

ALTUS ON THE HILL ABOVE FRAZER IN OLD GREER COUNTY

By *Barbara Kay Shelton*

INTRODUCTION

The manuscript of this story has a story in itself. This manuscript came with a letter to the Editor from Mrs. Weldon Ferris, journalism teacher in the Altus public schools, who wrote of her pleasure when two of her students followed her suggestions in class, and interviewed their pioneer grandmothers for an article assignment. Mrs. Ferris went on to say that "Barbara Kay Shelton chose to record that horrible night when Bitter Creek and Salt Fork met and the town of Frazer was no more. Mrs. Rogers, her grandmother, is one of the survivors of that flood upon which Altus was founded . . . Mrs. Rogers told Barbara several incidents I had not heard before. We decided it would be most effective to leave it as nearly as possible in the words in which she recalled the event . . . The picture of early day Altus was made some years later but shows some of the wooden front buildings constructed soon after the move up the hill to the 'high place' Altus."

*Barbara Kay Shelton was a senior in Altus High School when she wrote this story about two years ago. She, too, wrote a fine and very interesting letter to the Editor, saying that it would mean so much to her grandparents to have her story appear in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*. This in itself is a compliment because Barbara is the daughter of Stan Shelton, magazine editor of the *Wichita Falls Record-News*, and he had wanted her to write the story of the Frazer flood as a feature story for the *Wichita Falls*, or the *Denver Post's* western history section. Barbara's story appears here in *The Chronicles* just as she has written it, giving some history of Old Greer County as her grandmother told it.*

—*The Editor*

A Young Girl and a Town

This is the story of a pioneer family and a town. The town is Altus, Oklahoma; the family is that of Dr. J. E. Fowler.

Dr. Fowler moved to Frazer from Star, Texas. He and his wife traveled by wagon. When Dr. Fowler started west his family told him he would be back. Dr. Fowler retorted, "If I do it will be in a box." He spent the remainder of his life in southwest Oklahoma.

Dr. Fowler was one of the first doctors to settle in the part of old Greer County that is now Jackson County. His oldest daughter, Mrs. M. E. Rogers, tells of the move made from Frazer to Altus in June of 1891, at the time of the great flood:

"When we settled in Greer County we lived at Frazer. That's where Bitter Creek and North Fork of Red River meet.

Papa ran the drugstore. J. D. McMahan ran the post office.¹ We lived in the back of the drugstore. Papa used to watch the post office for Mr. McMahan when he was gone, and Mr. McMahan would watch the drugstore for Papa when he was on call.

"Papa was out a lot being the only doctor around. Mr. C. C. Hightower had a general store too. (Mr. McMahan and Mr. Hightower later founded banks in Altus.)

"That June (1891) Papa was sick. He had yellow jaundice. The flood happened one night; we were all in bed. We had a big rain that night. The two creeks overflowed and ran together. Jim Russell came and got us out.

"I think a headrise came down the North Fork. That was the blackest night I ever saw. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face except when it lightened. Jim walked at the head of the horses in waist-deep water and got the wagon and us out. He took us to Uncle G. Russell's place. That was on West Broadway now. Everybody gathered at Uncle G's.

"I don't remember much else. I remember Mama walking from bed to bed on chairs because there was so much water on the floor.

"Tom Baucum's daddy named the new town Altus."

At the time of the flood Mrs. Rogers was four years old. She lived in the drugstore with her brother and Dr. and Mrs. Fowler. A few weeks later, July 13, 1891, Mrs. Fowler died of typhoid fever. The typhoid fever epidemic was caused by the flood.

Frazer received mail and supplies from Vernon, Texas. The trip took three to four days. The men forded the Red River because there were no bridges. During the winter, wood was hauled from Indian Territory.

Later Dr. Fowler built a twelve-room, two and one-half story mansion for his family just two blocks east of the new town

¹ The post office was established October 27, 1890. (This note by Barbara Shelton refers to the Post Office established at Altus. This date is correct, and the first postmaster was Wiley Bancum. In 1901 to 1904, the name of this Post Office was Leger. The first post office at Frazer in Old Greer County [when it was still counted as part of Texas] was established on February 18, 1886, with Jennie A. Holt as Postmaster. Frazer post office was discontinued on December 31, 1895. [Refer to George H. Shirk, "First Post Offices within the Boundaries of Oklahoma," in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXX, No. 1 (Spring, 1952)].—Ed.)

square. The big, Victorian type house still stands, one of the few remaining examples of the homes of the Altus founders. An original stone wall surrounds it. In the sidewalk a name-plaque designates it as the home of Dr. Fowler. Mrs. Rogers continued to live in the Altus area until 1926 when she and her husband, Murph Rogers, a merchant, moved to Abilene, Texas. They returned in 1936, and now live across from the original Fowler mansion.