How Phil Campbell got its name

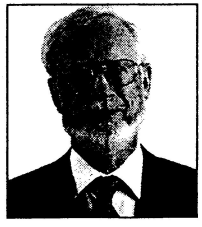
The town of Phil Campbell is the only town in the state bearing the full name of an individual. It was named in honor of Phil Campbell, a Sheffield resident who was building a railroad from Sheffield to Jasper during the late 1880s.

Campbell was born in Liverpool, England, in 1848. By 1880, he was employed as a railroad construction superintendent in Evansville, Ind. A few years later, he moved to Sheffield to supervise the construction of the Birmingham, Sheffield and Tennessee River Railroad. Campbell was appointed to the first board of aldermen for the Sheffield in 1885 and served as mayor from 1893 to 1895.

Campbell was often addressed as "Major," but nothing is known about his military service. His given name was actually Phillip, but he was commonly known as Phil according to contemporary news stories. He often signed documents as merely P. Campbell.

With blast furnaces under construction in Sheffield and Birmingham, the promoters of the new railroad dreamed of making a fortune by hauling iron ore, limestone and coal to the two industrial sites. Construction of the road began about 1885.

Campbell's contract required that the tracks from Sheffield be extended into Franklin County by a certain date with a locomotive on it. The construction gang worked furiously to finish laying the rails on time, but someone forgot to fire the steam engine. When the oversight was discovered, the deadline was about to expire. Campbell quickly gathered several yoke of oxen from nearby farms and hitched them to the locomotive. This is how the first "iron horse" entered Franklin County – in disgrace, but it was on time.



RICHARD SHERIDAN

COURTESY OF RICHARD SHERIDAN

This 1894 map shows how the railroad from Birmingham to Sheffield passed through Phil Campbell.

Mel Allen, a prominent Franklin County merchant, wanted to establish a town in the vicinity of his general store. He informed Maj. Campbell that if he would bring the railroad by the new town, it would be named in his honor. Campbell accepted Allen's offer and that is how the town of Phil Campbell came to be named for a mayor of Sheffield.

During the 1890s, a daily passenger train ran between Sheffield and Birmingham with many stops along the way. The northbound train arrived in Sheffield at 1:10 p.m. and headed south at 2:40 p.m. It reached Birmingham at 8:30 p.m. The railroad also was used to transport sandstone from Fern Quarry (near Littleville) and limestone from Rockwood (south of Russellville) to Sheffield. Campbell was listed as manager of the railroad in newspaper ads dated 1894.

The railroad company suffered many financial reverses and changed ownership a few times. It became known as the Northern Alabama Railway and ultimately was acquired by Southern Railway (now Norfolk Southern).

Philip "Phil" Campbell eventually left this area and moved to New Orleans, where he died June 30, 1932, aged 84 years and 6 months.

A nice photograph of him was recently located in Phil Campbell, and a copy is on display in Sheffield City Hall.

Richard Richard C. Sheridan of Sheffield is the author of a book on the "Deshler Female Institute" and has written many articles for history journals.