

## ECHOS FROM THE PAST

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### JEAN PIERRE CHOUTEAU, FATHER OF OKLAHOMA

Just as today, businessmen in the past faced continual challenges and the Chouteau brothers were no exception. As explained last week, because of politics they had lost their lucrative fur trade market close to St. Louis to a competitor. They had to explore new territory. So When Pierre Chouteau left St. Louis in March of 1796 to search for a trading post beyond Missouri's western borders, he was looking for a site and a waterway to transport furs to market. His party, maybe 18 in all, included other French traders and a few Osage Indian guides. Moving west southwest from St. Louis for about 400 miles the party came upon a sizeable stream which the guides called Ne-o-zho. Chouteau called it *grande riviere* or Grand River, the name it maintains today after crossing into Oklahoma.

A boat or pirogue was fashioned from the trunk of a cottonwood tree and Chouteau, along with an Indian guide floated down the river with the rest following along on the river bank. He was looking for the mouth of a spring branch that fed into the river and a place with a rocky bottom that could be used as a passable ford across the river.

Just imagine that river before it was inundated by Grand Lake. Today, Chouteau would have passed under Sailboat Bridge near the confluence of the Grand and Elk River, on past Carey Bay and Patricia Island, curved around the southern tip of Monkey Island, perhaps considered Horse Creek as a site, continued under a 150 foot beneath the Coves residential area, past Duck Creek, then beneath Langley Bluff to the confluence of the river with Big Cabin Creek, and finally to Saline Creek that empties into what today is Lake Hudson. There, he found what he was looking for, within the city limits of present day Salina, not only the ideal building site but near a salt deposit as well. The rest of his party following along the river bank would have ridden through the woods and fertile grassy meadows that lined the river and, in later years became home to farmers. It was the same journey that, one hundred years later, Henry Holderman, another entrepreneur, would make while searching for a dam site on the river to produce electricity.

In all, the Chouteau party spent two days journeying from where they launched the pirogue north of Miami to the mouth of Saline Creek flowing into the Grand River. At last, Pierre Chouteau had found the ideal location he wanted to build a trading post that was far enough from St. Louis to capitalize on an abundant fur trade, and with a water highway connecting to the Arkansas River that eventually would reach the Mississippi and the New Orleans market.

Inadvertently, Chouteau had also laid the groundwork for a debate among historians. Today, Salina is advertised as the "oldest city in Oklahoma" because of the Chouteau settlement in 1796. Historical purists insist that honor should be given to another settlement, Fernandina, located in Kay County near Newkirk. Some argue that Fernandina was established by French traders earlier in the 1700's because of certain European artifacts that were found there. Others disagree and believe it was an established Wichita Indian village where other Frenchmen traded with the tribe. In either case, the scales tip toward Salina for "oldest city" honors because Fernandina no longer exists.

Returning to Chouteau, we find him busily directing construction of a trading post as well as coordinating scouting parties that were sent in every direction to search for signs of Indian hunters and villages. After the camp was finished, for the next six weeks one by one, the scouting parties returned. And, one by one their report was not good. They had learned to their dismay, that no tribes had permanent villages within several days journey of the trading post! Using today's jargon, Chouteau had flunked a basic rule of Business 101 ..... "When establishing a business be certain there are customers." Discouraged, the party abandoned camp and returned to Fort Carondelet and the Indian Village near the Osage River in southwestern Missouri.

Again, by abandoning his trading post, Chouteau fueled the basis for still a second debate among historians. Since he left the Salina site during the spring of 1796 and didn't return until 1802 (with another business plan) was Salina established in 1796 or 1802?

In either case, that wasn't an issue of interest to the Chouteau's. Although discouraged with the failure to find customers for their fur trading business, the Chouteau brothers optimistically developed a new plan of action. Using their money and influence with the Osage, they began an extensive campaign to add fuel to a long-standing argument between factions of the Osage tribe. Typically, just like any political selection, there has always been an argument among Indian tribesman regarding who should run the tribe and the Osage were no exception. Playing on egos within the leadership over the next six years, the brothers convinced two influential chiefs, Big Track and Clermont, to move their permanent villages down into the valleys of the Arkansas, Grand and Verdigris Rivers. Ultimately, Big Track relocated near the three forks of those rivers and Clermont settled a few miles north of Claremore. The brothers now reopened the trading post naming it La Saline, WITH customers thus leading to another axiom, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again."

Now with the trading post established, the Chouteau's had not only improved their financial situation but attracted the attention of others. Eventually, Jean Chouteau turned the Salina fur trading business over to his son Auguste and returned to St. Louis to manage what became a fur trading empire. As the years passed, the territory long since ceded to the United States as a part of the Louisiana Purchase, attracted other settlers. And, with the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the population swelled even more, setting the stage for generations of immigrants of all races whose offspring would become famous in the future as artists, athletes, and astronauts. But in the beginning and through his perseverance, Jean Pierre Chouteau had established the cornerstone of what would become the state of Oklahoma and as such deserves the title, "Father of Oklahoma."