

St. George from 1914-1920

by Doug Alder and Paul Crosby

Here is what we can think of about the period 1914-1920. St. George was a pretty small place. It was 2215 in 1920, so it was smaller than that in 1914. U.S. Highway came through the county in 1930. Until then there were hardly any hard-surfaced roads. There were no traffic semaphores. In 1917 about 100 men left for World War I.

The Arrowhead Trail came through St. George from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City. This was an attempt by automobile manufacturers to enlist communities in building roads. They were competing with AAA, which was trying to do the same between Chicago and San Francisco. The leaders of Los Angeles did not want to allow San Francisco to get a monopoly on auto travel. One must remember that there were very few autos in those days. They were considered a toy for the rich.

But the problem was that there were so few roads on which to drive them. The auto investors hired racetrack drivers to take cars on trails and go to towns and give people free rides and get them committed to build roads and especially to lobby states to build roads. They franchised hotels. One such hotel was built here, the Arrowhead Hotel right in the center of town.

In 1909 a major event occurred but people here didn't quite see where it was leading. The federal government created the Mukuntuweap National Monument, east of the town about 45 miles. This was largely the result of outside lobbyists, Stephen Mather and Horace Albright who were trying to create a national park system. Two of John Wesley Powell's associates in the explorations of the Grand Canyon had explored the region and took pictures. The monument was later expanded and became Zion National Park in 1919.

This drew attention to Washington County but there were no hard-surfaced roads. In 1930 a tunnel was constructed allowing bus and auto traffic from Cedar City to Bryce National Park then through the mountains to Zion National Park and then over the mountains to Grand Canyon National Park. Many people still remember the Union Pacific busses that took people to their franchise hotels in the parks.

This development got people traveling to St. George and they discovered the fantastic scenery. Nonetheless the period of 1914 to 1920 was largely one of a self-sustaining agricultural community. Water was really scarce but nothing would grow without irrigation so farms were very small, five to ten acres. Many farmers turned to cattle raising to supplement their income. They formed cooperative herds with their neighbors and grazed their animals on the vast public lands. Webb Hill was likely one such spot.

Alfalfa was the main crop on the farms to feed the animals before they sold them for slaughter. People raised most of their food in gardens adjacent to their homes

in town. Most folks had one-acre lots in town and people were urged to live in town, not on the farms. This was to foster community living, much like New England. As a result St. George had an active Opera House, a fine community school--the Woodward, an impressive church--the St. George Tabernacle, bands, dances, even a Carnegie Library. The town square was the location of the Tabernacle, the Woodward School, the library (built in 1916) and the pride of the community, Dixie College. It began in 1911 as the St. George Stake Academy, sponsored by the LDS (Mormon) Church. The name was changed to Dixie College and in 1917 it began offering teacher training. It remained on that site until 1963 when it moved to the present, much larger, campus. It was under church sponsorship until 1933. For two years the community supported it until the state took its financing over in 1935.

The community was pretty isolated. The railroad never came to the county and the national highway did not come until 1930. Nonetheless St. George was the location of the St. George LDS Temple. This major architectural/spiritual achievement was completed in 1877 and continues to be a magnet today.

People from considerable distances in Nevada and Arizona and southern Utah traveled by buggy for several days to reach the temple where marriages and other sacred ordinances were performed. That made the town a regional capital, which it still is because of the temple. Nonetheless the population was small because of the very limited opportunity for making a living. The extreme heat in the summer (reaching 115 degrees Fahrenheit) made living here difficult.

There were no golf courses or retirement options until the 1960s. It is ironic that today St. George is consistently listed as among the most desirable places to live and to retire. It is growing rapidly. There are over 50,000 people in the city with the same number in the rest of the county. It has become a luxury community--a strong contrast to the period of 1914-1920.

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