

Echoes From the Past

THE GHOSTS OF MONKEY ISLAND

At least a century before the name “Monkey Island” was chosen to define the vacation destination that now exists, the area and a portion now inundated by the lake was the site of several thriving communities. The “island,” was so designated when occasional flooding from the Grand River, now Grand Lake flowed across the lowlands just south of Martin’s landing. As early as 1840, pioneers farmed the fertile land and communities were founded to supply residents with their needs. Its most famous resident was Stand Watie, later commissioned a confederate general during the Civil War, who moved from Honey Creek with his family in the 1840’s. The Watie farm was located in the area now occupied by the marina and surrounding buildings and extended nearly a mile further south, now inundated by the lake, to a curve in the river aptly named “Watie’s Bend.” Leaving the region during the Civil War the family returned afterward but it was not a happy reconciliation. Their son Saladin died in 1868 and another the following year. By 1883 Watie his wife and their two daughters were also gone.

The Waties were part of a community called Progress that included the area from Waties Bend, later known as O’Fields Bend, north beyond today’s golf courses. In addition to several other farm families, the area included Union School, also referred to as Progress, which served not only the educational needs of the children but as a social center for the farming community.

Further north, one half mile west of Ralston Cemetery near the middle of the island, was the town of Needmore established around 1875 when John Harold opened a general store in the vicinity. The town grew rapidly and eventually consisted of ten acres with homes, five streets and five artesian wells. The businesses catered to the needs of an agricultural community and included a general store, blacksmith shop, hardware store, a feed mill and two doctors. A subscription school was constructed and two teachers were employed to meet the educational needs of students some coming from as far south as today’s Snake Island. In 1907 Needmore, Indian Territory became Needmore, Oklahoma when it was awarded a post office. The community prospered and a common site was the long, horse drawn wagon trains carrying farm products from the Grand River valley through Needmore and on to the train terminal in Grove. However, prospects of the growing community were dashed in 1912 when the Missouri, Oklahoma and Gulf (MO&G) Railroad winding its way along Horse Creek was constructed 1 ½ miles northwest of town.

The arrival of the MO&G resulted in the founding of “old” Bernice, the brainstorm of Ross Mode and Charles Lee who bought 60 acres of land and laid out the town. Named for Bernice Mode Ross’ daughter, the town prospered in part because of the occupants of Needmore who moved there. At its peak, there were 400 inhabitants in Bernice which included an education facility that was accredited for the first two years of high school and enrolled about 125 students. Among other businesses in the community there was a bank, mercantile company, two blacksmith shops, two drug stores and a hotel. The town was also located on highway 59 which connected Vinita with Grove and residents boasted that the city water well, located in the middle of the road, was the only one of its kind. Unlike

the other Island communities and prior to being inundated by the lake in 1940, the town was moved 2 ½ miles west to its present site. However, even today some of the building foundations of “old” Bernice are still visible when the lake level is low.

Echo or Mud Center, which was located in the general vicinity of Echo Bay east of Martin’s Landing, now inundated by the lake, was another small thriving village adjacent to Monkey Island. Located west of the Grand River one mile from Carey’s Ferry terminal, Echo was the junction for early pioneers who either turned north toward Baxter Springs or continued west to Vinita and beyond. Echo was awarded a post office in 1882 and there were several businesses in the community including a dry goods and grocery store, a newspaper, the *Echo Hustler*, and a one room school. The school was distinguished by the fact that during the 1920’s it was the only one room school in the state of Oklahoma to pass requirements as a “model school,” with accoutrements such as a fenced yard, sanitary toilets, playground equipment, a large library and a cupboard for lunch boxes.

Today, full and part-time residents of Monkey Island enjoy the beauty of the area and its recreational facilities but there are reminders all around that they aren’t its first inhabitants. Ghosts from times past reside there as well.

