

Information for this article was retrieved from Rutherford Courier articles beginning in 1959.

By Angie Mayes

The current history of La Vergne actually begins in 1959.

From 1881 to 1958, La Vergne was a small farming community that had more animals than people. The population of the town in the 1930's was around 200 people. In 1970's census, 2000 people were counted and by 1972, there were 5,209 people in the town, prompting the Courier to call the area "one of the county's hot spots."

What turned La Vergne around and headed in its present direction was probably the formation of the Men's Club, an organization which included almost all of the men in the community, bonding together for the good of the community. From fighting for a new school to organization of the election for incorporation, the Men's Club was at the forefront of the discussion.

La Vergne as it is now known, began to take shape in 1960. A new post office with "fluorescent lighting and air conditioning was dedicated in 1960 with Sen. Estes Kefauver and other dignitaries attending the ceremonies. A.C. Puckett, who would later serve as mayor of the city, was postmaster at the time. Through the residents of the area voted incorporation down in 1961 and 1969, they approved it Feb. 1, 1972. Talk of incorporation began in 1970 when the Men's Club began discussing the matter.

"In recent years, La Vergne has presented problems only solved by an orderly government, arising from incorporation, spokesmen for the county have pointed out," wrote the Courier after the Rutherford County Court approved the incorporation of La Vergne.

THE ANNEXATION AND THE NEW GOVERNMENT

At 6 p.m. Feb. 1, 687 votes had been counted and La Vergne was once again an incorporated town. The official vote was 384-303. The citizens also decided that their government would be in the form of a City Manager and Board of Commissioners.

Three commission positions were open for the Feb. 29 election. Nearly 20 candidates vied for the three seats which were won by Vester Waldron, A.C. Puckett and C. Almond Chaney. The members voted among themselves and Waldron was named Mayor March 15. Puckett was named Vice-Mayor. Dave Bolin, current La Vergne city attorney, was named acting city manager.

Homer Kuykendall was named the first city manager in 1973 and Lafayette Barnickle was in charge of the city's recreation program.

In 1974, a measure to increase the number of commissioners to five was approved 402-81 and current alderman Jack Moore and Joe Montgomery (who retired in 1996) were elected. Chaney was reelected.

In 1976, Waldron, Puckett and Moore were all reelected. Waldron was then chosen as Mayor with Puckett as Vice Mayor. In 1978, Chaney and Montgomery were reelected.

In 1979, Kuykendall resigned as city manager stating that "Over the last few years, La Vergne has made great strides...I believe it has a great future."

The city has always been proud and that was never so evident as it was going into the 80's. "For La Vergne the 1970's has been a decade of preparation and 1980s will be the time to pull together," Waldron said. "When one reflects upon what we didn't have at the beginning of the 1970s and then asses what we have in the form of community growth and real progress, there's a lot to be proud of."

In 1980, Waldron, and Moore were reelected while Jerald Smith was elected. In 1982, Moore and Montgomery were reelected to the Council. Puckett was chosen as Mayor. A new City Hall was approved in 1982 and opened in 1983. The city paid cash for the building.

In 1982, the city also looked at annexing 4,500 acres out toward Waldron Road. Ninety percent of the residents along Rock Springs Road opposed to the measure. The city added 1,450 acres along Hollendale, Stones River Road and Sand Hill road in 1983.

By 1984, the city's population was at 6,500 people. "There will be no growth until the sewer system goes in," said Commissioner Smith. He was right, once the water and sewer were available to the city, the growth exploded.

ELECTION NOTES 3/8/84 Waldron was again chosen mayor.

Smith and Montgomery were reelected to the commission in 1986.

In 1988, the charter of the city was changed from city manager and commissioners to Mayor and Board of Alderman. Puckett and Moore were reelected while David Waldron was elected for the third commissioner spot. Since the charter and commissioner elections came at the same time, the city election to chose a board of Mayor and Alderman was to take place July 1.

Moore won the mayoral position. Philip Mankin, Puckett, Mike Webb and Montgomery were chosen as Aldermen and Puckett was named Vice Mayor.

Up to 1988, a property tax had not been necessary in the city, but with the growth in the city, city leaders found it necessary to find a way to pay for the infrastructure improvements. Montgomery was the only alderman to oppose the ordinance, siting that he didn't thing that the city needed the funds; after all, they'd built a new city hall, police station and miles of roads and paid cash for all of them. If the aldermen could justify the need, he'd vote for it, Montgomery said.

Over 100 residents attended the meeting for the second reading of the approval of the property tax. After it passed, it was announced that the rate -- 60 cents on each \$100 worth of property -- was to go into effect January 1. The current tax rate is 54 cents per \$100 (reduced in 1992).

In 1989, Shirley Winfee, the first female alderman was chosen. Montgomery was reelected to the post.

This year also marked the beginnings of internal turmoil among city officials, elected and hired, which would last for the next few years. Each week's Courier reported more and different details of statements, rebuttals and meetings about the administration.

In November of 1989, a petition, led by Richard Norris stated that they wanted the tax collection, personnel director and executive administrator's positions abolished. It would save the city \$100,000 they said. High water and tax rates were cited as the reasons for the dismissal of those positions. Moore stated that some of the signatures on the petition were forced.

Former codes enforcer Bobby Daingerfield filed a suit against the city, the mayor and the board for violating the Public Employment Freedom Act of 1980 and the Tennessee State Sunshine Law, stating the Mayor and Board of Alderman violated his right to free speech.

In 1990, Winfree, Doyle Martin and Moore announced plans to run for Mayor. Winfree won in a record turnout, taking 51.5 percent of the votes.

Webb and Tom Brewer won in the Aldermen slots. With Winfree's win, one seat on the Board was available, left to the Board of Mayor and Aldermen to appoint. Richard Norris was chosen as that person.

In October, 1990, Winfrey, who had cast the deciding vote to make her the city coordinator, dismissed herself from that post to "avoid state violations." The position was also dismissed at that time.

In November, 1990, former city administrator Tom Garrett sued Winfree and the city for \$500,000, stating that his constitutional rites had been violated. He was fired the same day that Winfree took office. He wanted his job back plus \$250,000 from La Vergne and \$250,000 from Winfree. He said he was fired because he supported Moore in the election. The week prior Daingerfield's suit had been settled.

In November, 1990, the state comptroller's office's audit uncovered possible wrongdoing by the city, stating that more than \$600,000 was mishandled. Sewer fees may not have been collected all meeting notes were not kept properly and there were various conflicts of interest in the administration.

By June, 1991, La Vergne projected \$500,000 worth of road repairs and despite the numbers, the property tax was not raises.

A Community development Committee was formed in November, with members including Winfree, Nancy Oxley and current Alderman David Fleming. In December, the city was given the National Guard's City of Excellence award.

In March of 1992, a group of 20 people called the City of La Vergne together (COLT) wanted Winfree ousted. They filed a suit in Rutherford County Chancery Court, stating that she used her post for personal gain.

In May, Winfree cast the deciding vote to raise her salary from \$22,000 to over \$30,000. She cited working 40 - 60 hours per week, doing the mayoral and city administrator duties as the cause/need for the raise.

For quite a while the board of alderman vote could be predicted with Brewer and Norris usually voting with Winfree's wishes and Webb and Montgomery voting against or abstaining on the vote. The turning point in the balance came in October of 1992 when Montgomery was reelected and current alderman Mark Dodd beat Norris.

Shortly after the election, Winfree was "stripped of certain duties," according to the Courier. In front of a standing room only crowd, the board passed that the assistant to the mayor position was not an assistant to the board position and that all personnel decision were to come before the board. Webb stated that one person should not be allowed to hire and fire at will.

"I want us as a team to move forward and get away from this animosity we have toward each other," Montgomery said. "I think that we're getting things in order and we need to work together."

The next week, Winfree reinstated the pay of Don Burton and Tim McEvers, police officers who were suspended without pay Oct. 15 by city personnel director Jim Ruddell and Police Chief Mike Patrick. The officers had allegedly allowed an armed civilian to "ride along" with them in public. Winfree stated that the suspension was politically motivated and at a special meeting, the two officers' pay was reinstated.

In November, Burton and McEvers were fired in separate 3-2 votes. In December, Winfree in turn fired Ruddell and Patrick; rehiring Burton and appointing him to chief. McEvers was made assistant chief.

"As long as we're fighting, the whole community is losing," Montgomery again stated, trying get the problems resolved.

The motion, as expected, went to court and Christmas Eve, 1992, the Courier reported that Ruddell and Patrick were to be hired back due to the court ruling. The Court said that Winfree had no authority to hire and fire. A lawsuit pending the rehiring of Burton and McEvers was pending.

Current city administrator Dan Briddle, who had been serving as temporary in that post, was given that job full time in June of 1994. Briddle had been an officer with LPD prior to his moving to city hall. At LPD, he had, among other things, helped the department be named the #1 department in the state in terms of quality percentage numbers in 1991.

In Feb. 1993, Ruddell was confronted by Winfree and accused of misconduct of buying beer in a city truck. He claimed it occurred on company time. "Tempers flare in La Vergne, Mayor, alderman collide on issued during board meeting," was the headline on the Feb. 11 Courier as the fight continued.

Burton presented to a grand jury a list of seven charges versus La Vergne officials (including three alderman) June 9, 1994. On June 23, he was indicted on weapons charges and making false statements to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms concerning purchase and resale of four semi-automatic weapons over a three year period.

“La Vergne and Shirley Canceled” was the headline on the Rutherford Courier as Webb defeated Winfree in the 1994 mayoral election. Webb took 43.5 percent of the votes. Joe Phillips was second, Winfree third and John King fourth. Montgomery and Fleming won the aldermen election.

In October, 1996, Montgomery retired from officer after 23 years of service. Fifty of Montgomery’s friends and relatives gathered at the board meeting to say goodbye to the political figure.

“He’s been a 20 year friend of mine,’ Webb said.

Patrick agreed. “He’s been a steadying factor on the board and has tried to work with whomever was elected. He’s done a lot for the city.”

In November, Sherry Green took the oath of office as the city’s second female alderman.