



City Of Wichita – Previous City Managers

Bert C. Wells (August 1, 1927-April 10, 1939)



Born: July 19, 1880 - Sheridan, Indiana

Died: September 2, 1948 - Hertzler Hospital, Halstead, KS

Interred: [Maple Grove Cemetery](#)

Mr. B.C. Wells, took office immediately upon Mr. Elliott's resignation, on August 1, 1927. He was 47 years old. He was educated at Friends University in Wichita and at Haverford College, receiving the A.B. degree from both institutions. He had been a resident of Wichita since the old mayor-council and commission days when he served the city as city engineer from 1907 until 1917, with the exception of a period of ten years when he served as city manager of El Dorado, Kansas from 1917-1927. He was a member of the Friends (Quaker) Church; the International City Managers Association which he served as first vice-president and chairman or member of several important committees; the American Society of Civil Engineers; the Kansas Engineers Society; Public Health Nursing Association; the Board of Friends University of which he was vice-president; and until he assumed the city managership of Wichita, Kiwanis.

Mr. Wells was employed at a salary of \$8,000, a salary which was reduced by state statute in 1933 to \$6,000.

Mr. Wells seemed to have every quality necessary for a successful city administrator if his long tenure and public popularity were indicative of anything. The Atchison Globe in nominating him for governor in 1938 said that he is a "practical, sensible, wholesome administrator of public affairs. He has poise and congeniality and looks forward; yet his feet never leave the ground. He has only one deficiency. He doesn't know how to make a speech. But if Kansas wants a governor who knows how to economize without being stingy, who knows how to handle men and who knows what a dollar is worth, B.C. Wells is the man to consider."

This description hardly did Mr. Wells justice. He was a truly fine gentleman. He was quiet, well-trained and above all, extremely honest and conscientious. Straight-forward and fair in all his dealings, Mr. Wells had built up a loyalty among his department heads and employees that was remarkable. They were unanimous in their praise of his contribution to the advancement of Wichita. From taxi driver to university president nothing but commendation was heard regarding this man. The worse enemies of manager government admitted that he was honest and that he made a good city manager. One of the eldest residents in the community, a former official in commission days and still a supporter of commission government went as far as to say that the success of city manager government in Wichita could be laid directly to Mr. Wells. "It's Wells and Wells alone." One of his department heads remarked that Mr. Wells had "proved to be a marvelous balance wheel." Another said, "Mr. Wells has made a wrong decision perhaps, but I never knew him to." Another, "He doesn't permit rifts and dissatisfaction to continue if they occur." A commissioner said, "We have a fine departmental organization (look at fire and police) and it can be laid to Wells' feet and Wells' alone. He did it. He should get twice the salary he does." A university president reported that Wichita had one of the best governments in the United States because of men like Wells and Wilson. There can be little doubt of the high regard and esteem that Wichitans held for their city manager.

In spite of the high praise from all quarters regarding himself and his administration, Mr. Wells remained entirely in the background in his modest, retiring way. He had been an inconspicuous administrator. In an effort to show its appreciation, the commission in 1935 voluntarily gave Mr. Wells a ninety-day vacation on full pay of which he took only thirty days. He was honored in 1933 by an invitation from the Oberlander Trust to be one of two city managers in the United States to visit Germany and study municipal government there at

the expense of the trust. He did not accept although Mr. Wilson, chief of police, made the trip.

In 1936, Mr. Wells announced that he would not be a candidate for reappointment. "I feel that my work here is completed. I took office when the fire department was badly disorganized and torn with internal strife. The apparatus was old and inadequate. During my term three new fire stations have been built and the men in the department are second to none and all are working in harmony. The police department was poorly housed all over the city hall and was far from ideal in personnel, morale, and equipment. Now the comment is quite common, here and abroad, that Wichita has one of the best police departments in the United States. In engineering, we have built two canal bridges, three bridges across the Arkansas River and four across the Little Arkansas River. Also a sewage disposal plant has been built. The channel of the Arkansas River has been straightened and widened. A fine baseball stadium has been built and a modern milk ordinance put into effect."

This modest recital of accomplishments didn't begin to touch on the progress made under Mr. Wells' guidance. Nevertheless, his resignation immediately became Wichita's concern. Some 300 petitions from civic clubs and groups urged him to reconsider. Newspapers noted how city affairs had been put on a strictly business basis in strong articles supporting Mr. Wells. San Diego, California offered him the managership at \$15,000, which he promptly turned down and finally withdrew his resignation. The commission was all for him and voted him the ninety-day vacation mentioned above. Mr. Wells' own statement was that "I'd rather leave in a blaze of glory than to peter out since I felt I had contributed about all I could." Apparently the citizens of Wichita did not agree with his conclusions.

Mr. Wells' contempt for politics was evident on all occasions where this question arose. The lack of it can be best shown by the conduct of the police and fire departments in recruiting. These departments were now free from politics as were all city departments. This was a far cry from the situation as it existed in commission days.

His relations with the press had always been cordial but reserved and needless to say, strained, during the months of the *Beacon* attacks on the city administration. However, those relations had returned to normal and Mr. Wells' door was always open to the press or anyone else who had business with him.

He had a strictly professional viewpoint. A table outside his office held recent copies of municipal periodicals. His leadership in professional organizations has been previously noted. He urged his department heads to attend professional meetings.

Mr. Wells had no public relations department. His interest had been to dramatize the progress of the city not through elaborate newspaper articles, speeches or city functions, but rather through a quiet but aggressive plan of giving maximum service to the citizens of Wichita at a minimum of expense. What his department heads did to acquaint the citizens of the service their department rendered, he considered the problem of the department head. As a result the police department had been especially active in this regard. They had prepared many exhibits relating to traffic, marijuana, and crime detection, which had been viewed by thousands of city visitors.

Mr. Wells rarely made a speech and to our knowledge had never been heard to speak upon controversial city policies publicly. He usually issued an annual report having missed three years in the last ten. Mr. Clarence E. Ridley's comment on a Wichita was pertinent. "Wichita is noted for its good municipal reports, but this issue easily eclipses all former ones. It has pretty nearly everything a good report should have. The paper, type, and entire make-up are perfect, and with a few more charts the illustrative material also would have reached the coveted goal. Two features deserve special praise and usually neglected in most cities.

1. Emphasis on significant statements.
2. Table of comparative rates for offenses known to police."

Those were Mr. Ridley's comments in regard to the report for the year 1931.

Mr. Wells made no special effort to maintain good public relations other than through the simple medium of

courtesy and friendliness and demanding that municipal employees employ these tactics at all times. The most casual complaint by the collaborator to the manager's secretary about the discourtesy of two health department employees was brought to the attention of the city manager and led immediately to a personal reprimand. "We can't have that in the city hall," he said of the matter later.

He withdrew from Kiwanis in order not to be liable for any possible criticism of partiality or narrow interests.

His public relations policy had been one of "efficient motion" rather than one of "publicity."

Justifiable criticism or any at all for that matter had been kept to a minimum. The managing editor of the *Beacon* said, "Wells is honest but has too little fire and is too conservative...a tight old Scotchman." In the same breath he pointed out that Chief Wilson was a nephew of city manager Wells, a story begun by the *Beacon* in 1932 during its attacks and having absolutely no basis. Mr. Wells never heard of Wilson until he was recommended by August Vollmer. Commissioner Israel, while he said that Wells is a fine, honest and efficient man and right nine out of ten times, felt that he was wrong that other time. "For years here, people have had so much confidence in Wells that the commission never took trouble to discuss matters. I don't think that's what the commission is for." Perhaps those men were right, but in the light of the other evidence, it was entirely logical to believe that their viewpoints had been colored by other factors. At all events the criticism was very minor and that of a small minority.

One is of the opinion that, while Mr. Wells was an extremely practical man, he had a broader view of community needs than had some members of his commission. For instance a point of dissension of late had been the operation of a market through the cooperation of truckers and nearby tradespeople. Mr. Wells was strongly of the opinion that such a plan would be of distinct benefit to the community and its citizens while Commissioner Crawford, a grocer, supported by Israel and Corn felt that this was unfair to the grocery men of the city. Many people were of the opinion that Commissioner Crawford should withdraw from a discussion and vote on this question since he was economically interested in the outcome.

Undoubtedly, the manager was an excellent judge of men. Death seemed to be the greatest cause for separation from the service at the present time, particularly in the administrative positions. The department head who had not held office for at least ten years was the exception.

Mr. Wells' excellent administration had been accomplished in spite of several major handicaps two of which stood out and a third that was proving to be a growing menace to good government.

The first was the major economic depression which his administration weathered in excellent shape. Employees cooperated by accepting salary cuts and Mr. Wells said he had not heard a single dissenting vote in this regard. Expenditures were cut to a minimum without hampering or impairing services through cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce tax committee. This committee sought to cut taxes of the city, county and Board of Education. Good planning and farsightedness prevented Wichita from undergoing the hardships through which many other American cities passed in these difficult times.

The second major battle of the administration was one with the publishers of the *Beacon* in 1932 and 1933. This has been related in Chapter III, page 34 (*City Manager Government in Wichita, Kansas*), but needless to say that the Wells' administration was completely exonerated of any of the charges hurled at it in the bitter denunciation of the *Beacon*. Public support was even forthcoming as the citizens of Wichita arose in their approval of their city government.

The third obstacle to good government in Wichita had arisen within the past year, namely the attitude on the part of Commissioners Crawford and Israel towards the commission's relationship with the administration. Mr. Wells had become very disgusted over the existing situation which is discussed at length in Chapter V, page 74 (*City Manager Government in Wichita, Kansas*). He felt that the present commission was the poorest in years and his resignation could be expected at any time according to his statement.

(Bert C. Wells was the current manager at the time the City Manager Government in Wichita, Kansas was written - he retired right before the book was published.)

Other Interesting Facts

He was of Quaker heritage and came to Sedgwick County as a youth with his parents in the late 1890s.

After graduating from Friends University, he received a scholarship to attend Haverford College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he graduated in 1904.

Married the former Sara Shoemaker at Indianapolis, August 7, 1904.

He taught at Oakwood School in New York and Corinth Academy in Virginia before returning to Wichita where he taught school at Wichita for two years.

He quit teaching and worked as City Engineer for Wichita (1909-1918).

He later served as city manager of El Dorado until 1921 and City Manager of Atchison (1921-1927) before returning to Wichita to become City Manager.

In 1939, he retired as Wichita city manager and bought a farm eight miles east of Wichita.

On January 23, 1956, the Wichita Board of Education approved drawings and specifications presented by Robert S. Mayberry, architect, for a new elementary school to be constructed at 3601 S. Pattie. The new building was needed as new houses were rapidly being built in the area south of Wilson School. Construction began on February 16, 1956, and the building was completed on September 18, 1956. The Board of Education chose to name the new building Bert C. Wells Elementary School.
