

HOME SWEET HOME

*Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam
Be it ever so humble there's no place like home*

The lyrics for the song written by John Howard Payne for an 1823 opera, found a place in history because it so adequately described the emotions of both the poor and rich...home is where the heart is. The magnetism of free or cheap land created by the Homestead Act, the prospects of gaining a fortune in mining or simply the lure of adventure attracted settlers of even modest means to new homes in remote areas of the west. Hopeful pioneers piled their most precious possessions into covered wagons pulled by mules or oxen and headed "to the promised land." When they arrived at their destination and after construction of some form of shelter, cabin or sod house, these few prized items became the centerpiece of their humble homes sweet home.

However, there were exceptions to humble homes in what became known as Indian Territory. The first to be constructed was the Chouteau home at the Grand Saline, or Salina, palatial in comparison to other pioneer dwellings. The family, with origins in St. Louis society and partners in a vast fur trading business, built a two story house of neatly hewn and fitted logs. The home had a passage way through the middle and stone chimneys at each end with a kitchen and dining room in a separate wing. The entire structure was white washed and filled with valuable furniture, books and other treasures. The lawn was planted with rare trees, plants and flowers. The Chouteau abode became the center of Three Forks society and the family entertained travelers of renown, among others Washington Irving.

Their home may well have remained the standard for elegance in the region for many years except for a significant political event occurring in Georgia, the debate over the fate of the Cherokee Nation. Nearly a century of assimilation into the white southern life style had resulted in a number of Cherokee families accumulating wealth, developing plantations and becoming slave owners. In fact, when the last of the Cherokees moved west, records indicate 1,592 slaves moved with them. So, upon their arrival and following the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Treaty of New Echota in 1835 and the forced removal resulting in the Trails of Tears in 1838-39, the wealthy among these newcomers provided a new benchmark for frontier housing quality. The construction of several antebellum homes and the activities that they engendered were highlights of society for the next two decades. Four examples follow.

After the Indian Removal Act and before federal intervention, the state of Georgia and the government began the harassment that eventually resulted in the removal of the tribe, and while most Cherokees were financially devastated, some survived. In 1834, Joseph Vann and his family were forced from their home, "Spring Place," first fleeing to Tennessee, then to Indian Territory. Vann recreated "Spring Place" on 600 acres of land about one mile south of Webber's Falls utilizing some of the master craftsman from the several hundred slaves he owned.

John Ross, who was Principal Chief of the Cherokees and remained in the east until all avenues of appeal for his tribe were exhausted, moved to Park Hill and also built a palatial home. Ross' "Rose Cottage," was said to rival the fictional Tara in the movie *Gone with the Wind*. His home, so named because of a ½ mile lane flanked by rose bushes, could accommodate forty guests overnight. It featured tilled fields, a blacksmith shop, dairy, stables and extensive slave quarters.

In 1844, "Hunters Home," similar to the antebellum home he left in Georgia, was built by a wealthy merchant, George Murrell, ½ mile east of Rose Cottage. Still standing today in Park Hill, the property of the Oklahoma Historical Society, it is of two story frame construction. The Murrell home is complete with parlor, library, dining room and four bedrooms. Close by were a smoke house, spring cooling house, barns, orchards, slave quarters and a mill.

Much further north at Cabin Creek Crossing on the Military Road, a young entrepreneur nicknamed "Greenbriar Joe" Martin built one palatial house, then a second further south on the west side of the Grand River. Both were furnished with the latest fashions from St. Louis and New Orleans. The Martin Plantation at Cabin Creek included a blacksmith shop, settlers store, stage coach stop, slave cabins and other out buildings.

Interestingly, aside from composing the lyrics for the song thirteen years before, Payne later became an advocate for Cherokee independence. He visited the nation at John Ross' invitation in 1836 and was even incarcerated in prison for a short time because of his support. Unfortunately, both his efforts on behalf of the tribe and the poignant lyrics of his song would be overshadowed by the devastation of most of the homes during the Civil War.

