

ALL ABOARD FOR THE END OF THE LINE

Following the Civil War, the development of the railroad was regarded as the transportation wave of the future, and its significance was not lost on entrepreneurs like Matthias Splitlog. Dubbed “the Indian Millionaire,” Splitlog not only would create a functioning town in Indian Territory, he nearly succeeded in connecting it to the rest of the world by rail. Matthias, born in 1812, half Cayuga, half French, met and married Eliza Barnett a member of the Wyandot tribe. Following their removal from Ohio to Kansas in 1843, their dissatisfaction with the assigned allotment along the Neosho River led the tribe to purchase 39 sections of land lying at the fork of the Missouri and Kaw rivers, the future site of Kansas City. The Splitlog’s allotment overlooked the confluence of the rivers then followed the Missouri eastward.

Matthias had the intellect of an engineer and in a few years had not only built a grist and saw mill, but constructed a steam boat that plied the rivers. As circumstances would soon prove, he also was a shrewd businessman. When the potential of the location as a city became evident, in 1857 promoters platted the land, and proceeded to purchase segments that eventually would become Kansas City. However, Splitlog retained his allotment until 1860, finally negotiating much more profitable contracts with both the promoters and the Union Pacific that proved to be the basis for his fortune. Those familiar with the region today would recognize the couples allotment near the river as Splitlog Hill and the Union Pacific rail yards that stretch out toward the east.

Fortune in hand, Matthias continued to live in the new community for several years, but dreamed of contributing to the future well being of his fellow tribesman. So, in 1874, he moved his family south to Indian Territory in today’s Delaware County, and founded a town adjacent to the Elk River. Naming it Cayuga Springs in remembrance of his tribe, he set to work. First, he constructed a sawmill in order to have building materials, then adding a gristmill and general store as well as establishing a ferry to cross the river. In addition to a large blacksmith shop, in order to provide opportunities for local employment, he supervised construction of a three story factory to manufacture buggies, two seated hacks and, as the occasion required, coffins. He also underwrote construction of a “subscription” school for elementary children with tuition set at five cents a day. Cayuga Springs soon became known as “a gem in the wilderness.”

Always planning for the future and with the advent in 1871 of two railroads now crossing Indian Territory, Splitlog was convinced that his town also needed to be connected by rail in order to flourish. Once again reaching into his deep pockets, in 1887 Matthias funded construction of a track from Joplin Missouri through Neosho to Goodman, then four miles west to his newest creation, Splitlog City. A final link of the railroad twelve miles to the southwest would tie Cayuga Springs, via Splitlog City, to the rest of the world. Splitlog City had become the site of his latest investment, the Splitlog Land and Mining Company. Matthias, along with numerous other investors, had suspected for years that there were rich ore deposits in the region. So, when swindlers salted the area with “fools gold” near Anderson, Missouri and convinced Splitlog and others that the deposits were real, a buying frenzy followed. Unfortunately, soon thereafter the hoax was discovered, and Matthias not only absorbed his own loss, but paid the losses of many investors he had influenced.

Financially damaged by the mining fiasco, Matthias was forced to sell the Splitlog Line at a significant loss to a relative newcomer, the Kansas City Southern Railroad. His dream of connecting Cayuga Springs to the rest of the world by rail was ended. Subsequently, the isolation that resulted marked the beginning of the end for the small community.

Splitlog's railroad may have been the first to fail in the region, but it wasn't the last. Throughout the remainder of the 19th century, rail service continued to be the ultimate for passenger travel and commerce. But the overhead was enormous and revenues proved to be inadequate. In 1896, the Frisco Railroad which extended its line from Arkansas to Grove, failed after a few years. Then in 1912, the Missouri, Oklahoma and Gulf initiated service from Baxter Springs, Kansas through the region to Wagoner, but never profitable, closed in 1965. Today, vestiges of long defunct rail service can be seen throughout the region...a grade, a bridge, an occasional abutment...the end of the line as it were, and all serving as another reminder of Echoes From the Past.

