

Cooke County History

# A Tragic Week

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*The Weekly News*

On May 10, 1907, the *Wise County Messenger* reported on a frightening incident experienced by mourners during a funeral procession for Dr. John C. Riley of Hemming, Texas. It was the culmination of the most tragic week in the history of that community.

Early settlers looked for a plentiful water source, rich soil and plenty of timber when staking a claim in a new territory.

One family would arrive, and then two and before long enough families inhabited an area that they

would officially establish a town.

In the late 1880s that happened in Cooke County in a place about 16 miles south of Gainesville. The newly created town received formal recognition and its new name of Hemming in 1890 when Gainesville banker C.C. Hemming donated land for a school there.

Four years later a store and cotton gin were built. Cotton proved a viable and profitable crop for the community.

A post office opened in the store with W.J. Pipkin as postmaster. Even though it closed in 1905, rural free delivery still came from Pilot Point.

In 1900, "B.R. Newton opened a general store and 5 years later Emberson & Alexander opened another one."

At its height right after the turn-of-the-century, "two general stores, a school, cotton gin, blacksmith shop, and three churches graced the town of Hemming. The population had risen to 125."

The town "acted as the region's cotton processing center and during the peak years of the cotton boom after 1900 the Hemming cotton gin handled 1000 to 1500 bales annually."

Often when a community had developed to that point, it generally stabilized, possibly fluctuating a little in the population and the number of open businesses or something would happen that made it either grow or start to decline.

In the early 1900s Hemming was one of those up-and-coming communities but a natural disaster was

about to change all of that.

On Saturday, April 27, 1907 a tornado, often referred to as the "Hemming Cyclone," hit the community. "Seven people were killed, others injured, and all but one of the town's buildings was destroyed. The only house left standing belonged to John Alexander and was on a hill about 500 yards from the center of town."

Those killed were Dr. John C. Riley, 59; William Alexander, 16; Grover Beavers, 14; Leona Nell Wells, 10; Pettis and Painter Wilkins, 8 and 4; and Oma Boydston, 6. Dr. Riley left behind a young wife in her mid-30s and eight children. Grover Beavers also came from a large family, his parents caring for nine sons and a daughter besides Grover.

G.M. Boydston recalled

"my parents telling of our being moved into our new house just a short time before the cyclone." His father told his mother "we really put the nails in this building. I think it will be here a long time unless a fire or a tornado destroys it." The house was lifted up in the air by the storm and G.M.'s sister was killed.

Dr. Riley died a few days after the storm. The Rev. A.J. Harris, who performed the funeral service, later reported about what happened. As Riley's burial was taking place as recounted to the *Wise County Messenger* on May 10, 1907, several ominous clouds appeared. Those in attendance had lost relatives and friends and seen structures destroyed as a result of the tornado. They grew fright-

ened at the possibility that another one might hit.

Some of those attending "scampered down to the bottom of the creek which promised shelter and safety. Others got down to their knees to pray. Women became hysterical." The story related that "the man who was driving the hearse made off as hard as he could go in the direction of the school house. It was a lively ride but it did not break up the procession for others followed the lead and there was a wild run for safety. This condition lasted for several minutes and then the cloud passed, the danger was averted, and the funeral procession resumed its interrupted course to the graveyard."

Though several of the structures in the town were rebuilt, by the early 1920s

Hemming was in decline. The "cotton gin closed in 1922. Seven years later the school was consolidated with the Mount Olive, Oak Hill, Bloomfield and Welling schools to form the Union Grove school district. The Hemming school was dismantled and the materials were used to build the new school."

By 1936, Hemming consisted of a church and a few scattered dwellings. In 1947 "the population had dropped to 10 and by the late 1980s it no longer appeared on county highway maps."

The "Hemming Cyclone" and the school consolidation were difficult events for the town of Hemming to overcome.




by Keith G. King

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For more information, call 940.665.6397.

The Lindsay Independent School District will hold pre-kindergarten and kindergarten registration from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Feb. 26 in the elementary school office at 500 Sixth St. in Lindsay.

Currently, Lindsay ISD does not have a pre-K program. Eligibility requirements are re-evaluated each school year.