

RECENT ACTIVITIES OF THE TULSA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

By Louise M. Whitham

That Oklahoma young people can develop a deep interest in state and local history and in their community's problems; that they can make definite contributions to their townspeople by carrying on local research problems and that they enjoy "History" when it becomes a tool rather than an end in itself, is, I think, demonstrated in the story of two projects recently carried out in Central High School at Tulsa, Oklahoma. The following account is offered not only as an argument for giving High School students an opportunity to know their community better but as a means of putting Tulsa's re-study findings on record.

It seems incredible that a town which secured its incorporation papers in 1898 should have bits of disputed history, but the mystery of Tulsa's two "first post-offices" persisted until 1941. It was then settled by Central High School's classes in Community History, collectively known as The Tulsa Historical Society.

I *Tulsa Post-offices.*

Government records showed that the Tulsa post-office was officially established March 25, 1879 as a part of the Star Route which carried mail from Vinita, Indian Territory to Clovis, New Mexico. J. C. Perryman was Tulsa's postman from that date until 1885 but he first kept the mail in the home of his brother, George Perryman, on what is now East Forty-first Street.

J. M. Hall, who came with the Frisco railroad in 1882, relates in *The Beginning of Tulsa* how people were obliged to go or send for their mail to the Perryman place about three miles southeast of the Frisco depot.¹

The Daughters of the American Colonists in 1937 erected a fine stone to mark "the place where mail was first delivered in Tulsa," placing it on the highway 300 feet south of the old George Perryman house.

About a year later considerable publicity was given an effort to preserve the house itself, but the project was abandoned when stories were circulated that there had been an earlier postoffice. The old post-boxes were rescued from the Perryman barn and are now in the trophy room of Central High School. For a couple of years even the Daughters of the American Colonists thought they had made a mistake in setting up their marker without more thorough investigation. Pictures of two quite dissimilar log houses were brought to members of The Tulsa Historical Society with claims that mail had been given out from each of them.

Finally, members of the Historical Society determined to bring all these stories into the open and if possible to settle the question.

¹ J. M. Hall, *The Beginning of Tulsa*, p. 20.

Particularly impressive were claims in favor of the double log house (known to have been built by George Perryman's father, Lewis Perryman, long before the Civil War) at what is now 31st and South Rockford Streets. Members of the Historical Society, accompanied by Mrs. Lilah D. Lindsey, one of their adult advisors, drove to Skiatook to see if Mr. Green Yeargin recognized the picture of this house as the one to which he delivered the mail when he served as mail carrier on the Star Route. As he had made the second delivery of mail and the last under the government contract his verdict in the controversy must be accepted.

When shown the pictures of the three houses in the dispute, Mr. Yeargin was as much puzzled as anyone. He positively denied that he had ever taken the mail to a log house, but the picture of the George Perryman house "didn't look right." He remembered it as built of finished lumber, painted white, with a long porch across the front and not all around the house as shown in the picture. He said he thought the house was square and he distinctly remembered "the mean little creek" he had to cross at the foot of the hill when he turned in at George Perryman's.

Then it was recalled that the big porch and the two front rooms were additions built in the nineties. Further investigation proved that Green Yeargin had correctly described the George Perryman house on Forty First Street as it was until the additions were made. "The mean little creek" now runs in the storm sewer. The marker put up by the Daughters of the American Colonists still stands, and that phase of the controversy is settled.

The persons who had advanced argument in favor of the old log houses were of such standing that no one thought they had deliberately misrepresented. The truth of the matter was that we had not stopped to think how mail for the Tulsa area could have reached this point before the Government took charge of its delivery in 1879. With our careless ignorance of Indian history we had not realized that some of the families here had, even before the Civil War, been educated in the missions and in the Creek neighborhood-schools. Recently we have read some of the letters sent by them or received by them during the Civil War. Obviously they followed the same methods used by people everywhere who are remote from a government postoffice. A Mrs. Weir, almost a hundred years old, related that whenever a person from this locality went to the Creek Agency or later to Muskogee, he brought back all letters which were addressed to his neighbors, except those from Washington, D. C. As far back as she could recall the Perryman family had assumed this responsibility, and since there were no frame houses in the country before the middle seventies, the problem of Tulsa's two first postoffices was solved.

This research had value to the groups engaged in it not only because it was an exercise in historical technique but because the

young people began to appreciate how far Indian culture had advanced before the inrush of white settlers.

For Oklahomans the story of how the racial elements that make up our population came to be here; what they have done toward community adjustments, and what their potentialities are for harmonious neighborliness and cultural advancement is one of the most important "understandings" we can get, for we have in miniature the same sort of racial minority problems that vex the warring nations. If we ever reach a happy solution of this problem it will be because we have approached it from fact and not from ignorance and prejudice.

II *The Battle of Bird Creek.*

This realization of a period of history about which very little had been known led to another big project, —a thorough, re-study of the Civil War battles which took place in or near Tulsa county. The battle areas have been visited several times by members of the Tulsa Historical Society in company with their adult advisors: Mr. Dean Trickett, Mr. Charles Grimes and Mr. Thos. Meagher.

Mr. Trickett's series on "The Civil War in Indian Territory," published in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, first stimulated student interest in the area. Before they secured their own copy of *The Official Records*, Mr. Trickett loaned his to them. Mr. Grimes' story will be included later in this account. Mr. Meagher has made a study of the flight of the loyal Indians from the Indian angle. Other prominent Tulsans have also aided the research.

Through Mr. Meagher an investigating group met Mr. Webb Tyner whose family, Cherokees, were living along Bird Creek when the battles took place, and who returned to that area after the war. He lives now on the banks of the Horse-Shoe Bend of Bird Creek so vividly described by Colonel Cooper in *The Official Records*.² Mr. Tyner told that when he was a boy people often found lead bullets in trees that were being chopped or sawed; that his neighbors had found all sorts of abandoned household utensils, parts of wagons, and eight-sided, long-barreled rifle barrels abandoned by the Indians in their flight.³ He showed the students an ancient salt-kettle that was the heirloom-trophy of his family. And then, very casually, he remarked, "Yonder is the hillside where Col. Cooper buried his dead the morning after the battle. I heard about it many times when I was a boy. Bob Childers helped dig the graves." Can you imagine the feeling with which the young people reread Col. Cooper's account of that burial? Before marking this location, search for some proof, such as remains, will be made.

Something decidedly personality-building happens to young people when they achieve things appreciated by their elders. There is

² Vol. 8, pp. 8-9.

³ Cf. Wiley Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in The Civil War*, p. 61 "Most of them were soon armed with a long barrel rifle known as the Indian Rifle that used a round bullet that was quite effective at short range."

also something very wholesome in the cooperation of older citizens with young people. May I bear my testimony that the boys and girls who have shared in these enterprises are better citizens, have a greater pride in their locality, because they have studied its history. Several boys now in service have written back to know what the Historical Society is doing; many others continue to report bits of information. Richard H. Johnson sent two dollars for our memorial fund from his first navy pay check.

Working at a long-time project while carrying on class room chronological-study is not difficult. In fact, "discoveries" of new material about a given project come most unexpectedly and time must be given to check and evaluate these findings. Conclusions held tentatively must often be modified as new data are discovered so it is well to hold a project-study open, as it were, possibly for two or three years. New students quickly grasp work already done and are ready to "carry on."

This Bird Creek study has added a few items to the story as told by Cooper, Abel, Trickett, Britton and Debo; interesting details and identifications with known modern places. The burial spot is one. "Mrs. Van's (Vann) house on the Verdigris" where Col. Cooper sent the wounded on that morning after his men returned from the burials was identified by Mr. S. R. Lewis, kinsman of the Vanns, as the Hendee pressure station now owned by the Oklahoma Natural Gas Co. Two fords on ancient Indian trails used by the loyal Indians in getting to Bird Creek have been located.

Of course, all these items had been known to certain persons in times past but as our town's population changes rapidly and as much of it is of comparatively recent addition, rather few people here are aware that Tulsa County has any battlefields.

Probably the greatest public benefit of this project has been in creating a general interest by telling the story to other schools, to clubs and to some two thousand individuals. Currently, the effort is to raise funds to erect memorial and informational markers to be placed on the battlefield. The Indian Woman's Club is co-operating with the Historical Society in doing this. The publicity campaign opened December 9, anniversary of the battle, and the unveiling of the memorial is scheduled for May 30, 1943.

There seems reason to connect the battle with three peculiar mounds discovered by Mr. Charles Grimes. In a paper filed with the Oklahoma Historical Society, Mr. Grimes wrote:

October 6, 1942

My dear Mrs. Whitham:

Supplementing our conversation of a few days ago relative to certain earth works located on the NE/4 of the SW/4 of Section 33, Township 21 North, Range 13 East, Tulsa County, Oklahoma, you are advised that I purchased this land on March 23, 1910; that I have been the owner of and in possession of said land since March 23, 1910; that at the time I purchased this land the same was a virgin blue

stem prairie; that at the time I purchased this land and for several years thereafter there were three crescent shaped earthen embankments located about 100 yards from the north boundaries of said tract; that these embankments were approximately 15 or 18 inches in height and from 50 to 75 feet in length, and approximately five or six feet in width; that they were composed of top soil black-loam; that on or about the year 1930 or 1931 I secured a road grader and leveled these embankments down in order that they would not interfere with the cultivation of said land; that at that time I did not know in what manner and for what purpose they had been formed but since that time in reading the official records of the battle of Caving Banks as reported by Colonel Cooper, said battle being between the Confederates on one side and the loyal Indians on the other side, it is my opinion and belief that these embankments were made by the forces of Colonel Cooper as a protection against an anticipated attack because it is approximately two miles southeast of the horseshoe bend formed by Bird Creek where the battle occurred and on the shortest route he could have taken to get his wounded to the home of "Mrs. Van" (Vann) on the Verdigris River where hospitalization was secured.

You are further advised that I have talked to John Perryman, now deceased, one of the loyal Creek Indians, who took part in this battle, who called it the Battle of Bird Creek Falls.

Trusting that this information may be of use to you in the splendid work you and your class are doing in assembling all available facts into permanent form relative to one of the greatest battles fought on Oklahoma soil during the Civil War.

On the night of the eighth of December, Col. Cooper camped about five miles north of the scene of the battle. All he says of the ninth, the night after the battle, is, "the sun having set, the troops were withdrawn and marched to camp." There would seem to be no special point in his returning to the last camp, five miles from the battle area, especially when he had thirty-nine wounded men whom he expected to hospitalize at Mrs. Vann's on the Verdigris, and when a position, somewhat to the south of the battlefield and on the open prairie, could be easily defended. On the night of the eighth he had "formed and disposed (his command) so as to protect and defend the camp on all sides and remained under arms all night." He must have been as alert during the night of the ninth.

Allowing for erosion and time, it is possible that the mounds which Mr. Grimes describes may have been at least twice as high in 1861 as they were in 1930. They were curved toward the northwest and may well have served either as a defense against attack or as a protection for the wounded from the December winds.

Gradations of probability, possibility and proof can be understood in making first hand studies of locations, interviews and authentic source material. Our groups classified as *probable* their conclusion that Indian withdrawals to Kansas in 1861 and 1862 were more numerous than a casual reader of a general text might realize and that the main reason for the flights was the Indian's desire not to become involved in "the white man's war" rather than merely Opothleyahola's fear of revenge from the McIntosh faction for his part in the execution of Chief Wm. McIntosh in 1825.

This conclusion was reached after reading a documented study of Jesse Chisholm's life which was brought to class by a member who thought her kinsmen had been the guide for the removal party which fought at Bird Creek.⁴ The text stated: "Jesse Chisholm sent word throughout the central territory between the two Canadians on each side of the ninety-seventh meridian" . . . "Hundreds of Indians flocked to the meeting place and the long trek began." . . . "Jesse Chisholm conducted a large group of Indians from the territory between the present towns of Asher and Shawnee to a haven of safety on the Arkansas River" (present Wichita). No mention was made of this removal party being stopped by military forces, hence this was a removal separate from that led by Opothleyahola. Reading Thomas (Wildcat) Alford's story of the removal of his family to Kansas in 1862 also widened our idea of the scope of these migrations. His reasons for the family flight clearly picture the frame of mind of a would-be-neutral people caught in the cyclone of war.⁵ Our own delay in getting into the present struggle, our reluctant participation in it are all so like the experiences of the Indians who tried to evade the Civil War! The universal pattern of wars is reflected also in the burial of the unknown Confederate soldiers near Bird Creek. We shall have many burials in unmarked graves in strange lands before the present struggle ceases.

And now a word as to the location-clues which we have found. John Perryman, talking to Mr. Grimes, used the term, "The Battle of Bird Creek Falls." Captain Jackson McCurtain, reporting to Col. Cooper, wrote of it as "the High Shoal battle on December 9, A. D. 1861." D. N. McIntosh also reported on "the battle at High Shoal, Cherokee Nation, on the 9th inst."⁶ Whatever else may have changed along Bird Creek we may be very certain that the four foot fall is where it was eighty years ago.

The two largest "dry ravines from the east" empty into Bird Creek below the falls as also does Delaware Creek from the west. These three points of identification are in Sec. 29, Twp. 21, Rge. 13 E. and probably mark the extreme southern end of the battle area. The apex of the bend and the burial hillside are just north of the falls in Sec. 20. The mouth of Hominy Creek in Sec. 18 is half a mile north and half mile west of the burial spot and that may have been the northern limit of the engagement. We cannot be positive of that for with some 1500 Confederates engaged and about the same number under Opothleyahola the battle must have covered a considerable area. Col. Sims of the Fourth Texas Cavalry, C. S. Army, reported that his men had charged down both ravines and then, "we mounted our horses and advanced up the creek about 1 mile."⁷

⁴ T. U. Taylor, Jesse Chisholm, pp.

⁵ Thomas Alford, *Civilization*, pp. 9-12.

⁶ *Official Records*, pp. 21, 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Colonel Cooper speaks of the Battle of Caving Banks but that is not helpful in location for the banks of Bird Creek crumble easily at many points. Colonel Sims and others wrote of the Battle of Chusto-Talasa. We have yet to find any agreement among modern Cherokees concerning the meaning or location of "Chusto" but the "Talasa" part is a mis-spelling of Talasee, the name given in 1850 by the Bureau of Topographical Engineers to the settlement of Talasee (Creek) Indians near modern Tulsa.⁸ Colonel Cooper's term "Tulsey Town" is the first use of that name which we have found.⁹ Bringing the Indian term over into frontier English seems to have made much the same transformation as was made with the French *Nion Chou* which became American *Neosho*.

Having made as thorough a study as they could of the battles fought in and near this county the members of the Tulsa Historical Society raised the question, "Now that we have assembled this material what shall we do with it?" They felt they owed something to the community. That is why they are writing and talking about the battle story, buying an oil painting, seeking support to set up memorial and informational markers to challenge attention and future investigating groups. Reminders of the past! Lest we forget!

⁸ Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes*, p. 151.

⁹ *Official Records*, p. 7.