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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 prairie grasslands, 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 Kickapoos. 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 superintendent 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 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
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.