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SILVER CITY CEMETERY: REMEMBRANCES OF A CHISHOLM TRAIL GHOST TOWN

By Gwen Jackson

Many moons before Silver City came into existence, Indian hunters from the Southwest crossed the nearly mile-wide Canadian River at what became known as the Silver City Crossing. Years later, Indians used the same crossing enroute to meetings at Council Grove and to trade with Jesse Chisholm.

At the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, Colonel William Emory was ordered to evacuate Union troops from Fort Washita, Fort Arbuckle, and Fort Cobb. He formed eleven companies, 750 fighting men, 150 women, children, and other non-combatants. They used the Indians' Canadian River crossing, also known as the Bond Crossing, was one of the points from which the "run" into Oklahoma County was made in 1889.

Because of the Civil War and loyalty to the Indians, Jesse Chisholm abandoned his Council Grove trading post and moved his family to Chisholm Creek near Wichita, Kansas. Tracks left by departing soldiers and the name Jesse Chisholm created one of the most famous cattle trails in history.

After the war, in 1866, Jesse saw the first herd come up the well-traveled trail to Wichita. The herd was driven by Captain Henry Spikes from Bryan County, Oklahoma. The

trail became known as the Chisholm Trail and was the main street of Silver City.

The history of Council Grove tells of a great hunting expedition organized in 1867 by Montford T. Johnson, Jesse Chisholm, and two of their friends. They camped on Walnut Creek, ten miles northwest of Purcell. Montford and Jesse liked the grazing prospects of the area. With Jesse's help and permission from the Chickasaw Nation, Montford established his ranch in the spring of 1868. It was this same year that runners were sent from tribe to tribe telling of Jesse Chisholm's death.

The Council Grove area became part of Montford Johnson's cattle and hog operations, which then consisted of 3600 acres. In 1886, Montford had to abandon his Council Grove Ranch because it was not in the Chickasaw Nation. Mr. Johnson lived in his Silver City Ranch headquarters.

On a fenced knoll two miles north of Tuttle in Grady County lies the well-kept Silver City Cemetery. The headstones tell stories of hardship, loving, living, and prospering of this Chisholm Trail town in the mid-1800's.

It is said that Silver City started when a Mexican family sold quirts to trail hands moving herds through that area after the Civil War. Three creeks made an ideal place for



Picture provided by Glen McIntyre of Kingfisher.

bedding cattle overnight before crossing the Canadian River. One, Silver Creek, gave the town its name.

According to Anna Couch, numerous young men on cattle drives married Indian women and took up land along the Chisholm Trail. One of the first to establish a home in the Silver City area was W.G. Williams, also known as "Caddo Bill." In 1878, Bill learned that he was not in Caddo County, so he sold his place on Montford T. Johnson.

At the time, Montford and his wife, Mary Elizabeth, moved to Silver City. Mary died in 1880 at 33 years of age and is buried in Silver City Cemetery. Montford's daughter, Stella, who died at age 25, is also buried there.

An early legend tells of a drover coming from Wichita after selling his herd. Indians were waiting for him on the knoll where Silver City Cemetery is located. They killed him and his horse and buried them with plans to return to take any silver he was carrying, but they didn't get back to dig up the remains. People in Silver City knew about the drover and started their cemetery where he was buried.

In 1883, Montford bought another ranch five miles west of Silver City. He sold his Silver City ranch to Charles B. Campbell. Mr. Campbell was born in 1861 at Fort Arbuckle; his mother was a Chickasaw, and his father was from Ireland. He received his education in the common schools of Indian Territory and at 17 started a cattle business for himself where he handled four to six thousand head per year. When thousands of longhorns were being moved up the Chisholm Trail, Charles Campbell established his store in Silver City. Charles Campbell and Montford Johnson were good friends as well as relatives.

In May of 1883, a post office was added in the store. Mail was carried once a week, and Phillip A. Smith was postmaster. About a year later, mail from Darlington to Silver City was increased to twice a week.

What is believed to be the first school in Grady County was started in 1885. According to Mary Bailey, Miss Smith, a Boomer from Kansas, received permission from Charles Campbell to camp on his land. She persuaded Mrs. Campbell to let her open a neighborhood school in the Campbell home. For several months, she taught the smaller children there. Following a disagreement with Mrs. Campbell, Miss Smith left and the school was broken up.

When Mary Bailey was working on her doctorate, she interviewed Mrs. Joe D. Lindsay, a former resident of Silver City. She said by 1886, when her husband came from Atoka, to take charge of the store, all goods were freighted from Atoka, Arkansas City, and Caldwell, Kansas. Mr. Lindsay's store at Silver City was about 25 x 30 feet. Behind the store was one well, which furnished water for Silver City.

In 1887, the first school house in Grady County was built. It was 24 x 36 feet with a log for a front step and rough boards to serve as benches and desks. Miss Callie Graham was the teacher in 1889; Meta Chestnut came from North Carolina to take charge of the school. Enrollment went from seven the thirty-five pupils with the first eight grades being taught.

Silver City residents used home remedies and patent medicine purchased at Lindsay's Store. Neighbors nursed the sick and buried the dead. Coffins were homemade of material purchased at the Silver City store and lined with fabric and lace by caring neighborhood women. Prayers and songs were led by neighbors, and funerals were held in the school house. Many headstones in Silver City Cemetery are

adorned with resting lambs and doves, indicating that times were hard for infants and that epidemics took their toll on young children.

Ed Cornett's parents ran the hotel in Silver City. As a young man, he watched the passing of the Chisholm Trail era. Although he was too young to claim land during the run of '89, he made the run and held land until his father and sister arrived to stake a claim. Ed later helped open the Oklahoma City stockyards. In 1923, he started the Cornett Packing Company. Silver City and the cattle industry influenced this man who lived to be one hundred years old.

A half mile east of the Silver City Cemetery was the Tuttles Ranch. Markers within the cemetery show that the Johnsons, Campbells, Bonds, and Tuttles were related by marriage. The present town of Tuttle was named for the Tuttle family.

When a railroad was build west of Silver City, it became evident that cattle would be shipped from there to the north. Montford T. Johnson and C. L. Campbell began raising thoroughbred horses on their farms. In later years, buyers of polo ponies came to the Johnson and Campbell ranches from Kansas City and St. Louis.

Montford T. Johnson established a bank in Union City in 1889, but it was moved to Minco in 1890. One day in the Minco Bank, Campbell and Johnson noticed a sticker indicating "U-See-It" on the bottom of the bottle-type water fountain. Johnson thought that that would be a good name for a horse. Both Johnson and Campbell died in 1894, so they wouldn't know that in U-See-It's bloodline would be Black Gold, the 1924 Kentucky Derby winner.

As the Campbells and Johnsons moved west, the Bonds and Tuttles spread to the east. James Bond tuttle was born July 15, 1896. He later became postmaster of the town east of Silver City, which was named Tuttle. He died in 1966 and is buried in the Silver City Cemetery. His son, Holmes Tuttle, lives in Los Angeles but continues to provide funds for maintaining the Silver City Cemetery.

The tracks of Main Street in Silver City are growing dimmer as wind fills them with sands of time. The surrounding grassland is pock-marked with old buffalo wallows and cattle springs. The visitor who goes to the ghost-town cemetery on Memorial Day must look for the roses blooming next to the fence. They were planted by an early-day Silver City resident. In Tuttle, there's a monument listing 112 names of Silver City residents. ●

Sources for this article are Mary Bailey, Chickasha historian, an unpublished history of Council Grove, and an interview with Deanna O'Hara, whose family owns the land surrounding the Silver City Cemetery. Also researched were various CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA items.

GWEN JACKSON of Amber, like her sister, Pat Kourt, of Thomas, is a regular WESTVIEW contributor.