History of the City of Conway

The Founding of Conway

A. P. Robinson, who came to Conway shortly after the Civil War ended, founded the City of Conway. Robinson was the chief engineer for the Little Rock-Fort Smith Railroad (now the Union-Pacific). Part of his compensation was the deed to a tract of land, one square mile, located near the old settlement of Cadron. When the railroad came through, Robinson deeded a small tract of his land back to the railroad for a depot site. He lay out a town site around the depot and named it Conway Station, in honor of a famous Arkansas family. Conway Station contained two small stores, two saloons, a depot, some temporary housing and a post office.

Conway was designated the county seat of Faulkner County in 1873, the same year that the county was created by the legislature. In October 1875, Conway was incorporated and, at that time, had a population of approximately 200. When originally incorporated in 1875, Conway was just one square mile surrounding Conway Station on the Little Rock and Fort Smith Branch of the Cairo and Fulton Railroad. By 1959, Conway encompassed 6.9 square miles. During the next 30 years, Conway grew rapidly annexing a total of 15.4 square miles. During the 1990’s, it grew even faster, adding 12.2 square miles. Conway now encompasses approximately 40 square miles. Almost all area annexed has been through petition by the property owners.

For many years, Conway flourished as a trade center for a large rural agricultural area. Hendrix College was established in Conway in 1890. Three years later, in 1893,
Central College for Girls was established, and Conway was on its way to becoming an educational center. The University of Central Arkansas was founded in Conway in 1907 as the Arkansas Normal School. Conway’s economy was firmly established upon agriculture and the educational institutions until World War II.

**The historical local economy**

After World War II, diversification of the city’s economy was started by a number of Conway businessmen, and several small industries were attracted to Conway. Subsequently, additional state institutions are located in Conway, including the headquarters for the Office of Emergency Services, the Human Development Center, and the Arkansas Educational Television Network. Conway has a sizable industrial and technological base. Industries located in Conway include Kimberly Clark, Amtran, Virco, Baldwin Piano, Carrier, and many more. Computer database giant Acxiom calls Conway its global headquarters.

The Conway Chamber of Commerce has made many significant contributions to Conway and Faulkner County. It began in 1891 as the Conway Board of Trade and eventually became the Conway Chamber of Commerce in 1927. Between 1891 and 1927, the organization underwent several reorganizations and name changes, but it always worked for the betterment of the county.

Two of the projects that most affected the county were the Lake Conway Project and the Conway Development Corporation. The latter created the Conway Industrial Park. Lake Conway was dedicated in 1951, and is covers about 6,700 acres. The
development of the lake in the state boosted growth in and near Conway and Mayflower because people wanted to live near the lake. Lake Conway is the largest Game and Fish Commission lake and is a popular fishing area. The Chamber has also been instrumental in attracting to Conway and Faulkner County the State Civil Defense Headquarters, the Arkansas Children's Colony (Human Development Center), and the Arkansas Educational Television Network (AETN).

Another major point in the economic history of Conway is the creation of the West Central Arkansas Planning and Development District (WCAPDD) that was organized for the purpose of improving and enhancing the social and economic well-being and opportunities for the people residing within its boundaries. WCAPDD is a multi-county, non-profit planning and development organization established to promote economic development; to assist local governments and private organizations in obtaining federal and state grants and loans; to prepare comprehensive regional plans for economic development and improve government services; to enlist private support for these activities; and to coordinate private and public programs in a multi-county district.

The concept of regional planning and cooperation in Arkansas began in the 1950's as the first organized efforts were made to attract industry to the many communities throughout the State. WCAPDD was established as one of eight economic development districts that encompass all of Arkansas' seventy-five counties.

Actual formation and implementation of these districts were made possible when Congress passed the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965. This Act defined the requirements under which regional planning districts were to be formed. The
Act was designed to enable and assist economically depressed areas to establish stable and diversified local economies through the creation of long-term employment opportunities. The act provides for assistance to the communities in the district by furnishing grant funds for regionally coordinated planning and development efforts. These funds provided by the Economic Development Administration (EDA) are the primary source of strategic planning assistance to the principally rural areas of the district.