

Echoes From the Past

THE VINITA AXEHANDLE WAR

One of a number of clashes that occurred during the settlement of northeastern Oklahoma was an unforeseen battle at Vinita between gandy dancers employed by the Missouri Kansas and Texas or “Katy” and the Union Pacific railroads. Included in the Reconstruction Treaties made between the U. S. Government and several Indian nations was an agreement that one north-south and one east-west railroad were to be allowed through Indian Territory. The prize for which ever railroad entered the territory was the lucrative cattle hauling business from Texas ranches south of the Red River. By the latter half of the 18th century, cattlemen had developed a preference for the Chisholm Trail on the western plains because it was less congested than the Texas Trail though Indian Territory that crossed the Kiamichi Mountains and involved endless miles of scrub brush where cattle were hard to herd. So investors concluded if a railroad could be built through Indian Territory the shorter distance to eastern markets would again be a more attractive option to ranchers.

The first to capitalize on seeking the prize was the Katy, born as an extension of the Southern Branch of the Union Pacific Railroad. On March 6, 1871, 400 workmen were the first to reach the north border of Indian Territory. Supervised by Bob Stevens a hard driving general manager whose men frequently laid 2,600 ties a mile. A large portion of Steven’s crew were Civil War veterans who had come west to find employment and were mostly veterans that had comprised the Irish Brigade, a grizzled outfit of New York Irishmen that had been recruited early in the war and survived nearly every battle that was fought in the east. The long hours these men toiled were accompanied by terrible working conditions that included dysentery, fevers, and chills coupled by swarms of flies and mosquitoes “that clogged a man’s nose and mouth.” Conditions were so bad for the work animals that their backs and legs were covered with burlap to keep them from being harassed by insects. Consequently, when the pending “war” occurred that would allow these men to vent their anger, they were primed.

During earlier negotiations for Katy right-of-way, Stevens had entered into an agreement with one Elias C. Boudinet, a Cherokee attorney and entrepreneur, to develop a way station within a two mile square plot of land near Big Cabin Creek that Boudinet had claimed and named Vinita. However, unbeknown to Stevens, he had more recently negotiated a brand new town site with the Union Pacific located three miles north of the Vinita site which he called “Downingville” to curry favor with Cherokee Chief Lewis Downing and other tribal authorities. As an additional incentive to himself, when creating this new way station, Boudinet had included ownership of a third of the new town site as his brokerage fee.

Late in the summer of 1871, as Katy employees were fighting the deplorable work conditions, now accentuated by the swampy wetlands south of Chouteau, Union Pacific workers had laid track within two miles of Downingville. Ordering his construction engineers “to remove any Katy facilities that were in their path and build right over the

Katy tracks,” Andrew Peirce, general manager of the Atlantic Pacific crews, set the stage for the conflict.

Upon being apprised of these events by telegraph, Stevenson now near Muskogee boarded a northbound train to determine what was happening. Reaching the Big Cabin, Stevenson was amazed to see the original town site of Vinita nearly deserted and, continuing on to “Downingville,” was enraged to see his opposition grading over and building on the Katy property. He immediately telegraphed his foreman to “move up his entire force and prepare to grade new sidings.” The next morning, a northbound Katy work train loaded with hundreds of Irish Brigade veterans pulled into the original Vinita on the Big Cabin. They then moved on to “Downingville” where Stevens issued orders to destroy any Union Pacific rails and equipment on their property and build a higher right-of-way. By evening the invaders tracks were buried under Katy ballast, ties and rails. When the Union Pacific employees were ordered to undo the Katy efforts the two workforces clashed. Unfortunately for the invaders, the Irish Brigade took the opportunity to unleash months of pent up frustration with mosquitoes, fly bites, and anything else they considered an injustice in one of the bloodiest railroad axe handle battles ever fought. There is no account of the number injured on either side but the evidence of victory was clear. The next morning found a Katy train leisurely rumbling back and forth north and south on their line with no Union Pacific employees in sight. Interestingly, in the aftermath of the conflict not only did Downingville become Vinita, but within a few years the Union Pacific and Katy Railroads reached an agreement whereby the east-west line continued on to “Tulsey Town.”

