

PENSACOLA, ON THE MOVE

Law abiding motorists traveling to or from Grand Lake on highway 28, slow down to the mandatory 55 mile an hour speed limit when they pass through Pensacola in Mayes County, unaware of the names “flexible” history. Pensacola, meaning “Land of Beautiful Flowers” according to the original founder, actually occupied four different sites, prior to the most notable namesake, the mile long Pensacola Dam five miles away. That distinction occurred as the result of a policy of the United States Corps of Engineers to identify building projects by using the name of established geographical sites nearby.

The first Pensacola site was composed of several buildings, including stage coach facilities and slave quarters, located on the west side of the Cabin Creek crossing of the Texas Road, eventual site of two Civil War battles. The buildings were the headquarters of a ranch owned by Joseph Lynch “Greenbriar” Joe Martin which he founded in 1840. Martin parlayed that original site into a 100,000 acre ranch that stretched from Cabin Creek to Spavinaw and, during the following twenty years, he became a very rich man. However, fate was to intervene and his ranch, which had become a popular wayside stop for immigrants, also became a strategic military site resulting in a series of skirmishes and the two aforementioned battles. The resulting conflicts combined to decimate the buildings and Martin’s fortune, like most property owners in Indian Territory during the Civil War, he never recovered.

The name “Pensacola” languished for three decades after the war until it was revived by Martin’s son, Richard. When the elder Martin died in 1891, Richard inherited a portion of the original ranch. He had built a home in 1880 near the confluence of Rock Creek and Cabin Creek about three miles southwest of the original Ranch. Richard’s home, one half mile south of the west end of the highway 28 bridge over Cabin Creek, is still intact and is currently being renovated. He also built a general store and, in 1896, applied to the postal service to open a post office naming it “Pensacola,” the second site so-named. History does not relate why, but a few years later, shortly before statehood in 1907, Richard relinquished the rights to the post office. He may have been preoccupied with marital problems. In 1911, Richard shot and killed his wife for being unfaithful, then committed suicide.

While obtaining a permit for postal service was not difficult, there were 38 listed in Mayes County alone, the area that had become known as Pensacola was now not being served. However, at the turn of the century one and one half miles north of Martin’s home, a school, and a Methodist church called Ghormley Chapel had been established. The small community attracted Isaac Garber who built a store in the Ghormley community and circulated a petition to reopen the post office and retain the name “Pensacola.” Garber had previously operated a general store and post office on Lynch’s Prairie, just north of present day Strang, so he promoted his new acquisition by using the familiar name, now in a third location.

It would seem that the name Pensacola, the “Land of Beautiful Flowers,” had moved around the Cabin Creek community sufficiently, and through Garber’s efforts, had found a final resting place. But subsequent events would prove otherwise. In 1910, attracted by

the cheap land created, in part, by the Dawes Commission's division of lands now available in Indian Territory, James Sims Wilson arrived in the Cabin Creek area. Wilson, a proud native of Paris, Kentucky began buying tracts of land that had been platted, south and east of the creek. Almost simultaneously, even suspiciously, the Missouri, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad Company announced its intention of building a rail line from Baxter Springs, Kansas to Wagoner and further west...but also across a portion of Wilson's newly acquired ranch holdings. Within months Wilson had developed plans for a town astride the proposed railroad right-of-way, however he needed a post office. A post office would put his town on the map, but unfortunately the area that Garber's post office served, the third site of Pensacola, included Wilson's ranch. Meeting with Garber, Wilson proposed a compromise, if he would move his store and post office Wilson would underwrite the costs and provide bridges suitable for automobile traffic across both Cabin Creek and Grand River. Garber agreed and, as the saying goes, the rest is history.

But history proved fickle and although Wilson's town started well, the fourth site of Pensacola did not sustain itself. A familiar situation in rural America, the depression of the 1930s, the closing of the railroad in 1965 and general economics all contributed to the communities decline. In time, perhaps only the dam will retain "Pensacola," as a fifth site for the name, but even so, a facet of Wilson's dream of a fourth Pensacola will still remain. Today and for years to come, motorists who pass through on Highway 28 will also be driving on Kentucky Avenue, a street name he chose in recognition of his home state.

