

UNION MISSION, AN UNFULFILLED DREAM

Reverend Epaphras Chapman had been given an exciting assignment, to determine the location of the first protestant mission to be established west of the Mississippi. The 28 year old, a Connecticut Yankee commissioned by the Board of the United Foreign Missionary Society, accompanied by Job P. Vinall, was to scout both eastern Kansas and Arkansas Territory for a suitable site. The purpose was to build a school, to educate the Osage tribe on the intricacies of farming and, of course, seek converts to the Presbyterian faith.

After visiting Brainerd Mission in Tennessee and making the long journey by river, the men reached Fort Smith on July 13, 1819 and successfully counseled with Cherokee and Osage tribesman. With the assistance of Captain Nathan Pryor, Chapman and Vinall selected a site on the Texas Road near the west bank of the Grand River, five miles northeast of present day Mazie in Mayes County.

Unfortunately, Vinall contracted a lingering illness and died at Fort Smith, but Chapman returned east. The following year after an arduous journey from New York, a Protestant “mission family” led by Chapman and including other ministers, teachers, farmers and journeymen arrived at Little Rock. Illness plagued the group, so leaving families behind in November, several male members continued to the thousand acre site that would become Union Mission and begun construction of cabins and other facilities, including a log school house.

Although willing to accept the concept the Osage, rulers of a proud nation that, for centuries, had extended north/south from the Missouri to the Red River and east/west from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains, were collectively unimpressed with the missionaries and their objectives. Their negative attitude was also fueled by white fur traders who wanted the tribesman to remain focused on hunting rather than farming. The prevailing attitude of many Osages toward the mission and its objective to teach farming were summed up by one elder tribesman who noted that, “building fences and plowing ground wasn’t his idea of how to get to heaven.”

In addition to the criticism of potential converts, the leadership of Union Mission faced several other adverse situations. The September following their arrival and after developing much of the site, a flood of unprecedented proportions for the Grand River destroyed most of the cabins and the crops, drowning many of the hogs and cattle that had been acquired. “Intermittent fever,” malaria, also took its toll among the mission inhabitants, resulting in multiple deaths, eventually even claiming Reverend Chapman in 1825. And, to add to those difficulties, a bitter war broke out between the Osage and Cherokees, another installment of a long time feud that further sidetracked the mission objectives.

As if the vagaries of Mother Nature, illness and armed conflict were not enough, government negotiations also added to the uncertainty of Union Mission’s future. In 1827, seven million acres extending from the Verdigris River east to the White River in Arkansas Territory, including the site of the mission, were deeded by the United States government to the Cherokees in exchange for their earlier claims against the Osage. This resulted in Union Mission, established to minister to the needs of the Osage tribe, now being located on

Cherokee land. Despite all of these complications, the mission family doggedly continued to pursue their objectives and took pride in the mission which one member described in a letter to friends back east “as having the appearance of a neat little village...with buildings placed around a square about twenty rods long and ten yards in breadth.”

Because of its location and the extent of travel on the Texas Road, during its existence, the site did become a popular stop for countless pioneers, as well as famous military figures and national personalities drawn to this new country. But that was not its purpose and in 1833, the government reassignment of the Osage to lands in Kansas signaled the beginning of its demise. In 1836 the mission was closed. The frustration of the mission family and their efforts may have been summed up in remarks written in a letter in 1835 by Abraham Redfield, who had served there all 13 years as a mill right and carpenter, “It is painful to think how little has been accomplished...find the Osages in the same ignorant and degrading state as when we came among them.” Today, silence pervades the former site of Union Mission and the small graveyard is the only memorial to the missionaries toil and sacrifice, a reminder that not all good intentions produce positive results.

