

THE TRAIL ENDED AT DAWES

Dawes, a pioneer community in the 1800s, originally called Timber Hill, was located nearly equidistant between what later would become the communities of Miami and Welch. A prominent site with an unparalleled view of the surrounding prairies, Timber Hill is topped by rocks and boulders, undoubtedly created by the earth's upheaval millions of years ago. The hill and surrounding prairie land proved to be an attractive building and farm site for early settlers. The first arrivals, five McGhee brothers, Scotch-Irish immigrants from Georgia with Cherokee wives moved into the territory a few years prior to the infamous Trail of Tears.

In addition to the rich prairie land that surrounded the area, over the years, the settlers near Timber Hill soon acquired an unintended benefit. The region proved to be strategically located along what became known as the Shawnee Trail. The trail, initially an Indian trace or path, developed into a road by pioneers bound for Texas territory. Known as the Texas Road to those traveling south, it was called the Shawnee Trail by drovers herding cattle north because of a Shawnee village located on the south side of the Red River. Drovers, or cowboys as they came to be known, herded cattle from the very southernmost parts of Texas, through Austin and Fort Worth, then Oklahoma and hundreds of miles on to railheads further north. Although the route was long, tedious and sometimes dangerous, it was profitable. A steer that could be purchased for five dollars in Texas, could be sold for as much as ninety five dollars at the railhead.

Drovers spent months herding their cattle, and upon reaching Timber Hill, the trail split into two routes, one was north to railheads at Weston (Kansas City) or St. Joseph, Missouri. The other alternative was northeast to Sedalia or St. Louis. So, arriving at this junction, drovers had an important decision to make, dependent upon available grazing or wet or dry weather conditions further north. In the meantime, they rested their herd, taking advantage of the bluestem grass and available water. This delay was economically advantageous to local citizens. A trading post was established nearby and drovers paid for pasture land grazing. Even later, in 1870 when the railhead finally reached nearby Chetopa, Kansas, drovers fattened their herds near Timber Hill before selling them. But soon afterwards, use of the Texas Trail dwindled and finally ceased because more attractive trails developed further west. Not only were those trails open prairie, but Indian tribes were willing to trade access across their lands for beef while property owners on the Texas Trail were charging a "head tax" on passing herds.

Although the decline in the cattle business affected Timber Hill residents, they were sustained by the rich prairie through farming and grazing. During the late 1880s and early '90s both Miami to the east and Welch to the west were founded, each served by railroads. These communities enabled Timber Hill families to both obtain necessities and provided an outlet to sell their farm products. In 1892, another important event impacted the Timber Hill community, passage of the General Allotment Act, by the United States government. The government, well known for its consistency in breaking treaties with Indian tribes until it finally just quit treating, formed a commission to implement the new law. Labeled the "Dawes Commission" for former Massachusetts Senator Henry Dawes, the commission

was tasked with the responsibility of allocating 29 million acres to settlers. Thomas Jefferson McGhee, son of one of the original settlers and a Civil War veteran, served as an employee on the commission during the Cherokee allotment. McGhee suggested that Timber Hill be renamed in honor of Dawes and the change was accepted.

Today, the pioneer families, the trading post and post office, a one room school and other buildings that might be indentified with the history of Timber Hill/Dawes are gone, only the cemetery remains. And, while the history of the community can be traced through the families that lived there, the cemetery offers an unresolved mystery. One gravesite along the northern boundary of the Williams – Timber Hill Cemetery belongs to “Ma” Barker and her sons. The family, notorious in the 1920s and 30s as the Barker Gang, committed murders, robberies and kidnappings throughout the mid west. Through the years, family members singularly met their demise and were buried at sites in California, Colorado and Florida only to be eventually exhumed and moved to their current resting place. Although numerous theories have been advanced, none fully explain their residency in “the silent city.”

The Dawes history adds an interesting chapter to the story of northeastern Oklahoma. Timber Hill exemplifies the variety in terrain that we expect in this part of the country and, like other communities several of its citizens have become leaders in state and tribal capacities. Now, if someone would explain why the Barkers are buried in the local cemetery, a final paragraph could be written.

