

## **BAXTER CELEBRATES CENTENNIAL THIS WEEK 100 YEARS**

By Megan Trotter

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Baxter will celebrate 100 years of being incorporated next week, and will be honoring their heritage all year. There are countless facets of the city's history — with enough stories about its people to fill several history books.

### **The railroad**

The little town started out as Mine Lick, but was changed to Baxter in 1902 to honor the late state Senator Jere Baxter.

“Originally the people of the Upper Cumberland were so proud of Jere Baxter they wanted to create a new county from parts of Putnam, Overton and Fentress, and name it Baxter County in his honor,” Putnam County Archivist Glenn Jones said. “That attempt failed, so they proceeded by changing the town of Mine Lick to Baxter.”

The man Baxter came into his popularity through the railroad. After the Civil War, there was a monopoly on middle Tennessee commerce by the L&N Railroad in Nashville. In order to challenge this monopoly, Baxter was in charge of building the Tennessee Central Railroad to connect Nashville and Knoxville. When L&N refused to let Tennessee Central trains to use their newly opened Union Station, Baxter ran for a seat on the Senate to try to force the issue. However, the bill was defeated, and Baxter died in 1904 of kidney disease. Despite this, his impact on the Upper Cumberland was enormous.

“The Baxter area was a rural place that wasn't on any river, like Cookeville, Monterey and Crossville. People were really isolated,” Jones said. “The Tennessee Central Railroad connected the Upper Cumberland to the rest of the country.”

### **Businesses**

The city of Baxter has long been home to family businesses — everything from grocery stores and cafes to service stations and theaters. June Swallows Lewis of Baxter remembers her family's business, The Cumberland Cafe, which her parents took over after her father's brother-in-law passed away.

“We operated the restaurant for 40 years, from early morning until we ‘rolled the streets up,’” Lewis said. “The restaurant and town were my life. I saw everyone in town, as the restaurant was the center of attraction for everyone. As Daddy always said, Baxter and the Cumberland Cafe were known from coast to coast as the home of the slogan, ‘A hamburger without cheese is like a kiss without a squeeze.’”

The cafe was host to musical jam sessions almost every week. Local musicians, school bands, and even those who went on to become Opry stars played at the business at one time or another, Lewis says.

“We purchased another building that evolved into running a successful furniture store, also for 40 years, until fire destroyed it and nearly a city block.”

The Winell Lee Mouldings and Hardwoods business in Baxter fought fire at one time as well, but bounced back and is still thriving today. It started in the 1940s by Isaac Lee, when he opened a sawmill. Since then, the business has passed on down the generations, and is still a family-run business today.

“I was in eighth grade when we moved here,” Jeanie Lee said. “I remember thinking it was just the neatest town — the mixture of what I thought Dodge City would be, and then you had all these stately buildings of the seminary. “

### **Seminary**

Baxter Seminary got its start in 1910, by a joint action of the Central Tennessee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the church’s board of education. The first graduating class contained eight students in 1914.

“The citizens and parents paid many of their donations in labor,” Lewis said. “Others contributed a certain percentage of his earnings to the building fund.”

By the time Rev. Harry L. Upperman became the seminary’s fourth president, the campus “had 12 acres, no electricity, no water — just wells — a poor furnace, and a debt of \$8,000,” Lewis added.

Upperman — for whom Baxter’s current high school is named — worked hard to further education through the Baxter Seminary.

“Dr. Upperman influenced people of wealth to give large gifts of money for the growth of Baxter Seminary,” Lewis said. “The beautiful campus became its own city, with over 12 nice two- and three-story brick buildings. There were eight residential houses, approximately 400 acres, and numerous pieces of farm machinery. In addition to the educational buildings, the barracks, dairy barns, and GI training classrooms were built.”

Students who graduated went on to become everything from doctors, preachers and lawyers to teachers, artists and musicians.

### **To the future**

The city of Baxter has been steadily growing since its birth 100 years ago, and continues to do so.

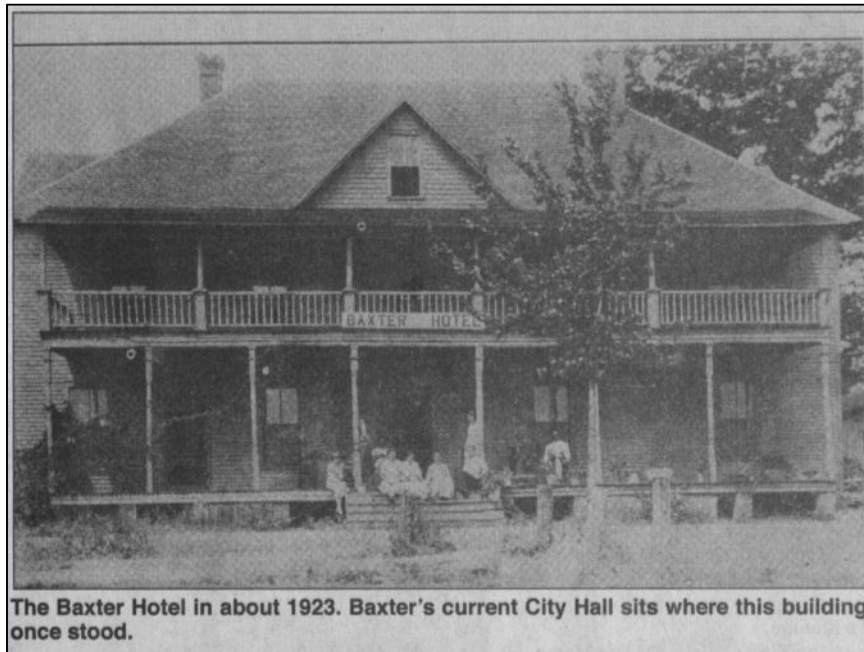
There are new businesses arriving all the time, the new Upperman Middle School that is scheduled to be completed this year, and improvements being made all over town — from road conditions to water line efficiency.

One thing is for sure — residents can look forward to the next 100 years as a time of continuing growth and improvement.

“We’ve had fires, we’ve had floods, but somehow it’s been because of really hard workers who persevere that we just rise above,” Lee said. “We just don’t give up.”

For more information on the city of Baxter, visit <http://www.cityofbaxter.com/>.

\*Read more about Baxter, Putnam Co., TN at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>



Hanging out at the Baxter Depot around 1910 are, in back, from left, Bill Dunn, Pleas Rush, Henry Lesley, unknown, and John Williams. In the middle: Will Judd, Will Sadler, Depot agent John Young, Virgil Stanton, John Lee and Mr. Brassell. In front: Arthur Judd and Lawrence Grace.