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Camdenton: A 20th-century county seat



An aerial view of Camdenton from years gone by.

By Tom Peters

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Most Ozarks towns were founded and settled during the first half of the 19th century, prior to the Civil War. Camdenton, however, near the Lake of the Ozarks, was a late bloomer, taking root in 1930 and 1931 as the Great Depression was settling like dust over the land. Nothing in Camdenton is older than 88 years.

As a result, beautiful Art Deco architecture in Camdenton, such as the Camden County courthouse, will be found — but no stately old Victorian homes.

In November 1930, Camdenton was officially designated as the county seat of Camden County, before most of the town was even built. Although Camdenton is high in the Ozarks hills, flood waters were the driving force behind its genesis, and the flooding was man-made, not natural.

Camden County

How did this all come to pass? Camden County was nearly 80 years old when Camdenton became the county seat. The county was organized on Jan. 29, 1841 as Kinderhook County, named in honor of Kinderhook, N.Y., the home of Martin Van Buren (1782-1862), eighth president of the United States (1837-1841).

Kinderhook is the anglicized spelling of an old Dutch word (recall that New York initially was called New Amsterdam) meaning “children’s place,” evidently because the early explorer Henry Hudson had observed many Native American children playing near the place. As a result of the ebb and flow of American politics, on Feb. 23, 1843 the Missouri State Legislature renamed the county Camden County, one of the many U.S. places honoring British statesman Charles Pratt (1714-1794), the first Earl Camden, who was sympathetic to the outcries and outrage of the colonists, no taxation without representation.

County seat musical chairs

Prior to 1930, Camden County had a succession of two county seats. The first was Erie, a small town on the Osage River. Originally the place was called Oregon, but on Feb. 23, 1843, the Missouri State Legislature passed a bill changing the name from Oregon to Erie, at the same time the county’s name was changed from Kinderhook to Camden.

On Nov. 15, 1855 the Missouri State Legislature passed yet another bill, changing the location of the county seat from Erie to Linn Creek, which was located at the mouth of Linn Creek, where it emptied into the Osage River. Linn is another name for the Linden tree, also known as the bee tree, and also whittlewood. Steamboats could easily dock at Linn Creek.

The first relocation of the county seat from Erie to Linn Creek took 10 acrimonious years.

“An 1845 court-approved petition to relocate the county seat to Linn Creek was delayed due to protests from outlying areas, and it was not until after an 1855 cholera epidemic at Erie that the seat of justice was moved in 1855 to Linn Creek (Earney 1995, p. 161).”

Thus, the affection of locals for steamboat-driven commerce, coupled with their abhorrence of cholera, carried the day.

Water and power



The construction of Bagnell Dam, shown in 1930. (Courtesy of the Missouri State Archives)

In the '20s, a man named Ralph Wood Street, a native of St. Joseph with a law degree from the University of Michigan, began having dreams about the potential for hydroelectric power in the northern Ozarks region of central Missouri. Cheap, efficient, sustainable power would fuel the growth of both St. Louis and Kansas City. Street visited Bagnell, a struggling railroad tie town, several times, including in September 1923.

Despite the best efforts of graft and corruption to kill it, plans progressed to the point that on a Sunday afternoon in October 1927, Louis Eagan, President of the Union Electric Land and Development Company, announced to the residents of Linn Creek during a special meeting held in the Foster Cafe that the dam would be built, and their town would become submerged.

Construction of Bagnell Dam began on Aug. 6, 1929, and hydroelectric production commenced on Oct. 16, 1931.

“A little syndicate”

When changes are afoot and residents are riled, some people see opportunities, rather than problems.

Two Camden County men, Clinton Webb and James Banner, collaborated with a couple of brothers from Springfield, John T. and William Woodruff, to form “a little syndicate,” as John T. Woodruff described it in his memoirs, to convince the citizens of Camden County that building an entirely new county seat from scratch would be better than just moving the buildings worth saving from Linn Creek to higher ground farther up the hollow, which had been the established precedent.



Demolition is underway at the former Linn Creek community. (Courtesy of the Missouri State Archives)

John T. Woodruff, a long and strong advocate for good roads, knew that paved highways would be vital to the economic success of communities in the twentieth century, and a town with two intersecting main highways would be much more viable as a county seat than one that had been simply relocated higher up the holler.

Woodruff knew that highways 54 and 5 were scheduled to intersect at a point approximately 5 miles south of Linn Creek. That point is now the center of Camdenton. The Missouri Highway Map dated Jan. 1, 1934 shows the new Lake of the Ozarks, with Camdenton as the new county seat at the crossroads.

The little syndicate began buying up land and planning to build a town. Ironically, although it was water that caused all the hubbub in the first place, in order for the new town to survive and thrive, it needed a good source of drinking water. John T. Woodruff hired Owen Medlin of Latham, Mo., described as a grizzled old driller, to drill a 400-foot well, tapping into a plentiful supply of water.

The proposed town also needed a good name. After mulling over all the possibilities, John T. Woodruff may have consulted a gazetteer and discovered that there was no other place in the U.S. named Camdenton, so he decided to call it that.

Publicity campaigns

A two-thirds majority of voters in Camden County was needed to approve a change in the county seat. Linn Creek's civic leaders started an advertising campaign. An ad in Keith McCanse's annual "Where to Go in the Ozarks" gushed:

Mounting their residences on rollers and skids, wrecking and rebuilding other structures, moving stocks of merchandise and places of business, Linn Creek was transplanted three miles up the valley out of the reach of the rising waters. This was done virtually overnight. New values, new ideals, new visions were created, and thus the new Linn Creek gained the appellation of 'The Miracle City of the Ozarks.'

With undaunted courage comparable to that of their pioneer forefathers who established the old town more than 80 years ago, the people of Linn Creek have builded anew. Linn Creek, rich in its historic association with the early days of Missouri, scene of bustling activities in steamboat times, common ground of Union and Confederate troops during the Civil War, has now entered a new era."

The little syndicate countered Linn Creek's advertising campaign with equally visionary prose. An article in the Sept. 7, 1930 Springfield Leader newspaper, perhaps influenced by some press release from the little syndicate, provided an Oz-like vision of Camdenton:

It will be a bustling, business-like city, a twentieth century town, built at the crossroads of highways which are the traffic rivers of today, with an airport, welcoming visitors from the skies, a beautiful modern hotel to make them comfortable, a rolling golf course, like a giant emerald stuck in the side of the hill, to amuse them.

The little syndicate also courted county voters by holding a huge BBQ dinner, free to all the citizens of Camden County. Buford Foster, a local restaurant owner who in the '50s would form several square dancing teams (including the Bullfrogs and the Tadpoles, which would appear on the nationally broadcast live hillbilly variety show called the Ozark Jubilee) attended the feast, along with most of the county. A three-pit BBQ area was stoked, and the 30-piece band provided the entertainment.

It must have been quite a shindig. One local fellow, Bull-Moose Chapps, brought a prodigious appetite and downed 21 BBQ sandwiches.

The results

In the general election held on Nov. 4, 1930, the proposal to move the county seat of Camden County to the new town of Camdenton passed. Even a majority of Linn Creek voters approved the change. Camdenton went on to become a thriving gateway to the Lake of the Ozarks region.

New Linn Creek continues to exist, but on a much smaller scale than Camdenton. John T. Woodruff worked on the Camdenton project only nine months, from early May of 1930 through late January of 1931. He then sold his interest in the project to Banner and Webb.

Resources

[Camden County Place Names, 1928-1945](#)

“Christen New Town Camdenton,” Springfield Daily News, Dec. 8, 1930

“Dam Over Troubled Waters,” Robert Dean Anderson, 2014

[Lake of the Ozarks website](#)

“Missouri Roadsides: The Traveler’s Companion,” Bill Earngey, 1995

“John T. Woodruff of Springfield, Missouri, in the Ozarks,” Thomas A. Peters, 2016

“Where to Go in the Ozarks,” Keith McCause