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in celebration of Colony’s one-hundredth anniversary

A New Life In Colony

By William D. Welge
There are few communities in Western Oklahoma that can boast of surviving one hundred years on the raw prairiegrasslands, with its bone-crushing winters, withering summer heat, and the ever-present wind droning night and day to test the souls of men and women. Yet there is one community that has managed to achieve the distinction of existing through periods of prosperity and adversity to reach that hallmark—Colony, Oklahoma. Originally named Seger’s Colony for its founder, John Homer Seger, Colony is located fourteen miles south of Weatherford in Eastern Washita County and is considered to be that county’s first established community. A view of the man Seger is a good place to start our consideration of the town.

John Seger was born in Illinois in 1846. In his youth, in 1864, he enlisted with the Union cause and served until the end of the war. By the early 1870’s, Seger had settled in Kansas on the newly opened lands that were once Kickapoo Indian country. There he met John D. Miles, agent for the Kickapoo. This friendship would result in Seger’s changing his life forever. When Agent Miles was transferred to the Cheyenne-Arapaho Agency, he asked Seger to come to work for him at that agency in Indian Territory. By 1872, Seger left his family behind and started for Cheyenne Country. He was employed as a brick mason and over the next several years held various positions, including the superintendency of the Cheyenne-Arapaho School.

By 1883, John Seger had tired of the rigors imposed at the agency with little compensation. He had done all he could do, or at least thought so. It was at this juncture that he was offered a position with a cattle company to string fence wire. The Briggs Cattle Company was leasing several thousand acres of prime grasslands on the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reserve. The lease covered an area as large as Washita County today. Seger would be required to fence nearly three hundred miles of wire. Leaving the agency, Seger struck a southwesterly course, crossing the treacherous Canadian River. His eyes gazed upon the rolling hills of endless prairie grass before him. Occasionally he would cross a small stream that was sparsely lined with cottonwood trees. After a few days travel, he came upon the panoramic beauty of the Washita Valley. He stopped by a small, clear running creek that later would be called Cobb. Here he built a picket and log house to live in. The land was well suited for cattle, as had been revealed a decade before in a surveyor’s description: “third-rate quality... and would be adapted only to grazing.”

Seger worked for the cattle company for three years. By 1886, he was ready to return to Kansas to be with his family; but as he was passing through Darlington Agency, he was informed that the new Indian Agent wanted to speak with him. Captain Jesse M. Lee of the Ninth Infantry had heard many good reports about Seger and wanted him for a special assignment for which he felt Seger was equipped.

With introductions made, the agent outlined his plan. He said there was a group of Arapahoes that were willing to farm or do anything else that would earn them a living. In Seger’s mind, this experiment for teaching agricultural skills to the Indians wasn’t a temporary arrangement. Although Seger listened intently to the agent, he was wanting to leave the territory altogether for Kansas, where he could enjoy the comforts of civilization that living on the prairie couldn’t provide. He had spent the best part of his life trying to help the Indians, and he felt that his accomplishments were few. Captain Lee urged Seger to reconsider; he flatly stated, “Your experience among these people is invaluable to me and to them. It would take years for any other person to get the experience you have and to be in a position to do what you can do.” Seger commented, “It goes into this now, it means a life work for me.”

With winter proceeding into spring, twenty-five Arapaho Indians led by Seger left Darlington Agency by a southwesterly route. Seger was returning to the Valley of the Washita where he had lived for three years. He knew the area to be the ideal spot to begin the experiment. By late February 1886, Seger and his small band of Arapahoes camped on the site which
would later bear its founder’s name. Thus began Seger’s Colony, an impressive history of progress for Indians and later white settlers who would homestead in the area.

Now that the nucleus of Indian settlers was established, the task of building a new life began. Preparations to accommodate additional families who were making their way to the colony began immediately. By summer, crops had been planted. Under Seger’s direction, the industrious Arapahoes were beginning to see the first fruits of their labors. This wasn’t the first time Indians had attempted farming; in fact, as early as 1846, the Cheyenne Chief Yellow Wolf, sensing that their way of life was coming to an end, told William Bent, famed Indian trader and agent to the Cheyenne in Colorado Territory, that “the Cheyenne are ready and willing to settle down and raise corn and make every effort to live like the whites.” The Treaty of Fort Wise in 1861 had among its provisions that the Indians were to settle down and become farmers. But to change overnight the nomadic ways of this proud people from centuries of their way of life was no small task. The days of reservation life were coming to an end as foretold by Yellow Wolf almost a half century before. All too quickly, these nomads-turned-farmers would have to survive among the white people they had once fought. Time wasn’t on their side to inherit the necessary skills to become proficient agriculturalists. Seger, with his patient and gentle manner, was there to help bridge the gap, hopefully to close it, and see the Indians become useful citizens.

It was necessary to travel to the agency at least once a month for supplies and equipment for farming purposes. Seger, accompanied by several “colonists,” would return to Darlington. These were Seger’s best salesmen for touting the advantages of the colony. Each visit brought new recruits to start the new life. By 1887, several Cheyenne families were induced to join their Arapaho brothers on the Washita. Within a few years, the population had increased to five hundred people learning the arts of husbandry. Captain Lee and Seger were proud of their accomplishments in so short a time period.

The year 1892 had two significant events in the life of the colony. First, the two tribes began the process of taking up allotments imposed by the government. An agreement had been signed to allot the Indians 160 acres to each head and then to open the surplus land for settlement by whites. Second, a dream was fulfilled to build a school for the children of the colony.

With the opening of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation, Seger’s Colony took on new importance. Although heavily populated by the Indians, there were soon several white families. Within a few years, a post office was established; the name of the town was shortened to Colony.

Seger was named Superintendent in 1892 and held the position until he retired in 1905. At that time, he was once again employed as an additional farmer until his retirement in 1920.

Colony has had many events in its century of existence. Years of prosperity coupled with adversity have made it a close-knit community. Since 1928 with the death of its founder, adversity has dogged Colony. The school’s closing in 1932 caused economic hardship in an already depressed economy during the Depression of the 1930’s. But agriculture continued to be strong.

The 1970’s saw a resurgence with the Anadarko Basin petroleum fields, which helped boost the economies of several communities. But the bust in the late 70’s struck hard, although there was still agriculture. Now in the 80’s, even agriculture has an uncertain economic future. How Colony will look after its second century is difficult to foretell. But if the first one hundred years can serve as an indicator, the town has a bright future ahead.