

A Brief History of Rogers

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Latitude and Longitude: 36°19'55"N 094°07'06"W

Elevation: 1371

Area: 33.5 square miles

Population: 38,829 (2000 Census)

Incorporation date: June 6, 1881

Historical Population as per the U.S. Census:

1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,265	2,158
1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
2,820	3,318	3,554	3,550	4,962	5,700	11,050	17,429	24,692	38,829

Rogers was founded as a stop on the St. Louis and San Francisco (Frisco) Railroad and developed as a shipping point for apples and a trade center for the surrounding rural area. After World War II, agriculture remained important, but business leaders also embarked on a successful effort to recruit light industry. Rogers has several major industrial plants and retail centers and is one of the fastest-growing cities in Arkansas.

Louisiana Purchase through Reconstruction

Settlers began to arrive in the vicinity of what is today Rogers around 1830. Most came from the Upper South states, especially Tennessee. The foundation of the local economy in the mid-1800s was subsistence farming, with tobacco as the main cash crop. The many streams in the region provided power for grist and lumber mills, and abundant timber allowed early industrialist Peter Van Winkle to establish a lumber empire near the hamlet of War Eagle (Benton County), east of what is today Rogers.

A major state road ran through what is now the City of Rogers. This road was part of the route used by the Overland Mail Company organized in 1857 by John Butterfield to carry the United States mail from Tipton, Missouri, to California. Callahan's Tavern, a stagecoach inn near a large spring in what is now northeastern Rogers, was a stop on the Butterfield route. The Butterfield Overland Mail route was discontinued after the outbreak of the Civil War because it ran through Confederate territory.

The Civil War put local residents in the crossfire between Union and Confederate armies. There were major military camps within a few miles of what is now the center of town, and in March 1862, the Battle of Pea Ridge took place nearby. Many barns, mills, and homes in the area were destroyed, and the economic and social development of the region was devastated.

Residents devoted the 1870s to rebuilding. The 1880s saw the arrival of rail transportation. The Frisco followed a route through eastern Benton County, bypassing the county seat of Bentonville. The railroad established stations along the route, and around each of those stations, a town sprung up. One of those towns was Rogers.

Rogers celebrates May 10, 1881, as its birthday, the day the first train pulled into town to be greeted by an enthusiastic crowd. The town with an estimated population at incorporation of 600 people was named for Captain

Charles Warrington Rogers, general manager of the Frisco. The railroad advertised the Rogers area across the Midwest, and as newcomers from states such as Iowa and Illinois arrived, Rogers began to grow. The town owed its growth to the fact that it was both a local trade center and a major shipping point for apples and apple products.

Post Reconstruction through the Early Twentieth Century

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, orchards surrounded Rogers. Along the railroad tracks were produce houses, apple evaporators where apples were sliced and dried, and an enormous apple-cider-vinegar plant. By the early 1900s, Rogers boasted a brick commercial district, concrete sidewalks, an electric light plant, public schools and a private academy, and an opera house. The light plant and school building are gone, but the opera house and most of the other early brick commercial buildings are still standing today.

By the 1920s, Rogers had grown to over 3,000 residents. The Apple Blossom Festivals, held each spring from 1923 through 1927, attracted thousands of people to Rogers to see the floats, tour the orchards in bloom, and see the Apple Blossom Queen crowned. But year after year bad weather plagued the events. The apple industry itself also was in decline since disease and insects had begun to wreak havoc in the orchards. The festival ended, and soon poultry replaced apples as the main agricultural product.

Population growth in Rogers slowed dramatically during the Great Depression. All but one of the community's banks failed. The Works Projects Administration offered employment to jobless residents and completed a number of local projects including the building of Lake Atalanta. The lake became the centerpiece of a large city park still serving the community today. The Rogers Relief Association raised funds for the needy, and entertainer Will Rogers, whose wife was from Rogers, gave a benefit performance to help the relief effort.

World War II through the Modern Era

Late in 1940, Rogers's National Guard unit, Battery F of the 142nd Field Artillery, was mobilized to active duty in anticipation of the outbreak of war. After World War II began, other Rogers men and women joined members of that unit in the military. Locally, the Red Cross made surgical bandages and knitted gloves, sweaters, and helmet liners. Schoolchildren participated in War Bond drives and collected scrap metal. Many residents left Rogers to work in defense plants, and some never returned. City leaders saw the need to attract industry to Rogers and began to work toward that goal.

After World War II, homegrown industries expanded, and companies from elsewhere opened plants. Among the first to relocate was Daisy Manufacturing, a maker of air guns that moved its entire operation to Rogers from Plymouth, Michigan, in 1958. During the next four decades, the poultry industry expanded and new industrial plants opened. The construction of Beaver Dam, begun in 1960, created Beaver Lake, providing recreation for tourists and retirees and assuring a water supply for industry. The resulting growth brought increased ethnic diversity to what had been a largely white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant community, and by 2000, nineteen percent of the population of Rogers was Latino American.

Education, Industry, Attractions, and Famous Residents

During its early years, Rogers was served by both public schools and the private Rogers Academy. By 2005, the Rogers Public Schools operated twelve elementary schools, two middle schools, a combined elementary-middle school, two junior highs, as well as a high school with two campuses, a main campus and a sophomore center. The town also has several private schools and an arts-based charter school. Northwest Arkansas Community College, although located in Bentonville (Benton County), is supported by tax revenue from and serves Rogers.

During its early years, the economy of Rogers was dependent on agriculture. Poultry growing and processing became important in the 1930s and remain so today. Major employers now include the Mercy Health System, Tyson Foods of Rogers, Bekaert Corporation, and Glad Manufacturing. In 1962, Sam Walton opened his very first Wal-Mart store in Rogers, and today many residents work for Wal-Mart or for one of the many Wal-Mart vendors with offices in northwest Arkansas.

Recreational attractions include Beaver Lake and the Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area, both east of Rogers. Historical and cultural attractions include the nearby Pea Ridge National Military Park. The Rogers Historical Museum, the Daisy Airgun Museum, and the Rogers Little Theater are located in the historic downtown, which has

been preserved through the efforts of the Rogers Main Street program. The Daisy Airgun Museum and Rogers Little Theater are located in the Rogers Commercial Historic District, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Notable residents include William H. "Coin" Harvey, a well-known political figure who moved to Rogers in 1900. He developed a resort at nearby Monte Ne and, in 1932 ran, for president on a third party ticket. Tom Morgan, who moved to Rogers in 1890, was an author of local color stories for such national magazines as the Saturday Evening Post. Betty Blake grew up in Rogers and married Will Rogers in 1908. As Will became one of the country's most famous entertainers, Betty helped to guide his career.

For additional information:

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