrick who owned a home there a lot on

which to move.

There were several reasons cited by those against the move including:

Sixty-five citizens had acquired homes in good faith;

The move would be expensive;

Property values would be destroyed in Hayrick;

A good two-room school was already constructed at Hayrick; and

A \$10,000 contract for a new brick courthouse was already let and couldn't be cancelled.

Cartledge was able to obtain an injunction to stop construction of the new courthouse, pending the proposed election. District Judge J.W. Timmins ruled

against Cartledge who appealed the ruling. Although the injunction was dissolved, it had delayed construction long enough that nothing could be done before the next election.

County Judge G.W. Perryman promised voters he would not call a special election while challenger H.L. Adams promised that he would call a special election if elected. Adams was able to unseat Perryman in the December 1890 election and, as his first official act, called for the special election to decide the location of the county seat to be held January 6, 1891. The election was between three sites - Hayrick, the present day location of Robert Lee and

Union City, four miles west of Robert Lee. Robert Lee won by 48 votes and there would be a new county seat. Bonds were issued for the new courthouse and the old ones burned in open court.

Just prior to the election, the courthouse at Hayrick burned, destroying most county records. The fire was thought to be arson. However, not long after the fire, a lawyer who had been investigating the burned records was found drowned in a shallow waterhole in Mountain Creek. A rock was wired to his neck and his feet were wired together. An inquest was held and a verdict of suicide was rendered. The case of arson was dismissed due to insufficient evidence.

[Editor's Note: Fran Lomas has found the "suicide" actually may have occurred four years later than originally reported.]

After the election, the moving process began. What records could be salvaged from the burned Hayrick courthouse were moved into a rented small frame building in Robert Lee. On January 27, 1891, this building also burned.

A new courthouse was constructed in Robert Lee in 1891 and housed Coke County's government offices for the next 65 years. On October 30, 1956, Coke County voters approved issuing \$300,000 in bonds to build the courthouse which has housed county government since that time until the present.

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