

JOHN N. FLORER: PIONEER OSAGE TRADER

By Frank F. Finney*

John N. Florer was born in the city of Cincinnati, Ohio, April 19, 1844. At the age of seventeen, he enlisted in the Union army and after the Civil War ended, pushed west to Lawrence, Kansas. For a time, he clerked in a store there but finding the occupation too tame for his restless and adventurous spirit he left for the new Osage reservation in the Indian Territory. He had married Anna Finney in Lawrence, whom with their baby girl, Maud, he temporarily left, until he found a home for them in their new location.

Under date of September 22, 1872, he and his partner, R. W. Dunlap received a license from the government to trade with the Osage Indians and they established the first trading store at the Osage Agency, now Pawhuska.

During the first few years, and until the buffalo were exterminated, Florer accompanied the Indians on their hunts to the western plains, with wagons of goods to supply their needs. In 1883, he branched into the cattle business and obtained with his partner, William J. Pollock, the first grazing lease granted by the Osage Council covering 75,000 acres. Successive unusually cold winters hamstringed the cattle business, and the cattle driven from Texas to fatten on the lush grass, died by the hundreds. Florer went bankrupt in the cattle venture but his credit was unimpaired with the banks and wholesale houses he dealt with in St. Louis and Kansas City. He was again able to finance another Indian trading business. This time he located his store at a point in the western part of the Osage Reservation and named the trading post "Gray Horse," after an old medicine man with the Osage name of Ka-wah-ho-tse. Here he built up a large trading business, carrying everything the Indians required. Wagons, buggies, lumber, hay and grain and beeves on hoof supplemented the stock of various items under the roof of his large store. "Johnny Shinkah", as Florer was known by all of the Osages, became their friend to whom they turned for advice and help in time of trouble. He spoke their language and was genuinely attached to them and their country which he referred to as "God's Country."

*Mr. Frank F. Finney of Oklahoma City contributed this sketch on the life of John N. Florer, early trader among the Osages in Oklahoma, upon request as the subject is introductory to the article that follows in this same number of *The Chronicles*, giving reminiscences of James Edwin Finney as told to the late Dr. Joseph B. Thoburn in 1918. John N. Florer's wife was Anna Finney, sister of James Edwin Finney and Thomas McKean Finney. Florer was brother of Thomas McKean Finney's wife, Abbie Florer, who were the parents of Frank F. Finney.
—Ed.

As Florer prospered, he vacated his small home adjacent to the store, and built a larger dwelling apart from the store on higher ground. Here orchards and gardens flourished on the pleasant surrounding grounds, with barns and pasture to the rear. With open-handed hospitality he delighted to entertain his friends and those who came from the states were surprised to find in this out of the way place, the comforts of civilization, such as ice from the ice house and running water in the house piped from the large tank kept filled from the windmill over the well.

In 1891, his daughter, Maud was married to John L. Bird who was employed in the Florer store. Bird became the first sheriff of Osage County after Statehood and engaged in the banking and oil business in later days. The wedding ceremony conducted by the Reverend Richard Cordley, of Lawrence, and attended by a large group of guests, was held in the store. Indian blankets which were hung to curtain off a part of the store provided a colorful setting for the occasion.

It was in the early eighteen nineties, that Florer whose drive had brought him into the wilderness of the Osage country again revealed the qualities of the pioneer who goes ahead of the crowd with vision and determination to achieve his goals. An Indian one day, took him to a spot on the banks of Sand creek and pointed to a scum casting rainbows on the surface of the water. The Indian managed to soak and squeeze out from a blanket enough crude oil to provide the trader a sample. From that day, Florer became imbued with the belief that the Osage reservation, was as he expressed it "underlaid with oil." With characteristic energy he set to work with the twofold purpose of obtaining the consent of the Osages to grant an oil and gas lease on their lands and to find responsible parties with sufficient daring to be interested in the wildcat scheme and to take the financial risks involved.

Through A. C. Stitch, a banker of Independence, Kansas, who at one time had been a partner with him in the Gray Horse store, Florer found the men he was looking for in Henry Foster and his brother Edwin B. Foster. These men were natives of New England and had successfully promoted the building of a railroad in southeastern Kansas. The Osage full-bloods were a conservative people, stubborn in holding to their old ways and customs, and fearful of anything that would bring more white men to the reservation to change things. It took all of Florer's influence and the support of the more progressive mixed-bloods to swing the majority of the tribe in favor of the lease which was entered into March 16, 1896 by Principle Chief James Bigheart on behalf of the Osage Tribe and Edwin B. Foster. The blanket lease covered the entire reservation for oil and gas mining purposes for a period of ten years. This historic lease marked the beginning of the era which would bring fabulous riches to the Osages.

Although the development of the Osage lease during the first few years went slowly, by 1905 many producing wells were brought in on the lease, and the Indian Territory Illuminating Oil Company which had acquired ownership of the blanket lease was progressing in a more favorable and prosperous condition. John N. Florer's dreams were materializing on a vaster scale than even that optimistic pioneer had hoped for.

Bright as his prospects were in the oil business, clouds came to nullify this good fortune and to darken his life. His wife, to whom he was devoted, died at Gray Horse in 1904. The following year his son Walter Osage Florer, the first white child to be born on the Osage reservation, died in Denver. His only son had married Minta Pollock, daughter of the former partner of his father in the cattle business and who later served as agent for the Osages. Tuberculosis had also taken hold of Carl, son of Florer's friend, A. C. Stitch of Independence. The fathers of the boys fitted out a covered wagon, bought a fine team of mules and started them to the mountains with a driver and a cook in search of their health. With heavy heart, Florer turned over the trading business at Gray Horse to his brother in law, T. M. Finney and sadly left the home where he had resided many happy years, to take up his abode in Alameda hotel in Bartlesville.

After a short illness, Colonel Florer, as he had come to be known, died, January 10, 1907 in the home of his nephew, Mortimer F. Stillwell, manager of the Indian Territory Illuminating Oil Company at Bartlesville. He was buried in the family plot in the cemetery at Lawrence, Kansas, from which town he had launched forth for the Indian country, 35 years before. John Palmer, a full blood Sioux Indian, who was adopted into the Osage tribe as a child and became a prominent lawyer, represented the tribe at the final services and paid eloquent tribute to "Johnny Shinkah", "the greatest friend the Osages ever had."