**Dover, Arkansas, USA**

Dover around the World by Lorraine Sencicle

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Highway 7 picture provided by Chuck Haralson,

Arkansas State Parks and Tourism Photographer

In 1803 the United States purchased a vast region in North America from France. This territory comprised of much of the central part of present-day US including Arkansas. At the time the Caddo, Osage and Quapaw American Indians, usually given the incorrect general name of Cherokee, had a vast complex of sophisticated villages in the area but when the colonists arrived, they moved on.

In a horseshoe shaped valley, with the towering Ozarks Mountains to the north and the rich Arkansas River valley flatlands to the south, Joseph Brearly arrived in the early 19th century. Why he called the community Dover, no one knows.

Dover flourished because it was the wagon train route to the west but like much of Arkansas, it was lawless. In the American Civil War (1861-1865) the folk sided with the Confederates. The Unionists won and following the conflict Dover was occupied by a small Unionist garrison. One of the locals shot the officer in charge and a riot ensued and 800 troops were sent in to quell the insurrection. This they did, but they also commandeered everything of value and lawlessness took on a new dimension. The situation was to last three years until the personal intervention of the Governor when peace eventually come to the town.

After that Dover quickly grew as it was on a major east-west trade route. Then in the 1870s the railway came. Unfortunately for Dover, it bypassed by some 10 miles and the town went into slow decline. This was exacerbated in 1931 when a fire destroyed much of the town, including many historic buildings.

By the 1960s, the population was 600 but it is now around 1,400. They are amongst the poorest of all the Dover's, in the US that I have looked at, with 10.6% of families below the poverty line.

Nonetheless, they feel strongly about their community and their beliefs. In 1995 two families, one Catholic and one Mormon, took on the US Constitution by arguing that a public prayer should be allowed before school football matches. The Supreme Court, however, did not agree.


Ronald Simmons

Moreover, the town has also gained infamy for it was here that Ronald Simmons committed mass murder at Christmas 1987. Simmons was a hard drinking retired US Airforce sergeant who had, seven years previously, lived with his wife and large family in New Mexico. There he was reported as having an incestuous relationship with his oldest daughter, Sylvia Gail. When she became pregnant, Simmons was called to account and he and his family disappeared. They resurfaced in Dover, Arkansas in a remote, densely wooded area and kept themselves to themselves.

On the morning of 22nd December 1987, Simmons shot his wife and youngest son and then strangled his three-year-old daughter. He dumped their bodies in a cesspool. When four of his other children returned home from school that day, Simmons told them he had a special Christmas present which he wished to give them separately. The gift was to kill them by strangulation and holding their heads under water in a rain barrel.

On Boxing Day Simmons's older married children were due for a family get together. The first to arrive was one Simmons' sons and his wife, they were shot dead and their son was strangled and drowned. His favourite daughter Sheila and her husband came next, they were both shot and their son too was strangled. The daughter he had by Sheila was also strangled. Simmons either dumped all their bodies in abandoned vehicles or just left them where they were. That is, with the exception of Sheila. She, he lay out carefully on the family table covering her with the best tablecloth. Then Simmons, apparently oblivious to all the corpses, spent the next two days watching television and drinking beer. Of note, Dover is in Pope County, which has an alcohol prohibition.

The following Monday, 28th December, Simmons went to Pope County seat, Russellville, and shot dead several more people. All told, he had murdered sixteen when the police arrested him that day. In court, Simmons was found guilty and sentenced to death on 10th December 1989. His death warrant was signed on 31st May 1990 by Arkansas's Governor, later President, Bill Clinton. Ronald Simmons was executed by lethal injection on 25th June 1990. This was the quickest sentence-to-execution time in the US since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976.

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