

ECHOS FROM THE PAST

EXPLORING OKLAHOMA, TWO INCIDENTS TO WRITE HOME ABOUT

There are many accounts of unanticipated incidents encountered by explorers in the northeastern region of what is today Oklahoma, but probably two of the strangest occurred during the same month and year. During September of 1719, Frenchman Claude Du tisme (do tin a), was the first explorer of record to cross the territory seeking a trade route to Santa Fe. Du tisme, eventually parlayed with Indian tribes near Chelsea before returning east in early November but negotiations had not been easy. He had traveled from a large Osage village near today's Nevada, Missouri where he not only had trouble convincing the Osage to let him proceed, but had a "hair raising" experience as well.

The Osage, who controlled northeastern Oklahoma as their hunting grounds were reluctant to let him proceed because they feared he would sell guns to their enemies. While negotiating with the chiefs Du tisme arranged to trade some goods he had brought with him in an effort to promote good will and to gain permission to go on. Unfortunately he made the mistake of displaying all of his trade goods for the Indians to see instead of bargaining with them one item at a time. Consequently, during the negotiations tribesman speaking in the Osage language discussed simply killing the explorer and taking his goods. Lady luck smiled on the explorer that day. As a child, Du Tisme had an affliction that resulted in hair loss and as a result had worn a wig most of his life, and equally important was the fact that he Indians were unaware that Du tisme understood their language. Upon overhearing their conversation, he took off his wig and threw it to the ground shouting that "if they wanted his hair they could have it for nothing." Overawed at this supernatural display, the Indians not only were convinced that he must be some kind of a god with great powers, they permitted him to continue on his journey of exploration with three rifles, limited supplies and a guide.

Du Tisme wasn't the only Frenchman to explore in Oklahoma that year. Coincidentally, during that same month of September, another explorer Bernard de La Harpe who was seeking trade with the Indians, traveled from the southeast, north across the Kiamichi Mountains. He then followed the Arkansas River until discovering a large Takawoni Indian encampment on the west side of the river between Jenks and Bixby. La Harpe and his small band stayed with the tribe for ten days and during that time a feast and festival was held for the honored guests. While exchanging gifts, La Harpe received an eight year old Apache slave as a token of the Chief's esteem. Upon receiving the child, La Harpe noticed one finger was missing from each hand. Noting the curiosity of his guest the chief apologized explaining that it was customary to remove fingers as a means of identifying the slave. He also expressed regrets that he had only one slave to offer as a gift. If the Frenchman had but come a month earlier the chief explained, he would have been provided 17 slaves as a gift, but unfortunately they had been consumed at a public feast.

La Harpe accepted the child as his gift and left the camp shortly thereafter. After considerable hardships, getting lost and being attacked by hostile Indians, he returned to his camp near today's Texarkana, Texas. Historical reports indicate that the child returned to the camp with La Harpe and when he sailed back to France the lucky child went with him, growing to adulthood in France and never returning to America.