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801 S. Filmore, Suite 205, Amarillo, TX 79101
(806) 379-6411 (voice) | (806) 371-0112 (fax)

Community History

By admin

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Although Amarillo itself is a relatively young city, having been founded in the late 1880s, hunting points and other artifacts that have been scientifically dated indicate human beings have inhabited the High Plains region for more than ten thousand years.

When, in 1541, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado led an expedition across this vast grassland, the Native Americans they encountered had never before seen a man of European descent. The arrival of the Spanish explorers would forever change the lives of the native tribes.

As the Texas frontier moved ever westward in the nineteenth century, colonists established trading relationships with the Plains Indians. But the Republic of Texas was never successful in establishing territorial control over the region and there were frequent hostile confrontations between the encroaching Anglo-Americans and native tribes.

Following the end of the Civil War, the U.S. military focused its efforts on controlling and confining the Indian population on the western frontier. By 1875, the Native American population in the Texas Panhandle had been relocated to reservations, making way for an influx of new settlers and huge herds of cattle.

The arrival of the region's first railroad made it possible to transport livestock to eastern markets much more efficiently. In 1888 the town of Amarillo was established next to a huge stockyard where cattle were held before being loaded into railcars. Two years later the town had a population of 482.

Within a few years the burgeoning community began to experience growing pains as demand for municipal services swelled. In 1913 Amarillo became the first city in Texas and only the fifth in the nation to adopt the city council – manager form of government, establishing a model for professional city management.

Natural gas was discovered in the area in 1918 and soon dozens of oil and gas companies were exploring the Panhandle Field, the largest known reserve in the world at that time.

With the advent of mechanized agriculture, farmers began breaking sod and cultivating hundreds of thousands of acres of what had been huge fenced tracts of grassland. The search for wealth and work was already attracting a lot of people to Amarillo by the 1920s, and the city's population swelled by some 27,000 to total more than 43,000 by 1930. Amarillo was well established as the region's hub city.

In 1942 the federal government opened two installations that would have long lasting impacts on Amarillo's future: The military established an Army air field at the Amarillo airport, and the Pantex Army Ordnance Plant was built east of the city. Both were closed after the end of World War II. The air base was reactivated in 1951 and expanded to house a Strategic Air Command wing.

More than 16,000 personnel were stationed at the base when it was closed again in 1967, delivering a severe blow to Amarillo's economy. The Pantex plant reopened in 1950 and produced nuclear weapons throughout the Cold

War years. In recent years, the mission at Pantex has been to disassemble weapons and maintain the nation's nuclear stockpile.

While Amarillo's economy was closely tied to agriculture and the energy industry through much of the city's early history, it has continually become more diverse as the city has grown. The arrival of new industry helped shelter Amarillo from the effects of the boom-and-bust cycles endemic to the farming, ranching, and oil and gas businesses.

Copper refining, fiberglass production, meat packing, and many other types of manufacturing have driven much of the city's growth in recent years. In addition, Amarillo has become home to a number of central office and customer service operations employing hundreds of people in white collar jobs. As a regional medical center, Amarillo health care institutions have grown to employ some 8,000 people.

Amarillo is becoming recognized as Rotor City, USA, a center for the very latest in aviation technology, and is home to Bell Helicopter Textron's Assembly Center where the V-22 Osprey, UH-1Y, and AH-1Z are built or remanufactured.

Amarillo enters the new millennium following a full decade of solid expansion and diversification, and is well positioned to lead the region in continued growth.