

BIG JAKE'S CROSSING

*By Bess Rogers**

In late 1898 the Rock Island railroad built west into Weatherford, where it stopped for a time—the end of the road. My father, Mr. G. W. Miller, had bought a farm four miles south of Weatherford in what was known as the Missouri Settlement. The family was large, four brothers and a sister, and farming was not very prosperous in those days, so my father was always looking about for something to supplement the income.

A Mr. Dean in Weatherford had received the government contract to carry the mail from Weatherford, Custer County, to the inland town of Cloud Chief across the Washita about twenty-five miles southwest in Washita County, Oklahoma Territory. Mr. Dean offered my father the job of keeping the way station on the road at "Big Jake's Crossing" on the Washita where the horses were changed each day on the way to and from Cloud Chief. The mail was carried in a two seated rig, which also carried passengers at two dollars a head whenever they wanted a ride.

There were no bridges in this part of the country on the Washita, and my father saw the need and the opportunity of a ferry boat at Big Jake's Crossing to be used in time of high water. With the help of my older brothers, he built a small flat boat, capable of carrying a wagon and team. It was operated by pulleys on a large rope cable, tied to a huge cottonwood tree on each side of the river. The charge for crossing was 25 cents for a wagon and team and 10 cents for a man on horseback. He also saw the need of a small stock of merchandise for trade with the Indians. He erected a small tent to house his store.

A group of Cheyenne Indians were camped a mile south of the crossing, and an Arapaho village was located five miles north. The Indians of both villages were good friends for there was a continual stream of travel on the north-south road between the two camps. The Indians came in wagons, a whole family usually seated flat in the bottom of the wagon bed, a half dozen dogs trotting behind, and many horsemen, usually riding bare back. On the east-west road there was an unending string of freighters hauling from the end of the railroad at Weatherford to Cloud Chief across the Washita. For the three years the railroad stopped at Weatherford, and the little pin point of Big Jake's Crossing became important to the progress of Western Oklahoma.

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When school was out in the spring of 1900, the family joined my father at Big Jake's Crossing. The living quarters were of a temporary sort, a large tent with a hastily built-shack in the back. But I think we did not mind too much, for my parents had lived in most of the makeshift kinds of shelters common to early day Oklahoma.

We children stayed close at home for a few days. I remember looking in awe at an Indian woman who came into the store with a long sharp hunting knife hanging from her belt. We were assured it was only for skinning animals, and, as nobody lost his scalp, my fears subsided. They did, that is, until one night we were awakened by the beating of tom-toms and the most wierd chanting that ever struck terror to the heart of white man. I was for taking off immediately for the farm in Missouri Settlement. Was it the war dance? Would the Indian women come with their long knives and peel our heads? Would we all be killed or captured?

But the next morning we were told by one of the English speaking Indians that a member of the village was ill—"blood in the mouth." It happened all too often at the camp. The performance we had heard was their method of warding off evil spirits and saving the lives of their people.

My mother, with true neighborly spirit, killed one of her fat hens and cooked a kettle of delicious soup to take to the sick woman at the camp. It seemed to be the policy of the Indians to keep their patients isolated (yet they knew nothing of contagion). So my mother left the soup with an old man who raised the flap answering for a door. She told him she would take the children to look around the village and return for the kettle later. In our round of the camp we saw Indian women sitting on the ground in front of the tepees doing exquisite bead work on moccasins. Some of the women were shy and withdrawn, but others were quite friendly. The children were shy too, but I could tell by the gleam in the little girls' eyes they would like to join us if they were permitted. I could see that, strangely enough, the Indians were as much afraid of us as we of them. A long eared dog trotting in front of us stopped to quench his thirst from a bowl of water sitting beside a tepee. As he licked his chops and trotted on, a little black eyed boy came out of the tent, picked up the bowl, and drank the rest of the water! Having completed the rounds of the camp, my mother went back to pick up her kettle. She asked the old man if the soup had been enjoyed. He nodded vigorously. He knew, for there was a trickle of golden broth running down from each corner of his mouth!

A great source of enjoyment for me was the many birds. The woods often rang with the melody of their singing. I was especially fascinated by the red bird, darting through the trees

like a flaming streak. We kids decided to catch one of the elusive little creatures. We built traps of willow twigs and watched for days. And one morning there he was! Jubilently we rescued him from the trap. But he was so piteously frightened, his heart beating so wildly, we decided red birds were better for distance viewing, and turned him loose.

We often made forays into the woods in search of wild flowers, "johnnie-jump-ups" on the river banks, and red bud on the fringe of the timber. Plum blossoms spread a white cloud over a little hill and sent out a delicate, heavenly perfume. On one of these trips my little brother stuck a thorn in his hand. He was crying lustily as we walked home. An Indian riding by dismounted and squatted beside my brother. He asked what was the trouble, and we called attention to the hand. "Walk-a-Pan make well," he consoled. Whereupon, he spat in the loose dirt of the road and with the spittle made a little ball of mud which he plastered over the wound in brother's hand. "Hand well now," Walk-a-Pan assured him. Even at the time I doubted the therapeutic value of Walk-a-Pan's treatment. But we heard no more from my brother.

Later I wandered back to the plum thicket and found the bushes covered with little half grown plums. For some strange reason I decided to see how many of the plums I could cram into my mouth. It is amazing how much the skin of a little girl's cheek will stretch. I surprised even myself. I started home to show the other kids my accomplishment. As I was crossing the stile into the yard I was met by my uncle who had come from Missouri to visit us. He kissed me on the cheeks, and the plums began to roll out of my mouth—into his shirt collar and down his vest. My uncle was somewhat of a dandy, and I often wondered what he thought of his little half wild niece in Oklahoma. I guess he did not care much for our crude manner of living, for he soon took himself back to Missouri and his law practice there.

The woods near the crossing were full of campers almost every night. We children would go down next morning to see what they had left. There was never anything but a burned out camp fire and a pile of egg shells. But it was fun to visit the places where they had been and speculate on who had spent the night there.

One afternoon the rain started falling, and we had to stay inside the house. It rained all night, coming down in torrents. At dawn the clouds broke away, and we walked down to the crossing. The river was rising steadily. There must have been extremely heavy rains farther up the stream, judging from the mud-laden water that was swirling down. There was an undertone of danger in its increasing murmur. Hourly my father drove stakes at the water's edge to gage the rise. The willow

tree that had playfully dipped its branches into the bright, sparkling little stream was already half submerged. The singing river was fast becoming a raging torrent. The water was soon too deep to be forded. My father and brothers rigged up the ferry boat and oiled the pulleys. I held my breath as the first heavily loaded wagon drove out onto the ferry, and the little boat moved slowly out across the swirling, muddy water. But as it made the trip back and forth without incident, I lost my apprehension, and even begged to be permitted to ride across.

There was never a let up all day long. Wagons and horseback riders were lined up eight and ten deep on both sides of the crossing. A crowd of freighters, ranchers, Indians, and covered wagon tourists stood about on the muddy banks watching the little boat battle the raging stream.

The rise continued. Whirling, foaming water lashed at the small boat. Debris lodged against it and had to be pried away—tree limbs, tangled wire and fence posts, dead cattle. There was a smell of decay in the muddy water. The river kept on rising. My father decided that the point of danger had been reached. He anchored the boat and refused to take anyone else across.

A drunk on the other side called out to come and get him. "You'll have to camp on that side until the water goes down," my father yelled back. "If you don't bring that boat, I'll cross on thith rope!" the drunk yelled thickly.

The boat remained at anchor, and the drunk caught the rope cable and started "cooning" it across. Slowly he moved holding to the rope, out to the middle of the stream where the roaring angry water almost touched his back. He might have been struck at any moment by a tree limb and dragged from the cable to certain death. He finally made it across. My father took him to our quarters and Mother brewed him a pot of strong black coffee. They sobered him up and gave him lodging for the night.

The river crested that evening and started slowly to go down. By morning the ferry was in operation again, and traffic moved as smoothly as it had the day before. It was several days though before the river could be forded again.

Then one day in 1901, a strange sound pierced the stillness of the rolling prairies—the shriek of an engine and the roar of a speeding train. Rock Island had extended its line west. Weatherford was no longer the end of the road. There was no need for the string of freighters on the winding trail. There was no need of the ferry boat at Big Jake's Crossing. The mail was carried by the railroad. The Cheyennes struck their tepees and disappeared as noiselessly as a sunset. The crossing, once bustling with activity, was silent and deserted. My family moved back to the farm in Missouri settlement.

A moment in the history of West Central Oklahoma had ended. The need for Big Jake's Crossing was over. But it had been caught in the mind of a small girl—the mystery of swiftly flitting, golden throated wild birds, the beauty of Oklahoma wild flowers, the humanity of the native Red People called "Wild Plains Indians," the wonder of loaded wagons and yelling cursing men, the tragedy and suspense of the rampaging Washita River.