

The Beginning of Cotter

“The town of Cotter crowded decades of history into the first few years of its existence . . .” - History of Baxter County, Arkansas, From the Beginnings to 1939, p. 48, by Frances Shiras

Embraced by the White River for more than three miles, the land at Lake’s Ferry which became the town of Cotter was known for generations by both the native population and new settlers as perhaps the most beautiful spot on the river. From the Big Spring on the riverbank to the vast views from the rocky heights 400 feet above, this site is varied as only the Ozarks can be.

Named for William Cotter, general superintendent of the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railway and later the general manager of the Missouri Pacific Railway System, the town site was laid out in early 1903 by the Red Bud Realty Company. The members of the firm were Walker V. Powell of St. Louis, president; Henri Devereaux, assistant chief engineer of the Iron Mountain, vice president; Jerry C. South of Mountain Home, secretary; Thomas Combs, former owner of the land and Lake’s Ferry, treasurer; and W. H. Tuttle, owner of a single share.

Building materials for the town and the railroad arrived on steamboats, a major means of transportation for decades, which soon would disappear in the smoke of the locomotives.

Cotter became a popular place for citizens of this sleepy section of the hills to watch the growing excitement. Visitors came to see the railroad bridge and tunnel construction, accomplished in part by master drillers from Macedonia, Italy and Austria. An extra attraction was a big steam shovel that cut away the mountain north of the depot and the approach to the railroad bridge, and loaded gravel for track ballasting.

By August, trains were arriving in Cotter from the south, providing more entertainment and commerce. Two current-driven ferries traversed the White River, bringing Marion County residents to join the party.

The intersection of South and Second was busy with the first business buildings in town. There were two general stores, J. G. Hall's on the northwest corner burned in 1907, and Billingsley & Metcalf on the northeast corner was taken down in 1931 to make room for the Masonic Lodge.

Tents housed the first church, school and hotel as well as the earliest settlers. Buildings of rough lumber and tar paper sprang up over the landscape. Railway workers, store keepers, and mothers with children to feed scurried on the dusty trails that served as streets.

Two structures built on McLean in 1903 are still standing: the Commercial Hotel, the oldest building in Cotter, and the Baxter County Bank building, once "one of the nobbiest little buildings in Cotter," and now a duplex apartment.

Large parties of fishermen began to take the relatively easy trip on the new White River Railway from the nearby cities of Kansas City, Chicago and St. Louis.

. . . Bass of three kinds, rainbow trout [sic], jack salmon, buffalo, red-horse, suckers and enormous catfish. Not the flabby fish that congregate at the mouth of city sewers, but large, firm-fleshed, fighting fellows that give the fishermen all they want to do to handle them on rod and line – The Cotter Courier, Jan. 1, 1904, quoting the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

In February 1904 the Cotter Courier reported that the population was between five and six hundred. There were six general stores, two drug stores, two groceries, one furniture store, two meat markets, one jewelry store, one bank, one blacksmith shop, three restaurants, two real estate offices, two pool halls, three doctor's offices, one central telephone office, three barber shops, one livery barn, two wagon yards, six hotels and boarding houses, two photograph galleries, one laundry, one shoe shop, one paint shop and one carpenter shop.

The Methodist and Baptist Churches held their first services during the summer of 1904, June 5 and July 10, respectively.

Discussion of incorporating Cotter began in February at a series of town meetings. By June, the petition was drawn up and signed. It was presented to and adopted by the county court on July 7 and finalized by the state of Arkansas on July 13, 1904. The first city election in August resulted in J. J. Chastain being elected mayor; Homer Goodman, recorder; and C. T. Cannady, Dr. J. G. Hall, Dr. Albert Garver, Thomas Musick, and J. P. Webb, aldermen.

As 1904 slipped into 1905, the people of Cotter began a somewhat less hectic time. "Old" buildings began to be remodeled and new ones continued to be built on the remaining lots. Lodges were formed, including Masons, Knights of Pythias and Owls.

Ice cream parlors and millinery shops joined the general stores and livery stables. The five-story Tremain Hotel was built on the southeast corner of South and Second, and an ice plant was built near the river. A wholesale grocer, Howard H. Gallup, opened the Big Red Store on the south side of South Street, west of Second Street.

At noon on Tuesday, September 5, 1905, a fire in the kitchen of the Miser Hotel, which was on the southwest corner of Second and McLean, got out of hand and much of the McLean Street business district was destroyed.

South of the hotel on Second Street, the Loughridge real estate office burned, and there, "by splendid efforts, the flames were checked."

On the south side of McLean, Bob Miser's hotel and Fred McClain's new furniture store, just west of the hotel, were destroyed. The fire was then stopped by "the big iron building of Morgan Jolly," [the corrugated iron building on the south side of McLean].

The north side of McLean, however, was not so lucky. Beginning at the corner of McLean and Second, the buildings burned were Meer's

general store, Garver and Mathews real estate office, the old Methven drug store, Cook's restaurant, Moreford's barber shop, attorney Allyn Brown's office, central telephone station, wareroom of Chastain Brothers, and the store of J. N. McCracken and Co.

Planning for rebuilding began immediately, but this time with an eye to the future. Most of the new buildings were built of brick, stone, or concrete blocks made on the riverbank in Cotter with sand and sifted White River gravel. Two of the major buildings from this time still exist, on the southwest corner and northwest corner of Second Street and McLean.

The Red Bud Realty Company began selling the remaining lots in preparation for the town's grand opening. It was a major celebration designed to encourage the purchase of lots in Cotter. This was a trend in many newly developed towns, especially those near the recently laid railroads. Buyers started arriving early for the drawing, which started at 11 a.m. on Thursday, November 23, 1905.

The drawing was held on the balcony of the Tremain Hotel on the southeast corner of Second and South. The deeds, each with a buyer's name already inscribed, were put in individual envelopes, and all the envelopes were placed in a trunk. Each lot number was written on a ticket, each ticket placed in an envelope, and all the envelopes were placed in a box. One envelope was drawn from the trunk and one from the box, and the name and lot number were thus joined together. The first buyer was Mr. R. C. Orr of Memphis, Tennessee, lot 375.

... 1470 lots sold ... 'The large crowd was rather a surprise,' so said several Cotter business men ... A conservative estimate of the crowd might be set at 1000 ... – The Baxter Bulletin, December 1, 1905

As a railroad boomtown, Cotter was the center of commerce for this region and wrote its own colorful history. The demise of the railroad started an extended period of quiet, but historic restoration and

promotion of tourism on the White River is painting a bright future for the city of Cotter.

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05/02/03

**article on display at The Anglin-Tinnon Railroad Workers Memorial
Information Center at Big Spring Park, Cotter, Arkansas**