

## *Founding our Town Government* Minden's original charter and amendments

This Echo of our Past involves a little bit of history of the formal incorporation of Minden as a town, and a look at some of the more unusual town ordinances that remained on the books well into the 20th century. The town of Minden was recognized as a city in April 1926.

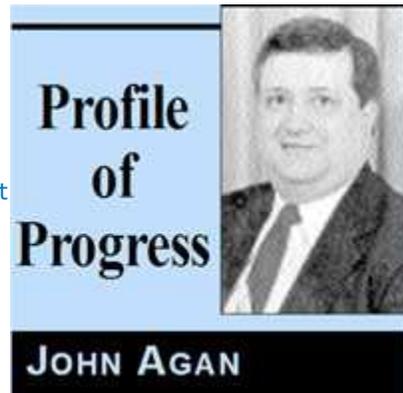
The next year, 1927, the city government published a revised version of the city charter and ordinances, including the original charter as currently amended and all ordinances remaining from the town era that still carried the weight of law. Today's column will examine that volume, and what it tells of the formal founding of Minden and how it gives a glimpse into life in the past here, through the types of activities the town government found necessary to regulate.

### Incorporation

Although the settlement of Minden was laid out in the shape of a parallelogram by Charles Veeder in 1836, formal incorporation as a town didn't occur until nearly 15 years later. Act 102 of the Louisiana Legislature of 1850, was approved on March 18, 1850, incorporating the town of Minden. While the town was then officially recognized by the state, no government was formed and no city charter was approved. In the aftermath of the Louisiana Constitution of 1852 (the third Louisiana Constitution to be in effect in less than 10 years), a supplement, Act 59 of 1853, passed on March 10, 1853, created a city charter and outlined the boundaries of the community and the essentials of town government. Minden was to include all of Sections 21, 22, 27 and 28 of Range 19 North, Township 9 West; a perfect square. The center point where these Sections met was the site of Drake's Store, the location of today's Drake Building. The city government was to be elected annually on the first Saturday of May and include a mayor and five aldermen. Power to operate the government and create whatever institutions necessary was given to these officials. Specific references were made to the authority to select a constable and to be responsible for public education in the city. This original charter was amended on four occasions and remained in effect until 1902, when it was rewritten. Let's look at some of the provisions of this charter and the accompanying ordinances that seem odd or interesting to us in the modern era; each of which were still in effect when Minden became a city in 1926.

### The City Market

Section 13 of the 1902 charter revision required that the city, ". . . establish and maintain market place for sale of meats, vegetables and produce, and to lease same, and fix rented value of stalls in said markets, and to regulate private markets." While we still have a "city market" in the summers, it is interesting that the city was in the grocery business, at least as a landlord, by requirement of law well into this century. This addition was at least partially caused by the move for increased public health that accompanied the Progressive Movement in the early Twentieth Century. That movement led to Dr. Luther Longino



being named town health officer - a role previously included in the duties of the Parish Coroner.

City Ordinance 9 dealt with disorderly conduct and included some intriguing language in its definition. Among these definitions were: "attending church drunk AND disturbing any of the congregation." So it was okay to be at church drunk so long as you were a quiet drunk. Also prohibited was "quarreling at church at any time of worship, or church business or gatherings of public worship." So much for the Baptist tradition of spirited business meetings. A final provision of this act, still on the books in 1926, prohibited riding a horse into any home or business in Minden. Apparently, mule riders did not present a problem in regard to invasion of structures.

#### Limited Fun

Another interesting facet of these ordinances was the many references to Veeder's original parallelogram as a special section in the city ordinances. The 1836 section was considered by these ordinances to define "downtown Minden" and the laws in downtown placed stricter limitations on behavior. For example, Ordinance 11, prohibited: "running or rapid driving of horses or mules on the parallelogram, streets, and alleys of the Town of Minden." While Ordinance 13, prohibited camping with a fire, but only within the parallelogram and on Union Street. Notice that "fast" mules seemed to be a problem along with horses.

Ordinance 15, if enforced, probably limited the fun of many children growing up in Minden in those years as it provided that: "any person throwing shot, rocks or other missiles with an elastic thrower within the town of Minden, shall on conviction be fined not less than two dollars and fifty cents nor more than twenty dollars and cost and in default of payment imprisoned at the discretion of the Court not to exceed thirty days for each offense." With a thirty-day penalty, I guess it was best to use the old style arm powered slingshots in Minden. However, that was probably covered by Ordinance 16, which applied a similar penalty for "careless or promiscuous throwing of rocks, stones or other missiles." However, the minimum fine for throwing was only one dollar. Again the wonderful technical language of ordinances. It seems that careful and moral throwing of rocks was fine.

#### Animal Cruelty

More serious was the crime outlined in Ordinance 20, which provided: "That any person who shall tie or any way attach to a horse, mule, cow, hog, dog or any other animal a tin box or anything that is calculated to frighten or annoy the same, on the Parallelogram, or any other streets, alleys or sidewalks of the Town of Minden, shall on conviction be fined not less than five dollars . . ." Today, such specific language would probably be lumped into a generic "disturbing the peace" ordinance, but clearly this prank had gotten to be a major problem in our town requiring direct legal proscription.

#### Vagrancy

Based on Town Ordinance 24, which defined vagrancy, Minden was not a very good place to be a "Mr. Mom." Among those considered vagrants, along with those "wandering the streets with no visible means of support," "habitual drunkards," and "female street walkers," were "all persons able

to work who have not work or occupation and who live on the wages of their minor children or wives." I wonder if there were every any arrests under that provision of the local law.

While the earlier Ordinance 20, listed a 5-dollar fine for tying a tin box to animals, Ordinance 29, placed only a minimum fine of two dollars and fifty cents for tying a can to a dog, under the definition of malicious mischief. That could be an important point a trial. I can almost hear the late Johnny Cochran, "Your honor, my client tied a square tin can, not a box to that dog, so you must acquit."

#### Drunkenness

Public drunkenness was the subject of Ordinance 36, which again had some interesting language as to what level of drunkenness required incarceration. Section Two of this ordinance required that: "Any person being drunk or intoxicated for 2 or 3 days within the limits of the Town of Minden may be arrested by the Marshall or any policeman and placed in the lockup and kept from drinking strong drink until sober at the expense of the Town, if such cannot be made out of the party." Poor Otis from Mayberry would have been out of luck in Minden, after his Saturday night binge. He would have been required to make it through another day inebriated before getting his free room. As for determining when one met the "qualifications" of the law, I have to wonder if a system like that used for abandoned cars on the highways was in place. The drunk was tagged when he was noticed with a dated notice and if he was still drunk two days later he was hauled into jail.

Town Ordinance Forty-One was another outgrowth of the concern over public health issues and dealt with public sanitation, covering issues ranging from dealing with disposing of dead animals to banning spitting on floors in buildings and on public sidewalks. The concern about spitting is made clear by Section sixteen of this ordinance which required: "Cuspidors must be provided in all public buildings in this Town in sufficient numbers for the convenience of occupants of said building and for the public; each said cuspidor must be emptied and washed out daily with an approved disinfectant and six ounces of said disinfectant shall be left in said cuspidor while it is in use." I certainly would not have wanted to be the inspector charged with measuring that six ounces requirement.

#### Traffic Laws

I will leave you with a couple of City Ordinances in place in 1926 that dealt with a modern device, the automobile. Ordinance 54 contained the driving rules for the City of Minden. In those days before state drivers licenses, Minden required you must be 17 years of age to operate a vehicle on the city streets in Section forty-one of Ordinance 54. If an underage driver were caught, the parent would be arrested. Speed limits were set by sections thirty and thirty-one. Trucks were limited to 10 miles per hour in the business district and 12 miles in other areas of town. Automobiles could zoom by at 15 miles per hour in downtown and up to 22 miles an hour in the rest of town, except in curves and dangerous points where 10 mph was the limit. Later in the 1920s, the speed of drivers in Minden would become such a concern locally that a newspaper call for stricter enforcement was picked up and repeated by the Shreveport Journal. Looking at the posted limits, I wonder what would happen to our Police Department revenue if that echo of our past were to be revived today.

*John Agan is a local historian, an Instructor at Bossier Parish Community College, and a published author.*