

Echoes From the Past

NATHAN PRYOR, OKLAHOMA NAMESAKE

Few communities in Oklahoma are as honored by a distinguished personality as the city of Pryor first known as Coo – Y – Yah which is Cherokee for “mulberry grove,” then in 1887 as Pryor’s Creek and finally in 1909 as Pryor. The city is also historically significant as the site of the Whitaker State Orphans Home, first established in 1879 for the orphans of Indian Territory.

The community’s namesake, explorer and war hero Nathan or Nathaniel Pryor was born in Virginia and later as a young man enlisted in the famed Lewis and Clark Expedition at Louisville, Kentucky in 1802. Following the completion of that expedition he was placed in charge of a military detachment at St. Louis in 1808 to lead the Mandan Indian Tribe to their home on the upper Missouri River accompanied by fur trader Auguste P. Chouteau and his fur trading party. However, the expedition was turned back by warring Arickara Indians. During his military service, Pryor had also been assigned the task of attempting to negotiate a peace settlement with Shawnee Chief Tecumseh who was a controversial figure and unpopular with many Indian tribes. That effort also would soon cause him grief.

In 1810, after returning from his mission with the Mandan’s, Pryor resigned from military service and settled in Dubuque, Iowa’s oldest settlement where he established a lead smelting business. Incensed by his recent involvement with Chief Tecumseh, during that winter, Winnebago Indians raided and destroyed his business and held Pryor captive threatening to burn him alive in his own house. Fortunately he managed to escape, crossing the treacherous Mississippi River. Shortly thereafter when the war of 1812 with the British began he returned to military life as an infantry captain in the 44th Regiment and fought courageously at the battle of New Orleans under then General Andrew Jackson. After the war he resigned his commission and came to the Three Forks area north of Muskogee where he was employed by his former acquaintance Auguste Chouteau to assist in the family fur trading business.

Venturing into the fur trading business for himself, Pryor entered into a partnership with Samuel Richards after obtaining a license from the Governor of Arkansas. The state of Arkansas at that time extended west of the Arkansas River into what today is eastern Oklahoma. Pryor’s license permitted him to “trade with the Osage Nation Indians as well as ascend the Six Bull (Grand) and Verdigris Rivers.” The partners established the Pryor and Richards Trading Post 1 ½ miles north of the mouth of the Verdigris River at a place that later became known as “Pryor’s Creek.”

Unfortunately, Nathan wasn’t as successful in business as he had been as an explorer and military officer. First, his lead smelting business in Dubuque, Iowa had been plundered by Indians and he had lost all of his possessions and investment and now he had a falling out with Richards, his business partner. That disagreement led to a series of judgments in favor of Richards, one of which required Pryor to pay \$600.00 as well as \$1000.00 in damages which he was unable to pay. Other business debts were also incurred. For example, court records indicate that in 1821 Alex Jordelas successfully sued him for \$92.50 and a judgment for damages of \$300.00.

Fortunately, during his sojourn in Indian Territory, Pryor had become a close friend of Osage Chief Clermont whose village was located north of Claremore. On several occasions he had interceded for Clermont during negotiations with other tribes and white traders. During this time he undoubtedly sealed that relationship when he married an Osage woman. Pryor also served as an intermediary with officers from Fort Smith and Fort Gibson when missions of “a delicate character” occurred with Indian tribesmen.

As a result of his association and successful negotiations Pryor turned his attention to Indian affairs and sought to become an agent of the government. His petition to become an Indian sub-agent came with recommendations from highly qualified sources. Colonel Arbuckle, commandant at Fort Gibson wrote, “Captain Pryor has done more than all of the other agents in restoring peace between Indians on the frontier.” In addition, two letters were written by Sam Houston to promote Pryor’s appointment and another by the Governor of Arkansas. Finally in 1830 Nathan Pryor’s quest as Indian sub-agent, a position for which he was eminently qualified, was officially approved at a salary of \$500.00. But his good fortune was short lived. Pryor who had no way of knowing he would be immortalized as the namesake of an Oklahoma city died the next year in 1831 and was buried five miles southeast of Pryor. However, in 1982 his remains were relocated to Fairview Cemetery east of town. Nathan now rests in the city that bears his name.

