

DRIPPING SPRINGS.....MADE FOR A MOVIE

Without a doubt, northeastern Oklahoma is one of the premier beauty spots in the southwestern United States. Rolling hills to the east, punctuated by the Grand River and endless plains to the west, provide a contrast in landscape. Delaware County, encompassing nearly 800 square miles, is a case in point. Along its southern boundary is a beautiful, rather unique combination of geological formations, caves and underground water sources in Natural Falls State Park, known as Dripping Springs. One local legend contends that Dripping Springs was well known to Confederate soldiers and, that somewhere on the property a concealed cave still holds weapons and wagons hidden there.

In 1888, several years after the Civil War, 170 acres was allotted to Jefferson Davis Carnes, of Cherokee descent who, with his family, had recently moved from Georgia. The land was immediately put to good use. A few years after their arrival, the Carnes Family built a large, two story home on the property with a unique water system. A windlass caught the fresh, cold spring water which ran into pails fastened to a cable. The pails could be drawn up to the house by cranking on the windlass. A spring at the entrance to another cave on the property was used to store milk and butter in the cold water.

By the early 1900's, the unique features of "The Springs" began drawing visitors from the surrounding region. Some, even further away, would come by train to nearby Siloam Springs, rent a horse and buggy and spend the day or several days camping out. Dripping Springs became such a popular destination that, in 1918, the allotment was purchased by the Rankin and Airy families who saw the potential for an even wider range of tourism. In addition to other amenities and attractions, they built a high swinging bridge 152 feet long to span a canyon and waterfall. Recently, the bridge has been replaced by a sturdy wood and steel structure. Dams were constructed which enabled boating and swimming and, in addition, they converted the original Carnes home into a hotel called The Wayside Inn, boasting six bedrooms, a dining room and other accommodations. Still later, another owner added a filling station and grocery store for the convenience of travelers on old state highway 33. By the early 1970's, Dripping Springs had become a destination for vacationers from afar.

But, as popular as the area became as a recreational destination, it would become even more visible after that, courtesy of Woodrow Wilson Rawls. Rawls, a native of Scrapper located near the winding Illinois River in Cherokee County, was about 18 when the Great Depression of the 1930's swept across the United States. Destitute like many "Okie's," the Rawls family loaded up their possessions and headed west, bound for California. However, the family car gave out in New Mexico and they took up residence there. Wilson became a carpenter who traveled extensively seeking construction jobs where they could be found, even in South America, Canada and Alaska.

During these years, the 1930's, 40's and 50's, as a means of recreation and as an outlet for his innate creativity, he also wrote stories. Rawl's, who had a limited education and was an atrocious speller, didn't show his manuscripts to anyone and kept them hidden in a trunk. However, after his marriage in 1958, his well educated wife, a budget analyst for the

Atomic Energy Commission, read the stories and encouraged him to publish them. Among the manuscripts was a novel entitled *Where the Red Fern Grows*. The story tells a heartwarming tale of a young boy, Billy Coleman, growing up in the Ozark Mountains during the Great Depression. It chronicles his efforts to save money to buy two hunting dogs and recounts their adventures as they roam Cherokee country.

As a result of this publication, two assets of northeastern Oklahoma were joined together, a vacation destination in the Cookson Hills and a talented author growing up in Cherokee Country. Rawl's novel was developed into a movie in 1974, starring Academy Award Nominee James Whitmore as Grandpa, and Dripping Springs was chosen as a site for several of the movie scenes. This "family friendly" story was so popular that it was recast in 2003 starring rock musician Dave Matthews with musical scores by country star Wynonna Judd.

The fact that Hollywood directors chose to film portions of the movie in this region comes as no surprise to those of us who live here. The picturesque characteristics, the hills, valleys and rivers are made for the movies. Nor should it be surprising that another celebrity traces his roots to our region. Once again the combination simply highlights the virtues and rich heritage of northeastern Oklahoma.

