

# **Salina Has An Interesting History**

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One hundred-fifty years ago, in 1858, a town that drew its riches from commerce, was established along the banks of the Smoky Hill River.

More specifically, Salina, correctly pronounced "Sa-LIE-na," saw its early settlers derive their living by hunting and trading with the American Indians and immigrants to the west. Robes and skins secured from the American Indians were hauled to Fort Leavenworth and sold.

Today's retail row along South Ninth Street, featuring such merchandisers as Target, Wal-Mart and Lowe's, is, some could argue, the natural evolution of those long-ago hunters and traders. But modern Salina is a more culturally aware, more economically diverse and population-rich retail hub for all of north-central Kansas.

Salina is the county seat of Saline (confusingly enough, pronounced Sa-LEEN) County, but by any pronunciation, our community of about 49,000 people sits in the middle of America's breadbasket. In this area, agriculture is the primary industry and wheat has been the dominant product since the middle of the last century. But in Salina, manufacturing also is key.

The first settlers were farmers, fleeing exhausted fields back East or the ravages of the Civil War. Early arrivals also included Northern Europeans -- mostly Swedes and Germans -- fleeing overcrowded homelands.

## **Off and running**

The Civil War ended. More settlers arrived. The railroad came, bringing more settlers. More railroads came loaded with still more settlers, tradesmen, professional folk, women, children and families, spawning the building of schools, colleges and churches.

The Saline and Smoky Hill rivers flooded. Each time, the town dried out and kept growing, largely to the south and west, away from the railroads and the occasionally bank-bursting Saline and Smoky Hill rivers.

World War II triggered Salina's great leap forward from a rural prairie town to a more worldly Midwestern city. Two military installations -- the temporary Army training cantonment of Camp Phillips, with a capacity of 40,000 troops, and more significantly, Smoky Hill Army Air Field -- changed the face and direction of the city. Camp Phillips closed shortly after the war and was dismantled, but Smoky Hill became Schilling Air Force Base, a strategic air command facility for B-47 bombers and refuelers. It also became the city's primary industry and fueled Salina's great housing boom of the 1950s.

The 1950s also saw the construction of a massive flood-control system of levees surrounding the town. You can walk, jog, hike and bike along a section of the levee where it crosses Crawford Street by Bill Burke Park, east of Ohio Street.

The flood of 1951 was the latest in a series of nasty soakings, and the city finally tired of toweling off. Besides the levees, a new channel was cut for the Smoky Hill River to divert its flow out of central Salina.

### **Schilling closes**

The city was more successful in controlling the elements than in reasoning with the U.S. government. In 1965, Schilling Air Force Base closed. Local leaders got Washington to give them the keys to the base, which came with plenty of buildings, warehouse-sized hangars and a main runway of more than 13,000 feet. Another 4,300-foot runway opened in 2003.

The base was converted into the Airport Industrial Center that contains a diverse mix of companies, including Salina Municipal Airport. The center is home to 80 businesses and organizations that employ about 4,100 workers with a payroll in excess of \$138 million. Salina's largest employer, Schwan's Global Supply Chain, known locally as Tony's Pizza Service, employs about 1,700 people.

Salina is known for the world's largest light bulb manufacturing plant, Philips Lighting, at 3861 S. Ninth, and the largest-volume producer of lead-acid batteries, the Exide Technologies plant at 413 E. Berg.

The city's industrial area shares south Salina with growing residential and retail neighborhoods. The city never stopped its southerly migration, leading to new interchanges along Interstate Highway 135 at Schilling, Magnolia and Water Well roads.