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Victorian Restoration

Opal Hartsell Brown

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VICTORIAN



Photo by O.H. Brown

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he house was old, majestic, beautiful. It was perfect as part of the setting of *OKLAHOMA PASSAGE*, the Centennial movie, which depicted a Cherokee family of one hundred years ago. The movie appeared first in April, 1989 and again March 4-9, 1990 on OETA, CHANNEL 13, OKLAHOMA CITY.

The movie portrayed the life and times of five generations of Cherokees, the fictitious Hannah Benton family, and starred Jeanette Noland as the matriarch. But... The house was far from the Cherokee Nation, and its builder a different character from any Benton.

Set in a pasture about four miles southwest of Marietta, Oklahoma, the house is in the old Chickasaw Nation. It was built in 1888 by a white rancher married to a Chickasaw woman. He was Billy Washington, who claimed kinship with the country's first President, George Washington.

Tagged "mean as hell" by a lawman in his book titled the same, Washington was a native Texan who drove herds of cattle, numbering up to seven thousand, through Indian Territory to Kansas. His family moved into the Territory, and he married a Chickasaw girl who is listed by two different names—Molly Smith and May Ellen McLish. Her family was said to be wealthy and influential before they were driven west on the Trail of Tears, but they managed to bring a few slaves.

In those days, a man in the Territory could use all the land he could handle as long as he didn't encroach upon another man's claim. Being an intermarried Indian, Washington took advantage of that privilege. He took advantage, people said, of things not privileges, such as rounding up wild and unbranded cattle and horses. Soon he prospered and began to dream.

About 1886, Washington began building what he hoped would be the finest mansion in Indian Territory. It would have two stories and a basement. Carpenters and artisans came to work, and in 1888, the Washingtons moved in.

There were nine rooms and four closets large

—By Opal Hartsell Brown

RESTORATION

Successful

enough for rooms. There was a bath with an iron tub, and the kitchen had a dumbwaiter to the dining room. There were gun slits in the basement and six to nine inches of gravel in the lower walls. The gravel was for insulation or perhaps for protection against enemies' bullets.

The floors and banisters of the stairway were of gleaming, inlaid hardwood, put together with wooden pegs, and the ceilings on the first floor were twelve feet high. An archway at the entrance hall, the fireplaces, and bay windows were decorated with gingerbread; and the walls were covered with imported Italian paper. The Washingtons bought their furniture in St. Louis. The mansion cost \$50,00, an equivalent of millions in our era.

A wide porch completely surrounded the house, as did a brick walk. At each entrance to the porch, the bricks were laid in a large, circular pattern. A circular drive was on the outskirts of the yard.

The Washingtons' ranch was described as reaching from Red River to the Arbuckle mountains and from Marietta to Ryan. From it, four trainloads of cattle were shipped to market four times a year. In addition, the domain raised cotton, grain, food, and had its own gin as well as its own commissary and facilities for printing its own money—paper, aluminum, pewter. A coin, unearthed in recent years, carried the inscription "W. E. Washington, Marietta, I.T. Good for \$1 in trade."

The master's one hundred to two hundred cowboys and other employees could use the money

in the ranch commissary. Washington was a millionaire by age 28; then trouble with the Indians stalked him.

The tribe passed a law to charge \$1 per head for grazing rights. Washington wouldn't pay, so the Chickasaw militia impounded his cattle. He paid and then retaliated. Legends disagree on details, but one

and others were supposed to have tried to rescue them but were run out of town.

Barbed wire, the allotments to Indians, and statehood were said to have helped bring an end to the Washington empire, but Washington's "greed" and high-minded attitude brought the wrath of the Indians upon him. He was driven from the

Chickasaws.

He, May Ellen, and son John moved to Carlsbad, New Mexico, where he tried to amass another fortune; but his tactics failed. In 1920, Tom Brannon bought the ranch near Marietta. When Brannon died, G. C. McMakin bought it. He also died, and C. M. Fleming, manager of the Rockland Oil Company, purchased it.

During the interim, the house was restored and, although presently unoccupied, remains an elegant mansion of Victorian architecture worthy of any movie setting.

Sources of information: Marietta Public Library, Ardmore Public Library, visit to the ranch, and miscellaneous contacts)

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account is that his cowboys killed the Chickasaws' horses.

Washington was tried in Chickasaw court, but acquitted. The Cattlemen's Association, of which he was an official, and May Ellen's family were believed to have saved the rancher. Other charges arose.

In 1909, Washington and another wealthy rancher were accused of hiring Jim Miller to kill deputy Gus Bobbitt. The lengthy story belongs to Ada, where Miller and three other outlaws were hanged by a group of outraged citizens. Washington

(OPAL HARTSELL BROWN, a retired teacher living near Davis, is a full-time free-lance writer who has been published many times in WESTVIEW) *