

## HOPEFIELD MISSION, A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

*Feed a man a fish and he can eat for a day, teach him to fish and he can eat for a lifetime.  
Ancient Proverb*

New Hopefield Mission was an innovation, created by a visionary. Initially started further downstream in 1823 and now relocated a second time in 1831 on the west bank of Cabin Creek at the confluence with the Grand River, this missionary endeavor was to be different than others. Traditionally, missions in Indian Territory focused on religion and education, were run by white ministers, and staffed by teachers educated in the east. Under the supervision of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the purpose was to educate and convert aborigines to Christianity. But Hopefield was created to teach Osage tribesmen how to subsist in the white man's world. There was neither a church nor school at this mission.

Unlike the Five Civilized Tribes from back east, so named because at least a portion had been assimilated into white culture, some for over a hundred years, the Osage continued to live as they had for centuries. As the southern branch of the Sioux Nation, the tribe had ruled the region west of the Mississippi River, south of the Missouri and across the Great Plains for centuries. They were hunters and noted warriors who fiercely defended their territory. Few outsiders dared to enter Osage country and their first recorded contact with white men was with soldiers commanded by Francisco Coronado and Hernando De Soto, both in 1541. But now, 300 years later, some of their land had been parceled off by the relatively new government of the United States and designated as "Indian Territory."

Hopefield Mission was the brainchild of Reverend William B. Montgomery, who established the first site as a farming project about five miles north of Union Mission in 1823. A minister by profession, Montgomery needed advice on farming and enlisted the aid of William Requa, who was also active at the Union Mission. Together, they helped their Osage interpreter build a cabin as well as one for themselves and began to clear land. Their activity and announced objective soon attracted eleven Osage families who established homes then cultivated small acreages. The Indians' enthusiasm increased and they were delighted when discovering they could train their own horses to pull farm equipment. By the end of the summer, the fledgling farmers had harvested enough extra corn and hay to sell at Fort Gibson.

Now, it might be assumed from its beginning that this "subsistence project" with the logic of introducing new ways of survival to the Osage would have a happy ending, but it was not to be so...suspicion, Mother Nature, and a series of tragedies would prove otherwise. And, as occurs with most innovations, there was resistance. Centuries as hunter-warriors resulted in derision and scorn of these "Field Makers" by their male peers, since by tradition only Indian women tended gardens. On occasion, the taunting erupted into open conflict, and the Hopefield occupants would flee to Union Mission for protection. Revenge also marred the experiment when The Bird, a farming convert, was found dead and scalped on the road, victim of revenge for some past hostility. Reverting to their old warrior ways, the Osage overtook the murderers, five white men, then killed, and scalped

them all. But despite these setbacks, the small experiment progressed, the next year more Osage families joined, and an excellent crop was harvested. However, another calamity soon occurred, an unprecedented flood inundated the settlement, washing away the cabins and granaries, even drowning several occupants.

This disaster, coupled with a realignment of land involving the Cherokees, caused Montgomery to relocate his project to the site mentioned previously and rename it "New" Hopefield. This time, lessons learned, the project prospered, even garnering mention in a famous authors book. During early October of 1832, Washington Irving who later wrote *A Tour on the Prairies*, Auguste Chouteau and their entourage traveling to Three Forks on the Texas Trail, stopped for lunch at the small mission. Having overcome a series of obstacles, New Hopefield prospered for nearly five more years, but then its fate was sealed by a catastrophe that could not be overcome. An unprecedented epidemic of cholera swept through the region, eventually claiming nearly 400 Osage lives. The plague decimated New Hopefield and after 16 deaths including both Reverend Montgomery and his wife, the surviving tribesmen abandoned the settlement. The elements had finally won.



