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Saloon in the River

Kate Jackson Lewis

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SALOON IN THE

To almost any Oklahoma resident over 50, just the mention of Statehood Day sets off a string of memories of the state's colorful past. To some, of course these memories came from listening to the reminiscing of their parents or grandparents.

Stay around awhile, and you'll hear the story of the Sand Bar, a saloon built shortly after the land opening of 1889. It was located just east of the middle of the South Canadian River separating Lexington and Purcell.

The Lissauer brothers, Charley and Sam, new arrivals in Purcell, were responsible for building the crate like structure which stood on

wooden pegs driven deep into the sand. It looked like a ramshackle houseboat, so it was nicknamed the "Ark."

A wooden boardwalk was built on sills laid on the sand, bridging the gap between Oklahoma and Indian territories. The walk extended to the Santa Fe depot, thereby accommodating Purcell residents and serving as a lure to passengers arriving on any of the eight daily passenger trains.

A motley group made its daily trek to the Ark. It consisted of the thugs, panhandlers, peddlers, and some "plain people." Poor and rich alike left their money at the saloon.

Going over was likely easy, but

the return trip must have been eventful since bottles were forbidden on the west side of the river. Each drinker would either drain his bottle or lose money on his purchase. One can imagine the whopping, stumbling, and falls (into the sometimes chilly river water) that must have occurred.

The Lissauer brothers had hoped to become rich in this newly opened territory, so they devised another plan to make their wealth come faster. They built Little Sam's saloon on Lexington's main street. It was a fine brick building equipped with all the "fineries."

Sam and Charley were headed for "pay dirt." While the Ark's novelty

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID OLDHAM



RIVER

— by Kate Jackson Lewis

attracted crowds of both the spenders and the curious, Little Sam's caught the more affluent citizens.

Both brothers were happy now that it seemed they were well on their way to success and wealth. Then the gunfighters, robbers, and toughs began to give them trouble at the Ark. Charley hired a retired Texas ranger to guard his place. This stopped some of the robbers, but some of the more determined took advantage of the ranger's occasional absences to raid the bar.

Mrs. Savada Todd, a Lexington native, said her father, Harve Booker, once worked at the Ark. She remembers hearing her father say,
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"Sometimes things get pretty wild out there."

According to a History of Lexington School, Sand Bar Town, made up of buildings, tents, shacks, and saloons, sprang up on the east bank of the river. One of these saloons was named First Chance and Last Chance, a name which may have been prophetic for some men who later lost their lives in the river.

Business was still booming at the Ark; then came a setback. According to one oldtimer, a "head rise" came, flooding the river and washing the Ark about half a mile down the river. After the water went down, Charley hired a house mover to bring what was left back.

It was patched up and business went on again as if nothing had happened.

In October of 1890, the PURCELL REGISTER stated, "Sand Bar town is growing--but what if a great rise comes?"

It did for in February of 1891, the REGISTER had this comment, "just one house and the Ark left."

This flood was the worst that the settlers had ever seen. Chouteau

Creek, coming from the north, pushed through Lexington with a roar and met the river flood.

Together they made a mile-wide river, trapping the people of both the First and Last Chance and the Ark.

The town itself was having its bout with the flood water, too. Three feet of water was flowing down main street. The residents had too much to do to think of the river saloons. They were busy trying to save their own houses and business establishments.

One lone citizen, Bob Scott, a farmer who lived near the east bank of the river, made the two saloons' captives his concern. It was nearly night, so he had to work fast. Using a trusted big-footed plow horse as a conveyance, he made his way through the churning water to the First and Last Chance saloon where he found three men, two of them sober enough to mount the horse. He took them to high ground and returned for the third. Back at the saloon, Scott loaded the drunk man on behind the saddle.

The man was too intoxicated to stay on, so he slid off behind the horse, making a futile grab at the animal's tail. He was soon lost in

the swift, muddy waters, never to be seen again.

Darkness was coming, and the river was rising as Bob Scott started his hazardous third trip through the turbulent water toward the Ark. Charley Lissauer, the bartender, and a customer were hopefully awaiting a rescue. Only two of the men could ride on the horse with Scott; the third had to wait for the next trip. Lissauer and his bartender went first. For Scott, the third man's rescue was too much to hope for. When the farmer braved the merciless water to complete his mission, the Ark was gone--taking with it the remaining man.

The Ark was restored to its mooring and rebuilt by Tom and Ray Farmer, brothers, but its tenure was brief. By this time, the novelty of the birdcage saloon had worn off. Crime became rampant, made so by gamblers, robbers, and gunmen. The saloon, no longer profitable, was soon abandoned.

For many years, so one settler said, "Charley sat on a bench in front of Little Sam's saloon, talking and dreaming of the fortune he might have made."

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of battered cotton from the silted, solid dirt. Dad strode on, head down, hands deep in his pockets. But when he looked at me, I felt that his eyes didn't touch me. I felt sad.

And I remember the dust storms that made the Thirties notorious. But my memories are not the desperate ones shown in LIFE. I watched them (at least one I'm sure of) come rolling from far off across our farm. I remember thinking that the dust clouds looked like the wind ballooning Mother's sheets--only these sheets were brown. But the clearest memory is the sand those storms left. The floors were grainy and gritty underfoot, and Mother's sweeping seemed to go on and on. Twitching a window curtain brought down another veil of dust, and lifting a crocheted doily left its imprint on

the wood beneath.

But at that time during the early Thirties, I had no way of knowing that the times were unique. I had no point of comparison. To my way of thinking, things were worse when the cows got out--or when it was too muddy to go to town on Saturday--or maybe a special event was cancelled because the car wouldn't start. Those were the real heartbreakers--the ones that make my throat tighten even now. Or the day Old Major died. The death of that beautiful bay horse put a pall over the whole summer. I'm sure Dad's grief was deeper and more severe than mine. I had only lost a dear riding friend--he had lost half of a team.

Such was the texture and rhythm of childhood--or at least *my* childhood--in the Thirties. As all of childhood seems to do, time moved slowly--so slowly that there

was always some incredible adventure waiting somewhere out beyond the fringe of time. Maybe it was an ice cream social at a neighbor's; maybe it was going to visit a little friend who had a new blackboard and real chalk; maybe it was Mother and Dad playing Rook with neighbors (like the night I put a pink doll dress on their big white cat who then jumped into the middle of their game); maybe it was the Old Settlers' Reunion and parade at Mangum (always a birthday treat); maybe it was a birthday or Christmas--the time between those events stretched on endlessly then.

I know now, of course, that the times were hard financially--for us as well as everyone else. But at the time I didn't know it.