

SPAVINAW, PROFILE OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY

From pioneers to sports icon, the diversity of Oklahoma history is no more evident than that reflected at Spavinaw, in Mayes County. Pioneer spirit, social conflict, war and celebrity make it a microcosm of events that typify Oklahoma's background.

Upon his arrival in Indian Territory in 1829, Lewis Rogers, son of Captain John Rogers, built a dam and mill on Spavinaw Creek and discovered a "deer lick" or salt spring further downstream. From that time until 1924, both figured in events that would play a role in the history of the region. Today, the mill lies beneath a lake created by Spavinaw Dam and the "deer lick" is under the south end. Just the town of Spavinaw, incorporated a century later, remains as a reminder of the past.

In earlier times, a mill and access to salt were crucial to pioneers and when Eastern Cherokees began arriving a decade later, Roger's venture attracted several families who settled in the area. Shortly thereafter, an unusual situation of secular bigotry developed regarding Mormons and their beliefs. In the early 1840s, Lewis Rogers had disposed of the mill, which was in need of repair, and it became the property of Joseph Lynch "Greenbriar Joe" Martin. Joe's father John, a wealthy man who had been Chief Justice of the Cherokee Supreme Court died. The inheritance from his father, combined with his own shrewd business skills had enabled young Joe to amass over 100,000 acres of land. His holdings ranged from today's Ketchum to Strang and it included Spavinaw Creek as well as Lewis Rogers' mill. In 1846, Martin hired Jacob Croft, a Mormon from Texas, traveling with his family on the Texas Road, to restore the mill. Croft decided to stay and was retained to manage the mill. He and his family were accepted into the community. However, in July of 1855, a group of Mormon missionaries from Utah arrived at Croft's home. Their objective was to establish missions, hold services and baptize converts among the Cherokee and Creek Tribes. At this time, Mormons were still practicing, or were accused of practicing polygamy. Complaints of citizens, many of whom deemed the religion a cult, resulted in Chief John Ross ordering all Mormons to leave the nation.

The Civil War set the stage for two more events involving Spavinaw Creek, the mill and surrounding area. The late 1850s saw anti-slavery agitation gain momentum across the United States and in Indian Territory. Just as the states, some in Indian Territory owned slaves and some didn't, so their loyalties were divided. When war finally began, soldiers representing all nations in Indian Territory were recruited by both the North and South. Stand Watie, then a Colonel in the Confederate Army commanding the Cherokee Rifles, participated in battles and several skirmishes in northeastern Oklahoma. Usually outmanned and outgunned, the Confederates often used guerilla warfare, "hit and run" tactics, because they knew the territory so well. On June 25, 1862 a large Federal command that included Indian troops left Baxter Springs, Kansas to find and defeat Watie and his command. Clashing two or three times, the two opponents again exchanged gun fire at Spavinaw Creek and the Confederates disappeared into the hills. Isolated incidents between the two factions continued to occur in the area for the next year, but on July 2, 1863, it would be associated with a Confederate defeat. The plan, later known as the First Battle of Cabin Creek, a crossing at "Greenbriar Joe's home, called for Watie's 2000

troops to be joined by 1500 under the command of General William Cabell. However, upon approaching from the south across Spavinaw Creek and then Lynch's Prairie, Cabell was thwarted by flood waters on the Grand River and could not assist. Watie's command was overwhelmed and defeated.

When peace finally came, Greenbriar Joe's vast holdings were devastated. Soon thereafter his brother-in-law, Joseph Lynch repaired the damaged mill, which then became known as Lynch's Mill, and resumed operation of the salt works and business. A few years later, in the early spring of 1878, a post office, Lynch's Prairie, was established four miles west of the mill. In October, the name was changed to Spavinaw Mills.

Less than four decades later, another event took place that would have a huge impact on the area. Tulsa, 60 miles west of Lynch's Mill, had long sought an additional water supply for its growing population. In 1924, due in part to the engineering genius of W.R. Holway and his concept of gravitational water flow, Tulsa's problem was solved. But in the process, a dam was built creating Spavinaw Lake that inundated both the mill and surrounding residences. Because of the lake's magnetism as a recreation site, in 1930, the town of Spavinaw came into existence. It gained immediate visibility as THE regional vacation spot, populated by wealthy Tulsans as well as a few with marginal credentials. Boat races and water shows were held on the lake and summer homes were constructed nearby. The community became notorious as a "swingin'" town with excellent dining, wide open saloons and gambling. While its popularity continued for well over a decade, today few associate Spavinaw with that era because a more enduring event occurred right after the town's incorporation, one that residents reserve as current "braggin' rights." On October 30, 1931, residents Elvin and Lovell Mantle announced the birth of their son Mickey Charles. The Mantles moved four years later and Mickey grew up in Commerce, but today, the town takes great pride as the birthplace of the 1974 Baseball Hall of Famer. Hardy pioneers, social conflict, war, deprivations, good times and celebrity, Spavinaw has had it all, a sampling of Oklahoma history.

