

Donation of the Month

Object: Frisco Railroad Pass
Catalog #: 1987.12.127
Donor: Vera Key Estate



Without the Frisco, there wouldn't have been a Rogers. Before the train came roaring through on May 10, 1881, the land with its rickety dogtrot log cabin was the farm of Benjamin F. Sikes. A few weeks later the town was officially incorporated. The coming of the railroad allowed Rogers to grow and prosper over its well-established neighbor to the northwest, Bentonville.

The St. Louis and San Francisco Railway was formed in 1876 in St. Louis. As its name implies, the goal of the company was to connect St. Louis to the west coast. However, the planned Frisco line from Vinita, Oklahoma, to Albuquerque and on to San Francisco was never built. Instead the company became concentrated in the south central area of the country.

Eager to open up new areas to passengers and freight, the Frisco began construction in Arkansas in 1880. Depots were an important part of any railway, creating strategic operational links for its employees and bringing prosperity and future railroad business to existing towns and towns-in-the-making. A depot was planned for Benton County, with its exact location dependent upon the approval of the Frisco's right-of-way agent and the raising of \$600 to pay for its construction.

There are differing tales about why the depot wasn't built in the county seat of Bentonville, the county's oldest and largest town at the time. Some say it was because Bentonville residents assumed that their city would be chosen and didn't bother to court the railroad. Others say that preliminary surveys favored a shorter, easier-to-construct route through eastern Benton County, even though the area was sparsely populated when compared to the western half of the county. Whatever the reason, several factions of folks in the soon-to-be Rogers area tried to attract the depot to their particular plot of land.

In the end the Sikes faction won out by raising the cash, donating the land, and deeding over the right of way. A town site of 15 city blocks of 12 lots each was initially surveyed and platted in March 1881. By the end of the year more property was platted, including some land owned by Sikes' brother, J. Wade Sikes, the town's first mayor. The city was named in honor of Captain Charles Warrington (C.W.) Rogers, vice president and general manager of the Frisco

Building the railroad line and depot was no small task. Because the Frisco was forging new territory, few accommodations or amenities existed for the construction workers; the men camped out or lodged in nearby farmhouses. Lumber and other building materials were brought in by wagon over roads often made muddy by continuous cold and stormy spring weather. Entrepreneurs flocked to the area to provide services and merchandise to the workers. For Rogers' first anniversary Major A.J. Allen wrote an account of the town's early days:

One man [John Cox] who had waited patiently and long for good weather and lumber opened up a business house in the top of an oak tree. The huge oak had been felled to the ground and he took his wagon body off the wheels, and placed it lengthwise on the trunk of the tree. He then, like a good Southern man with Yankee principles, stuck up a sign with six letters [saloon], and spread out his goods for sale; and judging from the number of people who daily gathered about his place of business, we conclude that he did a good thriving business. He said he would open the first business house in Rogers, and he kept his word.

The coming of the train was a major event. Since no one knew exactly what time it would arrive or how long it would stay, people from outlying areas packed picnic baskets and camped out the night before. Many Northwest Arkansas folks had never seen a train before and weren't sure what to expect or how to react. A group of boys perched on a stack of railroad ties got the fright of their life when the engine let off some steam, believing the "iron horse" to be exploding. The engineer almost created a panic when he announced he was going to "turn the train around" for the return trip. Nearby spectators promptly scattered, thinking the train was about to do the impossible — turn around like a horse and buggy might, irrespective of its need to stay on the rails!

Probably to thank and honor the citizens who helped make the new depot possible, the Frisco gave out railway passes. The 1881 pass seen here was signed by C.W. Rogers himself. It was issued to J.A.C. Blackburn, scion of a distinguished pioneering family, Confederate captain, business owner, lumber baron State Senator, Rogers booster, and grand uncle of the pass's donor, Vera Key. In 1914, 33 years after he witnessed the first train's arrival, Blackburn saw the train come into the new union depot. In a letter to the newspaper he wrote:

"Thirty-three years makes a wonderful change in our citizenship as well as in the improved appearance of our city. There was one open saloon here in 1881. There is no open saloon in the entire county at this time, yet there are some men whose breath still reminds one of that old 1881 saloon. Its stench seems to never have entirely left Rogers."

With the completion of the rail line and depot in Rogers, the construction camps moved to Fayetteville and other points south. But the businesses remained and new settlers moved into the area, attracted by open land and the availability of transportation. The city grew. By the end of 1881 Rogers is thought to have had a population of 1,000, quite a significant increase from the few farm families who called the area home just a year or two before.

Eventually Rogers became an important shipping center for the county's growing fruit industry. The passenger depot was also busy with special excursions bringing tourists to the health resorts of Electric Springs and Monte Ne in the early 1900s and to the Apple Blossom Festivals of the 1920s.

Although freight trains still pass regularly through Rogers, the days of the Frisco ended in 1982, when the Frisco was taken over by Burlington Northern. The passenger era for Rogers ended earlier in September 1965, when the last passenger train pulled out of the Frisco depot at First and Cherry.

CREDITS

"Rogers Came Into Being When Frisco Chose Shorter Survey for the New Road," *Rogers Daily News* (July 1, 1950); "Arrival of Frisco Railroad's First Passenger Train Marked Birth of Rogers May 10, 1881," *Rogers Daily News* (August 28, 1956); "'The Town Opposite Bentonville' Marks a Major Milestone: The Frisco Arrives," by Margaret Ross, *Arkansas Gazette* (October 22, 1967); "The Frisco Comes to Rogers," by Midge Garza, *Northwest Arkansas Morning News* (May 28, 1987); and "History of the Frisco Railroad," by Jan Harcourt, for an RHM exhibit (September 6, 1988).