

“The Father of the Dogwood Festival”



JAMES EDWARD WHEAT

January 6, 1887 - October 10, 1968

The Growth of the Tyler County Dogwood Festival

The Tyler County Dogwood Festival, the oldest outdoor historical pageant in the South, is a continuing tribute to its founder, James W. Wheat. It calls attention to the beauties of the area in story, pageant and song. In the spring of 1938, when the dogwoods were in bloom, James E. Wheat arranged a meeting near the Polk and Tyler County line of a group of the state's leading citizens whose aid he hoped to enlist in promoting the completion of U.S. Highway 190. His guests, from other parts of the state, were so impressed with the natural beauty of East Texas that Jim Wheat hit upon the idea of an annual event which would focus attention on the area when "It's Dogwood Time in Tyler County." On the night of Saturday, April 6, 1940 the first Dogwood Festival was presented by some thirty people to an audience of 300 in a small amphitheater on the grounds of the Woodville school. From the day he had the idea until the day he died, Jim Wheat was President and major promoter of the project which he so ambitiously started. He was born, raised and spent virtually all his life in Tyler County. He was a leader in his own community in school,

municipal, church and civic endeavors. In state and national circles he reached the highest levels of success in the legal profession as Chairman of the Democratic Party in Texas, the first Chairman for the forerunner of the Texas Historical Commission, an early reformer of the Texas Prison System, and in other varied capacities. He received citations and accolades from all sides, yet he often stated that his greatest satisfaction was the success of the Tyler County Dogwood Festival. He liked to say in the bulletin each year that the Festival indicates "what can be done in small towns where there is a spirit of good will and broadminded appreciation of the cultural and esthetic values of life which enables people to work together for the common good." That was Jim Wheat's "ethic", his "Citizens Creed".

We are fondly reminded of it and of him each year when we realize that once again, "It's Dogwood Time in Tyler County."