

EARLY TIMES ALONG THE ARKANSAS RIVER

By Louise Morse Whitham¹

If there are archeologists after the next Ice Age, some twenty-five thousand years from now, they may dig into the sizable heaps of Tulsa's ruins and from the twisted masses of metal deduce that here was once a settlement of Steel Users. Thus they will indicate our manner of living, or our "culture", from a general use of some typical item.

Twentieth century archaeologists are proving that so far as human use is concerned, Oklahoma is not a new land. Scientific excavations in the Grand River valleys have revealed at least four distinct cultures, the very latest discoveries identified as Mound Builder artifacts.² Stone mealing bowls and weapons are remains from the oldest known culture. Cave Dwellers, perhaps as recently as 250 B.C. to 500 A.D., left their records along Honey Creek, near Grove. Those low mounds so common in eastern Oklahoma are the ruins of pre-Caddoan earth-houses. In them pottery has been found which is unsurpassed by that of any other American tribe.³

Prehistoric remains thus show the same cycles of possession, followed by conquest and change, which characterize the more recent occupancy of our state.

Civilization moved westward along the Arkansas River system, the great highways of this primitive land.⁴ Its place names were

¹ Mrs. Louise Morse Whitham, sponsor of the Tulsa Historical Society and teacher of history in Central High School, Tulsa, is well known for her interest and contributions to the history of the Arkansas River region in Oklahoma. The article here published for the first time should be particularly valuable to teachers who seek to interest their pupils in collecting local and state history, suggesting as it does a plan of procedure for class work. It represents the original draft of Chapter I for a student-produced history in the study of the Tulsa region. Taking this as a basis a few years ago, a research and writing class of sixteen specially selected seniors in two semesters work blocked out the work-sheets, the forms of which are still in use as "Historical Background" by state history classes in Central High School. Since that time, every reference in the way of books and published material relating to Northeast Oklahoma and Tulsa in particular has been classified by the students and is used by them in preparing and correcting their work units. This plan for class procedure has aroused fine interest in the study of local history. *The Tulsa Daily World* (Sunday edition) is publishing a series of articles, "Early Days in Tulsa," written and edited by Mrs. Whitham.—Ed.

² *The Tulsa Daily World*. October 12, 1939.

³ Joseph B. Thoburn and Muriel H. Wright, *Oklahoma: A History of the State and Its People*. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., Inc., 1929). Vol. I, pp. 14-17.

⁴ Grant Foreman, "Early Trails Through Oklahoma," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, III (June, 1925, No. 2, pp. 99-119; Muriel H. Wright, "Early Navigation and Commerce Along the Arkansas and Red Rivers in Oklahoma," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, VIII (March, 1930), No. 1, pp. 65-88.—Ed.

given by the explorers and trappers who made our early history. The first written observations on the peoples of the Arkansas Valley were made about four hundred years ago. At that time, in 1542, the Spanish explorer, de Soto, had penetrated the territory far west of the Mississippi, and Coronado had crossed Oklahoma into Kansas. Coronado visited the upper reaches of the Arkansas, and de Soto the lower, each unaware of the other. Both wrote about the numerous and peaceful Quiveran tribes (Caddoans) living in dome-shaped, timber-framed dwellings covered either by grass-thatch or earth. With the Spanish came a valuable beast of burden, the horse, and because of it the whole manner of transportation and warfare was greatly changed for the Indian. Finally the peaceful Caddoan tribes were forced to give way before the warlike Sioux whose descendants we know as the Osages.⁵

Almost two centuries later, Bernard de la Harpe, a French trader, made a trip northwest from his establishment at Natitoches. When he struck the Arkansas river in Kansas he followed it homeward, and thus became the first white man to set foot on Tulsa soil. His diary tells us that after spending ten days in a confederated Caddoan-Pawnee (Panioussa) village near Coweta, he continued down river on the morning of September 13, 1721. He estimated the population of the village at about seven thousand. It must have had some permanence for near by were cultivated fields of Indian corn, beans, pumpkins, squash and tobacco. As the hunters were organizing a buffalo stalk and as there were both tepees and huts in the village, some of the number were probably visitors.⁶

Most successful of the French traders who bought furs from the Indians of this region were the Chouteaus. When their trading monopoly with the Osages of Missouri was given to another in 1796, Major Jean Pierre Chouteau set out to the southwest to find a new location suitable for a trading post. Guided by his Osage friends, over old hunting trails, he finally reached a point on the Neosho, which he called the Grand River, near the Arkansas. Here he established Chouteau's Trading Post at what we know as Salina. One hundred and forty-three years later, his birthday, October 10, was officially designated Oklahoma Historical Day.⁷ Sheltered by woods, supplied by both fresh and salt water springs, and at the most inland point of water shipment, Chouteau's Post was ideal headquarters for the trappers who followed him.⁸

⁵ Thoburn and Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-33. Cf footnote 10, p. 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁷ Vinson Lackey. *The Chouteaus and The Founding of Salina*. (Tulsa: Printed by Claud E. Neerman Co.).

⁸ Grant Foreman, "The Three Forks," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, II (March, 1924), No. 2, pp. 37-47; in "Minutes of the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma Historical Society, October 25, 1944," *ibid.*, XXII (Winter, 1944-45), No. 4, pp. 476-80.—Ed.

By 1800 it was evident that a new period of events was opening in the western wilderness. Spain and France alternated ownership of the Mississippi Valley before 1803, when \$15,000,000 was paid to Napoleon by the United States for Louisiana Province.⁹ There were no reliable maps of this vast area, so President Jefferson sent out military expeditions to study the country.

First of the American explorers along the Arkansas River was Lt. James B. Wilkinson, whom Captain Zebulon M. Pike, commander of the Rocky Mountain expedition, detached from his party at the "great bend" of the river in Kansas, with orders to find its outlet. Wilkinson and five enlisted men hollowed out a cottonwood log for one canoe and stretched hides over a framework of poles for another. Leaving Pike on October 28, 1806, they were soon forced to abandon the canoes because of ice in the river. Despite great hardships they reached the mouth of the Verdigris on Christmas Day and found shelter in an Osage camp. Lt. Wilkinson recommended a fort at Three Rivers, as the junction of the Verdigris, Grand, and Arkansas rivers was commonly called.¹⁰

Although Spain could not prevent the cession of Louisiana to the United States, it claimed all lands drained by the Arkansas River. The dispute was settled in the treaty of 1819 in which the Red River became the boundary line to the one hundredth meridian. Our government then determined to survey that river. The next year Major Stephen H. Long led an expedition to the source of the Arkansas River. There he detailed Captain John R. Bell, accompanied by the naturalist, Thomas Say, to make a careful survey and report of the entire river bed. The most distressing incident of the trip occurred at the Tulsa camp, August 22, when deserters made off with all this data. Bell wrote that he saw only a few Osages on the entire trip. When Major Long joined him, Captain Bell learned that Major Long had mistaken the headwaters of the Canadian for the Red and therefore had surveyed it instead of the Red River.¹¹

Following the recommendations of Wilkinson, Bell, and Long, Fort Gibson was erected in 1824 on the Grand near the Arkansas River, and not far from the Verdigris. Three Rivers had a new name. So popular was Col. Mathew Arbuckle who established Fort Gibson, that three military camps and a Fort have borne his name. The second of the camps, built in 1834 at the junction of the Cim-

⁹ Grant Foreman, *Indians and Pioneers*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1936). Pp. 27-28.

¹⁰ Thoburn and Wright, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

arron and the Arkansas rivers, may be located today only by its heap of stone ruins.¹²

Thomas Nuttall, a Harvard professor of botany, made three field trips from Fort Gibson. On the last one, along the Arkansas to the mouth of the Cimarron, August, 1819, he nearly lost his life. He later wrote of the "terrible woods" as he floundered along at night, very ill, and alone, through a blinding thunderstorm and rain. That must have been near the present location of Tulsa, for he reached a down river trader September 3.

Washington Irving and Charles Joseph Latrobe were writers who saw this region before it had changed greatly from the primitive. In *A Tour of The Prairies*, written in 1832, Irving describes the missions, the posts, and the forts which he found along the eastern part of the state. His story agrees with Latrobe's *The Rambler In North America*, in telling about the abundance and variety of wild game and wild fowl. It is difficult to imagine elk and bear, deer and antelope at home in our own valleys, but they saw them. They also saw great herds of buffalo and wild horses in this vicinity. They found dense woods, from five to ten miles wide, along the river banks, and in them a great variety of native fruits and nuts. There were fish in the rivers and wild turkeys in the brush. Even the hollow trees were full of honey. When we remember that as late as 1890 two pecan trees, each with a circumference of twenty-six feet were cut down near Tulsa we can understand Irving's feeling about these ancient forests.¹³ He wrote, "We were overshadowed by lofty trees, with straight, smooth trunks, like stately columns. As the glancing rays of the sun shone through the transparent leaves, tinted with the many colors of autumn, I was reminded of the effect of sunshine among the stained windows and clustering columns of a Gothic cathedral."¹⁴

All this was in the neighborhood of Tulsa in the last of its primitive days.

¹² Fort Arbuckle was established in 1851 on the Washita River. —Wm. B. Morrison, "Fort Arbuckle," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, VI (March, 1928), No. 1, pp. 26-34; James H. Gardner, "One Hundred Years Ago in the Region of Tulsa," *ibid.*, XI (June, 1933), No. 2, pp. 765-85.

¹³ Located on Mrs. Lilah D. Lindsey's farm.

¹⁴ Undoubtedly Irving camped near the present site of Tulsa and passed along the river through it, but there is no evidence that he stood "at the spot" of the monument in Owen Park, nor that he predicted the "founding of a great city" at this place. Several writers have said that about the Three Rivers' location.