

THE MERCHANTS OF THREE FORKS

Location, location, location, an axiom of real estate agents, certainly applied to Three Forks at the confluence of the Arkansas, Verdigris and Grand Rivers and Mother Nature's gift to enterprising merchants. Rivers were the highways of America prior to the advent of trains or decent roads and this waterway to the southwest was unparalleled. Although the rivers were only seasonably navigable above "the forks," the fact that the Arkansas freely flowed to the Mississippi made the site a natural for fur trading and a magnet for a variety of characters who established businesses there.

For the most part, history does not record the details of the discovery of Three Forks other than to note that Spanish explorer, Hernando de Soto camped somewhere in the region during the winter of 1541. After that there were occasional informal references by French and Spanish traders that passed through. Nor did French Captain Claude Du tisme mention Three Forks during a brief visit to the region in 1719, although he did make note of salt mines, perhaps further north on Saline Creek. So it really wasn't until Jean Chouteau established his trading post at Salina in 1796, that history in the area became known. Even then, Three Forks was permanently inhabited only because Chouteau convinced Osage Chief Casheseagra to move his constituents there to provide hunters for the family fur trade. That and President Jefferson's negotiation for the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 finally fulfilled the real estate "location" axiom.

Among others who would establish businesses that were drawn to this new Mecca of trade were a cast of characters including, a soldier of fortune, retired explorer, struggling businessman, felonious banker and a former governor who would become a president.

The soldier of fortune was Joseph Bogy, a resident of Arkansas Post near the Mississippi River who had traded along the Arkansas, but more recently had been a victim of theft. In 1807, Bogy had encountered Choctaws who were warring with the Osage on his way upriver to the Three Forks area and they had relieved him of over \$9,000 worth of trading items. Never-the-less Bogy persisted and established his trading camp about four miles north of the rivers' junction where he continued his trading venture until the mid 1820s.

Nathan Pryor, an army officer and explorer, former member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, established a trading post on the Verdigris near present day Okay in 1819 with a partner, Samuel B. Richards. Richards had owned a trading post at Arkansas Post. Apparently this business association was not successful and Pryor became more interested in becoming an Indian agent, neglecting the trading venture. He was named agent just before his death in 1831, but not before Richards sued him over financial issues.

George W. Brand and Captain Henry Barbour also arrived in 1819, Brand came from Tennessee and Barbour from Pittsburg. The partners cleared thirty acres below the Verdigris Falls on the east bank near present day Okay, built ten or twelve buildings on the property and provided ferry service across the Verdigris River. The venture was short lived and was purchased by Colonel Auguste P. Chouteau, possibly in part because of Barbour's health because he died the next year in 1821. Without question, the Chouteau name is the most connected with Oklahoma's fur trading industry. Auguste's father Jean Pierre had initially, perhaps mistakenly, established the family trading post sixty miles

north of Three Forks at Salina. Auguste assumed control of the venture and moved it to Three Forks in 1820. He expanded westward to other sites during the next twenty years, but eventually over extended his ambition and his finances. Chouteau died impoverished.

In 1821, Hugh Glenn formed a partnership with a former army buddy and business associate, Jacob Fowler. Not much is known about Fowler, but Glenn, a supposedly successful Cincinnati banker at thirty, was accused of fraudulent practices and fled west, eventually to Three Forks. Fowler set up their fledgling business and obtained a trading license that extended to the head of the Arkansas River. Accompanied by Glenn, the pair spent a year traveling west to the Rocky Mountains then southwest to Santa Fe. At the time, there was no tax on furs and after acquiring eleven hundred pounds, the business partners were last recorded as being seen in St. Louis.

In April of 1829, Sam Houston, recently resigned Governor of Tennessee, estranged from Eliza his wife of four months, arrived in Three Forks. The next year, without benefit of divorce, he married Tiana Rogers and set up a mercantile business on the Military Trail in Three Forks, west of Fort Gibson. Houston remained perpetually drunk but the couples business, known as "Wigwam Neosho," thrived until 1833 when Houston moved to Texas without Tiana. He did divorce Eliza shortly thereafter and was chosen as president of the fledgling nation to the south in 1836.

The excitement of settling the American west was not only filled with fascinating events and adventures, but a lengthy list of unique characters that molded the country. In those parameters, the merchants of Three Forks are a microcosm.

