

## Tulahassee was once a bustling community

By Liz McMahan

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TULLAHASSEE — This small Wagoner County community used to bustle with activity. In the mid-1930s, the population was 250.

Today, it's very quiet.

Standing in front of city hall, there's no traffic most of the time. The only sound that can be heard is the clank of a chain against a gate across and down the street. There are two churches here and one business. Bates Barbecue is open only on Friday and Saturday nights. The entire business is surrounded by a chain link fence.

Tulahassee was established as one of about 27 all-black towns in Oklahoma. It took its name from the nearby Tulahassee Mission, which was opened in 1850.

The town got its first post office in 1899. Tulahassee still has its own zip code — 74466 — but there's no real post

office. Instead, mail is delivered to a cluster of mail boxes that stand in front of the town hall. There's a big blue box for outgoing mail. There's no place to buy a stamp or mail a package without going into Porter, five miles down Oklahoma 51B.

Eddie Vann, 67, was reared near here. Her great-great-grandmother donated the land for Pleasant Grove Baptist Church 158 years ago. It's still open and is just down the county road from Tullahassee.

Vann left here when she was 17 and fulfilled a lifelong dream of retiring here 11 years ago.

The Tullahassee she grew up with is quite different than the town today, Vann said.

“(Then) there were houses all up and down and in the back areas. There were a lot of people,” she said. “It was a bustling little community.”

Up where Bates Barbecue is now stood the cotton gin. And just east of that was the railroad depot, she remembers. On the north side of the tracks was Dr. Minn's medical office. He also had a small store and upstairs he used to run the town's movie theater.

Across the street to the west is the only remaining vestige of those days, the shell of the A.J. Mason Building. It is on the National Register of Historic Places but where the merchandise display windows used to be there are pink-painted concrete blocks. The building's roof collapsed years ago, and weeds now stand where merchandise once was.

The town's census was at its lowest — 90 — in 1990, the same year the town's Carter G. Woodson School was closed, and its students started attending Porter Consolidated Schools.

The U.S. Census in 2000 showed Tullahassee with 106 residents — 16 of them over age 65. The 2005 population estimate was 110 residents.

Mayor Benice Howell doesn't think there are that many people in town today. She estimates today's population at only 70 or 80 and says most of them are elderly.

There are young people in town, but most of them are only here because they are being raised by grandparents, said Robert Bates, owner of Bates Barbecue and a former town mayor.

Bates said he is seeing new residences pop up around Tullahassee, but not in the town itself.

A lot of the property in town has been abandoned.

“Most of these towns where Grandma and Grandpa died, nobody every thought about getting the property changed over to them,” Bates said.

He believes Tullahassee would flourish if property were available for sale.

All the new homes in town are mobile homes or double-wide mobile homes that have replaced houses that have fallen in, Bates said.

Projections from the U.S. Census Bureau don't project a lot of growth for Tullahassee for the next 25 years. Those projections show that by 2030, the town still will only have about 150 residents.

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