

FIRST PLACE: OPEN DIVISION

“Weston: Time Capsule in a Town”

By Frederick J. Chiaventone

“July 3, 1803 – After passing a bad sand bar we stopped . . . at an old trading-house, which is now deserted, and a half mile beyond it camped”

This short entry in the journals of explorers Lewis and Clark is very likely the first written description of what would grow into the town of Weston, Missouri. Studying their notes it would appear that they first landed at about the spot where Weston Bend State Park fronts the South Bluff Road and their camp was pitched near where the old train station and current City Hall stand. But, as evidenced by the ruins of an old “trading-house” described in the journals they were not the first white men to visit the area. For years before French trappers and traders had found this an attractive and beneficial place to live and work.

It would be a few years after Lewis and Clark’s visit before civilization again touched the area and that would be in 1827 when Colonel Henry Leavenworth established in Kansas the fort that would bear his name. Just across the Missouri River from Fort Leavenworth two members of his dragoons, Joseph Moore and First Sergeant Thomas Weston staked out the first claims in what would become “The Queen of the Platte” referring not to the river but rather the Platte Purchase of 1836 which opened the area officially to settlement. Finding it hard to expand on his dream of a settlement, Moore sold part of his interest in the area to Bela Hughes, a young lawyer from Illinois. Shortly thereafter Hughes reached out to old contacts and with their help soon began attracting settlers of German and French decent to this new location on the western edge of the United States. Pioneers from Virginia, Kentucky, New Orleans, and Canada began to trickle in and Weston began to grow.

It was a beautiful spot and perfectly located to assist the westward movement of adventurous Americans. The early settlers were soon followed by a host of professionals including doctors, lawyers, and merchants. Before long the town was a beehive of activity. An ideal port for riverboats the waterfront was soon teeming with activity and the town grew to meet their needs. With wonderfully fertile soil planters, most coming from the American south, soon were producing profitable crops of tobacco and hemp, the latter being indispensable for the manufacture of ropes and hawsers so much in demand by the burgeoning riverboat trade and for equipping wagon trains moving west. Other settlers found this an ideal area in which to gather honey and maple syrup and raise hogs. Located at a juncture of the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails Weston grew to become the second largest city in Missouri after St. Louis and was referred to as the ideal “Jumping Off Place” for westward movement. By the 1850’s Weston was a hotbed of activity with trappers and hunters bringing in the bounty of the country in pelts and furs as merchants outfitted throngs of emigrants moving inexorably

West. The little town on the Missouri River was perfectly situated for America's westward expansion so that business flourished and its citizens prospered.

Personalities synonymous with westward expansion were common to Weston. Foremost among many was the entrepreneurial Ben Holladay who began by opening a small tavern but soon expanded his business interests to form the famous Overland Stage and Express Company. Securing lucrative passenger, freight, and mail routes to the West Holladay became known as "The Stagecoach King" and was exceptionally prosperous. Not content with his overland transportation endeavors Holladay worked with his brother Major David Holladay to establish a distillery which remains in operation to this day, the oldest continuously operating distillery in the United States. Nor was Holladay the only person of note to call Weston home. When his father was killed after giving an anti-slavery speech in Leavenworth a young Bill Cody moved in with his uncle Elijah and worked in his dry goods store. It was while not sweeping out the store that the young Cody would kick around town in the company of his friend James Butler Hickok. Both young men were recruited into the fledgling Pony Express with Bill as a rider and his older, taller friend as a station keeper. With the end of the Pony Express experiment both signed on as scouts for the Union Army during the Civil War. After the war both would move on to make sterling reputations for themselves – Hickok as "Wild Bill" and Cody as "Buffalo Bill." The two even made a brief appearance as actors on the New York stage in a production of Cody's drama "Scouts of the Prairie." Hickok however, was not quite the showman as his younger friend. Frozen by stage fright Hickok gaped silently at the audience then walked off-stage and headed back to the West to star in his own real-life dramas. From a youth spent on the dusty streets of Weston the two would blaze a trail into American history.

But with Weston's prosperity came great challenges. In 1855 a tremendous fire devastated most of the downtown area. The business district was soon rebuilt but the Missouri River was also unpredictable and a great flood before the Civil War moved the channel several hundred yards effectively closing the port. While steamboats continued to stop at Weston the loss of the port made transfer of goods to and from boats more challenging. This setback was soon alleviated with the construction in 1859 of a railroad line which effectively connected the town with Westport to the south and St. Joseph to the north. Then, of course, was the Civil War itself which effectively sundered the community with many producers of hemp and tobacco dependent on slave labor while some leading citizens favored the abolition of the institution. The local commander of Union forces at Fort Leavenworth was taking no chances and quickly stationed a volunteer infantry regiment from Wisconsin in Weston. This outfit was known for their unusual mascot. While one Wisconsin regiment was known for its bald eagle "Old Abe," the regiment in Weston was known for keeping a pet black bear on a stout chain. The Union forces made their headquarters on the third floor of the Mettler Building which had once played host to many a formal dance for the officers at Fort Leavenworth. To this day one can still see the evidence of Union troops on the second floor with "Guard Post No. 6" painted on the wall of the building and small triangular holes punched into the wooden door lintel by the bayonets of the soldiers as they ducked in and out of the room to report.

One Union detachment hurried down from St. Joseph in an effort to capture Confederate guerilla leader Silas Jordan. They didn't capture Jordan but did run into a band of Southern guerillas who engaged them in battle along Bee Creek and just opposite of where the Red Barn Farm stands today. The southerners held their own until two pieces of Federal artillery were brought up and turned the tide of the small engagement. Two Federal troops were killed and two rebel guerillas captured and hanged for their participation. That, however, was about as close as the violence of the Civil War got to Weston. For all the disruption the war brought to Weston there was little outright fighting. It was bad for business.

The Civil War was far more forgiving of Weston than was nature as residents would find out in 1881 when the Missouri River flooded once again this time moving the channel a good two miles from the town. Then in 1890 the community was devastated by a catastrophic fire which all but destroyed the downtown area. Again the community rebuilt but the flush times were over. Weston, whose population had once been second only to St. Louis, was losing people quickly and the town's population had dwindled to a mere 900 souls. But the citizens of Weston remained proud of their little population and in 1960 established the Weston Historical Museum. By 1972 some twenty-two blocks had been designated to the National Register of Historic Places. Now well into the 21st century, Weston has established itself as an attractive and inviting small town off the beaten track. Home to industrious people, historic buildings, and fascinating enterprises from the St. George Hotel, to America Bowman's 1842 Keeping Room and from Pirtle's Winery to the Avalon Restaurant. Visitors to Weston come not only from the surrounding area but from around the world. All are delighted by this hidden jewel nestled in the bluffs along the Missouri River. War, fire, and flood could not destroy the "Queen of the Platte."