



At left, a horse-drawn carriage transports patrons of Red Oak's home and tea tour. At right, the Wilson Performing Arts Center hosts a variety of entertainment. Photos by Laura Kloewer, courtesy of Red Oak Chamber & Industry Association

# Red Oak

## Rich history abounds on the banks of Red Oak Creek

By Ashley Rullestad

Located in Iowa's southwest corner in Montgomery County, Red Oak is a town with a rich history in military, railroads and calendars. It derives its name from Red Oak Creek, which flows through the community and is named for the red oaks on its banks. The first settlers there arrived in the mid-1850s.

Red Oak became the official county seat of Montgomery County in 1865. The county was formed in 1851 and named after Revolutionary War hero Richard Montgomery. It was in those early days that the county experienced rapid growth, with its peak population of 17,803 recorded in the 1900 U.S. census.

The railroad arrived in Red Oak in 1869 and that's when the town's growth began to boom. With the arrival of the railroad, Red Oak became a frenzy of activity. The population of Montgomery County tripled in size between 1870 and 1880. Red Oak became the trade center for the area with industries such as meat-packing, a brewery, a glove factory, buggy manufacturing, a cannery, flour mills and a brick-and-tile works.

Today, visitors can experience Red Oak's impressive

collection of turn-of-the-century homes by taking the Historic Heritage Hill Tour, which reflects the wealth the railroad brought to the area from the 1870s to 1916. Because of the railroad, luxury building materials like stone, marble and granite could be delivered more easily from other parts of the country. The size of the home made a statement as to the financial success of the owner and everyone wanted to be seen as the biggest and the best.

Red Oak has a proud military history. It is said that in the American Civil War, the area provided more Union troops per capita than any other in the state. During World War I, Red Oak's Company M went to the front lines with a full strength of 250 men. After brave fighting, Company M suffered a staggering 160 casualties with 52 soldiers killed in action.

The town has a particularly strong and moving connection with World War II history, too. Red Oak gained national notoriety after the town lost more of its sons, per capita, in the war than that of any other community in the United States. Residents would gather daily at Red Oak's

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A Community of Opportunities



Photo courtesy of Tj Clark



## History

Red Oak is a community firmly rooted with rich traditions of growing industry, embracing worthwhile projects, celebrating history and caring for fellow citizens. Walk, bicycle, or drive the Heritage Hill Tour as it guides you through the community's vast collection of Victorian era homes, its historic downtown, and other local treasures like the community's Carnegie Library, the Murphy Calendar Company, the Chautauqua Pavilion, the Burlington Northern Depot WWII Museum, and much more. Finish your adventure at the alluring Montgomery County History Center where all your questions about Red Oak's prosperous past can be answered, and a new chapter can begin. Come help Red Oak celebrate its Sesquicentennial (150 years) celebration from Thursday, June 27th to Sunday, June 30th during Red Oak Junction Days – Montgomery County's largest celebration. There's fun for the whole family!

## Arts & Culture

Red Oak is becoming Southwest Iowa's next arts destination. In 2009 the Wilson Performing Arts Center opened its doors which brought to the area a resurgence of arts and culture. With a growing community of artists, Red Oak is becoming a popular destination during the Southwest Iowa Art Tour in September. Even new businesses catering to the arts are finding their homes in Red Oak's historic downtown. This addition of the arts compliments Red Oak's expansive music tradition of singers, songwriters, and groups of every genre. From the bygone sound of Ivan Smith's Red Oak Rockets to Steve Horner's award-winning soundtrack in 2018, Red Oak has long been known for its vast array of musicians. Whether you're a musician, a painter, or digital artist, come experience Red Oak as the community designs a new future forward.

## Innovation & Restoration

Red Oak is actively reinventing itself as the beautiful rural community many families are desiring. With Victorian homes being restored to their former beauty, the historic downtown being revitalized with new business storefronts and modern second story apartments, the Red Oak Community School District building a new campus, the community's recreational trails actively expanding, fiber-optic internet lines being pushed through the ground, and a growing entrepreneurial culture arising; Red Oak is entering a new Renaissance.

Visit [www.redoakiowa.com](http://www.redoakiowa.com) for more info, follow [@RedOakChamber](https://twitter.com/RedOakChamber) on social media, or contact the office via phone or e-mail!



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A photograph of downtown Red Oak, circa 1940s. Photo courtesy of Red Oak Iowa Photos Old and New, Facebook

Presented in the Interest of Good Citizenship  
BY  
**THE THOS. D. MURPHY CO.**  
RED OAK, IOWA  
THE BIRTHPLACE OF ART CALENDARS

DECEMBER 1949							1950							FEBRUARY 1950						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
							1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4			
4	5	6	7	8	9	10	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
18	19	20	21	22	23	24	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
25	26	27	28	29	30	31	29	30	31					26	27	28				

Thomas D. Murphy founded the internationally acclaimed Murphy Calendar Co. in Red Oak.

Johnson Hotel to await and exchange news about the war. Indeed, one particularly tragic day – March 6, 1943 – more than 100 telegrams arrived bearing news of Red Oak soldiers missing in action.

Remembrance and reverence for the sacrifices of those soldiers is an integral part of Red Oak’s community and history. In 1961, community members began flying flags to remember the fallen and those who had served, with 52 flags flown that first year. Now, during each Memorial Day and Veterans Day, more than 1,500 flags, donated by the families of war veterans, fly at Red Oak’s Evergreen Cemetery. The Montgomery County Court of Honor, which stores the flags, sponsors special ceremonies during each day of remembrance.

Red Oak is also known as the birthplace of the decorative picture calendar. In 1888, Edmond Osborne and Thomas D. Murphy purchased a woodcut of the Montgomery County Courthouse and to offset the cost they sold advertising around the picture and added a calendar pad. Because of their venture, Red Oak became known as the birthplace of the art calendar industry. The Thomas D. Murphy Calendar Co. was in existence for more than 100 years before closing. Because of the company’s history and because at least one copy of each calendar the company printed has been preserved, Murphy’s calendars have become coveted and valuable collector’s items.

The Wilson Performing Arts Center, a state-of-the-art facility, attracts regional performing artists. It includes an auditorium, a spacious lobby for exhibits, classrooms and studios for music rehearsals and dance.

Speaking of entertainers, a number of notable people hail from Red Oak and perhaps the most famous is Johnny Carson, the iconic former host of television's "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson." Carson, who hosted the show on NBC from 1962 until his retirement in 1992, was the man millions of Americans tuned into every night for decades to be entertained at the end of the day.

In recognition of his 25th anniversary on "The Tonight Show," Carson received a personal Peabody Award, the board saying he had "become an American institution, a household word, [and] the most widely quoted American." They also said they "felt the time had come to recognize the contributions that Johnny has made to television, to humor, and to America."

#### **HISTORICAL ATTRACTIONS IN RED OAK**

##### **Montgomery County Courthouse (105 Coolbaugh St.)**

The Montgomery County Courthouse, completed in 1890 with red limestone in the Romanesque Revival design, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It stands three-and-a-half stories tall, was built for \$100,000 and is considered one of the best Victorian Romanesque courthouses in Iowa.

##### **Red Oak Public Library (400 N. Second St.)**

In 1907, the Carnegie Foundation announced that \$12,500 would be available to communities for the construction of libraries. The town was responsible for securing a building site and project support. The library opened its doors in 1909.

##### **CB&Q Depot (305 S. Second St.)**

In 1903, the CB&Q (Chicago, Burlington & Quincy) Railroad Depot was built, linking Red Oak to more urban communities. It was re-dedicated in 2003 on its 100th anniversary. Today, it serves as a museum celebrating the community's significant military heritage, including a World War II Memorial Museum that commemorates those who served in Company F and Company M. Both units were part of the 168th Infantry Regiment, 34th "Red Bull" Infantry Division. The depot is one of nine places in Montgomery County on the National Register of Historic Places listings in Montgomery County.

##### **The Chautauqua Pavilion (E. Oak and N. 8th)**

The Chautauqua Pavilion located in Chautauqua Park, built in 1907, is the largest covered pavilion west of the Mississippi River and is also listed on the National Historic Register. Speakers on the inaugural program included orator and politician William Jennings Bryan, social reformer Jane Addams, Wisconsin Gov. Robert M. La Follette and evangelist Gipsy Smith. ■

*(Ashley Rullestad lives with her husband Todd and children Merin and Henry in Ankeny. She is a freelance writer for a variety of central Iowa publications, including Iowa History Journal.)*



**The Montgomery County Courthouse in Red Oak was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1981 and is part of the Red Oak Downtown Historic District.** Photo by Laura Kloewer, courtesy of Red Oak Chamber & Industry Association



**The Heritage Hill Tour showcases Red Oak's impressive collection of historic homes.** Photo by Laura Kloewer, courtesy of Red Oak Chamber & Industry Association