

## Earlsboro — Boom and Bust

JOHN W. MORRIS, University of Oklahoma, Norman

Earlsboro is not unique among the villages and small towns of Oklahoma, but neither is it typical. Located in central eastern Pottawatomie County, near the boundary of that county with the Seminole Nation, its site has twice caused it to be a "boom" town of considerable importance, and twice a decaying, disintegrating, and dilapidated village.

Earlsboro was founded during the last part of 1891, a few days after the Choctaw Coal and Railroad Company (now Rock Island) extended its trackage westward from the Seminole Nation toward Shawneetown and Oklahoma City. Two landowners platted the part of their farm adjacent to the railroad and filed the townsite plat with the County Recorder. The original name of the settlement was Boom-De-Ay, as in the song, but shortly thereafter it was changed to Earlsboro to honor an official of the railroad. With the establishment of the village the post office known as Tum, approximately two miles south of the townsite, was moved to the new community.

The fact that Earlsboro was situated near the Indian Territory boundary aided its early growth as well as that of other villages similarly located. Intoxicating liquors were prohibited in Indian Territory, but saloons in Oklahoma Territory were legal. Because of the demand of the Indians for liquor the villages along or near the border—Keokuk Falls, Violet Springs, The Corner, and Earlsboro—became known as "whiskey towns." Three of the first four businesses established in Earlsboro were saloons, the other was a grocery store. The number of saloons and stores handling liquor continued to increase and to dominate the business activities of the village until 1905. During that year it was estimated that 90 per cent of the merchants were dealing profitably in liquors. So profitable was this activity that Pottawatomie County reported 65 registered saloons and two licensed distilleries in 1905. With approaching statehood, however, many liquor dealers started moving their activities to other states and the first "boom" period ended. When the Indian and Oklahoma territories united to form the state of Oklahoma in 1907, prohibition was applied to the entire state.

Along with the whiskey trade, Earlsboro developed as a small commercial center serving nearby farmers. A blacksmith shop, grist mill, and cotton gin were built. Churches, both Protestant and Catholic, were started and a school district organized. Some of the platted streets were graded and homes constructed along them. The railroad located a box car next to the track to serve as a depot and the village became a regular stop for passenger service.

During its first year of existence, Earlsboro had a population of about 100 persons (Table I). By 1900 the population had increased to 400 and it continued to increase until 1905 when it reached an estimated 450 persons. The special census of 1907, however, recorded only 387 persons living in the village, the decrease being accounted for largely by the moving of liquor dealers. For the next three years the population fluctuated little as the 1910 census listed 388 individuals. After 1910 the population decreased gradually, the 1920 census showing a total of 317 persons, or about 80 fewer than 20 years previously.

During the early 1920's the commercial activities of Earlsboro were like those of many other small, farm-centered communities (Table II). Poor roads and slow moving methods of transportation caused farmers in the vicinity to trade in Earlsboro. Subsistence stores supplying the most essential needs dominated the business area. A bank and newspaper also aided in making it an active rural center. Saturday was the big day of

TABLE I — EARLSBORO POPULATION

Year	Population
1892	100 (estimate)
1900	400 (estimate)
1907	387
1910	388
1920	317
1928	3,500 (estimate)
1930	1,950
1940	486
1950	278
1960	257

the week. The horses and wagons that stood along the curbs of the main street, or filled the space in the alleys back of the stores, when the village was first founded, were gradually replaced by the model-T Ford and the

TABLE II — BUSINESS ESTABLISHMENTS OF EARLSBORO

Unit	1920*	1928**	1940	1963
Drug Store	1	23	1	0
Grocery Store	1	24	1	0
Dry Goods Store	1	15	0	0
General Store	2	7	1	1
Shoe Repair	0	4	1	0
Barber Shop	1	26	1	0
Beauty Shop	0	18	1	0
Cleaning-Pressing	0	11	1	0
Cafe	1	21	2	1
Bakery	0	1	0	0
Hotel	0	1	1	0
Rooming House	0	14	0	0
Theaters	0	3	0	0
Pool Hall	0	9	1	0
Dance Hall	0	8	0	0
Bank	1	1	1	0
Weekly Newspaper	1	1	1	0
Welding	0	9	0	0
Garage	0	8	1	0
Filling Station	1	41	3	1
Oil Field Supply	0	13	0	0
Lumber Yard	0	23	0	0
Grist Mill	1	3	2	0
Ice Plant	0	2	0	0
	11	286	19	3

\* H. Barrett, pioneer resident

\*\*C.L.O. Bryan, Editor, *Earlsboro Journal*

Chevrolet touring car by 1925. The hitching post remained, however, and it was not at all uncommon to see teams of horses or Indian saddle ponies tied at the racks. Farmers worked until Saturday afternoon and then brought their families to the village for a supply of the week's necessities and an exchange of local gossip. Gathering in groups on the dusty street corners, or sitting on the benches in front of the stores, they speculated on possible crop yields in the fall and that made occasional remarks about how rich they were going to be when "that wildcat" became an oil well.

This situation was completely and abruptly changed on March 1, 1926. On that day "that wildcat," the first well in which commercial production was found in the Earlsboro Sand, and the well which caused the active development of the Earlsboro Field, "blew in." The Earlsboro Sand was penetrated at a depth of 3,557 feet and oil started flowing at a rate of 200 barrels per day. Although this well was minor compared to some drilled in shortly thereafter, the discovery started a violent oil boom; speculation in royalty rights and leases mounted rapidly, and drilling became frenzied.

Once begun, Earlsboro grew rapidly, so rapidly that in two or three months the immediate area contained a population variously estimated at from 5,000 to 10,000 persons. Main street was lengthened from one to five blocks, with numerous side and parallel streets added to the business section. The streets were lined with temporary one-story frame buildings housing grocery stores, drug stores, butcher shops, clothing stores, barber and beauty shops, pool halls, picture shows, lumber yards, filling stations, and cafes—"so many cafes and hamburger joints that it seemed that one occupied every other building." A large four-story brick hotel was soon under construction. Doctors, lawyers, engineers, and geologists sought office space in any type of building.

Among the most striking establishments of Earlsboro were the rooming houses. These buildings were usually two-story frame houses varying in width from 25 to 50 feet and often 150 feet long. Some were divided into numerous small rooms each containing a cot, chair, and wash stand with basin and pitcher. Some had only one large room crowded with cots and beds which were rented by the night, or in some cases for an eight-hour shift. The rooms or beds rented for as much as \$5.00 a night with such comforts as soiled linen and bedbugs.

Practically every home in Earlsboro rented rooms. In many cases spare bedrooms, living rooms, dining rooms, and porches were used to house oil field workers. Garages, coal sheds, and even chicken houses were cleaned out, cots put in, and rented for as much as \$2.00 for eight hours, one cot often bringing as much as \$6.00 for 24 hours of service. Even with these accommodations rooms were scarce and newcomers often spent the night walking the streets or sleeping on the ground.

The residential area expanded as rapidly as the business section. Shotgun houses of all varieties were built on land once used for gardens or lawns. Tents frequently occupied unused spaces and often tent space in a back yard rented for as much as \$25.00 per month. No streets in the residential areas were paved or graveled. During the dry part of the year they were deep with dust, but when it rained they were almost as deep with mud.

Public utilities were almost unknown to Earlsboro when the "boom" started. There was no sewage disposal, the water supply was furnished by individual wells, and most of the homes used kerosene lamps for light. During the early "boom" period water was hauled to the community by trucks and sold along main street for five or ten cents a glass. The Earlsboro post office was entirely inadequate to handle the increase in mail. Since Earlsboro was too small to have delivery service, everybody received his mail at the general delivery window, or from a box in the office. Two general delivery windows were soon opened, but this procedure only slightly relieved the situation. The people waiting to receive their mail often formed lines two blocks in length.

One of the biggest problems that faced Earlsboro during the "boom" period was transportation. There were no paved roads in the community or town. Because of the heavy traffic every road leading to Earlsboro was either a cloud of dust or a sea of mud, depending upon the length of time since it had rained. Automobiles, teamsters, and trucks all moved

at a snail's pace. Rainfall was exceptionally heavy during the fall of 1926, exceeding the normal by seven inches. Roads and fields were so boggy that it seemed drilling would have to be temporarily discontinued. Trucks were practically abandoned in favor of horses. Rail transportation service was even more inadequate than the roads. The Rock Island was unprepared to handle the volume of business. Trackage and storage space were missing. The general superintendent of the Rock Island lines was sent to the Seminole area to take charge of construction.

By 1928 the "boom" was beginning to settle as the limits of the producing fields were determined. New oil developments in nearby fields resulted in many of the single workers seeking steadier employment in such places as Seawright, St. Louis, and Oklahoma City. New leaders, working with the older ones, began to bring order out of chaos and to improve the facilities of the community. Main street was paved, a city water system developed, and electricity brought to the town. New churches replaced the old ones and a modern school plant was built.

In 1928 the population within the incorporated limits of the community was estimated to be 3,500, but by 1930 the population had decreased to 1,950 persons. In 1928 the number of business establishments, as listed in the *Earlsboro Journal*, totaled 286 (Table II). The 1940 population census and a count of business establishments in the same year indicated that the second "boom" period had definitely ended and that the second decay stage was well advanced. During the 1930 to 1940 decade the population dropped to 486 persons, or a decrease of 75 per cent, and the number of business establishments declined to 19. Since 1940 the village has continued to deteriorate.

Present day Earlsboro is but a broken hull of the twice "booming" community. About 50 homes, many unpainted since the 1930's, remain scattered about the incorporated limits. Several residential streets have been closed and a few even plowed and planted. Only uncared for trees and broken foundations occupy many previously densely populated blocks. The business area definitely shows that the "boom" is over and that the village is dying. Once busy streets are now almost unused. The Saturday afternoon crowds of pre-oil days no longer gather. The pavement along the main street is seldom cleaned, and when cleaned it is by the winds of the world. Only one block of brick buildings remains and only two of these are in use. Many, with all windows and doors off, stand as reminders of the past. Grass and weeds grow in cracks along the sidewalks and in places once occupied by buildings. The depot built to replace the first box car station has long since been removed and trains no longer stop. And an almost fatal blow to the village came two years ago with the closing of the bank.

Earlsboro, the largest and last of the "whiskey towns," is about to follow the others into oblivion. The 1960 census recorded only 257 persons, many of whom were "old-timers" dying with the community. Only three businesses—a general store, a filling station, and a cafe—exist and one of them, the cafe, is open only part time. The only indicator of activity is the consolidated school.

How long will Earlsboro continue? As the oldest resident stated recently, "We can always hope for another 'boom.'"