

FORT COBB—PRAIRIE TOWN

By Vera Zumwalt Holding*

In the shadow of the hill where the old stockade once stood, a prairie town lifts its proud head, named for the famous old military post, Fort Cobb. The story of this community is the story of many prairie towns in Oklahoma yet few of them can boast of such a colorful background; such a lusty, hearty western spirit bred of the joining of the old south with the north, the red man and the white in bonds of neighborliness and friendships which have lasted through cyclone and blizzard, drought and sand storm, gentle summer rains and crimson day-dawns for over half a century.

The smoke spiral ascending from the old time teepee or from the campfire where waddies cooked black coffee and jerky, is like the smoke from an old cobb pipe—the smoke of remembrance.

On October 1, 1901, on a fertile plain between Cobb Creek and the Washita River, eighty acres of land formerly belonging to Nora Hazelett was platted into a townsite and laid off into wide streets and avenues.¹ In less than six months the population numbered five hundred with fifty business houses dotting the streets. Sided, tent-topped business houses were erected where a corn field had lately been, showing the determination and foresight of the citizenship that realized the trade conditions and the desirable location of the town. The Rock Island Railroad had come through the year before.

Among the seven saloons were the Cotton Exchange Bar and the Rough and Tumble. The Caddo County Bank was run by the Hite brothers. The Cobb Hotel was operated by Mr. and Mrs. W. A. Zumwalt. John Davenport had a Livery Barn, and Lindsey, a blacksmith shop. Hite's General Merchandise, George Hall's Barber

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been opened to settlement on August 6, 1902.—Ed.

¹ The townsite of Fort Cobb was in the Wichita-Caddo Reservation that had

Shop and Hays Meat Market were among the first merchants remembered by the town's oldest citizen, Tom Henderson, still actively engaged in business. The first year a cotton gin was built by the Chickasha Milling Company, managed by E. J. Luce. Thomas Kearse, an early day banker, was also interested in cattle ranching. The first physician was Dr. Peters. Dr. George O. Johnson who came later was elected the first senator from Caddo County to the First State Legislature, in 1907.

The first post office here before the opening of the Wichita-Caddo Reservation was called "Cobb," established on September 20, 1899, with Hugh B. Brady as postmaster. The name was changed to "Fort Cobb" on October 31, 1902, with Henry Amey as postmaster.²

The first school was opened in two down-town buildings with an enrollment of thirty-seven students. Dr. Peters, W. J. Grant and O. W. Waltman were the first school trustees. T. W. Cooper was employed as first teacher but in less than a month the enrollment had increased, and a lady teacher was hired to assist him. Some of the parents and pupils disliked the assistant, so they brought in a new one. Older folk remember with a smile the day they had two teachers attempting to instruct the same pupils in the same room. The first teacher refused to be ousted so stayed on for several months. A. L. Oakison was the first principal of the school regularly elected. He taught in the first real school house erected in Fort Cobb.

Two churches were organized this first year: the Methodist, organization of which was perfected October, 1901, by J. W. Grant, with ten members; in March, 1902, the Congregational Church was organized with fifteen members. Robert W. McCrackin and J. B. Weatherman were elected deacons of this group. The members of both church organizations met in the different homes of the members until church buildings were erected.

The lusty town grew and prospered. Rodeos, Indian stomp dances, box suppers and Sunday school picnics made up the entertainment for both young and old. Fast Runner, a Caddo Indian, with his wife lived about a mile from the town on Cobb Creek, and was one of the best friends the townspeople had. Indian Scout Pamjo, the father of Nora Hazelett, was also one of the men whose fine assistance and advice helped the early day citizens.

Tom Henderson, one of the first settlers of the town and was later postmaster, still takes an active interest in civic affairs. His grandson, T. H. Henderson, is now postmaster. The elder Henderson has operated a gin and seed cleaning plant in Fort Cobb for

² George H. Shirk, "First Post Offices within the Boundaries of Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXX, No. 1 (Spring, 1952), pp. 52 and 62.—Ed.

years, and boasts that he has lived here fifty-five years. Recalling the early days, this spry, alert business man of eighty-two remembered that Monte Churchill had gone from the old time afternoon rodeos in Little Jenny Flat to Madison Square Garden as a champion rope artist; that Maymie Milwee, outstanding artist, is a home town girl who has made good. Mr. Henderson leans back in his hide bottom chair and really brags with just cause about the Milwee boy: "Mrs. Milwee's folks, Lena and William K. Hartwell, didn't come to Caddo County until 1910, but they came to Logan County in 1889. They've been the backbone of this area ever since coming here." Then, Henderson goes on to tell about Leonard and Maymie Milwee's son, Claude, who showed the Grand Champion Shorthorn steer at the International Show held in Chicago in 1947. He is the only F. F. A. boy to win this honor. The steer had been bred by O. H. Deason and Son, also of Caddo County.

Perhaps the fine honor which the Milwee boy brought to his home town started the Shorthorn movement in the area which has made Fort Cobb in Caddo County the "Shorthorn Capital of the World." The Oklahoma Shorthorn breeders hold their state convention here every April.

Since a community is judged by its newspaper, the advent of the first newspaper proved a source of much information: "Fort Cobb, the pearl of the Washita" and "Caddo County, best section of the grand Oklahoma Territory," are the two headlines of the front page of *The Caddo County Record*, Vol. I, No. 1, a three column newspaper published on May 15th, 1902, at Fort Cobb. The mast head reads, "Published every Thursday, James Herbig, editor and manager." In the first editorial, "Our Bow," James Herbig said in part:

We being among the first to cast our lot with the few in the infancy of this village, knowing the need of a newspaper among our people and to scatter and broadcast to the outside world the welcome to our city and to Caddo County, the glad tidings, the upbuilding of our village since its infancy six months ago and the magnificent growth of our country since the day of the opening last October. . . . A paper that every farmer will gladly welcome to his fireside, a paper that the citizens will be proud of. A paper that will advertise to the outside world the upbuilding of our beautiful city and its many advantages of thousands of broad acres of rich fertile prairies that border the town on every side.

This six page weekly had for its advertisers, J. L. Craig, physician and surgeon; Oscar Davidson, the tinner; W. H. Halley, lumber dealer, located near the stock yards; C. W. Van Eaton, hardware, pumps, windmills and ammunition; The Caddo County Bank with Morris Lee Hite, president, W. M. Hazelett, vice-president, and Boone D. Hite, cashier; Marshal and Son who used the spot cash system in order to share the expense of book keeping with their customers in savings; Werner's Livery Stables that had good rigs, and says in the first advertisement, "When in need of a rig to take your best

girl for an evening drive, or taking trips overland, get your outfit from Mr. Werner." Other advertisers were Smith Brothers Hamilton-Browne Shoes and Stetson Hats; Grant Miller, the ice man; Ray and Kalmbach had on hand fresh and salted meats. Weatherman's Red Front Store advertised, "Drygoods, Shoes, and Notions," and also sold groceries, flour, feeds and queen's ware.

The Fort Cobb Grocery operated by Christy and Ritcheson boasted, "A child may come to this store and get good and full weights the same as their parents." Their motto was, "Quick Sale and small profit." Good news stories appeared concerning the Kirkwood Lumber Company, The Ludwick Furniture Company, Halls Barber Shop. Nora Hazelett in a half page advertisement was urging people to come to Fort Cobb, "The prettiest situated town in Oklahoma. . . . Doctors fail to do well."

Grimmett and Gilbert were placing before interested parties the most desirable real estate in Oklahoma. H. Starkey advertised blacksmithing and carriage repairing; Tignor, the barber, "had wide experience and skill and his patrons included the leading men of the city."

The Fort Cobb Land Company advertised choice relinquishments and school lands cheap. Indian Leases were from 3 to 25 cents an acre. The Staedlin Lumber Company had J. L. Summers for manager. Hamilton and Huffman advertised the best quality baking goods. Custard pies were a little higher because the price of eggs had gone up to ten cents a dozen. McPheeters Drug Company advertised only drugs and medicines and a prescription service. The I.X.L. Feed Yard was run by G. W. Zimmerman. Nice news stories were included on Hotel Cobb, and the Commercial Hotel, both of which had clean beds and excellent tables.

In local and personal news, G. W. Zimmerman had gone to the country to buy Indian ponies. R. L. Riggins had killed "a monstrous rattler, having eight rattlers and a button, on the west side of town Saturday morning." A nice line of ladies sateen bloomers along with muslin drawers, two pairs for twenty-five cents. "Red Lucas brought in a fish weighing 65 pounds on Wednesday morning, supplying the town with fish."

A full page advertisement announced a list of choice claims at very reasonable prices ranging from \$150.00 to \$3000.00 by the Herbig Realty Company. Chautauqua and Literary Circles afforded the cultural advantages at Fort Cobb.

In an issue of the *Fort Cobb Express* dated July 17, 1952, this paper having begun as the *Caddo County Record*, is a story of the bank's fifty years of service. A charter was granted to this bank on July 9, 1902, by William Grimes, then Secretary for Oklahoma Territory, to Thomas Kearse of Sickles, Jas. B. Yont of Fort Cobb

and J. H. Korndorfer of Medford, with a capital stock of \$5000.00. Kearsse was named president. In 1912 D. L. Burket and associates purchased the controlling interest and continued in charge until the bank moratorium in 1933. During the bank holiday, Otto Wray and associates purchased the control and opened during the moratorium with Ray as president. He continued in this capacity until 1949, when W. D. Finney succeeded him, and is now in that office. The bank building is now one of the most modern, beautifully arranged and decorated small banks in the southwest with a capital stock, according to a statement of that year, of \$25,000.00. Mr. Finney, who came to the area in 1908, is a Past District Governor of Kiwanis, and one of the most ardent fans of the history of the Fort Cobb community. He keeps the glory and the color of the old days alive by making addresses about his home town and its historical background, all over this area.

A beautiful new high school building is being erected and the elementary school is being enlarged and modernized. The area around Fort Cobb, as the first newspaper stated, is one of the most fertile in the state, and is known for its cotton and peanut crops. Irrigation is carried on with the sprinkler system, and those who live close enough to the river use its water; those farther away dig shallow wells from 220 to 300 feet deep producing from 200 to 1,000 gallons per minute. Short Horn cattle breeding is of course the major industry.

An annual fair is conducted without taxes and without passing the hat. Folks from all outlying districts—Foster, Oney, Highland, Swan Lake, Oak Grove, Oak View, Hopewell, Broxton, Washita, Cheatham and other districts—pour in to help put the fair over. The fair organization has its own carnival, and keeps the money in town. All of the carnival booths are manned by hometown folk. The premiums paid to the different entrants in the Fair have paid off in a creditable fair grounds fully paid for. Even the preachers dig in and help with the concessions during Fair time, according to R. G. Miller whose "Smoking Room Column" on the Fort Cobb Fair is a prized possession, proudly pasted in many scrap books, in this little city.

SMOKE GETS IN MY EYES

Like smoke from the bygone fires of the old Chieftains, something got in my eyes the day I visited Fort Cobb. Driving over the silver ribbon of concrete State Highway 9, from Anadarko, "the Indian Capital of the World," past the Natural Bridge under which my sister and I set up an early day bakery with broken bits of colored glass and china, and elegant mud pies baked on the hot rocks, across Cobb Creek where the ice had to be broken that we might be baptized on that long ago Thanksgiving morning. Looking up to "the hill" where often we gathered arrow heads, my heart was

so flooded with memories that it was hard to breathe for the first few hours of my visit. There, down by the old river bridge was the place we learned to dance. Drawn under a colorful Indian shawl we could keep perfect step with Nana, Fast Runner's wife, who taught us many things of prairie lore, of wild bird songs and moon signs, of teepee tales and legends.

Not too far away where the old watering tank once stood, we played "run-sheep-run," and "dare base." The Parks twins, the Burnhams, Ethel and Monte Churchill, the Foster girls, Joe Ellison, and the Cheathams and Chester Henderson and Maudie all hold front seats in my heart.

There in Little Jenny Flat was the place we raced our own Indian pony, "Little Jim," on Fourth of July picnics and rodeo days. We had cheered with the crowds as Monte Churchill and Allie Burger and Jimmie Downing showed off their prowess as kid rodeo performers as did our own brothers, Edd, Claude and Ernest. The oldest one had to sit on the sidelines, although he had his own pony, for Otho was our crippled brother.

Set well back in a field was the mansion belonging to Nora and Bill Hazelett. He was the ball player we cheered to win, and it was at their home I saw the first player piano. Asking what had happened to the mansion, I learned it was a six room white house that had been torn down for progress.

At the home of Mrs. Newton Dickerson, a spry beautiful lady of ninety-two and an aunt of Mr. Finney, my heart turned over when she asked, "Aren't you the little redhead who used to sing?" She also remembered the prairie fire that wiped them out as new comers to a claim; she recalled her husband finding my father, W. A. Zumwalt who took him home until he could make arrangements to send for his family and belongings back in Kansas.

Visiting the Wingos of the *Fort Cobb Express*, to my delight I found that Mrs. Wingo was the former Myrtle Garner, who was an old time sweetheart of one of my brothers. It was she who showed me the blue feather she had kept in an envelope and upon which was written: "Blue feather from Quanah Parker's War Bonnet given to Mr. Zumwalt who in turn gave it to me following a barbecue celebration in 1902." It was signed by Mrs. Clemmie Garner, Mrs. Wingo's mother.

I went back to the bank to thank Mr. Finney for his fine help and all the data he had accumulated and loaned to me, and found a plate made and hand-decorated by Maymie Milwee, which Mr. Finney had hung there close to the door for all to see and read. I would like to share the inscription with you. I am glad I wrote this verse, for it is how I feel:

“On the arm of a red-dyed river
Like lovers in embrace
A town lifts spires and towers
With a look of pride on its face.
I remember when a corn field
Was plowed to make Main Street
And a sided, tent-topped dwelling
Made my small world complete.
Now the river sings in gladness
And an Indian sky bends down
And a rainbow bright with mem’ry
Spans the years to my home town.
And I love each shaded pathway
My heart runs down each street
And I am just a child again
As old time friends I meet.
Oh I sing not of the city
Though its fame is quite renown
But of open hearts and welcome . . .
They’re my folks . . . It’s my home town.”

“Vera Zumwalt Holding.”