

DEWITT ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE ROARING TWENTIES

In a front page article of one of its two weekly newspapers, the DEWITT ENTERPRISE, J. M. Henderson, Jr., editor, gives some insight into the seat of Arkansas county seventy years back. Calling his "The Home Paper of the Largest Rice Belt in the World", editor Henderson issued the challenge "To Make 1920 A Year of Progress" in his New Year's Day issue. (1)

"GOOD-BYE 1919

"The year nineteen-nineteen has been a varied one for DeWitt. The rice men would call it a bad year as would most of the farmers. And as DeWitt is dependent upon the farmer for this prosperity, it may be said the old year was not such a good one for the town.

"The writer made his first acquaintance with DeWitt just one year ago, and he is thus able to see many of the changes made during the year.

"The City Council, elected in the spring of 1919 with progress written over its program, has not been able to move things like it promised. True, the records will show attempts to pass sidewalk ordinances and street improvements, and at this writing final action has not been taken. Two new street improvement districts have been formed and work may be started soon, but the fact remains that the streets and sidewalks are in a condition that would have been a disgrace to any frontier town fifty years ago.

"The light and power and water which we were promised many months ago has not yet materialized; no, not even the promise of a start has been worth while. And DeWitt today stands tied up with a contract for light and power with a corporation so negligent that the people of Marianna last week asked the city by petition to buy or give to someone their electric plant. What will 1920 bring for DeWitt in the light line? Will we continue to flounder around in the dark at night or shall we walk the the square on summer evenings under the blaze of many lights?

"The water system is even more necessary than the light. As a fire protection alone a good water system would prove more than profitable investment. Then there is the sanitary viewpoint. How many of the infectious disease which this section of the country puts up with year after year are traceable to the open well, or the dirty pump?

"The disastrous fire of last June taught us the need of a water system for the protection of the town. The risks are so terrible that many of the merchants cannot obtain fire insurance, and those who have insurance have to pay such rates that the excess rates would about pay their water bill for a year.

"Despite all these drawbacks DeWitt has many business men and citizens who have unlimited confidence in the future. Many business transactions have taken place during the year which lends emphasis to that statement.

October 1989

"The fire which burned out several merchants led to the hunt for new locations. None were to be found for some of them, and to our shame no new building has yet been started to replace those lost in the fire. (2)

"The Dudley building alone stands out as the only new modern brick building to be completed in the city. This the Dudley Hardware has occupied and it makes the most presentable store in the town.

"The Moncrief Building got started in the early summer but delays in getting material has held up the completion of what will be a great improvement to the city.

"The Carnes Hardware and Garage Building on Main Street has not yet been commenced, though much of the material is on the ground.

"Many business changes have been noted from time to time in the city. Perhaps the notable of these are as follows:

"C. N. Ruffin sold out to the DeWitt Mercantile and Supply Co., and Mr. Ruffin assumed management of the Grocery and Dry Goods Department of the Mercantile Co., and after many alterations and changes, this store now presents a most respectable and city-like appearance.

"W. B. Fulton of the Farmers Exchange opened early in the new year with a little stock and much faith, and today he boasts a good business and is firmly established.

"The Rice Mill has changed hands, too, and the larger company with its larger buying and selling power should add strength to the future of DeWitt.

"THE NEW ERA has passed from the control of the Old Veteran Newspaperman, Mr. Landis, to younger hands and no other change in the city will have so much bearing on the future growth of the community.

"McCown and Co. have moved to Stephens building.

"Moory, our congenial confectioner, is here with the intent of making us some fine ice cream and cakes and will shortly announce his intentions in the advertising columns.

"Bussabarger, who bought out Moory's bakery, is confident of the future.

"Wilson & Co. bought the Pete's Cafe and after making some changes, now conducts an up-to-date place to eat. "Pete" has got back to the eat game, too.

"The picture shows at the Gem Theatre are being kept up to a high standard of picture, better in fact than in most towns of this size.

"B. G. Jones has taken the meat market recently run by T. M. Crain, and is now located in the Rogers Building.

"From a few tools, and despite a fire, Wilson Bros. have made a garage name for themselves which is enviable.

"The Stephens Millinery is an addition to the business houses.

"Many other changes have occurred which all goes to show that underneath the delay and the apparent stagnant conditions there is

moving the ferment of growth.

"When we say good-bye to 1919, we can also ask ourselves what of the New Year??"

Robert A. Barry of DeWitt's other weekly, The NEW ERA, adds another dimension to the city of seven decades ago in a January 1, 1920 editorial:

"WHAT OF 1920?"

"Yes, DeWitt, What of it?

"Somebody said if one's foresight were as good as his hindsight, we would do and not do this and that.

"And it is true.

"But What of 1920? This is the interrogation which The NEW ERA wishes to propound to DeWitt at the beginning of a new year.

"We should not parlay and brood over the shortcomings of the past, but should, as a community, set our pegs high for the coming year and all work with one accord for the development and advance of our home town.

"It is a popular but erroneous remark that opportunity knocks but once. Opportunity has been banging at the door of this town fully twenty years and with systematic regularity, she has been ignored by the inhabitants thereof.

"Opportunity is knocking at the door of this fair little city NOW as it never knocked before. What are we going to do about it this time? Will we throw open the portals and bid her welcome-- Come in--or will we continue to follow the beaten path of our ancestors and turn a deaf ear to her appeal? The most lowly, unlettered inhabitant of this town has enough brains to see the possibilities ahead. The hearts of the younger generation are "on fire" with enthusiasm for the modern advantages which may be had for the effort. Even the old-timers who belong to the "better be keefer" class are warming up to the needs of the hour, and it is the prediction of The NEW ERA that something is going to jar loose in DeWitt in 1920 that will surprise the most sanguine among us.

"We are lacking in nothing that is necessary to the expansion and development we all crave, except ACTION. Now is the time for DeWitt to "show her colors", to reach forth and grasp the opportunity. Let us have action. Build houses, boast, shout for DeWitt, and let the world know you are proud to be a citizen of the town where you found your wife and expect to live and bring up your family. Loosen up and be liberal. Don't rear your children in a half-hearted fashion just because you were (by force of circumstance) brought up that way. They are entitled to the best you can give them, and you can give them the best there is right here in DeWitt if you will place the same value on the future as you do on the money you own. (3)

"Listen, fellow citizens, we have had our ear to the ground, and we want to tell you that never before in the history of this town has there been so strong an undercurrent of dormant enthusiasm

as right now.

"Never before was there more ample resources to pay the cost.

"Never before was the time more propitious.

"Then Why Delay?

"With concerted action on the part of every citizen who claims this little town as his home, where his business interests are, DeWitt can be made a wonderfully beautiful little city and a fitting inheritance for the generations to follow.

"For years and years we have enjoyed the fruits of our labors as farmers, merchants, bankers, traders, etc. made possible for us by the rare fertility of surrounding soil. We have boasted and yet boast one of the best and richest counties in the state of Arkansas. We have labored, saved and hoarded our wealth until we are financially able to paddle our own canoe no matter which way the wind blows. We have stinted, economized and saved and kept our town free from debt, of which fact we can all feel proud.

"But there is another side to the proposition.

"Aside from our property deeds and bank balances, where is our reward for those years of labor and depravation? If we would enjoy the little comforts and conveniences which belong to this period [in time], we must go elsewhere to get them. We gather our lantern (or flashlight) when we walk about at night to dodge potholes and prevent collisions as we did in the long, long ago. We exercise our arms at the old-fashioned pump or drink rainwater, which we sometimes "ferget to ketch", just as we did when David Crockett was a lad. We crowd into the "little church around the corner" and spit tobacco juice under the benches like grandpa used to do. We scrouge and elbow one another in our much too small a school house until the teacher doesn't know A from B and we don't either.

"The only things we possess which belong to this age are the automobile and the "pictur show".

"Now, isn't that so?

"But What of 1920?

"Dollars are powerless without intelligent action. We have the money, the brains, the energy and the civic pride. Therefore, there is nothing to do but get busy. Your cash is worth nothing in the community if not working. Your citizenship is of small importance is you live for self and self alone. You will never get anywhere if you wait for the other fellow to make the break. You can boost if you haven't a dollar, and if you are a real sensible booster, you are a greater asset to the community than the miser with his idle millions. If you have grown rich in DeWitt, you owe the town that made you rich a debt. Pay up or move out. There are others waiting to take your place that WILL willingly pay for what they get. You cannot consider yourself a component part of the community if you have spent a lifetime gathering shekels for yourself and putting none back to help your town grow in a manner commensurate with your personal prosperity.

"Turn over a new leaf, everybody, this New Year's Day; and

let's make 1920 the epoc[h] year in the life of dear old DeWitt, our home, our all."

Some January reinforcing stories as to the condition of DeWitt's streets and the lack of up-to-date municipal services from DEWITT ENTERPRISE.

NEW COTTON BELT CASHIER DOESN'T LIKE DEWITT

"P. Killgore of McNeil, Arkansas, has been appointed cashier in place of W. A. Fuller who has been changed from DeWitt to Pine Bluff with the Cotton Belt Railroad.

"Interviewing Mr. Killgore, he said he and his wife had arrived here on Friday night last, and his wife had already gone back. He has asked for a transfer.

"Their impressions of DeWitt were that they wanted to get away as soon as possible. McNeil hadn't everything that was up-to-date but did have electric lights, and could see where they were going..

"The muddy state of our streets--worse still the crossings--and where no sidewalks, is enough to scare anyone away who had been used to things very different which rightfully belong to citizens." (Issue of Thursday, 15 January 1920:10:3)

IN THE SOUP

"The streets of DeWitt were never in a more shameful condition.

"It is said by old residents here that this last few days have produced a state of muddiness never seen before. In the streets adjacent to the depot and the rice mill the "soup" is really pretty.

"It would not be so bad for pedestrians if the crossings were such that people could get by.

"We know of property owners who were notified to put down concrete sidewalks last spring and who now have their homes surrounded by these modern blessings. But when they want to cross the street, they must dive into the soup and wade around in a depth of about ten to twice that many inches.

"Of course, we know that arrangements have been made to put down real macadam streets, but it seems to us that this fact should not prevent us from doing enough work on the present streets to make and keep them passable.

"The merchants should realize that it is much easier for a woman to reach down her mail order catalog and do her shopping by mail then to face the terrors of the mud and slush of our streets, and for this reason should urge that some temporary work be done to keep them in better condition.

"It is consolation, however, to know that a change will be noted next winter, and with nice clean streets and a new depot and electric lights, DeWitt will present a wide-awake appearance and we can hang out the slogan "Watch Us Grow". (Issue 22 Jan 1920:6:2)

DEWITT BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL DIRECTORY
January 1920 (Partial)

Arkmo Lumber Co., Carl Owens, Mgr.

Attorneys:

J. M. Brice

Botts & O'Daniel, Office over Home Bank

Carpenter & Bowers

Gibson & Burnett, Office in Rasco Bldg.

John W. Moncrief, Office in National bank Bldg.

Barnett Drug Co., P. H. Snaar, Mgr.

L. A. Black, Distributor for J. I. Case and Oakland Sensible
Six

Bob's Place, Fresh vegetables, fruits & The Best Candy

E. G. Bowers Auto Co., West Main

Tom Bowers Grocery

Verne Bowers, Jeweler, Main St., W of Square

J. L. Burd, Confectionery, W side of Square

Carnes Bros., Distributor for Arkansas county of Cletrac
Tank-Type Tractors

Cash Variety Store, F. L. McKissic, Mgr.

Champion Shoe Shop of DeWitt, N side of Square

City Meat Market, east side of Square

Commercial Hotel, Mrs. W. H. Dunn, Prop., N side Square

DEWITT ENTERPRISE, J. M. Henderson, Jr., Editor

DeWitt Hardware & Implement Co., W. F. Schallhorn, N side
of Square

DeWitt Machine Shop, B. F. Harshbarger

DeWitt Mercantile & Supply Co., "Everything from a Tooth
Pick to a Threshing Machine", L. A. Black,

DeWitt Pharmacy, B. Latimer & Dr. C. E. Park, S side of Square

DeWitt Rice Mill, Branch of Stuttgart Rice Mill Co.

H. B. Dudley Hardware, SW corner of Square

W. W. Earl, Horse Shoeing and Carriage Shop

The Farmers Exchange, W. B. Fulton, Mgr, E side of Square

First National Bank, L.A. Black, Pres., W side of Square

Gem Theater

Health Care Providers:

Dr. T. M. Hill, Dentist, Office over Post Office

Dr. C. A. Lumsden, Office N side of Square

Dr. C. W. Rasco

Dr. J. L. Sisson, Dentist, Office over Cash Variety Store

Dr. E. H. Winkler, Office over 1st National Bank

Dr. H. B. Winters, Office over DeWitt Pharmacy

Dr. C. T. Wood, Veterinarian

Martin's Grocery, W side of Square

McCown & Co., General Store
Moory's Cafe, W side of Square
R. L. Moncrief & Son, General Store

The NEW ERA, R. A. Barry, Editor & Business Mgr.
New York Store, Chas. Fleisig, Mgr., S side of Square
Overland Service Station, W. L. Smith, Mgr.

People's Meat Market, Jones Bros. (B.G. & W.D.), Succesors
to Crain

Mrs. J. W. Porter Lumber Co., C. P. Chaney, Mgr., W side town
W. C. Poynter, Loans, Abstracts, Fire Insurance, Notary
Rousseau Grocer Co., Suppliers also of Feed, Seed & Coal

J. S. Shackelford, General Store
F. J. Spratlin, "The Land Man"
Sparks Hotel

J. E. Stephens, Furniture, Furnishings, Pianos, Phonographs
Roland Stephens, Undertaker

W. C. Willis Tire & Battery Co.
Wilson & Co., Cafe, successor to H. Peterson

The foregoing is not purported to be a list of all the commercial enterprises and professionals in DeWitt seventy years ago. Sources used in its compilation were the December 1920 issues of the DEWITT ENTERPRISE and The NEW ERA and 1920 promotional brochure, ARKANSAS COUNTY IN PICTURES AND PROSE, Describing Its Resources, Enterprises, Opportunities and the Men Behind Them in the Heart of Arkansas' World-Famous Rice Belt", publisher not found although 48 pages and cover seem intact; date "Anno Domini 1920"; price "35 Cents the Copy".

NOTES:

- (1) For additional information concerning DeWitt newspapers see D. Core, "History of DeWitt Newspapers" 31 GPHS BULLETIN (Apr 1988) at 7.
- (2) Report of the fire in the 5 June 1919 issue of DEWITT ENTERPRISE: "\$20,000 FIRE ATTACKS SQUARE, Fierce Blaze Licks Up Six Buildings ... Businesses left without homes were Shackelford's Grocery, Bill Miller's Pressing Parlor, Cullipher's Grocery, C. W. Fox & Co., Tires, Wilson Bros. electrical shop and Willis vulcanizing plant ... Owners of destroyed building were G. R. Holloway, Gordon Estate, A. B. Cullipher and Dr. C. A. Lumsden, who, as the owner of four, sustained the greatest loss.
- (3) Editor Henderson spoke out concerning the need for housing in DeWitt and the miserly tendencies of the affluent in ENTERPRISE issue of 27 November 1919:6:1, stating: "New Tent City Proves lack of Houses" ... "DeWitt has a million dollare bank account but no home for many of its citizens."

Dorothy Jones Core