

QUAPAW'S "BRAGGIN' RIGHTS"

Over the years the town of Quapaw, located in the northeastern part of Ottawa County, has, in one way or another, stayed in the news. There are conflicting stories about its origins, but few Oklahoma communities can lay claim to more "braggin' rights" when it comes to obtaining national visibility.

The region around Quapaw has been home to a number of small eastern Indian tribes since an agency was established in 1871. One version of the town's beginning reports that in 1891 a Kansas farmer, Isaac Bingham, moved his family into Indian Territory and opened several businesses. Another story focuses on the town being founded in 1896 when the Kansas City, Fort Scott and Memphis Railroad, later called the Frisco, connected Baxter Springs to Miami and established a depot there. In either case, the town was first officially recognized when a post office was opened in the community grocery store in 1897. Both versions agree that the town's namesake, Chief John Quapaw, donated land for a community school and was instrumental in having a large one room building moved from the old Quapaw Boarding School. Later, other buildings were also relocated from the old government school.

The arrival of the railroad had an immediate impact on Quapaw. Within a few short years, by 1904, farmers were reported to have shipped 1000 railroad cars of hay, 800 cars of corn and 25 cars of flax to eastern markets. With the construction of a second railroad, the Missouri, Oklahoma and Gulf in 1913 east of town, the need for growth was inevitable. As a result, community leaders platted an addition, "New Town Quapaw," on land known as the Whitebird – Shapp addition, and incorporated the whole town in 1917.

While the town folk were pre-occupied with growth and the everyday affairs of business, most were unaware of the groundwork for national visibility being laid by a frequent visitor from Claremore, Lynn Riggs. Riggs, who visited the farm home of his aunt and uncle near Quapaw in the 1920s, was inspired by the flat terrain, the "wind sweeping down the plain," and the "corn as high as an elephants eye," descriptive phrases he later incorporated into a play, *Green Grow The Lilacs*, in 1931. That play eventually morphed into the musicale *Oklahoma* in the 1940s, and after McAlester Representative George Nigh introduced a bill during the 1953 legislative session, the theme song became the state song. During each of 2,212 performances viewed by 10 million people, Quapaw was mentioned as the town where menacing farm hand Jud gave a fictional account of a deadly arson that supposedly had occurred there.

But even before Riggs frequent visits, Quapaw and the surrounding area had obtained a degree of national visibility. In 1904 lead and zinc minerals were discovered and the Old Dark Horse Mine began production east of town. As the mining field developed and spread it became recognized as the most predominant in the tri-state area that abutted Oklahoma with Missouri, and Kansas. A world market was created with the outbreak of World War I and towns in the mining region, including Quapaw, became known nationally. Ultimately, fifty percent of the lead and zinc metal used during the war and 9/10ths used by the United States were produced there. Quapaw was definitely "on the

map.” By 1917, propelled by mining and commerce, the population of Quapaw had grown to 3000 and 18 passenger trains were stopping daily

Although, the town’s most notable claim to artistic fame may be related to the origins of *Oklahoma*, another incident later renewed the community’s national exposure. During a 1976 episode of the sitcom *M*A*S*H*, while Colonel Potter goes to Tokyo for rest and relaxation, his horse develops colic. B.J. Hunnicut mentions that his father-in-law, a resident of Quapaw, Oklahoma knows all about horses. An urgent telephone call to Quapaw solves the problem. In reality, B.J. Hunnicut, played by Mike Farrell, was married to a Quapaw native and, in fact, her parents did live in town. On occasion *M*A*S*H* reruns continue to remind viewers of that “Quapaw connection.” Still later, the community’s recognition beyond the borders of Oklahoma was again enhanced when resident Anna McKibben was recognized as Miss Indian Princess, USA.

For five decades, Quapaw also has had the distinction of welcoming westbound tourists to Oklahoma. From 1933 until 1985, countless travelers arrived on the “Mother Road,” Highway 66. Inevitably, there also were some “unwelcome” visitors. Depression era criminals Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, “Pretty Boy” Floyd, “Machine Gun” Kelley and the Barker Gang frequented the highway and undoubtedly stopped in town for gas or food. The tri-state corner was a magnet for gangsters because of the lack of lawful reciprocity between connecting states that allowed them to avoid pursuing officers.

The MO&G railroad shut down in 1965 and the mines long before that. Highway 66 was de-commissioned in 1985, and today, Quapaw, is primarily a bedroom community of 1000 residents. However, given past history, it may be only a matter of time before another event will add to the town’s “braggin’ rights.”

