

## NORTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA, CENTER OF COMMERCE

In 1806, following his exploration of the Arkansas River from Big Bend, Kansas to Arkansas Post near the mouth of the Mississippi, Lieutenant James Wilkinson recommended "The setting up of a trading post at the mouth of the Verdigris, for the benefit of the Indians in the region." In part, his observation regarding the site near present day Muskogee proved to be not only accurate, but understated. In fact, soon after Wilkinson passed the site and continued down the Arkansas, he met Joseph Bogy and a crew already poling canoes upstream with over nine thousand dollars worth of merchandise to be used in fur trading. Bogy was bound for the confluence of the Arkansas, Grand and Verdigris rivers which soon became known as The Three Forks. The trading site he chose was just below the Verdigris River rapids, not too far from where Wilkinson suggested. Bogy and his companions set about constructing the necessary cabins and a warehouse to house the trade goods. However, shortly afterwards, a large party of Choctaw warriors attacked the small settlement and relieved the trader of his inventory. Despite this setback, he persevered and the region would soon far exceed the expectations of either Wilkinson or Bogy.

At the time, the fur trading industry was quite profitable, no import tax was levied on most furs, and other traders soon saw the merit of establishing similar businesses. In 1815, among others, Nathaniel Pryor and Samuel Richards set up shop, although within four years, Richards died and Pryor lost the business. Shortly after that, Pryor opened a small trading post near the confluence of the Grand River and what became known as Pryor's Creek. Undoubtedly the largest operation was developed in 1819 by Henry Barbour and George Brand, who cleared thirty acres of land, erected twelve log houses and three warehouses, including a general store, They also provided ferry service across the Verdigris. Their firm was purchased in 1823 by Auguste Chouteau who moved the family fur trading business from Salina, but retained his home there. Chouteau added ship building to his new acquisition, constructing flatboats fifty to eighty feet long capable of carrying fifty tons of freight to New Orleans. The crew for these flatboats were rugged frontiersmen who were allotted three gallons of whiskey each, an average for consumption on the journey. But, because poling the flatboats back up the river was not practical, they were sold after arriving at their destination.

While Indians were in the majority of hunters and trappers, white men were also prominent. Many were simply called long knives by tribesmen, but some pioneer trappers were well known in the trade. For example, Tom Stover lived and hunted along the Grand, Alexander McFarland on the Illinois and Poteau and John Lemmons ventured as far south as the Red River.

Before the Civil War and until railroads crisscrossed the country, rivers were the main method for transportation and the Three Forks was the western terminal of river traffic that typically began at St. Louis on the Mississippi or Cincinnati on the Ohio. Upon their arrival by river boat, expeditions were organized and outfitted, then would proceed overland by wagon and packhorse, eventually as far as California.

**But river traffic was not the only avenue of transportation to the region. Around 1820 the Texas Road, originally an Indian path called the Osage Trace, had become a route for herding Texas longhorns to profitable markets in the north, first to St. Louis and later Kansas City. The trail, beaten down by the hoofs of cattle, also become the central section of a military road that stretched from St. Paul, Minnesota, through Iowa then to Fort Leavenworth and Fort Scott, Kansas on to Fort Gibson and finally terminating at Fort Jessup near Natchitoches, Louisiana. It was the major overland thoroughfare for pioneers traveling from mid America to Texas and later to California. The Texas/Military Road, U.S. Highway 69 generally follows it today, passed through the Three Forks area. Thousands, possibly a million or more pioneers and their wagons traveled along the Texas Road during their migration west, a trend continuing through most of the nineteenth century.**

**For over two hundred and sixty years before negotiations concluding with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, French and Spanish explorers had sought trade with the far southwestern outposts of Santa Fe and Chihuahua, Mexico. Rivers were the superhighways of that era and improved means of water transportation, combined with the natural confluence of three rivers in northeastern Oklahoma, further enhanced by the Texas Road, enabled the region to become accessible by land or water. As a result, the site was the terminus and the premier center of western commerce well into the nineteenth century.**





