

THE ANNUAL OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL TOURS

By R. G. Miller*

The scene was the board of directors room in the Oklahoma Historical Society building. The business session was drawing to a close. The president, secretary, treasurer and all committee chairmen had made their reports and, just before adjournment, the way was opened for consideration of new business for the good of the Society.

Whereupon I, newest member of the board, dared to rise and offer a suggestion. For thirty years I had been an Oklahoma resident, being transplanted here from Arkansas. During all that time I had traveled every county in Oklahoma, knew people in every county, had visited the principal historical and scenic centers in the state, knew the highways and trails and had been a regular reader of the *Chronicles*.

I had sat through that session of the Board and listened to discussions of various historical sites and projects. For years I had read and heard of these historical shrines. I wondered how many of the officers, directors and staff members of the society had ever personally visited the revered historical points they had been talking and reading about through the years.

The question was put and the result was amazing. Very few of those present, who were charged with guiding state historical thought, had ever seen such important historical places as Rose Hill, Wheelock church, Fort Gibson, the Santa Fe trail, old Colony, Doan's Crossing, Fort Arbuckle, Sequoyah's hut, Boggy Depot, Tuskahoma and ever so many others.

So my suggestion was that the Society should organize and conduct an annual tour to visit the state's principal historical points. The suggestion was immediately approved, and the Society has had a tour as part of its regular program of service every spring since.

I was requested to write a story of the tours for *The Chronicles*. It is being done from memory. This story may be viewed as a newspaper story instead of an historical essay. That is because I am a newspaper writer, not an historian. But my heart is in Oklahoma history. I love it.

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THE IRVING TOUR, 1955

Perhaps the most interesting tour the society has conducted was the one in the spring of 1955, known as the Washington Irving Tour. That tour generated, by far, more local, statewide and national interest and following than the three previous spring tours.

The Irving Tour followed, in the main, much of the trail blazed by Washington Irving, statesman and author, who accompanied a party of U. S. Rangers on an expedition west from Fort Gibson in 1832, and wrote the literary classic, *A Tour of the Prairies*. The original Irving trail (on today's map) from Fort Gibson was up the Arkansas river to Tulsa, west through Keystone and Yale to Castle Rock southeast of Stillwater, thence west and south past Wild-horse prairie to open fields near Arcadia where the "ringing of wild horses" occurred; on south past Moore and Norman, thence eastward back to the starting point.

People from 28 towns and cities in the state were on the Irving Tour. At the first night meeting, open to tourists and local people, 172 persons gathered in the auditorium of Bacone Indian college to enjoy an historical and musical program. The second night stop, the Student Union on the Oklahoma A. and M. College campus, Stillwater, attracted 200 persons. And at the noonday event the third day, at Castle Rock, on the bald prairie, there were 275 persons.

Fort Gibson itself is an historical and a scenic sight for anybody to see. The beautiful Grand river was seen at two places, also the Verdigris river. A stop for coffee and good neighborliness was made at the Chouteau trading post, Salina, after having stopped previously at historical Three Forks, now Okay.

In Claremore the tourists saw the wonderful Will Rogers memorial. In Tulsa they saw the Three Nations Corner, the Gilcrease Museum, the University of Tulsa and the Irving monument. Farther west, near Keystone, the happy tourists walked into Bear's Glen, a beautiful woodsy canyon of which Irving wrote interestingly in his book. Tourists stood on Castle Rock, near Mehan village, where the Irving party stayed two days. They trod the prairie where the Irving group saw many wild horses and later in the day they saw horses and buffalo recalling scenes described by Irving, at the Cargill ranch east of Edmond and on the prairie a few miles farther east. At Irving's campground on Crutcho creek, a few miles east of Oklahoma City, the tourists visited the spot where the travelers in 1832 were rained in for three days. Then they visited some of the wild buffalo hunting grounds near Norman before heading back east.

The Irving tour gained favorable publicity in magazines and newspapers and by television and radio all over the nation. That publicity was probably spurred by the fact that 16 persons from Sleepy Hollow, Irving's old home, came to Oklahoma to join in the Society's Historical Tour. Not only did the New Yorkers come, but they

brought 100 or more cuttings of ivy from the famous Kennilworth Castle in Abbotsford, Scotland, which Irving introduced into this country, the original plantings having been given to him by Sir Walter Scott. These ivy plants are now thriving in Oklahoma.

Probably the most valued effect these historical tours are having is emphasizing Oklahoma history to people in all walks of life. Oklahoma has not earned any laurels for the way its people have embraced state history. The tours are helping to center attention on it. More schools are including classes in basic history. More people in homes and in business houses are showing interest in it. A few state officials and legislators are giving encouragement. Members of the Board of Directors and of the staff of the Society are eagerly awaiting the 1956 tour.

One thing has puzzled officers and directors of the Society. On the four tours conducted thus far, chiefly in the eastern half of the state, very few individuals from eastern Oklahoma have taken part. At least ninety percent of the tourists have been western Oklahomans. Special efforts are to be made to enlist the touring co-operation and support of eastern Oklahomans on the 1956 tour.

The first tour, back in April of 1952, attracted only about 75 persons traveling in 20 private cars. That tour covered territory that is rich in Oklahoma's early history. It may be repeated in later years, as interest in things historical grows.

THE FIRST TOUR

The first tour's caravan left Oklahoma City early in the morning. The first stop was Norman, where the historians visited the university library and the museum. Farther south a stop was made at the spot, near Wayne, where the original California Trail crosses highway 77. One or two additional stops were made before reaching old Fort Arbuckle, west of Davis, where the ruins were inspected.

On south to the Carter Indian seminary in Ardmore, and a luncheon-meeting with southern Oklahoma historians at Lake Murray lodge. On east across Lake Texoma and to Durant, truly an historical area, and the annual dinner-meeting of the society in the Southeastern college dining hall. Continuing east the next morning stops were made at the markers for Armstrong academy and Spencer academy, and a visit to Goodland orphanage near Hugo. East of Hugo history was relived at the old Rose Hill plantation site.

Farther east the tourists made a most interesting stop at Wheelock academy for Indian girls. Luncheon was served by the Indian girls and a fine program was presented. On adjoining acreage a visit was made to old Wheelock church, first established in 1832, the rock building having been completed in 1846, the state's oldest church building. After that the tourists were guided south of Idabel to see the first cultivated farm in the state, dating from 1808, and the site

of the first postoffice, Miller Court House, opened in 1824. At the night stop in Broken Bow a fine program was enjoyed in the high-school auditorium.

On the second morning out the touring historians visited the oldest and largest tree in the state at old Eagletown. This cypress tree is estimated to be 2,000 years old and is 90 feet tall and 42 feet around at its base. It is a show place for thousands of tourists every year.

Then followed the drive across the beautiful Kiamichi mountains to Tuskahoma, near which stands the old Council House of the Choctaws. The travelers really enjoyed the mountain drive. Spring greenery and spring flowers were showing off. One hundred different kinds of trees waved welcome and 100 different kinds of birds presented symphonies. The tumbling mountain streams of clear water were sights to see.

Leaving Tuskahoma, a late luncheon stop was made at Hartshorne Indian school for boys. The young students put on a most enjoyable program which carried religious emphasis, it being Sunday. Homeward bound, the caravan made three or four more brief stops at historical markers and wound up the first tour, everybody happy and having seen some of the state's most historically important sites.

THE SECOND TOUR

When it came time to consider the second historical tour I got on my feet again at a board meeting and suggested that all of Oklahoma's history was not made in eastern Oklahoma and recommended that the 1953 tour cover some of western Oklahoma. It was done.

The first stop on that tour was Anadarko where visits were made to the Riverside Indian school and the Plains Indian museum. A stop was made at the marker at the site of the original Wichita agency, oldest in the west side of the state, and at Fort Cobb, another-day historical spot. On west to old Colony which was a tribal educational center for many decades. Then into Cordell for luncheon with historically-minded folks from many counties in western Oklahoma.

There were stops on the courthouse lawn in Hobart, at Altus-Lugert lake in the Quartz mountains, near Devil's canyon where the Wichitas once set up and maintained a village, and then to Mangum, capital of the old Greer Empire, where old and new stories of history were recounted. North to Elk City for the night, sparked by a banquet in which state history was the only theme.

Taking off the second morning, the historians crossed the old California trail, stopped at the site of Custer's battle with the Cheyennes, and headed across the western prairies for Boise City, the luncheon stop. Following an inspiring and enriching meeting there, the caravan was guided across more open spaces to old Camp Nichols and the Santa Fe trail which date back to the early and middle

1800s. Back east to Guymon for the night and another grand meeting to learn more history.

The third day provided for marvelously interesting stops in Beaver, once "capital" of the Panhandle region, and at Woodward, Seiling and Watonga.

On this tour, and the first one, a few scheduled stops had to be skipped because of lack of time. The caravans always ran late, too late at times to fulfill the schedule. Everybody was sorry.

THE THIRD TOUR

As these historical tours came around, year after year, they were becoming more popular and interesting.

The 1954 tour went north and east from Oklahoma City. A breakfast stop was arranged at Guthrie, first territorial and state capital, having been born with the run of 1889. Next stop was Perry where the local historical society and the First Families greeted the visitors enthusiastically and told of Perry's part in opening and settling the Cherokee Strip.

In Ponca City the travelers were filled in on history in that region and they saw the Ponca City museum and the Pioneer Woman statue. Eastward across the Osage hills to Pawhuska for a luncheon-meeting with historians in that area. A visit to the Osage museum was enlightening.

Then south to Tulsa for the night, after spending three hours seeing the wonders of the Gilcrease museum of history and art—one of the high spots of all the tours. Next morning, an hour in the Will Rogers museum in Claremore and a view of the Davis collection of 22,000 guns. Then to Pryor for an hour with Thomas J. Harrison's wonderful collection of Bibles, and to Salina for a fried chicken luncheon. There the historians met descendants of the original Chouteau family who founded the state's first permanent white settlement.

From Salina, back toward Pryor for a stop at the grave of Nathaniel Pryor, then a trip to Union mission, first mission opened in the state in 1820, and site of operation of the first printing press. Then through Three Forks to Muskogee for the night. A fine historical meeting was conducted there.

The third morning an early stop was made at old Fort Gibson, and a visit made to the beautiful national cemetery there. Then to old Park Hill, very rich in history, seat of much Cherokee activity, and to Tahlequah, capital of the Cherokee country for so long a time. Some tourists wished to remain in the Tahlequah area for a week.

On eastward, a stop was made at the 115-year-old waterpower grist mill just south of highway 51, and a luncheon stop was made at Stilwell where more history of early missions was told. Later in

the afternoon another high spot of all tours was Sequoyah's log hut, now in a park, northeast of Sallisaw. Finally, homeward by way of Tenkiller Lake and a final stop for the Kolache festival in Prague.

That's the story of the four tours up to now. At least a wordy glimpse of the tours.

Next spring's tour is tentatively set to cover the Chisholm Trail from the Red river to the Kansas line. And it is very likely that the historical societies of Kansas and Texas will join their Oklahoma neighbors and historians in doing this tour in a more impressive way.