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Maxine Wilhelm

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Settlers Along The One Hundredth Meridian

By Maxine Wilhelm

The marker for the "Empire of Greer" or Old Greer County was on the 100th Meridian where it crosses Highway 66 near the small town Texola, Oklahoma. It is now in the 100th Meridian Museum in Erick.

The long controversy and several surveys that involved a number of families on the 100th Meridian dispute affected Texola more than any other town along the border because it was the only town so close to the meridian. Many of the early settlers and their heirs in Texola lived in Indian Territory; Greer County, Texas; Oklahoma Territory; and Beckham County. The meridian was surveyed in different locations and was moved.

Even the name of the town was a problem. The Texokla original plat was in Sections 30 and 31 and was surveyed by P. A. Williamson and owned by Choctaw Townsite and Improvement Company. Streets and alleys were dedicated November 16, 1901. The Texoma original plat of forty acres in Section 31 was surveyed by A. W. Putnam and owned by Louis B. Sims, who dedicated the streets and alleys on February 13, 1902. Here was a town with two names which were very confusing to everyone, especially the

Pony Express. So, after a time the suggestion was made to use a part of both names (*Texoma* and *Texokla*) and call the town *Texola*. After much discussion, an election was held and the matter settled; a post office was also built.

The Board of Greer County Commissioners meeting in regular session on June 6, 1905, declared, "In the matter of the incorporation of the town of Texola, Greer County, Oklahoma Territory, the board examined the returns of an election held on May 27, 1905, to determine whether said town should become an incorporated town; finding that there were 26 votes for incorporation and 25 votes cast against incorporation and all proceeding therein appearing regular and legal, it is therefore ordered and declared by the Board that said town has been legally incorporated by the name of Texola."

Greer County, Texas was surveyed into sections and townships in 1873, and some homesteading had been established by the State of Texas. After 1896, homesteading was a gradual process sponsored by the Federal Government under the original Homestead Act that had been signed by Abraham Lincoln.

The Homestead Act provided settlers a chance to file on 160 acres if they were willing to occupy and cultivate the land for five years. Many settlers found it too difficult to acquire the necessary capital to carve a home and livelihood for their families out of the virgin prairie. Therefore, usually two out of three failed the five-year residency required for a full patent. There was some speculation on land development, but most of the pioneer settlers just wanted a piece of land of their own and a chance to raise their families on the new land. Most of the people were very poor, living on corn bread and the wildlife they could kill until they could raise a garden and crop.

Some of the settlers lived in tents or in dug-outs until they could get through the first year. Many of them built half dug-outs, sod houses, or if they had some money, plank houses. One or two rooms made from 1" x 12" boards stood on ends butted together with 1 x 4s covering the cracks.

The unbroken grass sod of the prairie made warm houses during the winter and cool for the summer. There was a plow that cut through the matted sod about 3" deep and 12" x 12" squares were stacked on top of one another in

brick fashion to make the walls.

The roof was reinforced with tree trunks or 2" x 4"s and sod placed on the top. Tar paper was invented later, and it was effective in helping keep out dust, rain, insects, and small rodents. The inside walls of sod were plastered with mud made from clay; through careful application, the walls could be made fairly smooth. When the plaster was dry, the walls were whitewashed several times with lime and salt. The salt was used to discourage insects and waterproof the walls. The clay floors in the dug-outs and sod houses were scraped smooth. After water was boiled in a big iron pot in the yard, it was carried into the house and spread out on the floor until the area was completely soaked, thus making a very hard, packed floor that could be swept. Sometimes a carpet could be purchased, but most of the time the women made rag-braided rugs to decorate their houses.

Schools were a problem in the early days because the homestead land wasn't subject to taxation the first five years, and districts weren't organized. One-room schools were built on land donated by landowners. The first such school was built in Texola in 1902.

Texola began to prosper and grow. When the Rock Island Railroad came through, there was a tremendous amount of farm products from all the surrounding area to be shipped. For example, a large market for hogs was developed, and Texola became known as the broomcorn capital. People from all the surrounding communities in both Texas and Oklahoma came to buy, sell, see a doctor, do their banking, or just to visit. Churches, a school to include all the grades, and a jail were built. Oldtimers remember that very few people had to be put in jail during

the winter because there were only bars on the window and door.

During the Depression in the 1930's, the bank closed; and several stores slowly went out of business. Residents began to drift away--selling out or being foreclosed--until the town today has only a few families left with memories of a better time.



One farm on the meridian near Texola is typical of how it was. The place of 160 acres was homesteaded by Mr. and Mrs. Andy Swagger in 1898 when Mr. Swagger applied for a patent. All the land was in Indian Territory. Mr. Swagger later bought another small tract joining his place. There was odd acreage along the 100th Meridian; it wasn't always in quarter sections. The Swaggers lived in a half dug-out to prove their claim. The road leading north from Texola went by their place to the North Fork of Red River, where there was a crossing. Covered wagons, freight wagons, and wagon trains stopped at their farm for

the night because they had a wagon yard, horse lots, and watering troughs. Mr. Swagger sold corn to feed the horses to the wagon masters for 50 cents a bushel.

Later, a two-room house was built on the place, and it was sold to Burt and Max Downer (brothers) in the 1920's.

In 1930 when the Federal Government declared the 100th Meridian correct, the discovery was made that 185 acres on the farm was in Texas and 12 acres in Oklahoma. The State of Texas finally corrected the land measurements along the 100th Meridian in 1942. The abstract is interesting to see because the inside contains a 2" x 2" foldout map of the land and the 100th Meridian. The land doesn't run north and south but along the meridian as it was surveyed during another time.

Mr. and Mrs. Bill Wood became the owners of the much-disputed land in 1949. They moved the two-room house onto the Texas side, adding on to it to make a comfortable home. The true 100th Meridian runs along the edge of their yard.

The children could attend school in either state, but they chose Texola and later Erick when the Texola School closed. The Woods vote in Texas, pay State taxes in both states, and personal taxes in Texas. Both states keep up the roads and sometimes overlap each other's work. Mail is delivered from both states. The interesting facts go on and on.

One landowner on the 100th Meridian a few years ago couldn't get a telephone in Oklahoma without building the line himself, so he got a phone from Southwestern Bell in Texas. The problem was that his house was in Oklahoma, and his well house was the only building in that area of Texas. W

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