



12-15-1985

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### Recommended Citation

McIntyre, Glen (1985) "Unknown Famous Man," *Westview*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol5/iss2/10>

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*He was a useful and important life*

# Unknown Famous Man

By Glen V. McIntyre

He has a cattle trail named for him — as well as schools, creeks, streets, libraries, restaurants, and even drive-in movie theaters; yet no one really knows who he was. His life as an Indian trader, interpreter, guide, and peacemaker has been pieced together by historians from bits of journals, army records, and reminiscences — leaving many parts still unknown and others tantalizingly fuzzy. Jesse Chisholm evolves today as perhaps the most unknown famous man in Western Oklahoma. He was involved on the edges of some really interesting incidents in early Oklahoma history and directly involved in some of the most important.

One of the barriers in the way of understanding Jesse Chisholm is a problem concerning names. He is often confused with another man — John Chisum — a New Mexico cattleman. In fact, John Wayne played that Chisum in a movie titled CHISUM, and Billy the Kid at one time worked for John Chisum.

In addition, although Jesse Chisholm's name is associated with some of the earliest days of settlement; and although the bulk of his life was spent in East Central Oklahoma, his greatest achievements and his death are firmly tied to Western Oklahoma.

Chisholm was born in the eastern mountains of Tennessee either in 1805 or 1806. His father was Ignatius Chisholm, a Scotch trader; his mother, Martha Rogers, was a full-blood Cherokee. She was a sister of Tiana Rogers, the Cherokee wife of Sam Houston when Houston lived in what is now Oklahoma from 1829-1834. Thus, Chisholm was also a distant cousin of the famous humorist Will Rogers.

Jesse's family moved to Oklahoma in the 1820's with some of the Cherokees known as the Old Settlers, Cherokees who moved to the West voluntarily instead of waiting to be forced to move as were those who came on the Trail of Tears.

It's believed that the Chisholm family was in the neighborhood of Fort Gibson (near present-day Muskogee) by 1825 and historians have found a record of Jesse, in 1830, putting in the low bid to supply the garrison at Fort Gibson

with grain.

By the mid-1830's he had joined up with the trader James Edwards, who had a trading post near the point that the Little River joins the South Canadian a few miles south of the present-day town of Holdenville. Edwards had married a Creek Indian woman and had two daughters named Eliza and Lucinda. By 1836, Jesse had married Eliza, the oldest daughter. Eventually, he would have two sons, Frank and William, by her. The Chisholms made their home a few miles up the Little River from Edwards' store. Here Jesse continued to live for several years, using it as a base for trading expeditions out into Western Oklahoma.

The first Jesse served as a guide and interpreter was in 1834 for the famous Dragoon expedition.

In June 1834, the First Regiment of Dragoons under the command of Brigadier General Henry Leavenworth and Colonel Henry Dodge left Fort Gibson to venture out onto the plains and make contact with the various Indian tribes. This expedition included as junior officers Stephen W. Kearney, who would later lead the Army of the West in the Mexican War, and Jefferson Davis, later President of the Confederacy. The famous artist George Catlin was also included. In addition, thirty Cherokee, Delaware, Osage, and Seneca warriors served as guides and hunters. One of these was Jesse Chisholm.

The expedition first went south to the general area of Tishomingo, then west to the Wichita Mountains. Near the Wichitas, the Dragoons had a peaceful meeting with a large group of Comanches — possibly the beginning of Jesse Chisholm's lifelong association with the Comanche tribe.

A few days later the Dragoons reached the village of the Wichita tribe set in what is now called Devil's Canyon in the Quartz Mountain State Park.

This expedition was successful in making peaceful contact with Plains tribes. Some of them — including the Kiowa — were even taken to Fort Gibson in 1835 for a peace conference at which Jesse Chisholm was one of the interpreters.

In the 1840's, Chisholm's talents as

an interpreter were used again and again. In 1841, James Edwards reported that Chisholm could talk the Comanches into sending a delegation to Washington. In 1843 and 1846, Chisholm was present at councils held at Council Springs near present-day Waco, Texas.

Also, in 1843, Jesse Chisholm's name appears as a footnote to the life of Sequoyah, the inventor of the Cherokee alphabet. Sequoyah had gone to Mexico looking for a band of Cherokees who had moved to that country, hoping to convince them to return to the United States to join the rest of the tribe. During the trip, Sequoyah vanished. A party of men was sent to search for him, and eventually the searchers found that he had died and been buried in Mexico. When they returned, they dictated their account of Sequoyah's death, and Jesse Chisholm signed the document as a witness. He was probably one of the few men in the area who could write.

In 1846, Eliza, his wife, died, but he kept up his connections with the Edwards family until 1859. In 1847, he married Sahkakee McQueen; by her he had four children — Jennie, Lucinda, Frank, and Mary.

In 1849, Chisholm's talents as a peacemaker proved useful again. The Gold Rush in California had begun; and although a majority of the settlers went by a northern route, a considerable number went by the southern route or California Road, which went along the South Canadian River. Jesse Chisholm was sent to talk to the Comanches and convinced them to allow the settlers safe passage through Western Oklahoma.

He continued as a guide and trader through the 1850's establishing another trading post near Asher in Southern Pottawatomie County and then in 1859 starting a trading post in the Council Grove area in far Western Oklahoma City.

The coming of the Civil War to Indian Territory brought bitter division both inside tribes and between tribes. Even during this terrible conflict, Jesse Chisholm tried to be a peacemaker. He held conversations with many Plains tribes, convincing them to remain



Monument to Jesse Chisholm erected by the Oklahoma Historical Society. Photo by Dr. Ray V. McIntyre

neutral. Soon, however, it became clear that remaining neutral was dangerous in an increasingly Pro-Confederate Indian Territory. So in 1861, he led several tribes, including the Wichitas and Shawnees, up into Kansas. There, near the site of present-day Wichita, Kansas, Chisholm bought a ranch and built a house.

After the Civil War, Jesse returned to Indian Territory to re-establish his trading post on the banks of the North Canadian River in what is now far Western Oklahoma City. From this trading post, he laid out a trading route to Wichita, Kansas. This was the first portion of the Chisholm Trail.

He continued his efforts to bring

peace to the Western tribes, bringing in the Comanches in 1865 to the Council on the Little Bend and later being present at the Council of Medicine Lodge.

The photo shows a rather shy, tired, aging man with gray hair and a stubble beard. It doesn't tell of the fourteen Indian languages he could speak, nor of the many peace councils he had attended. It doesn't speak of the many expeditions he guided or of his legendary gun-shyness. He evidently rarely, if ever, wore a gun — an unusual thing for the times. In regard to the picture, the cliché, "You can't judge a book by its cover" is surely fitting.

In 1867, Jesse Chisholm began what would be the last major enterprise of his life. Along the North Canadian River in present-day Blaine County, there are several salt flats. In the early spring of 1868, Jesse Chisholm went north from his home in the Council Grove area to work the salt flats. After he had refined a load of salt, he retraced his path down the North Canadian River, stopping on March 4 to camp at a place called Left Hand Springs.

These springs are a few miles north and east of Geary. Here, Chief Left Hand, an Arapaho, liked to camp as the springs provided a good source of fresh water.

According to the story, Jesse Chisholm died on March 4, 1868, after eating bear meat cooked in a copper kettle. The cattle trail which is named after him had begun only in 1867 and wouldn't really hit its stride until after Chisholm's death.

Jesse Chisholm was buried at Left Hand Springs in a grave whose exact location isn't known but whose approximate location is fixed by a grave marker erected many years later by the Oklahoma Historical Society. Its inscription reads: "Jesse Chisholm, Born 1805, Died March 4, 1868. No one left his home cold or hungry." It's an epitaph which any man would envy.

However, considering all the councils with the Indians in which he participated over his entire life and his work to keep the Southern Plains quiet, perhaps we should add "Blessed are the peacemakers" to this epitaph of a useful and important life. ●