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ARP, TEXAS

by Fred R. Stewart

Some cities and towns are named in honor of prominent local families, historical events and geographical locations, but for Arp it was a case of mistaken identity in the early 1900s.

According to historical booklets, the city was named in honor of Georgia newspaperman William "Bill" Arp, aka Charles Henry Smith, a young lawyer and one of the best known humorists and satirists in Georgia.

In the early 1900s, a man reportedly visited the community enroute across the state. He supposedly said he liked the climate, people and everything about the community. The people were also impressed with him and to show their pride in knowing this man renamed their community in his honor when a post office was established. The man's name was Bill Arp.

In an article in *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine*, October 18, 1970, Joseph H. Baird wrote of "Bill Arp's Humor in the Bleak South." The article told of the real Bill Arp and how the pen name was assumed by Smith. In 1861, Smith wrote a letter to President Abraham Lincoln expressing his sentiments toward Lincoln's issuance of a proclamation that the militia of the seceding states disperse and disband.

In the South, this was taken both with anger and amusement. The proclamation came after Confederate batteries fired on Ft. Sumter and most of the Southern states had withdrawn from the Union.

The proclamation was accepted with mixed emotions by many of Smith's friends. Some taking it lightly, others with anger. A tenant farmer and ferry boat operator who heard the reading of Smith's letter asked if he was going to print it and what name he was going to sign to it.

Smith said he had not thought about a signature. The farmer replied, "Well squire, I wish you would put mine, for them's my sentiments." The article was signed with the farmer-ferry boat operator's name which marked the beginning of the pen name Bill Arp which Smith used and made famous through the last quarter of the 19th century.

Smith continued to write about the Civil War, and for a quarter-century his weekly articles were printed in the *The Atlanta Constitution* under the name of Bill Arp.

Smith kept the Bill Arp pen name until his death in 1903 at the age of 77. As for the real Bill Arp, Smith often wondered what had happened to the tough, wiry ferry boat operator. Smith heard several times Arp had visited Texas but was never in direct communication with him. As for Smith, he never visited Texas.

Before becoming Arp, the community was known as Jarvis Switch, Strawberry Switch, and Strawberry, in recognition of the area's most productive crop.

In 1905, the Arp School District was incorporated, composed of some 6,581 acres of land covering some 10.28 square miles and owned by a total of 23 individuals. When the city was finally incorporated as Arp in 1931, the territory contained less than two square miles within the proposed city limits with a population of less than 650.

Soon after the city's incorporation, Guy Lewis brought his oil drilling ideas to the area and drilled the first oil well in that area in 1930-31. The success of his well brought about one of the largest booms in the area. Before the oil strike, Arp produced strawberries and tomatoes and some roses, but the oil production was rapidly climbing and so was the population as it became the place to be in East Texas.

With the oil strike came a surge of population, business and overall growth, taking the sleepy little community by surprise and whipping the area into a large scale culture shock.

At one time during the boom, Arp had three hotels, four large oil refineries, a lumber yard, several oil supply companies and the famous Arp Roses Inc., nursery.

The businesses contributed to the town's growth with sizable payrolls as the population was growing by leaps and bounds with people flocking to East Texas and bringing with them additional business opportunities.

Arp was the place to be during the 1930s as it was more or less the perfect commuter's home with oilmen working in the fields near Turnertown, New London and Kilgore. Arp offered the suburban-type living but was blossoming into one of the more wealthy cities in the East Texas region.

But the new found fortune soon faded as the oil fields dropped production and oil companies moved elsewhere. The refineries followed the oil strikes and with the work went the people. As the population, which had reached more than 4,000, began to dwindle, so did the businesses and all the success and fortune that had come with the sudden boom.

On April 6, 1933, the state Railroad Commission ordered oil production stopped in East Texas fields (some 10,000 wells) in order to determine the potential production and equalize the pressure among the wells for a period of five days. With this halt, more people and businesses began to leave Arp.

According to present "old timers," people started leaving the city and the surrounding area and by 1945 the area was dying as businesses closed down, the oil production diminished, and drillers started moving on as did the oil refineries. Arp was dying slowly and steadily.

By 1950, the Premier Oil Refinery was the last to close and leave the area, taking more residents and more businesses. All the time the city was losing the wealth, population, and industry, city leaders were trying desperately to discover a means of keeping the population up and increasing the business power again.

In 1958, the city population was 550 and vacant buildings became a common sight in the city with less than a third of its peak population. Arp faced the possibility of becoming a ghost town.

H.D. Mitchell, former chamber of commerce head, and other chamber members approached General Electric (before the plant's move to Tyler) about locating in Arp. This invitation from Arp was turned down since GE had already gained ownership of the present land site.

After this effort to re-build Arp failed, the Chamber of Commerce decided to purchase acreage, subdivide it and offer the lots for sale at \$1 each, provided the buyer agreed to build a home of not less than \$5,000 value within a reasonable length of time. The campaign caught on and suddenly the population climbed again. This campaign gained national recognition in newspapers from coast to coast, national television news and visits by major networks.

As a continued effort to re-build business and population, the Arp Chamber sent a letter to the New York Stock Exchange, after learning of the Exchange's

proposed move to a new location.

Arp offered the Exchange 18 acres of land located on the main line of the I.G.&N. Railroad and adjacent to Highway 135. It was also promised an additional 100 acres which would be offered for home sites of Exchange employees. The \$1 per lot sale and the Stock Exchange invitation together made headlines from Alaska to Texas and attracted a visit by CBS News, but the Stock Exchange turned the offer down.

The home site campaign attracted some 65 families and soon the population was slowly on the upswing again. In 1959, Arp Trades Day was born and the weekend event soon became a landmark for the city. According to some persons, the Trades Day was originated in Troup but was run out of town by irate citizens who objected to dog traders leaving low value animals in the town.

In the past 15 years, Arp had a population of just over 1,000 but again people left, either to find better work or move to a larger area where more opportunities were available.

The 1976, population was 816 with few or no new businesses emerging in the city, no overwhelming resident growth and few people leaving. Perhaps city fathers remember tales of the 1930s boom and feel their city is fine the way it is. At the 1974, Chamber of Commerce banquet, the chamber president remarked he did not think Arp wanted any big business or large numbers of new residents moving to their city.

The thinking of Arp has changed in the 1970s. Perhaps the city fathers feel it is better to be what they are and not reach for vast glory or boom. Nevertheless, Arp still exists, nothing like it could have been with oil and nothing like it might have been without the efforts of city fathers in the 1950s.