

Echoes From the Past

THE MILITARY ROAD.....HIGHWAY TO PARADISE

The written history of northeastern Oklahoma frequently refers to the “Military Road” or “Military Trail” used by soldiers and pioneers to traverse the region. Extending for more than a thousand miles, the Road originating at Fort Snelling in St. Paul, Minnesota, wound south through Fort Dodge and Fort Des Moines, Iowa, then west to Fort Croghan near Omaha, Nebraska. Turning south through Forts Leavenworth and Scott in Kansas it entered Oklahoma at Baxter Springs. Passing through Oklahoma it continued to Fort Jesup, Louisiana and then to the Gulf of Mexico.

Initially, the “Road” was just a trail marked by a combination of plowed furrows or mounds of rocks at mile intervals in prairie country and blazing timber in the wooded sections. Crossing rivers and streams was always a dangerous situation and, if possible river crossings with rocky bottoms were sought. The Road favored high ground and the route was often determined by the availability of fresh water springs. From 1834 to 1846 it was patrolled by a few hundred men comprising the elite First Dragoon Regiment, light cavalry who were a stabilizing element that successfully protected whites from Indians, Indians from whites, and Indians from Indians. The trail only became a road after thousands of wagons had developed a distinguishable path. Even recently area residents have been able to discern occasional wagon ruts that still define it. Forts sprung up along the way as a necessity to supply the troops and communities were often founded nearby. Five of the fourteen forts on the Military Road were located in Oklahoma: Forts Wayne, Gibson, Coffee, Washita and Towson.

After the Indian Relocation Act of 1830, the portion of the Road through northeastern Oklahoma, sometimes called The Texas Road or Emigrant Trail, became increasingly important as settlement developed. Crossing into Indian Territory at Baxter Springs, it passed Hawk’s Tavern and wound south just west of Quapaw crossing the Neosho River at Poole’s Ferry. In addition to the ferry Moses Poole, an Ottawa Indian, maintained a blacksmith shop, a store and a post office at the site. Continuing south over Hudson Creek the road crossed the prairie to what would later become Fairland in 1888. It then ran southeast of Afton north of Sixkiller Cemetery to Knight’s Tavern. The tavern, a large log structure with a breezeway in the middle included a dining area on one side and sleeping quarters on the other. In 1994, history buffs arranged for the tavern to be moved and it was systematically dismantled then reconstructed and served as a chapel on the Brush Creek Boys Ranch near Jay before fire consumed it several years later.

Leaving Knight’s Tavern, the traveler would have continued southwest passing north of what would become Ketchum in 1912 and onto Knell’s tavern at Cabin Creek. Repairs to equipment and supplies could be made at the Cabin Creek crossing where “Greenbriar Joe’s” blacksmith shop and store were located. If they were traveling by stage coach, passengers would acquire a new driver for the next phase of the Baxter Springs to Fort Gibson route. This was the “turnaround point” for their first stage driver and his horses.

From the Cabin Creek crossing, the route stayed west of the Grand River continuing south, east of Pryor, Chouteau, and Wagner. Here the Road turned southeast and travelers would cross the Grand River at Flower Creek then on south to Fort Gibson.

Used as a passageway to the southwest in our region the Military Road and more specifically the Cabin Creek crossing became etched in the history of northeastern Oklahoma during the Civil War. The Road was a vital supply line to Fort Gibson for federal troops and, while the north had considerably more resources in both manpower and supplies, the constant harassment of confederate cavalry was always a threat. The threat became reality in two instances at the Cabin Creek crossing, the first on July 17, 1863 when northern troops successfully defended their supply wagons and the second on September 18, 1864 when confederates thoroughly defeated federal troops and made off with over a million dollars worth of equipment and supplies. Second Cabin Creek is generally regarded as the most successful confederate victory west of the Mississippi. Today the original highway to northeastern Oklahoma, our modern day version of paradise, is confined to history books and an occasional marker, but in the 1800's it was the pathway to a new life for pioneers.

