



Early in its career, Wichita's Cow Town adopted Hollywood's image of the West, evident in this "shoot-out" staged in Cow Town in the 1960s.



COWBOY BOOSTERISM

Old Cowtown Museum and the Image of Wichita, Kansas

by Jay Price

In late 2000 Wichita's Twenty-first Century Tourism Council commissioned a report from an Atlanta-based consultant to determine the viability of tourism for the city. The final report suggested that with its array of museums, Wichita had enough cultural facilities to attract visitors—if only the city could promote them better.¹ In the months that followed, Wichitans began to debate how the city should market itself.

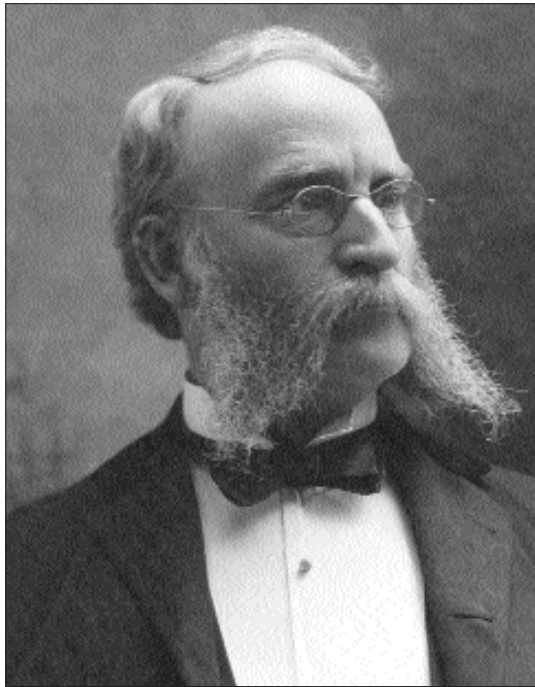
The problem was that there was no one image the community agreed upon. A June 24, 2001, article in the *Wichita Eagle* summarized the quandary with the headline: "Cow town vs. Air Capital." The article suggested that there were two main images Wichita could promote. The first was what the article called "a new and improved Wichita of high-tech jets and the \$60 million Exploration Place science center." The other perspective felt that "country is cool and Wichita should ride the Chisholm Trail to tourism success." This second image has been problematic for Wichita since the 1870s and 1880s.²

A search on the Internet for "cowtown" will bring up sites primarily from Fort Worth, Texas, with Calgary, Alberta, a distant second. Fort Worth is proud of being a

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1. "Report: Wichita can lure tourists," *Wichita Eagle*, August 30, 2000; "Who loves ya, Wichita? Not Wichitans," *ibid.*, September 3, 2000; "Consultant says Wichita's vibrant, end of discussion," *ibid.*, September 3, 2000. Quotation in "City dreams big for tourism," *ibid.*, August 31, 2000.

2. "Cow town vs. Air Capital," *ibid.*, June 24, 2001. Space in this article precludes the equally interesting discussion of how much Wichita has really embraced the "Air Capital" image, especially for a community with a small, languishing air museum and equally limited air service.



Wichita Eagle editor Marshall Murdock celebrated the passing of Wichita's cowtown days and welcomed its progress as a city of commerce and culture.

cowtown and reinforces that image with institutions such as the Cattle Raisers Museum, the Stockyards Museum, and the restored mansions of cattle barons. The name "cowtown" is connected with everything from local businesses to religious organizations. The city even has an institution called the "Big Balls of Cowtown" that collects and preserves early western swing music. By claiming to be a cowtown, a community is trying to show that it retains that spirit of the cattle drives, the energy of those early boom towns, and the dash of the cowboy life. It reinforces that image through "western" symbols in its advertising, having museums about cowboys and the cattle trade, and holding festivals such as country music gatherings and rodeos.

Wichita, Kansas, by contrast, has never been completely comfortable with its cattle town image. Over the years the city has experimented with a variety of images, including being "Southwestern" and later the "Air Capital." It was not until the 1950s that public sentiment for perhaps reclaiming that exciting part of the community's history resulted in the creation of Old Cowtown Museum. The museum reflects a larger debate about the city's character:

is Wichita more western, part of the American heartland, or a modern technology and business-driven city almost totally disconnected from the region around it? In this matter, Old Cowtown is more than a museum. It is a symbol of a city still coming to terms with its identity.

In 1872 a railway line connecting Wichita to the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad allowed the town to tap into the stream of cattle that had once bypassed the small trading post settlement on its way to Abilene. Stockyards, depots, and hotels appeared. Saloons, gambling establishments, and brothels catered to the transient Texans who drove the cattle, especially on the west side of the Arkansas River, in Delano. Wichita's local leaders, with a few exceptions, tended not to be directly invested in the cattle trade itself. For example, William "Dutch Bill" Greiffenstein built hotels and made his money in part from the need for lodging. Others were involved in banking, providing the credit needed to finance cattle sales. With this money, the community abandoned the log houses they lived in two years earlier and constructed impressive buildings in the Second Empire style, Stick style, or other fashionable Victorian looks. Even at the height of the cattle boom, however, the town had a varied economy, with agriculture being the mainstay of the region. It was perhaps symbolic that in 1874, in the middle of the cattle era, Mennonite farmers from Europe brought Turkey Red wheat to central Kansas.³

Although the cattle trade gave Wichita an essential boost that helped it overcome its nearby rival communities, the rowdy, lawless, and rootless Texas cowboys seemed at odds with the image the town leaders wanted to show (shaping an ambivalence toward Texas that remains to this day). Marshall Murdock's *Wichita Eagle* openly celebrated the passing of the cowboy as an embarrassing, if colorful, part of the city. One article noted:

at that time [1873] the streets were thronged with Texas cow boys, with huge spurs on their heels, and howitzers strapped upon their backs. Every other door opened into a saloon. . . . The town was head-

3. H. Craig Miner, *Wichita: The Early Years, 1865–1880* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982); Robert R. Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns* (1968; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Everett Dick, "The Long Drive," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1926–1928 17 (1928): 27–97; Harry Sinclair Drago, *Wild, Woolly and Wicked: The History of the Kansas Cow Towns and the Texas Cattle Trade* (New York: C. N. Potter, 1960); Jimmy M. Skaggs, *The Cattle-Trailing Industry: Between Supply and Demand, 1866–1890* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973).

Over the years many Wichita residents have supported Murdock's vision of the city and have promoted Wichita's business and industry image, evident in these 1940–1950 brochures issued by the Wichita Chamber of Commerce.

quarters for harlots for two hundred miles around. Fighting, shooting, and even killing were not infrequent. . . . Gamblers were more numerous than respectable men. Those were the days of the cattle trade in its glory. Then the name of Wichita was synonymous with crime. The cattle trade, comparatively speaking, has gone but in its stead has come the grain trade, and a hundred folk more beneficial and conducive to the permanent growth and prosperity of Wichita.⁴

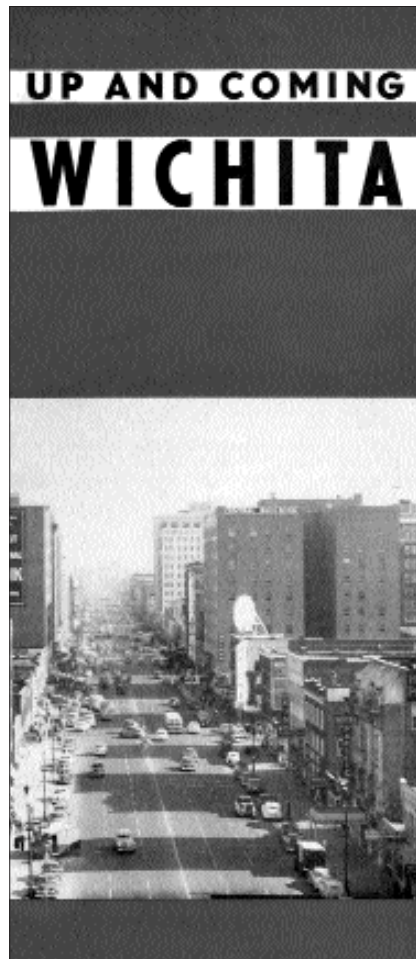
The article went on to conclude that Wichita was now the heart of “The Happy Valley” where agriculture flourished. Thus, when the cattle era shifted with the quarantine line west to Dodge City in 1876, there was little remorse in Wichita, now ready to capitalize on other ventures such as agriculture, commerce, and real estate.⁵

In communities around the nation, the first interest in the past often has come from the local elites, for whom “history” meant the great deeds of their ancestors and the people their ancestors knew. They created community memories based on carefully selected collections of persons and events. Furthermore, the present identity of the community shaped whose story was told and whose was not. Communities that wanted to connect their images to the patriotism of the Revolutionary War, such as Williamsburg, Virginia, emphasized the lives of the founding fathers. Monterey, California, preserved the homes of the early Anglo traders who shaped the community from the 1820s through 1840s. After the Civil War, Charleston,

South Carolina, reveled in the mansions of its antebellum planters. Santa Fe, New Mexico, saw itself by the 1920s as a tricultural center with a strong emphasis on the blending of Hispanic and Native American cultures.⁶

In Wichita civic identity, and by extension the community's sense of its heritage, centered on business, where anyone with luck, brains, and drive could invest in the opportunities around them and become rich. It was not surprising, then, that the community traditionally traced its origins to a pantheon of colorful entrepreneurs including Jesse Chisholm, Darius Munger, William Greiffenstein,

6. See, for example, Martha Norkunas, *The Politics of Public Memory: Tourism, History, and Ethnicity in Monterey, California* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South, Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860–1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Chris Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997); Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past: Essays On History and the Public* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).



4. *Wichita Eagle*, December 2, 1875.

5. Craig Miner, *Wichita: The Magic City* (Wichita: Wichita–Sedgwick County Historical Museum Association, 1988), 9–44; C. Robert Haywood, *Victorian West: Class and Culture in Kansas Cattle Towns* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991); Richard M. Long, *Wichita Century* (Wichita: Wichita Historical Museum Association, 1969).

James R. Mead, Dr. A. H. Fabrique, William Woodman, and Marshall Murdock (in more recent years, the city's aviation connection has added several twentieth-century names to the pantheon such as Clyde Cessna, Walter Beech, and E. M. Laird).

Wichita started shaping its heritage from the beginning. In 1877 city founder Darius Munger and his colleagues established a meeting of "old settlers." At the meeting, founding members of the community gathered to reminisce about the "good old days"—for most, a period of only five to ten years earlier. It became an annual event, held every February 22, with speeches and events reflecting on how far the community had come.⁷

By the twentieth century local history tended to come from the handful of aging founders who survived or from the next generation who were children in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s. J. R. Mead's daughter, Ignace Mead Jones, was active in collecting items on local history, especially on her father. Rea Woodman, the daughter of William Woodman, wrote a series of recollections of her growing up in the new Wichita. Filtered through the eyes of someone who was a young child during these years, the recollections were warm and fond. She, too, felt the "lawless" reputation of Wichita was undeserved, commenting that

though the saloons outnumbered the stores three to four to one . . . Wichita stoutly maintained her lines of moral cleavage. Plainsmen, prospectors, and cowboys . . . composed the transient population; behind their bravado of gun and spur the substantial citizens of the town carried on, always on the job.⁸

In fact, Woodman noted that 1872 was significant not because of the cattle trade but because it was the year that the local grange was organized and when Marshall Murdock came to town.⁹

Boosters and civic promoters also had a strong role in shaping the community's sense of its past. O. H. Bentley's 1910 *History of Wichita and Sedgwick County, Kansas*, was a forthright booster publication designed to show how far the community had progressed. With a focus mainly on how the various businesses and institutions had developed, the book's recounting of the cattle days was brief, and its discussion of lawlessness was couched more as

"whimsical and eccentric" than actually violent. One chapter admitted that "too often the ring of the revolver . . . carried death with it," but the overall impression was of the place being lively, an energy that naturally translated to the business spirit of the 1900s. The heritage rested with business, not cowboys.

Another example of early history writing came from the Eunice Sterling Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), which published the book *Illustrated History of Early Wichita* in 1914. In the book's initial section summarizing local "history" (really more of a random collection of facts and events), the cattle years received only two lines: "History says it was in June 1871 that Abilene and Wichita became rivals for the Texas cattle trade. In 1874 Wichita shipped, according to the data, somewhere near seventy thousand head of cattle." Most of the book contained photographs of streetscapes, schools, businesses, clubs, and churches. One photograph showed the oldest surviving frame church as a rooming house while another featured the ruined remains of William "Buffalo Bill" Mathewson's cabin, the caption noting that an Englishman had taken some of the timbers to turn into souvenir bowls, canes, and boxes to sell back in Britain. One chapter, however, covered "a sketch of the seamy side of early Wichita," recounting a time when the city marshal shot someone at night. Rather than a wild shoot-out, the event apparently resulted in the marshal's mother and sister being dismayed that their relative had killed a man and the marshal surrendering himself to an officer of the peace (who called the homicide justifiable). This chapter also contained a list of early lawmen in Wichita, including Wyatt Earp, who was described as simply "a police officer, of later day fame as referee in Pacific coast prize fights." Overall, the focus was on pioneer settlers who carried on civilization as best they could in dugouts and log cabins.¹⁰

By the 1910s interest in preserving the artifacts of Wichita's history also emerged. A group of local residents created a display in 1919 for what became the Sedgwick County Pioneers Society to preserve the memories of the first founders and residents of the community. The group began to collect artifacts and memorabilia of the city's past, initially displaying them in part of the county courthouse. Meanwhile, a few historic structures still remained. Woodman's account suggested that Munger's barn had been

7. "Old Settler's Meeting, *Wichita Beacon*, October 3, 1877; "The Pioneer," *ibid.*, February 26, 1879.

8. Rea Woodman, *Wichitana 1877-1897* (N.p.: n.p., 1948), 27

9. See, for example, Ignace Mead Jones Collection of James R. Mead Papers, Special Collections, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kans.

10. Eunice Sterling Chapter, *Illustrated History of Early Wichita, Incidents of Pioneer Days* (Wichita: Daughters of the American Revolution, 1914). Quotations in the sections "Early Wichita" and "A Sketch of the Seamy Side of Early Wichita."

placed in a local park as a memorial in the 1910s, but by the 1930s it was gone.

By the 1930s and 1940s other prominent Wichitans, including *Wichita Eagle* editor Victor Murdock (son of Marshall) began to explore the city's early history. In 1935 the Wichita Women's Business and Professional Women's Club joined forces with the Commonwealth Club to work toward creating a city museum. Local businessman Ralph Cauthorn furthered the process by bringing together these and other civic leaders at a 1937 meeting to create what many felt was a long overdue historical museum. In 1938 museum supporters met at the Allis Hotel to form an organized movement with memberships open to all "who love the great Southwest, its history and its proud traditions." Not long afterward, the members of the Pioneers Society gave their collection to this new organization, the Wichita Public Museum Association—later known simply as the Wichita Historical Museum. These supporters persuaded the city commission to provide a display room in the Forum auditorium for an exhibit. The museum opened in June 1939, with Governor Payne Ratner dedicating the exhibit. This organization was the start of what is now the Wichita–Sedgwick County Historical Museum.

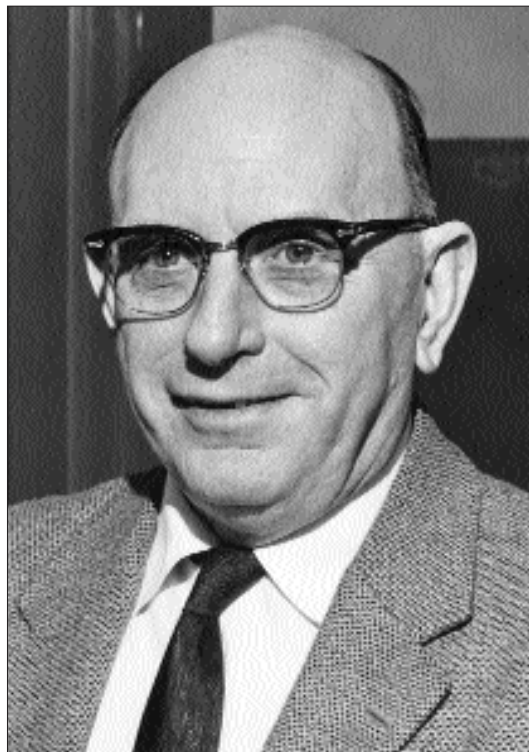
According to the Wichita Public Museum Association, however, this would be only the start. The association proposed that Wichita have an outdoor museum:

We should have an early day county court house from some western county represented here, Indian houses, sod houses, [an] early day country school, church, J. R. Mead's Indian trading post, the first Butler County Oil Derrick, and other structures and objects of historical significance.

A 1941 brochure further suggested that Wichita should be the site of an Indian museum covering all native peoples of the Americas, from Eskimos to Patagonians.¹¹

Yet this was the minority view. Wichita had established itself solidly as a city of business, technology, and commerce. "Wichita is dynamic—going places—doing things," a 1941 edition of *Wichita Magazine* noted. Wichita

11. *Wichita Public Museum Association*, brochure (Wichita: n.d.); R. M. Cauthorn, "Paper Read . . . [on the] Opening of the Museum in the Forum," June 6, 1939, Wichita–Sedgwick County Historical Museum, Wichita; *Handbook of the Wichita Public Museum Association, a Museum of Science and History* (Wichita: n.p., 1939); *Museum News* 1 (April 26, 1939). Quotations in *Wichita Public Museum Association*, brochure (Wichita: 1941); *The Wichita Historical Museum*, brochure (Wichita: ca. 1964). "History—Wichita Historical Museum," August 20, 1968, Nona Clemons files, Wichita–Sedgwick County Historical Museum; "Museum to Close in 2 Weeks," *Wichita Eagle*, May 18, 1979.



Richard "Dick" Long, manager of the *Eagle's* morning edition, promoted the history of Wichita and the development of Cow Town.

pioneer W. G. Maxwell was not alone when he observed that "the real thing for everybody to do is not to think so much about the past but to think more of the future."¹² The message Maxwell gave was a common one in Wichita. The city's image had long been connected to various booster slogans, from Marshall Murdock's "Peerless Princess of the Plains," to "Watch Wichita Win" in 1910 to the "Air Capital," first adopted in the late 1920s. From the 1870s through the 1950s, Wichita saw itself, and actively promoted itself, as a southwestern city with connections to Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, and eastern New Mexico, following the line of the Santa Fe railroad. The ties were more commercial than cultural, however. Although a 1928 *Wichita Eagle* article quipped about "the new way of thinking of Wichita as belonging to the Southwest rather than the Middle West," a major attempt never was made to embrace the architectural or cultural trappings that came to define a place as "southwestern."¹³

12. Quotation in "Wichita's Past Interesting but Future is More So," *Wichita Eagle*, October 23, 1927.

13. "Something New in Home Building," *Wichita Beacon*, May 17, 1928; Glen H. Thomas, "Old West Lives on In Line and Figure," *Wichita Magazine* 6 (October 1929): 8, 26.



The oldest surviving building in Wichita, the Munger home, eventually was moved to Cow Town where it was restored to become part of the museum site.

In 1940 Wichita celebrated its seventieth birthday and its seventy-fifth in 1945, providing opportunities to explore local history. The eightieth anniversary of the founding of the Chisholm Trail, in 1949, resulted in a jubilee event with more discussions. Meanwhile, the *Wichita Eagle* began running short pieces on the city's early years. Victor Murdock ran a series of articles about the history of the city, talking about everything from personalities to prominent homes and stories of the cowtown era. Richard "Dick" Long, manager of the *Eagle's* morning edition, produced a similar set of illustrated pieces called the "Wichita Historical Panels." Both series discussed the plating of the town, the coming of the railroad, the wooing of the cattle trade, and the construction of such buildings as the town's first hotels, store, stockyards, church, and jail.

Just as the *Eagle* was running its vignettes, a few people in the community began to rediscover that a handful of Wichita's earliest structures, still surviving, were threatened. One was the log home of Darius Munger. It dated from 1869 and had the reputation of being the oldest surviving building in Wichita. Over the years the home had been added to and had been encased within the larger house of William Woodman. By the 1940s work on the Woodman home uncovered the original cabin in very good condition. The Eunice Sterling Chapter of the Daughters of

the American Revolution purchased the home in 1944. For more than five years the home sat in need of repair and restoration, a costly endeavor beyond the resources of the chapter. The best they could do was put a strong fence around the building.¹⁴

Another threatened structure was the city's first frame church, built by the Presbyterian community in 1870. One day in 1942 architect Harry Overend discovered that a dilapidated rooming house on North Main had started out as this church. At the *Eagle*, Dick Long approached Victor Murdock with running a story about the building. Murdock approached the building's owner about purchasing the old church. The owner flatly refused. It was a money-maker in Wichita's tight World War II rental market. In the years that followed, Murdock continued to try to acquire the structure. "The people of Wichita cannot let the first church fall apart," he once insisted.¹⁵ Just before Murdock died in 1945, he made Long promise to oversee the building's acquisition and restoration.

In 1950 a small fire convinced the fire department that the old rooming house was a fire hazard and should come down. The fire chief tipped off Dick Long, who scrambled back to town from a Texas vacation to find that the owner had already given the building to a salvage operator. It took some negotiations before Long convinced the operator to sell the building to him for four hundred dollars and include an adjacent structure, the former parsonage. Something had to be done to house and restore the buildings, which Long had dismantled and stored in a city lot. The initial hope was to have the city take on the restoration of the buildings, but city officials were concerned that such an endeavor would be construed as a misuse of funds. Thus, Long called together a group of interested citizens to find the money to purchase the buildings. By April they had formed a nonprofit corporation called Historic Wichita, Inc., to oversee the restoration and eventual operation of the church and parsonage. Among the founders were Robert Aitchison, a local artist and textbook publisher; Jesse Clyde Fisher, a Methodist minister; Tom Fuller, the owner of a uniform company and the grandson of one of

14. *Guide Book to Wichita Cowtown, 1869–1872* (Wichita: Historic Wichita Inc., ca. 1958).

15. Quotation in "First Church and Home were First of 46 United Seen in Cow Town Here," *Wichita Eagle*, morning edition, June 29, 1969.

Wichita's founders; Larry Roberts from a local mortgage company; former mayor Robert Israel; and Orville Bell, at the time a semi-retired businessman who had served three terms on the county commission.

Meanwhile, the DAR saw what it believed was an opportunity to have the Munger House restored. They approached Historic Wichita and offered to donate the structure along with three thousand dollars to help with its restoration. Soon afterward the local school board purchased Wichita's first city jail, at that time being used as a storehouse. The board "sold" the jail to Historic Wichita for one dollar. Thus, restoration could begin on a fourth building once a location was found. The organization approached the City of Wichita and offered to donate the buildings to the city as a park. The city refused.

Historic Wichita now had to find a place for its new acquisitions. The members met with Emory Cox of the city's parks department, who suggested they contact the Wichita Water Company, which had a twenty-three-acre parcel by the Arkansas River that was used only for emergency water wells next to Sim Park and the Art Museum. In 1952 Historic Wichita agreed to sublease the surface rights to all twenty-three acres from the city (at the time, Historic Wichita only needed one). The church and parsonage, the Munger House, and the jail were moved on site and reconstruction work began.

Restoration proved difficult. Much of the church's siding, for example, was worn and brittle, and restoration might have stopped had not Lola Fisher, widow of Jesse Fisher, underwritten a large part of the costs. Soon afterward, the organization constructed a caretaker's house to cut down on the vandalism that was plaguing the reconstruction efforts. The effort paid off. By late 1953 the first visitors could tour the restored buildings. A new museum was born.¹⁶

16. Richard Long, "Wichita Cowtown," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 26 (Spring 1960): 92–100. "Bylaws of Historic Wichita," April 28, 1950, Old Cowtown Museum, Wichita. Larry W. Roberts, "Cow Town, Wichita: An Original Historical Village," *Kanhistique* 1 (August 1975): 10; *ibid.* (September 1975): 10; *ibid.* (October 1975): 10; *Guide Book to Wichita Cowtown, 1869–1872*; "Cow Town Will be Opened To Public in September," *Wichita Eagle*, morning edition, May 28, 1953; "First City Jail Moved to Park," *ibid.*, May 29, 1952; "Cow-Town of 1872 Will Be Partially Completed August 1," *ibid.*, June 29, 1952; "25-acre Site in Sim Park Area Lease To House Wichita's Historic Buildings," *ibid.*, evening edition, October 2, 1951; "Historic Wichita Acquires House," *ibid.*, morning edition, October 6, 1951; "Ancient Frame Jail Bought for Historical Restoration," *ibid.*, August 14, 1951; "Dick Long Heads Historical Unit," *ibid.*, June 1, 1950; "Wichita Reconstructing 'Pioneer Village,'" *Topeka Daily Citizen*, July 26, 1953; "Cowtown Wichita Has Been a 17-Year Project," *ibid.*, October 25, 1959; "Cowtown Grows to 71 Structures," *Wichita Eagle*, morning edition, June 11, 1961; *An Illustrated Walking Tour Guide to Historic Wichita Cowtown* (ca. 1978–1979). Old Cowtown Museum; *Historic Wichita Cow Town: Walk*

Like many outdoor museums, Historic Wichita's project began originally as a historic preservation activity with the main goal of saving old buildings from demolition. Yet very early in the planning for the site, as Long later recalled, "the idea came for a cowtown village. . . . We decided to go ahead and restore from 20 to 30 buildings which were a part of Wichita during the cowtown period of the community, from 1870 to 1880."¹⁷ These different structures would be tied together by a common purpose—to showcase Wichita in its early days, "to secure the authentic atmosphere of this northern terminus of the Chisholm Trail, when it was at its height as a cattle town." The world of Long's "Wichita Historical Panels" would come to life in three dimensions in a facility popularly known as "Cow Town."¹⁸

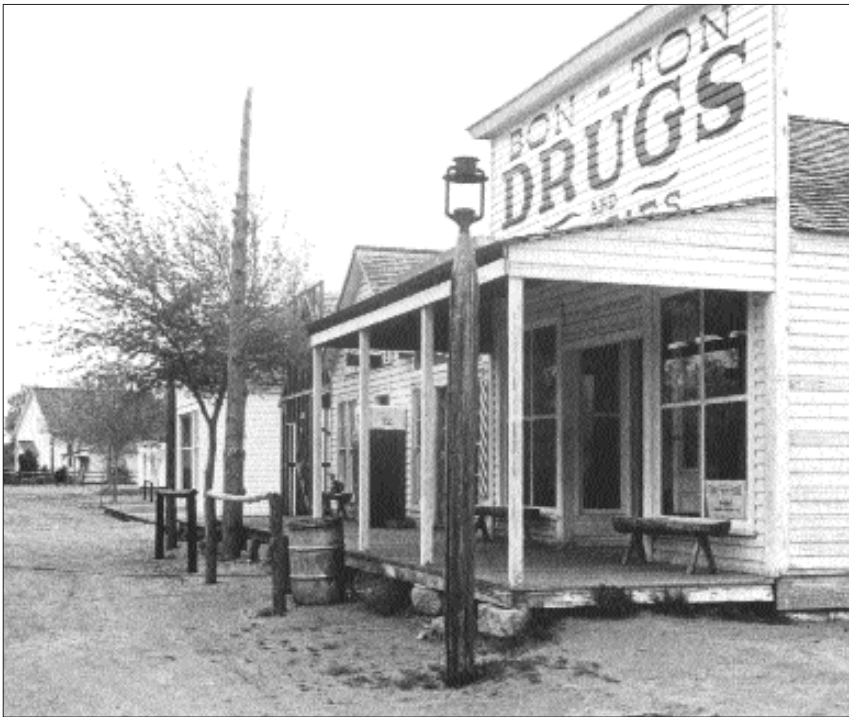
The first of these reconstructions was a drug store, whose plans were under way even before the Munger House and jail had been moved on site. John McEwen of Steffens Dairy also sat on the board of Historic Wichita. He purchased a two-story building from North Main and moved it to the new site in 1953 with the hope of restoring the first story as a drug store and the second story as a land office. A windstorm damaged the new/old structure, but insurance paid for its rebuilding, ultimately as a one-story structure. Once open, the store contained one of the earliest soda fountains brought to Kansas. Eventually, the drug store had a neighbor: a former township hall that had been condemned by the fire chief and converted into a replica of the first post office. In between the post office and the drug store stood another small building that had been reconditioned into a barbershop. In the shop was a chair in which, local legend said, Wyatt Earp had sat.

Historic Wichita actively encouraged businesses and clubs to sponsor the creation of one of the building replicas. For example, Larry Roberts, chair of the construction committee, and his ranch partner, Kenneth Alliston, created a replica of Wichita's first school building on Alliston's ranch. The replica then was dismantled and trucked to Wichita to be reconstructed, with money from the project coming from McCormick–Mathers schoolbook publishers,

Down the Wooden Sidewalks of the Old West (ca. 1975), Wichita–Sedgwick County Historical Museum; *Wichita Cow Town Vidette, Centennial Year Souvenir Edition* (Wichita: Wichita–Sedgwick County Historical Museum, June 1961). Larry Roberts to E. N. Smith, December 20, 1952, City Clerk's Office, Wichita, Kans.; Resolution of Historic Wichita, Inc., May 31, 1950, *ibid.*; sub-lease April 22, 1952, *ibid.*; "The Story of Cow Town," *ibid.*

17. Long, "Wichita Cowtown," 98.

18. "Wichita Reconstructing 'Pioneer Village'"; For most of its early history the museum was known as "Cow Town," only in the 1980s did it become "Old Cowtown Museum" or simply "Cowtown."



The first of Cow Town's reconstructed buildings was the drug store. Once opened, it contained one of the earliest soda fountains brought to Kansas.

The timing seemed perfect. During the 1950s the United States had fallen in love with the Wild West. Television shows and Hollywood movies fueled a nearly insatiable demand for cowboys, Indians, cavalry soldiers, outlaws, and pioneers. In 1955 Hollywood even came out with a movie called *Wichita*, in which an exaggerated portrayal of Wyatt Earp as a lawman appeared on screen to bring law and order to a rowdy frontier town. The lead actor in the film, Joel McCrea, came to Wichita for the film's premiere and even attended the first wedding held in Cow Town's restored church. A few years later McCrea was made an honorary member of Cow Town's volunteer fire department when he came through to promote his new television series *Wichita Town*. In 1957 actor Hugh O'Brien, who played Wyatt Earp on television, visited Cow Town to the cheers of supporters. Thanks to movies and television, during the 1950s Wyatt Earp emerged from being a relatively obscure local figure to one of Wichita's leading ancestors, often eclipsing the image of people such as Munger, Mead, and Greiffenstein.²¹

where Aitchison served as vice president. Roberts felt the community should have a fire station, but no photographs or descriptions of it existed. "Undaunted, I decided to build one out of the whole cloth, starting with the idea of the hand-drawn pumper."¹⁹ To fund the project, Roberts created a mock fire company composed of volunteers. At the volunteer gatherings "pioneer" style meals were served, and attendees were encouraged to provide financial assistance. In 1952 Dick Long and Larry Roberts met with the Santa Fe railroad to look over several depots in the region that could be relocated to Sim Park. Historic Wichita settled on the old depot that was similar but not identical in structure to Wichita's original. The Santa Fe helped move the depot to Cow Town and to reconstruct the stockyards in miniature nearby. The Santa Fe even donated an 1890s-vintage boxcar to sit next to the depot.²⁰

To an extent, Wichita started tapping into the fad. In addition to Cow Town, Wichita saw the creation of Joyland, an amusement park that featured a full-sized Old West town. In 1961 Wichita Centennial Enterprises constructed Frontierland, a 220-acre commercial tourist facility on west Highway 54. Advertised as "Mid America's Playland," Frontierland openly promoted itself as a place where the West of the movies came to life. It even had a "gunfight corral . . . where authentic gun battles take place hourly." Shepler's set up business in Wichita to become one of the largest retailers of western wear in the country. Meanwhile, western-themed motels sprang up along Kellogg Avenue, and local establishments such as Cowboy Cleaners featured western motifs. Wichitans had not taken to wearing cowboy hats as everyday wear as did their neighbors in Texas, but for the first time Wichita started

19. Roberts, "Cow Town, Wichita," (September 1975): 10.

20. Ibid.; *ibid.* (October 1975): 10; "Historic Wichita Plans Outlined," *Wichita Eagle*, morning edition, April 2, 1955; "Cow Town Fire Company Approved by Directors," *ibid.*, May 12, 1954; "Cowtown Wichita Has Been a 17-Year Project"; "Wichita Reconstructing 'Pioneer Village'"; "Building Slated for Cow Town," *Wichita Eagle*, morning edition, October 30, 1953; "Land Office, Drug Store Building to Be Restored," *ibid.*, March

28, 1953; *Wichita The Cow-Town of 1872 is being Recreated, Adjoining Sim Park*, brochure (Wichita: ca. 1952); "Santa Fe Depot Built as Replica," *Wichita Cow Town Vidette*, July 1961; S. B. Maple to City Commission, April 8, 1955, City Clerk's Office.

21. See various clippings in the Old Cowtown Museum scrapbooks including "Actor McCrea Inspects Wichita's Cow Town," *Wichita Eagle*, morning edition, May 14, 1959.

thinking of itself as a western town—at least for some.²²

Yet while the rest of the country was seeing images of Wichita as a rough and tumble cowboy town, the spirit did not always translate into local support. Cow Town grew as an institution but was not well funded or widely supported. The Chamber of Commerce did not promote the Old West town as a major attraction in its publications. In 1956 a visiting reporter mused that although the museum attracted visitors, “Wichita does not love ‘Cow Town’ because it recalls a time before the virus of bigness bit the community” (although in reality, Wichita grew precisely because its early leaders’ active boosterism). This report went on to suggest, however, that the humble frontier town was something that made Wichita unique because

Worthy as the city is in the number of airplanes it manufactures, the tons of broomcorn and barrels of crude oil it sells and its fine bank clearings, Wichita is hardly the metropolis which would attract a visitor interested in art galleries, museums, ancient monuments. . . . But Wichita draws strangers from distant states to see the restored frontier town assembled by a little band of men and women with a sense of the past.²³

Official city support varied. Early on it provided a caretaker for the facility. In 1955 Historic Wichita obtained state legislation that allowed the city to acquire, preserve, and maintain historical monuments as well as allocate up to fifteen thousand dollars for the process. In 1956 a city commissioner moved that an additional fifteen thousand dollars be budgeted for Cow Town, but the motion failed to receive a second, it appearing improper for city funds to go toward a private organization. The following year, a similar



In preparation for the Kansas centennial celebration in 1961, a number of new buildings were rapidly constructed in Cow Town to depict a “complete pioneer town.”

proposal for seventy-five hundred dollars also failed, with “economy” cited as the reason—the city’s funds set aside for emergencies were already being rapidly depleted and adding another responsibility seemed unfeasible at the time. One commissioner suggested that the city “get rid of” its responsibility to the facility altogether. For a time in early 1957 rumors surfaced that Cow Town might close and Historic Wichita, Inc., disband.²⁴

Then things began to turn around. Marge Kirby with the Girl Scouts of Wichita suggested that the youthful members could serve as tour guides. The plan had promise, and Historic Wichita and the Girl Scouts set up a system of regular tours, with Kirby as coordinator. The relationship between the Scouts and Cow Town has been one of the museum’s most enduring and fondly remembered partnerships.

However, the biggest boost came from the celebrations of Kansas’s centennial in 1961. Throughout the state, communities began to work on ways to participate. For Wichita, Cow Town was a logical outlet. Many at the museum

22. Postcard collections of Joyland and Frontierland, Wichita–Sedgwick County Historical Society.

23. Quotation in “Visiting Newsmen Finds ‘Cow Town’ Distinctive But Unloved by Wichita,” *Wichita Eagle*, morning edition, September 7, 1956; see also “Our History’s Rich, but Often Neglected,” *Wichita Beacon*, May 28, 1965.

24. “City Funds for Cowtown ‘Doubtful,’” *Wichita Eagle*, evening edition, June 3, 1957; “Historic Wichita Organization Expands Board of Directors,” *Wichita Eagle* July 17, 1957. Minutes of the Wichita City Commission, February 14, 1956, City Clerk’s Office; “Cowtown,” memo, February 6, 1956, *ibid.*; Ralph Wulz to Frank Backstrom, May 31, 1957, *ibid.*; Dick Long to E. M. Baird, May 14, 1957, *ibid.*; Ralph Wulz to H. D. Lester, July 20, 1955, *ibid.*

made certain that Wichita's part in the centennial celebration centered on Cow Town. In 1959 Richard Long, by then serving as president of the Kansas State Historical Society, noted that the museum was under pressure "to have a complete pioneer town ready by 1961."²⁵ This celebration helped encourage groups such as the Wichita Chamber of Commerce to support the project by boasting that "Cow Town authentically depicts the roaring cowboy era of 1869–84," a depiction expected to bring in tourists. The president of Historic Wichita once crowed that the reconstruction of 1870s Wichita was one of "the most vital" undertakings in the state during the centennial year.²⁶

Meanwhile, the city had a change of heart and agreed to contribute fifteen thousand dollars in city funds to help with the restoration and development of Cow Town. As part of the arrangement, in September 1959 the city took possession of the twenty-three-acre property and the buildings on it. Historic Wichita now ran the facility on behalf of the city, with Historic Wichita hopeful that the city would take over the complete operation of the site once the construction was completed. Dick Long had stepped down as head of Historic Wichita, Inc., succeeded first by former mayor Phil Manning and then banker J. O. Wilson. Manning remained active as the business manager of the centennial project, staying on to become essentially the museum's first director.²⁷

Early in 1961 a one-hundred-thousand-dollar building campaign was launched, and in preparation for the state centennial, the number of buildings at the museum doubled. Some were late-nineteenth-century structures relocated to the site and adapted to an 1870s appearance. Many others, however, were recreated out of new materials. In the enthusiasm, the desire to convey something that

looked like the Old West sometimes overshadowed the actual history. False fronted buildings made of plywood stood next to structures from the early 1900s that were adapted to new uses. Among the largest additions was a variety theater that could house melodramas and contained a sixty-by-eighty-foot dance floor. Next door stood a 1910s-era building that was reconditioned as Delmonico's Restaurant. To document the changes, Historic Wichita began publishing its own newspaper: the *Wichita Cow Town Vidette* (named after the first paper in the community).

Individuals or local establishments sponsored most buildings. Larry Roberts and his mother donated money to re-create the first law office of Wichita in memory of Roberts's father. One man re-created a blacksmith shop in memory of his father. Associated Grocers of Wichita donated a turn-of-the-century-era grocery store to the site. The *Wichita Eagle*, by now lead by Marcellus Murdock, oversaw the re-creation of the first *Wichita Eagle* building, complete with operable printing presses. Former Wichita mayors joined together to support a re-created city hall. An association of local banks oversaw the re-creation of a bank building. An auxiliary of the Wichita Association of Home Builders furnished two cottages donated to the museum. Other buildings included a honeymoon cottage, a late 1800s structure reconditioned as the Southern Hotel, a gunsmith's shop, livery barn, land office, and clothing store.²⁸

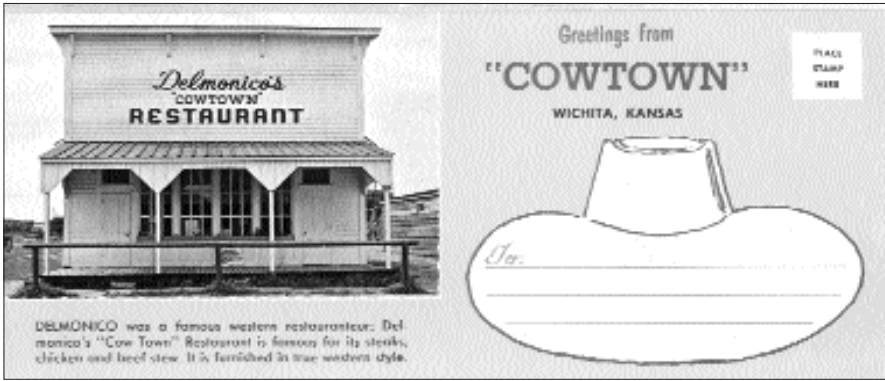
Operating with an annual fifteen thousand dollars in support from the city, Cow Town continued to grow. In 1962 the museum moved a 1910-era school building from Meridian to the site. An undertaker's facility emerged in 1964 when Gill Mortuary donated elaborate woodwork from the late nineteenth century to construct the building. In 1966 the former town hall of Rockford, Kansas, became transformed into a saloon now known as Fritz Snitzler's. Another late 1800s structure became Keno Corner, the notorious gambling establishment that once stood at Douglas and Main (even though the original structure was a two-story corner building and its modern successor was a rather simple one-story wooden building). Meanwhile, several 1890s cottages threatened with urban renewal-linked demolition came to the site as parts of a shopping

25. Long, "Wichita's Cowtown."

26. "Chamber Asks Recognition of Cow Town," *Wichita Week*, May 26, 1960. Actually, Cow Town was one of four western-themed attractions in Kansas. Dodge City's re-creation of Front Street in 1957 was farthest west. "Old Abilene" to the north featured a similar combination of historic buildings and modern re-creations. In Greensburg, a local businessman created an entirely fictitious western community called Burketown, named for its developer. See "Rebuilt Kansas Cowtowns Showing Glimpses of Past," *Wichita Eagle*, morning edition, July 1, 1973.

27. "Cowtown Wichita Has Been a 17-Year Project"; "City Accepts Cowtown Bill of Sale Deed," *Wichita Eagle*, evening edition, September 8, 1959; "Buildings Due at Cow Town" *Wichita Eagle*, morning edition, May 28, 1959; "Board to Back Cow Town Fully," *ibid.*, July 2, 1959; "Editor Tells Background of Cow Town," *ibid.*, September 13, 1959; "\$15,000 City Fund to Aid Project," *ibid.*, May 28, 1959; "Chamber Asks Recognition of Cow Town," *Wichita Week*, May 26, 1960; "48 Buildings in Cow Town Planned by Centennial Year," *Wichita Eagle*, morning edition, February 18, 1960; "Campaign to Begin for Frontier Village," *ibid.*, March 21, 1961; "Historic Wichita, Inc. Elects Officers," *ibid.*, January 13, 1961; deed and bill of sale, September 5, 1959, City Clerk's Office.

28. "48 Buildings in Cow Town Planned by Centennial Year"; "Cow Town Gets Rich Prize," *Wichita Eagle*, morning edition, November 6, 1960; "General Store Given to Town, History Sought," *ibid.*, July 24, 1960; "Campaign to Begin for Frontier Village," *ibid.*, March 21, 1961; see also various articles in the *Wichita Cow Town Vidette*, July 1961; "Cowtown Grows to 71 Structures"; Building files, Old Cowtown Museum, Wichita, Kans.



Throughout the 1960s, with the support of the city, local businesses, and individuals, Cow Town flourished. As depicted in this brochure, however, the museum followed the “one of each” approach (one hotel, one church, and so forth), creating the image of a small town rather than an urban community.

arcade for vendors selling antiques, popcorn, and other western or old-fashioned souvenirs.²⁹

Although probably not apparent at the time, Cow Town was enshrining two very different, even conflicting, traditions. One was the Wichita of the founding fathers, the other the Wichita of the Old West. Cathy Ambler, in her study of outdoor museums in Kansas, has noted that many of these museums preserve buildings that emphasize a past of settlers and pioneers who were hardy, thrifty persons with a strong sense of community spirit. With a preponderance of schools, depots, general stores, churches, and barns, these museums present a harmonious whole, tastefully organized and with a minimum of the clutter that would have been part of the real community.

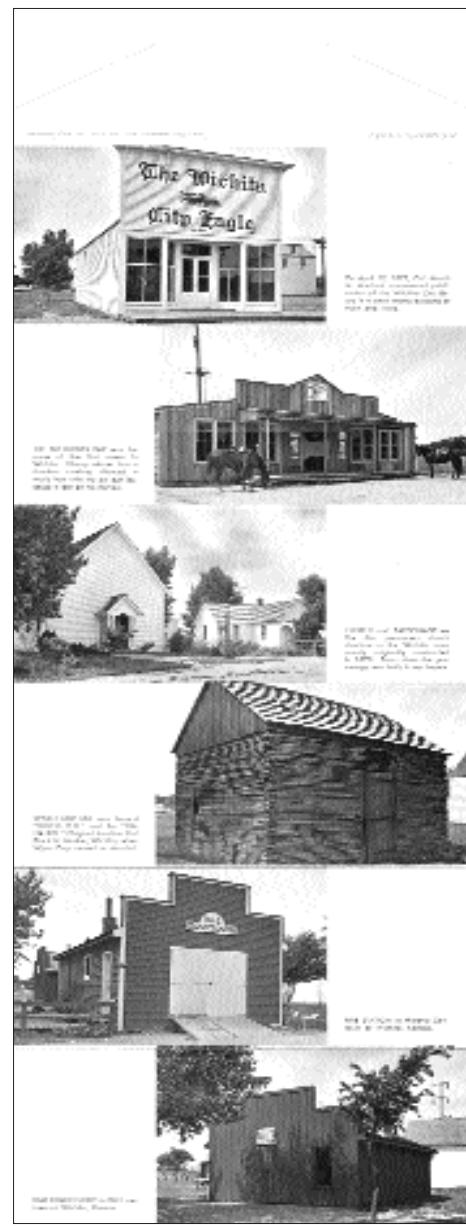
Cow Town paralleled this sentiment in many ways, with its church and parsonage, its “founding father” log cabin, early school house, drug store, post office, and depot. The “small town” image was still very much in evidence, especially because the buildings tended to be small, one-story, frame structures instead of the brick edifices that appeared early in the town’s history. Moreover, the museum had gone for the “one of each” approach while the real Wichita had several churches (or hotels, saloons, livery stables, and so forth), not one. Thus, the visitor gained a sense that Wichita was a small town like other Kansas small towns, not a bustling community that even early on was trying to be urban.³⁰

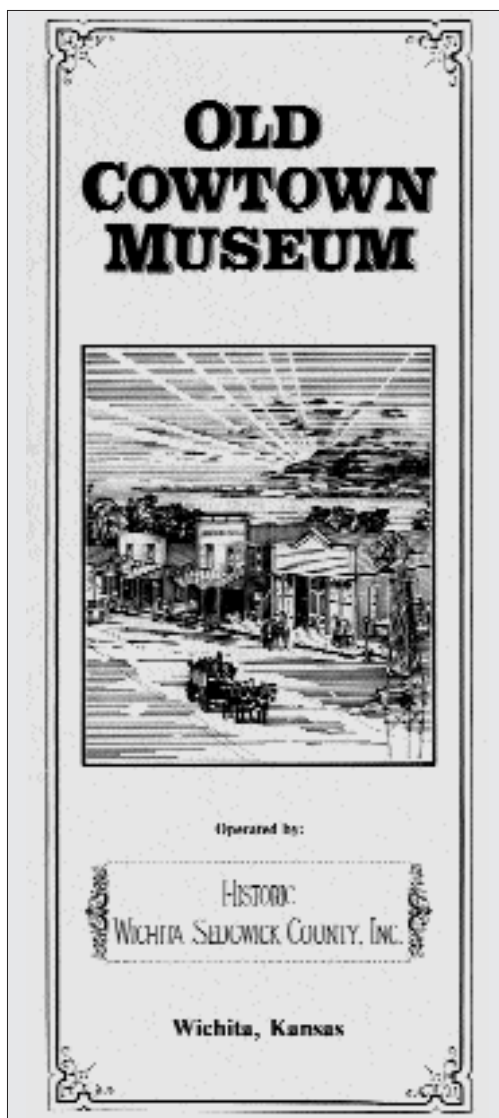
The other tradition showed up in the museum’s very name: Cow Town.³¹ It was not “Pioneer Wichita,” which

29. See Building files; “The Bystander,” *Wichita Eagle*, evening edition, April 3, 1964.

30. Cathy Ambler, “Small Historic Sites in Kansas: Merging Artifactual Landscapes and Community Values,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 15 (Winter 1995): 33–48.

31. Even the name was problematic. As historian Robert Dykstra observed, the phrase “Cow Town” was never used in the 1870s and appeared in the 1880s as a “mildly derogatory term.”





By 1981 Cow Town had been renamed Old Cowtown Museum and began to reshape its approach to telling the story of Wichita's history.

would have implied an agrarian focus. Nor was it "Victorian Wichita," with the image of ornate buildings and ladies in ruffles and corsets. The museum, and by extension the community, embraced the western mystique coming across the television and movie screens. In the mythology of the Wild West or Old West the cowboy and lawman, not the entrepreneur or farmer, were the romantic heroes. Towns tended primarily to be stages for dramatic showdowns where banks existed to be robbed and trains existed to be held up. The "western" town was the antithesis of

everything Victorian, even though most western communities of the 1800s tried to emulate eastern styles and social patterns as much as possible.³²

Connecting with this vision of the past, Cow Town's supporters created "western" institutions such as a variety theater, gunsmith, hotel, Keno Corner, and sheriff's office (even though Wichita's sheriff actually shared a desk in city hall). In this tradition Wyatt Earp, not the early entrepreneurs, became the main hero of a different pantheon. When Historic Wichita first acquired the jail in the early 1950s, newspaper articles mentioned Wyatt Earp only in passing, if at all. By the late 1950s, the old calaboose became "Wyatt Earp's Jail." Even a modest Victorian home became (incorrectly) "Billy the Kid's House," in memory of the man whose mother was active in early Wichita. Gunfights were regular occurrences. In the early 1970s, for example, one volunteer group, the 1870 gang, staged regular gunfights at Cow Town with a program often featuring Wyatt Earp and Wild Bill Hickok (conveniently "visiting" from Abilene). Thanks to Cow Town, Wichita started remembering its past as starting from a rough and tumble settlement for cowboys and shoot-outs (even though the Texas origins of many of the original cowboys were downplayed). The same newspaper that in the 1870s said the cattle trade and its Texas cowboys were on their way out was by the 1970s trumpeting how the legacy of the cattle days lived on.

Yet the conversion of Wichita to a western town was far from complete. By 1970 the city had adopted the slogan "Center City, U.S.A.," with a focus on being a modern, livable community. The frontier image of Wichita celebrated through Cow Town was part of the story many Wichitans decided was best left in the past. As a brochure of the Wichita Convention and Visitors Bureau from that era once put it, "today the six shooter and cowboy have been replaced by the 'good life.'" Marshall Murdock could not have said it better.³³

32. Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1997); George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western: From Silents to the Seventies* (New York: Grossman, 1973); Jim Hitt, *The American West from Fiction (1823–1976) into Film (1909–1986)* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 1990); Buck Rainey, *Western Gunslingers in Fact and on Film: Hollywood's Famous Lawmen and Outlaws* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 1998); Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); David Daly and Joel Persky, "The West and The Western," special issue, *Journal of the West* 29 (April 1990).

33. Quotation in "Wichita Is . . ." (Wichita: Wichita Convention and Visitors Bureau, n.d.), Wichita–Sedgwick County Historical Society col-

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ichita had three more chances to focus on history: the Chisholm Trail centennial in 1967, the city's one-hundredth birthday in 1970, and the Bicentennial of 1976. For the Chisholm Trail celebration, Cow Town was a natural venue, hosting mock shoot-outs, Indian dances, and music events. Unlike the Kansas Centennial, which had a strong 1800s focus, the "Wichitennial" told the story of a city that started as a small cattle town and became the "Air Capital." A variety of events included parades, interfaith services, Native American powwows, and art shows. Dick Long wrote a book entitled *Wichita Century* that focused on the city's cattle town story. Cow Town continued its traditional role of reinforcing the Wild West image by hosting gunfights, stagecoach robberies, and trick riding. Yet things were changing for Cow Town, symbolized by Dick Long's death in 1971.

The city continued to support Cow Town financially, thanks in part to a 1973 bill from the state legislature that allowed the City of Wichita to appropriate fifty thousand dollars (instead of the earlier limit of fifteen thousand) for improvements at the museum in preparation for the Bicentennial. City support for the museum also meant that Historic Wichita worked in connection with a city-appointed body, the Historical Wichita Board (created to oversee all city-owned historic properties). Meanwhile, the county had become a supporter of local historical institutions such as the Wichita Historical Museum and Cow Town, reshaping the main controlling board into Historic Wichita Sedgwick County, Inc. By 1981 the facility, now renamed Old Cowtown Museum, had a broader story to tell. During these years the museum began to professionalize. Old Cowtown Museum hired on a staff of curatorial (funded by the county) and education professionals who coordinated a cadre of devoted volunteers. Volunteers often specialized in specific aspects of nineteenth-century life from blacksmithing to social dancing. Some spent long hours of research perfecting roles and "characters" such as Dr. Fabrique. The transition was painful for some, particularly for longtime volunteers who had been fixtures in the museum for decades and were now told to change their dress and activities. Ever since, volunteers and staff have

lection. "Chisholm Centennial Draws 10,000," *Wichita Eagle*, evening edition, August 23, 1967; "Cow Town To Come Alive in Days of Chisholm Trail," *ibid.*, morning edition, August 20, 1967; "Wichitennial Ends in Blaze of Skyrockets," *ibid.*, July 19, 1970; Wichita Centennial newsletters, Old Cowtown Museum; Miner, *Wichita: The Magic City*, 202–4.

sometimes worked closely together and at other times clashed dramatically.³⁴

Along with changes in structure, the museum faced changes in the nation's attitude toward the West. After trying to adapt the western to a post-Vietnam mentality and the various civil rights movements, Hollywood stopped making western films by the early 1980s. On television, *Gunsmoke* gave way to *Little House on the Prairie*, and then western-themed programs seemed to fade altogether. The Bicentennial tended to emphasize America's pioneer roots instead of the mythic duel between white hats and black hats. On the academic front, scholars began exploring what came to be called the "new western" history. In books and journals, a previous focus on the "frontier" shifted toward looking at issues of race, class, and gender in the American West. Some scholars started questioning some of the long-standing myths of western history, finding, for example, that frontier justice was a more complicated phenomenon than the movies showed. In the museum world, institutions started focusing on telling a location's story rather than simply displaying endless cases of old items. The public demanded, and received, more sophisticated exhibits connected with the latest scholarship. For some museums, "living history" became a growing trend as trained interpreters spent long hours of research to accurately portray daily life of an earlier era. Institutions that could adapt to such changes had a much better chance of surviving than those that did not. Around the country, western-themed establishments, often with adjoining "museums" filled with cow skulls and barbed wire, started closing. In Kansas, Frontierland and Greensburg's "Burkeville" actually became ghost towns.³⁵

In its early years Cow Town displayed items dating from the Civil War to the Great War, with guides in outfits ranging from 1860s formal attire to 1960s western wear. By contrast, Old Cowtown Museum in the 1980s and 1990s tried to paint a picture of an entire community, not just the

34. "Training Set for Prospective Cow Town Tour Guides," *Wichita Eagle*, January 9, 1977; "New Philosophy, Old Cowtown Museum," memo, February 16, 1982, City Clerk's Office. "Note For the Guides," 1976, Old Cowtown Museum; see also *Sagacity* 1 (Winter 1996); *ibid.* (Fall 1996); various editions of the *Cowtown Volunteer Newsletter*, Old Cowtown Museum.

35. Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, 120–92; Fenin and Everson, *The Western: From Silents to the Seventies*, 357–79; Hitt, *The American West from Fiction (1823–1976) into Film (1909–1986)*, 293–96; for the "new western" history, see, for example, Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1987); Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds. *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1992).

works of great men or mythical gunfights. As a press release from 1981 put it: “more than depicting the cattle era, however, the Old Cowtown Museum . . . depicts a cross section of life styles and developments from the time of the earliest settlement to a full blown Victorian era.”³⁶ Exhibits such as one simply on Indians (featuring a birch bark canoe brought from Pennsylvania) or a building containing only the memorabilia of donor Lawrence Thompson (including one hundred different types of barbed wire) were replaced by ones that concentrated on life in the 1870s. Static exhibits that once fenced off visitors behind barriers of wood and chicken wire started giving way to interactive exhibits where visitors walk through to talk with costumed staff. In 1984 the museum commissioned several local historians to produce a story line to guide training and exhibit design. Meanwhile, Cow Town added a greater focus on agriculture in early Sedgwick County with a re-created 1800s Sedgwick County Fair, a major annual event. The museum marketed itself as a living history village along the lines of Williamsburg and Greenfield Village, where everyday life and activities were main attractions. As a promotional brochure from 1988 noted: “national and regional media are praising it [Old Cowtown Museum] for providing an authentic, quality historical experience rather than an amusement park version of the West.” In 1990 a decade of work resulted in the museum being accredited by the American Association of Museums. Ever since, the museum has struggled to reconcile its mission as a history site with the popular vision of the West that still inspires many. While never completely abandoning its lawmen and gunfight elements, the museum has gradually moved from the cowtown/Wild West image that many still felt made Wichita unique.³⁷

A changing ethic also applied to the buildings. For example, in 1969 the museum took possession of a cabin that dated to the mid 1860s. In 1974 the Mid-Town Citizens Association acquired the home of Marshall Murdock and donated it to the museum. The home underwent considerable restoration as one of Wichita’s two federally funded Bicentennial projects, the other being the Indian Center.

36. “Old Cowtown Museum,” press release, March 1, 1981, Old Cowtown Museum.

37. William E. Unrau, H. Craig Miner, Patricia Christgau, Stan Harder, and Elizabeth Kennedy, “Old Cowtown Museum Story Line and Planning Recommendations,” October 1984, Old Cowtown Museum; “Cowtown Polishing Image,” *Wichita Eagle*, April 29, 1989; “Reliving the past,” *ibid.*, April 12, 1990; *The Many Faces of Old Cowtown*, brochure (Wichita: June 1988); *Sagacity* 1 (Winter 1996); *ibid.* (Fall 1996); various editions of the *Cowtown Volunteer Newsletter*.

With the home’s opening in early 1982, Cow Town had a setting to explore Wichita’s Victorian side. In the 1980s a grain elevator from Bentley arrived and received restoration. In the 1990s Cow Town acquired the buildings of what is now the DeVore farm and, more recently, the Blood Orchard. Reproduction buildings tended to be more accurate reflections of what was actually in early Wichita rather than the western look of the 1960s (a look Larry Roberts once dismissed as “marginal foo-fer-aw”). New constructions included Lakeside, the museum office modeled after the home that once encased the Munger House, and a two-story drug store that replaced the 1950s version. Perhaps the most symbolic change was when the museum demolished the small commercial shopping area with its popcorn sheds and boutiques so that the main farm house of the 1870s agricultural exhibit could be moved through.³⁸

Even so, Old Cowtown Museum remained the community’s most visible symbol of its cowboy reputation, and only a handful of other institutions in Wichita have reinforced the western image. For example, before they closed in 2001, the twin eating/drinking establishments of Rowdy Joe’s and Redbeard’s in Old Town (the revitalized warehouse district) hearkened back to a gunfight between two colorful figures from Wichita’s early history.³⁹

Until the 1970s Cow Town was the most visible presenter of the community’s past and often was an important community space for events and festivals. An article in the *Wichita Beacon* once concluded that “this metropolitan area is giving fairly good support to one historical organization (Cow Town) letting another starve pitifully (the Wichita Historical Museum); and let-

38. Historic Wichita, Inc., “Horse Thief Cabin,” 1969, Old Cowtown Museum; “Cow Town Gets Legendary Cabin,” *Wichita Eagle*, evening edition, October 27, 1969; “Fight on for Old House,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 4, 1974; “Tour of Murdock House Like Walk into History,” *ibid.*, September 13, 1974; Historical Society Buys ‘Eagle’s Roost,’ *ibid.*; “Midtown—The Past Seeking a Future,” *Wichita Independent*, January 24, 1975; “Marsh Murdock House Resembles Former Self,” *Wichita Eagle*, October 26, 1976; “Early Wichita home ‘natural’ for Cowtown reception area,” *Wichita Beacon*, August 20, 1977; “Grain elevator is back in business,” *Wichita Eagle*, January 22, 1989; *Sagacity*, 1996–1997.

39. By the late 1980s and early 1990s a renewed attempt to revitalize the downtown began. Centering on part of Douglas by the railroad tracks, a combination of city and private endeavors worked to renovate a section of warehouses and abandoned stores into a district of shops and restaurants. Although more than a mile from where Wichita first emerged, the district was christened “Old Town.” It centered around a square in front of a newly created “farm and art market.” In 2001 Wichita re-opened one of its last great structures: the Eaton Hotel, made infamous by Carrie Nation, who took a hatchet to the bar in 1900. With condominiums in place of the earlier hotel rooms, the Eaton is expected to be another cornerstone of downtown redevelopment.

ting others escape for lack of support."⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Walter Innes Jr. had assembled a collection of aircraft into a modest museum at the new Wichita Airport. However, the museum closed with a lack of community support, and the "Air Capital" would have to wait another thirty years before it had a museum dedicated to aviation. Some wondered if Cow Town had become so popular that other aspects of Wichita's history, such as aviation and oil, were being overlooked.⁴¹

The Wichitennial and Bicentennial launched or reshaped several other historical institutions, each of which told a very different story of the community. For example, in 1976 the Wichita Historical Museum signed a lease with the city for use of the now-abandoned 1892 Romanesque Revival City Hall. The Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum, so named to reflect the support that both the city and the county gave to the project, opened in late 1980. Among the exhibits were *Wichita, the Magic City*, focusing on the city's founding and growth through 1911; a Victorian home interior; and the Jones 6, an automobile built locally from 1915 to 1920.⁴²

In planning for the Wichitennial, Native Americans representing eleven tribes agreed to incorporate the Mid-American All-Indian Center, Inc. As negotiations continued, the foundation managed to secure a new site from the City of Wichita—at the confluence of the Big and Little Arkansas Rivers—at the cost of one dollar. To promote the center's construction, the Native American community began holding annual powwows and the Mid-America Cowtown Rodeo on Cow Town grounds. In 1974 Blackbear Bosin dedicated the facility's most recognizable symbol: an immense, stylized statue of a Plains Indian named *Keeper of the Plains*, a symbol that Wichita also embraced as its own. As part of the Bicentennial celebration nationwide, the city passed a two-million-dollar bond issue to help construct the facility, which opened in May 1976.⁴³

40. "Our History's Rich, but Often Neglected."

41. "Why not Move History Museum to Cowtown Site," *Wichita Eagle*, evening edition, March 9, 1964; "Our History's Rich, but Often Neglected."

42. "Wichita Original Town Urban Renewal Area Project Number Kansas A-5-2, Wichita Kansas," 1972, minutes and brochures from Wichita History Museum, Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Society; "Grand Old Lady [City Hall] to Celebrate 80th Birthday," *Wichita Beacon*, June 2, 1969. "Whatever Happened to the Historical Museum Project?" *ibid.*, January 14, 1979; "Museum to Close in 2 Weeks," *Wichita Eagle*, May 18, 1979.

43. *The Mid-American All Indian Center, Inc.* (Wichita: Mid-American All Indian Center, 1976); "The Indian Museum: Where do we go from here?" *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, October 7, 1979; "Wichita Plans Indian Center," *Wichita Eagle*, July 30, 1970; "Center Proposed as Monument to Cul-



Beginning in the 1980s the museum hired curatorial professionals and coordinated the activities of devoted volunteers, who often specialized in different aspects of nineteenth-century life.

Wichita continued to add to its collection of historical museums. Several members of the African American community began a movement to save the threatened 1917-era Calvary Baptist Church in 1972 and 1973. After a decade of struggle, the help of a sympathetic state senator, and a one-hundred-thousand-dollar renovation effort, the church opened to the public as a museum in 1983. In the late 1980s Wichita State University acquired Frank Lloyd Wright's Allen-Lambe House but soon afterward turned the property over to a private foundation to operate. The Great Plains Transportation Museum opened near the former Union Station around a collection of locomotives and rolling stock. Meanwhile, a local group of aviation enthu-

ture of American Indian," *ibid.*, August 10, 1967; "Eyesight Loss Inspires Indian Artist, Adviser," *ibid.*, morning edition, December 16, 1962; "Wichita Woman Last of Tribe Residing Here," *Wichita Beacon*, October 17, 1963; brochure, *Mid-American American Indian Center and the Indian Center Museum*, brochure (Wichita: n.d.); Mike Mayfield, "Perspective," *Gallery Notes: The Indian Museum* (March 1979); Holly Wright, "The Indian Center Museum" (paper, November 30, 1999, Mid-America All-Indian Center); "Wichita Powwow Opens With Rhythms From Past," *Wichita Eagle*, morning edition, July 28, 1973; "Festivities Keep Temp Moving At Indian Meet," *ibid.*, July 29, 1973.



siasts, the Wichita Aeronautical Historical Association, had formed with the intent of establishing a museum of Wichita aviation in the worn and decaying 1930s airport terminal. Although limited by lack of funds and confined mainly to a core of volunteers, the Kansas Aviation Museum began welcoming visitors by the late 1990s.⁴⁴

The biggest institutional challenge to Wichita's cowtown image has been Exploration Place or simply "EP," a science/children's museum. Like Cow Town of the early 1960s, the hope was that this museum would be "the" attraction to bring in the out-of-town visitor and provide a new sense of civic identity. As Phil Frick, a local lawyer who headed the extremely successful capital campaign, boasted: "it's a tourism thing. It's an economic development thing. It's an educational thing. It's an entertainment thing. It's a downtown thing. It's an architectural statement. It's our Sydney Opera House."⁴⁵

44. "Black Historical Society Marks Years of Progress," *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, October 22, 1984; "Turmoil, Financial Problems Dim Hopes for Black Museum," *ibid.*, October 19, 1981; "Doris Kerr-Larkin's spirit kept alive black history," *Wichita Eagle*, February 27, 1994; *First National Black Historical Society of Kansas*, brochure (ca. 1985); "The Museum Craze," *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, January 9, 1977; "New life stirs inside air museum," *Wichita Eagle*, December 16, 1997; Sandra Reddish, "Kansas Aviation Museum," (paper, November 29, 1999, Kansas Aviation Museum, Wichita); Deborah Livengood, interview by Sandra Reddish, October 1, 1999, private collection of Jay Price.

45. "Mission Statement," Exploration Place, Wichita; "The very fine art of creation a new community resource," *Wichita Eagle*, April 26, 1994; "Wichita center will engage community," *ibid.*, February 17, 1995; "Museum site will be 'an even more special place,'" *ibid.*, September 23, 1994; "A river runs through it—Architect Moshe Safdie embraced the flowing curves of the Arkansas River when he created his unusual design for Exploration Place," *ibid.*, March 19, 2000; "The science of redevelopment as Wichita's Exploration Place project breaks ground today, museums in other cities are packing them in," *ibid.*, May 31, 1997; quotation in "Anticipation Ready for Exploration Place to Open Now," *ibid.*, September 11, 1999.

At the EP opening ceremonies on April 1, 2000, Mayor Bob Knight announced that "we are here today understanding, perhaps for the first time for some people, that Wichita, Kansas, is a world-class city." Many agreed. The City of Wichita had donated the twenty-acre property. Sedgwick County had allocated twenty million dollars for the project. Perhaps the strongest source of support came from the aircraft industry. For example, Velma Wallace, a philanthropic widow whose husband was a longtime head of Cessna, donated ten million dollars to kick off the project. Inside, the aviation section did not feature displays of historic aircraft. Rather, it had hands-on exhibits to discuss aerodynamics and the principles behind flight. History also was represented at the site: *Kansas in Miniature* told the story of Kansas and its architecture through a layout with miniature replicas of buildings from around the state. However, at its heart, EP enshrined the image that Wichita had wanted to convey since its founding: a modern, respectable community, a good place to raise a family, and oriented toward science, technology, and of course, business.⁴⁶

46. "Science center donor is . . . Velma Wallace," *ibid.*, October 12, 1993; "Our heroine," *ibid.*, October 13, 1993; "Science Center Near Preliminary Goal," *ibid.*, October 3, 1996; "State Pledges \$1.5 million to Exploration Place," *ibid.*, July 1, 1998; "Exploration Place Gets \$1 million—the Cessna Foundation is Underwriting 'Kids Explore,' A Storybook Playground for Children," *ibid.*, March 4, 2000; "Plans for Exploration Place Aviation Exhibit Take Win: Family of Aviation Pioneers Gives Almost \$1.5 million," *ibid.*, September 25, 1998; *Your Guide to Explore* (Wichita: Wichita Eagle and Beacon, 2000); "A Popular Place: Attendance at Exploration Place Has Smashed Expectations in the First Month," *Wichita Eagle*, April 30, 2000; "A dream comes to life—Exploration Place greets its first visitors, and the city celebrates its new world-class attraction," *ibid.*,


During the past two decades Old Cowtown Museum has successfully marketed itself as a living history village providing an authentic, quality historical experience. Additions to the site during this time include the Murdock home (far left), a grain elevator from Bentley (left), and the DeVore farm (right).



Although Wichita (or at least part of it) embraced its cowtown past, that past was largely a twentieth-century creation. In the nineteenth century the foundation of the community was commerce and business, of which the cattle trade was an important example. Yet the community was as much a place of Victorian propriety as of cowboy brawls. For most of their history Wichitans tried to downplay the rowdiness associated with the cattle years. The civic leaders usually were not cattlemen themselves and preferred to remember the community as starting with entrepreneurs, not cowboys. Early historical works from the first decades of the twentieth century confirmed that assumption. It was that reverence for the early founders that sparked the first moves to save a collection of early buildings into an artificial town.

The image that early Wichita was mainly a rough cowtown with frequent gunfights emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, when Cow Town tapped into the western genre that

was popular at the time. By emphasizing the cattle era/cowboy theme, the museum touted an image that many segments of the community had been trying to overcome since the 1870s. The museum has been struggling with that legacy ever since, even as it has tried to include everyday life, Victorian culture, and early agriculture as part of its interpretation. Started as a shrine to men such as Darius Munger and William Greiffenstein, the museum has had a harder time overcoming its past as a shrine to Wyatt Earp.

Ironically, the rest of the country has long felt that Wichita was and is a cowtown. Early boosters argued that the city's lawless reputation was due to misperceptions from outsiders. In the twentieth century the western movies and institutions such as Cow Town reinforced to the rest of the nation the idea that Wichita had strong ties to a western, cowboy heritage. Much to the horror of Wichitans themselves, many people outside of Kansas still think of Wichita as another Amarillo, where people regularly wear cowboy hats, listen to western music, eat barbecue, and speak with a twang. Wichita is somewhat trapped in terms of its image, both from outside perceptions and from its own doing. The Wild West image, even if exaggerated and at times inaccurate, continues to hold on. Marshall Murdock's struggle to downplay the Texas cowboy connection continues. 

April 2, 2000; "Exploration Place a boon to other attractions," *ibid.*, February 27, 2000; "Don't fret, Exploration Place will help build tourism partnerships," *ibid.*, February 19, 2000; "The place to be?" *ibid.*, February 13, 2000; Jay M. Price, "Kansas in Miniature," *Journal of American History* 87 (December 2000): 984–87; *Exploration Place, 2000*, brochure (Wichita: n.d.); Kerry Jones, "Exploration Place," (paper, December 2000, Exploration Place). Quotation in "A dream comes to life."