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Early Weatherford, 1898-1919

by Vonda McPhearson with John Donley
excerpted by Joyce Stoffers
from Chapter Two of Weatherford, Oklahoma: 1898-1998

Before examining the origins of Weatherford, it is important to remember that prior to its founding, there was an earlier nearby settlement of homesteads, “the Missouri Settlement,” organized in 1894 in the northeast corner of Washita county, about five miles south of the future town of Weatherford. The school founded there, “the Missouri School,” opened in 1896, and continued educating students until its closing in 1952. Moreover, early settlers there, such as the Auxier family, later became residents of Weatherford.

As with many towns, Weatherford owes its beginnings to the expansion of the railroads. When the Choctaw, Oklahoma, and Gulf Railroad moved west from Geary, it selected the route along Big Deer Creek and Little Deer Creek to avoid the higher hills which would have made the grading of the road bed more difficult. The town that would be situated at this westernmost point would become the terminus of the railroad.

As for the founding of Weatherford proper, the townsite manager, Beeks Erick, chose the site for the town and John W. McLoud, “General Solicitor in charge of town-site,” purchased four tracts of the original townsite in July, 1898. The company then sold 250 acres of land which they had platted into town lots. About $40,000 worth of permanent improvements had been made in the grading of streets, the building of a permanent bridge across Deer Creek, and the placing of a dam across the creek to ensure an abundant water supply. The plat was filed at the Custer Register of Deeds on August 15, 1898.

On July 22, 1898 it was announced that the new town in Custer County was to be named Dewey, and an application for a post office was sent to Washington, D.C.; however, there was already a Dewey in Indian Territory so this name could not be used. Some say the town was named for Lorinda Powell Weatherford who, despite being able to only sign her name with an “X,” became the first postmistress for the settlement in August of 1893 when she established a post office on the Weatherford homestead. Others say the town was named after her spouse, William J. “Bill” Weatherford, but either way, the town was named after the Weatherford family.

On August 3, 1898, in what was then a seventy-five acre cornfield owned by John Jones, the present site of Weatherford was established as construction workers completed the Weatherford State Bank by mid-afternoon. In August, J. W. Rice arrived in Weatherford as the new postmaster and within six months, the “town of dirty tents” boasted a population of 2,000. One of those early tents housed Ed Sullivan’s Hotel—probably the area’s first restaurant.

Other businesses were quick to get started, such as the Cottonwood Mill, a water-powered sawmill on Deer Creek so named because of all the Cottonwood trees. Nonetheless, the bustling heart of Weatherford’s business section in late 1898 was Eighth Street, and the corners of Eighth and Main. The Patterson and Fowler General Store was a huge wooden building later used as an opera house, and across the street was Howard Bonebrake’s hardware store. Nearby was Frank Toothacker’s saloon, Curly Caldwell’s hardware store, a blacksmith shop, a wagon yard, J.E. Keep’s hotel, and Demming’s grocery store. Allie Patterson, reported to be the first customer, remembered the grocer had to open cases and crates to fill her order.
By October of 1898, although Weatherford's streets were filled with ankle deep dust from the cornfield, there were eight lumber yards, fifteen wagon yards, fourteen saloons, and five dance halls. The new community had the reputation of the roughest and wildest town in western Oklahoma Territory. Anheuser Busch, founder of the famous brewing company, heard of the town and visited Weatherford in December, 1898, as did an assortment of gamblers, real estate agents, and pioneer farmers. With the arrival of the railroad in Weatherford, the business section moved to East and West Main Street, where it remains today.

While no surviving copies can be found of Weatherford's first newspaper, The Weatherford Independent, copies have been found of The Republican which was first published on January 12, 1899. Others followed and were ready to report on events such as the election of Weatherford's city officers, and the completion of the first brick buildings: the State Exchange Bank, and the Weatherford State Bank building — into the rear of which J. J. Williams, M.D., who had his medical practice in a dugout southwest of Weatherford, moved his office and living quarters. By 1904, local residents could read announcements about the home delivery of breads, cakes, pies, and fruits: a service offered by two different bread wagons.

Perhaps one of the most important businesses in an age before refrigeration, was an ice plant. In September, 1901, the Weatherford City Council granted F. A. Wheeler, John Butler, and Willard Weaver a five year franchise to operate the Weatherford Ice Company. Under the franchise the plant had to have a capacity of ten tons per day and a storage of twenty carloads as well as a building outfitted with approved machinery for the manufacture of ice. Furthermore, the ice was not to be sold at a higher price than charged by com-
pany outside Weatherford.

In 1906, the Weatherford Ice Company’s wagons were equipped with gongs, which the drivers sounded while making their rounds so that customers would be reminded to put cards in their windows allowing the driver to know how much ice they wanted. Customers were encouraged to weigh the ice in front of the driver. Blocks of ice were to be fifty pounds or more at one delivery per address for $.50 per one hundred pounds, less than that would be $.60 per hundred, with no sale less than $.10. By 1913 Weatherford had its own municipal ice plant.

Because of the stress caused by the Wall Street panic of 1907, Territorial Governor Frank Franz closed Weatherford’s German National Bank and the First National Bank. The citizens of Weatherford treated the matter as a joke and patiently waited for the banks to reopen. When they did, Weatherford banks issued certified checks in denominations of $1, $5, $10, and $20 to be used as money for as long as needed.

Farm implement merchants had a “good harvest” in 1902. They sold 132 binders and headers, 122,000 pounds of twine, two steam engines, and numerous thrashing outfits for nearly $73,000 in income. The importance of area farming prompted M. A. Farr to announce in 1904, plans to build a grain elevator with a capacity of 20,000 bushels. Two years later Weatherford built another mill and elevator plant. Area wheat farmers purchased stock in the corporation to operate the Citizens Independent Mill and Elevator Company. (The Co-op Elevator currently operates at the same location.)

With the demand for cotton, the retail dealers association opened a cotton yard. Cotton farmers, not ready to sell their crops, could have it ginned, baled, and then stored at the cotton yard until they were ready to sell. In turn, cotton farming became an important industry and by 1918 Weatherford had its own cotton gin as well and a number of new brick buildings too. In 1919, Dr. D. Gaede built a new brick veneer building on the southwest corner of State and Main Streets. The basement contained ten treatment rooms and baths. Gaede specialized in hydrotherapy and homeopathic medicine and gave electric baths, Russian baths, hot air baths, sea salt baths, Swedish movement massage, and electric massages and tonic rubs.

In the days of predominantly wooden buildings, fires were all too common. On July 3, 1901, fire destroyed the wagon yard, Baldwin and West Lumber Company, and two homes. Another fire burned two grocery stores, a harness shop, and the City Drug store on February 17, 1909. After John Thacker’s general store burned in October 1911, a $40,000 fire swept through the business district on February 14, 1912 destroying six buildings. The town’s water system pumped 1,200 gallons of water per minute for four hours in order to control the flames. In the wake of these and other fires, insurers threatened rate hikes if the city did not provide better fire protection, so residents loaned the city sufficient money to purchase a fire truck.

Community leaders also encouraged non-wooden buildings in an effort to reduce the fire hazard, so the new Nicholas “Nick” Hermes’ brick plant, located one mile southeast of the Custer Street bridge was a welcome addition. The plant manufactured the brick for many homes, commercial buildings, the Southwestern Normal School administration building, and the first brick school house in Weatherford. By 1903 Hermes employed thirty workers.

The Weatherford farming community kept in step with the changing times. In 1904, O. B. Kee and Howard Bonebrake bought their first cars. Both men were proud of their automobiles and planned a race up the hill to the Normal school. A large crowd gathered to watch, but surprisingly, no one was sure who won the race. Cars were indeed making inroads into Weatherford, and although blacksmiths still enjoyed a profitable business, by 1916, the impact of automobiles became evident as the city installed “Keep to the Right” and “10 mph” street signs and declared that all cars had to be parked at an angle of 45 degrees. With
the popularity of the automobile climbing, the
timing was right for John Sallaska to open a new
Buick showroom and garage November 1, 1917.

As the new century arrived, the formation of
civic and social clubs, and educational and reli­
gious institutions joined the establishment of busi­
nesses as high priority items. In February, 1900,
J. J. Williams was a founding director of the Com­
mmercial Club, now known as the Chamber of Com­
merce. The Commercial Club was instrumental
in securing the telephone line from Cloud Chief,
but efforts to develop an electric railroad line from
Colony and to locate the power plant in
Weatherford never were realized.

As one might expect, the growing town expe­
rienced some pangs as some citizens felt the need
to rein in certain activities. So, in July, 1902 the
city council passed an ordinance providing a fine
of $50 and not more than $100 for running saloons
on Sunday or after 12:00 a.m. and for gambling,
playing games, or racing on Sunday. Moreover,
the founding of the Probiren Club in 1900, sought
to make Weatherford a more “appropriate” com­
munity for Southwestern Normal School by influ­
encing city officials to remove saloons and houses
of prostitution.

By 1906, the club joined the women of
Weatherford in trying to replace the town’s “wild
and wooly” reputation. The two groups worked to
influence additional local ordinances. Since women were not allowed to vote, they circulated a petition to abolish liquor and “other activities” that were associated with it. Nearly every woman in Weatherford signed the petition, and when the city council met on July 6, 1906, George T. Webster presented the petition. George Ruddell, moved that the city attorney and Webster draw up an ordinance abolishing all forms of prostitution. Thus, Weatherford became a dry and “sin free” city even before statehood, positioning itself at the forefront of conservative Oklahoma communities early in its history.

The fall of 1904 brought the Probiren Club into action again when it established a woman’s “rest room” located at 33 Broadway. The object was to provide for women who accompanied their families into town a free room with comfortable chairs, a sofa, drinking water, and reading material. Women could also eat lunches brought from home. The room was opened every weekday from seven a.m. to seven p.m.

Over the next decade, local women and the Probiren continued to influence local ordinances with their views of what constituted appropriate behavior. For example, they influenced the election held on June 2, 1914 to express their concerns about pool halls. The election was held without expense to the town, as both newspapers printed the election proclamations, the Democrats furnished the ballots, John Carter furnished the building, and C. C. Penn, Charles Houk, J. P. Randal, and Eugene Forbes gave their services on the election board. The vote was 79 for the pool halls and 185 against.

With the assistance of the Circle of Mercy, the Commercial Club began work in 1909 on a solution to the “problem of tramps and beggars.” The club mailed cards explaining that all beggars and tramps should be referred to the Circle of Mercy and that the city would give every beggar a meal in exchange for work.

During Weatherford’s first decade, there were some famous (or infamous) violent incidents. At a City Council meeting in July of 1903, recently deposed City Marshall John Isom shot Bill Weatherford in his left thigh because he was angered by what Weatherford had said about him to the council. Weatherford responded by pulling a gun from under his shirt and chasing Isom. When the acting city marshall tried to restrain Weatherford, Weatherford’s gun went off, setting his pants on fire and leaving him with a nasty powder burn on his abdomen. He then surrendered his weapon and later recovered from his injuries. Meanwhile, John Isom was never charged with a crime. Plainly, it appears that the old-time town of Weatherford really could boast an image that was part wild, wild west given the number of prostitutes, salons, and public gunfights like this one!

On July 8, 1905, Kate James was shot to death south of Deer Creek, approximately two and one-half miles northeast of Weatherford, and the mystery surrounding her murder has long since become the stuff of local legend with a site close to where her body was found now known as “Dead Woman’s Crossing.” While traveling to visit relatives, James and her thirteen month old daughter, Lulu Blanche James, met for the first time Fanny Norton, and the three spent the evening of July 7 with the A.R. Moore family in Weatherford before heading to Hydro early the next morning. Katie James probably did not know that Norton had been tried and acquitted for shooting a Weatherford bartender in the back. Later on the morning of July 8, a woman left a baby, who turned out to be Lulu, with John Bierschied’s family, and pitched a bundle of what turned out to be bloody clothes in nearby bushes before driving away. While Lulu was unharmed, Kate James could not be found, and when private detectives questioned Norton about the disappearance, she claimed James had abandoned the baby with her. Then, stunningly, in the midst of the questioning, Norton excused herself to the bathroom where she poisoned herself to death.

In late August, George Cornell stumbled upon what turned out to be the severed skull of Kate James with a bullet hole behind the right ear, and
her badly decomposed body was found “hidden in a clump of bushes” one mile north of the Morton School House. Norton’s .38 caliber revolver with one of two cartridges missing was found nearby. In September, a coroners’ jury concluded that Fanny Norton had murdered Kate James in order to rob her. Nevertheless, until this day, uncertainty over the possible involvement of potential accomplices such as Martin James, the husband of Kate James, or William Moore, Norton’s brother-in-law, and questions regarding why Kate James even joined up with Fanny Norton to travel with her in the first place continue. Thus, while the coroners’ jury ostensibly closed the case, for many locals, the story of Kate James remains one of Weatherford’s great mysteries. She is buried in Greenwood Cemetery.

Citizens of Weatherford met in early 1912 and elected a board of eight freeholders to write a new city charter to forward to Governor Lee Cruce. Three unpaid officials, a mayor, a commissioner of public utilities, and a commissioner of public highways, were elected to manage the affairs of the city. Their first official act was to reduce the number of city employees from thirteen to six. The first election after the new amendment went into effect in 1915 divided Weatherford into two wards—the one east of Custer street comprised Ward One, and west of Custer comprised Ward Two. J.H. Anderson was elected Mayor under the new form of government.

Frontier communities always demanded entertainment. By 1902 there were enough interested parties in Weatherford to form a city band. But since most musicians could not afford to buy their own instruments, residents raised money to purchase the instruments and uniforms which in turn would officially belong to the city. Band members gave a thirty minute concert every Saturday afternoon at the park.

There were two theaters in Weatherford when G.K. Harris sold the old Opera House on West Main Street to J. E. Riley in 1919. Riley promptly tore down the landmark which long had been the place of public gatherings and entertainments such as dancing, skating, theatrical performances, and political speeches.

Fairs were also a popular form of entertainment in rural areas. In 1902 the Weatherford Fair Association held their first annual fair and races at the fairground. A regulation half-mile track featured pony races, Indian races, foot races, bicycle races, and a three-minute trotting race.

The first Indian Fair held by the Cheyenne and Arapaho in Oklahoma took place southeast of Weatherford during the fall of 1910. Two thousand tribal members were camped near the fairgrounds when the fair opened. Later estimates suggest five thousand were in attendance. In addition to a parade every morning with the Indians dressed in their native costumes, feathers, paint, bangles, and beads, there were races, merry-go-rounds, and peanut and lemonade stands.

The exhibits and displays, including embroidered dresses and war bonnets handed down from
generation to generation, came from Darlington, Redmon, Colony, Cantonment, Indian Mission, and Mohunk Lodge at Colony. In the Indian Mission, there were exhibitions of Navajo work, pottery, elegantly made baby cradles and baskets.

The Indian Fair of 1912 proved to be the largest to date with several thousand tepees staked at the fairgrounds south of town. The program consisted of horse racing, foot racing, arrow throwing, mock battles, and Indian dances. In attendance was Old Cedar Woman, a 114-year-old Arapaho living near Bridgeport.

Two years earlier, the Chautauqua had come to Weatherford for the first time providing a week-long series of events. Topliner of the event, former Democratic Presidential nominee William Jennings Bryant, spoke on Wednesday afternoon. The program featured musical entertainment as well as other noted speakers. There were also playground experts, individuals conducting hiking trips and bird studies, and storytellers. In 1912, the second annual Chautauqua arrived with entertainers like the Harmony Concert Company, the Boston Journalist, and the Venetian Troubadours.

Weatherford locals even turned the domestic challenges World War I posed into a form of entertainment. The war brought a shortage of wheat and flour, so in order to encourage homemakers to use other grains for baking Weatherford held an "Emergency Bread" contest in 1917. All Custer County cooks were encouraged to enter the competition by using a substitute for part of the wheat flour, such as kaffir meal, corn meal, rye, cottonseed meal, oatmeal, or peanuts. Prizes were awarded in the categories of best loaf of bread, best quick bread, best cookies, and best wafers.

The towns of Mangum, Mountain View, and Granite were in competition with Weatherford in 1900 as sites for the proposed Southwestern Normal School. In Weatherford, Beeks Erick had deeded the Territory of Oklahoma a forty-acre site at the top of the hill, but the decision for the site would rest with a territorial board. Matters were complicated by the existence of two territorial boards: one of the boards was named by Governor C. M. Barnes shortly before he retired, whereas the other was named by the new Governor, W. M. Jenkins.

The Barnes Committee visited Weatherford and cast three votes in its favor, with only one vote each for Granite and Cordell. The Jenkins Committee selected Granite in Greer County as the site for the Normal School. Weatherford believed that since it was chosen first, the school should be located in Weatherford. Residents raised $10,000 for the legal fight. On October 5, 1902, steam whistles sounded and the firebell rang. People rushing to the expected fire were surprised by the good news, "We have got the Normal!" Beeks Erick had sent the message from Guthrie to J.W. Walters that the courts had decided in favor of Weatherford. All night the bells tolled, the whistles blew, shotguns and pistols popped, and anvils boomed.

O. B. Kee, who owned the land adjoining the proposed site for the Normal school, contributed an eighty-foot road around the tract. The town of Weatherford furnished water for twenty-one years at $5 per year and promised $5,000 for the beautification of the grounds, including the planting of trees. By 1904, the construction of the Southwestern Territorial Normal School was completed. The territory Board of Regents for the Normal Schools appointed J. R. Campbell, superintendent of the Guthrie city schools, as president.

The Normal School opened with 123 students from eighteen counties of the territory and five states. Tuition was free, and board and lodging could be obtained from $3.00 to $3.50 per week. On February 9, 1904, the Normal School Band led the entire faculty and the student body in double file up the hill, from where they had been holding classes in the Weatherford Exchange Bank building on West Main Street, to the new building. In 1908, the Oklahoma legislature appropriated money to construct a science hall. Affectionately known as "Old Science" the building is still in use ninety years later.
A rather colorful scandal of sorts played itself out at the Normal in 1910 and 1911. In the spring of 1910, the Board of Regents purchased statues of Apollo, the Discus Thrower, and Hercules for Southwestern's Art Department. When President J.F. Sharp unpacked the statues and discovered that fig leaves did not cover their sex organs, he took a hammer and chisel and personally removed the offending parts of the statues. The story quickly spread throughout the community. Thereafter, J.F. Sharp was known as "The Sculptor from Tennessee." The statue affair and the election of a new governor, eager to make his own political appointments, influenced the State Board of Education to dismiss Sharp in April of 1911.

While Southwestern Normal School started a student training corps in the fall of 1918 to provide Army officers for America's involvement in World War I, a more serious outgrowth of the war developed. The Oklahoma State Council of Defense authorized the creation of County Councils of Defense for the purpose of making sure all Oklahomans were "100% patriotic." The councils urged citizens to report any disloyal act or utterance. Few bothered to notice that it was left up to the individual patriot to determine what constituted disloyal acts and utterances. Emotions and hysteria mounted as the search for disloyal citizens swept the community. On May 9, 1918, the Weatherford Council of Defense met secretly to consider charges that C. H. Simpson, Professor of Agriculture at Southwestern Normal, was guilty of making disloyal remarks. Supposedly Simpson had said that Germany possessed a better government than the United States and that Americans had no rights on the seas that Germany had to respect. His accusers were never identified, and Simpson received no hearing. The State Board of Education ordered him dismissed. Simpson, in effect, was found guilty of a crime on the basis of hearsay evidence, without the formality of a trial, and without his having any knowledge of the entire proceedings. Such wartime hysteria, it should be noted, was not peculiar to Weatherford, but in fact gripped other parts of the nation.

When the war ended, Weatherford celebrated the signing of the Armistice by sounding the fire siren at 4:30 on the morning of November 11, 1918. The celebration continued until late in the afternoon with impromptu parades and automobiles rushing wildly through the streets and most people just enjoying themselves now that the burden of war had been lifted. Weatherford was preparing for a new decade.

Sources

Weatherford Daily News

Copies of Weatherford: 1898-1998 can be purchased by calling (580) 772-7101