

THE PROMISE THAT WAS PARK HILL

One of the earliest prominent communities noted in some publications as a “Ghost Town of Oklahoma” is Park Hill, located two miles south of Tahlequah. With origins dating back to 1829, it soon became not only a social and cultural center for newly arrived Cherokees, but the scene of murder and subsequent chaos as well. Founded first as a mission in 1829, after the arrival of settlers in the mid 1830s the settlement grew steadily but was not a compact village. Homes and businesses were scattered over a span of approximately three square miles. The community soon became a center of learning and culture. Dr. Samuel Worcester, a missionary relocated a printing press to Park Hill from Union Mission in 1837 and published millions of pages of the New Testament, hymn books, law and text books and yearly almanacs. Soon after Worcester set up his printing press, on May 18, 1839, Samuel Newton established a post office. Soon Cherokee dignitaries arrived to settle there, among them Principal Chief John Ross and his brother Lewis who each constructed homes in the Park Hill vicinity. The community was “on the move” as Cherokees struggled to carve out a new existence in their segment of Indian Territory.

But tragedy unfolded almost immediately as a result of the long standing feud between Treaty Party signers and Traditionalists who were convinced that the signers had sold them out back in Georgia. On June 22, 1839, Elias Boudinet, one of the signers, was lured from his home by three men. Boudinet was asked to obtain some medicine for a friend from Samuel Worcester and, as the men approached an intersection near Worcester’s home, Boudinet was set upon and stabbed, literally hacked to death. His assassination was part of a well contrived plot that simultaneously resulted in the deaths of Treaty Signers Major Ridge, on a road north of Dutch Mill, Arkansas and his son John at his home on Honey Creek near Southwest City, Missouri. Although the crimes were obviously coordinated, a few weeks later the Council of the Cherokee Nation declared that the assassinations were “legal executions,” and that the men were outlaws because they had signed the treaty...thus adding fuel to the fiery violence between the two factions that would rage well beyond the Civil War years.

Although unrest and occasional clashes continued sporadically in and around Park Hill, and even though the Council had determined that Tahlequah would be the Nation’s capital, the settlement continued to thrive and grow. On its eastern edge, near the confluence of Park Hill Creek and the Illinois River, William Ross built a saw and grist mill and ½ mile north, De Lano & Company opened a mercantile store. Other stores were opened further west by John Ross and George Murrell. Several affluent and famous citizens also relocated to Park Hill from Georgia. One of the most notable was Arch Campbell, sometimes called “Chief.” Arch arrived in 1839 and built a two story home of hewn logs about ½ mile east of the Boudinet residence. He was regarded as a great warrior and had participated in the battle of Horseshoe Bend under command of General Andrew Jackson and later in the Battle of Clermont Mound in 1818. He and other braves had traveled from Georgia to the Verdigris River to take part in that victory which, for the most part, ended Osage threats in Indian Territory.

As time passed, old animosities within the Cherokee Nation began to subside and energies were focused on nation building. In 1849, the Cherokee Female Seminary was opened on the site of today's Cherokee Heritage Center and a local resident, Steven Foreman, organized the Cherokee National Public School System and became the first Superintendent of Education west of the Mississippi.

However, with the advent of the Civil War, Park Hill's golden years abruptly ended as well as the Cherokee Nation as a whole. Although the Nation had eventually declared allegiance with the South, the war also became an excuse to renew animosities about the treaty. Park Hill became the center of frustration for both Union and Confederate sympathizers who looted and burned nearly every structure in the community. The senseless rationale for their vindictiveness is indicated in a letter Indian Confederate General Stand Watie wrote to his wife in which he stated, "I had the old Council House set on fire and also burnt down John Ross's home." Neither action had any military significance. In another instance, Park Hill resident Hannah Hicks, a daughter of Samuel Worcestor, reported that her husband Abijah was mistakenly murdered because he was thought to be a Confederate sympathizer.

The promising future, then the later incidents that occurred at Park Hill, represent a microcosm of the history of the Cherokee Nation for the remainder of the 19th century. The community remains as a reminder that neither ever recovered to regain the promise of prosperity and sovereignty that preceded the war years.

