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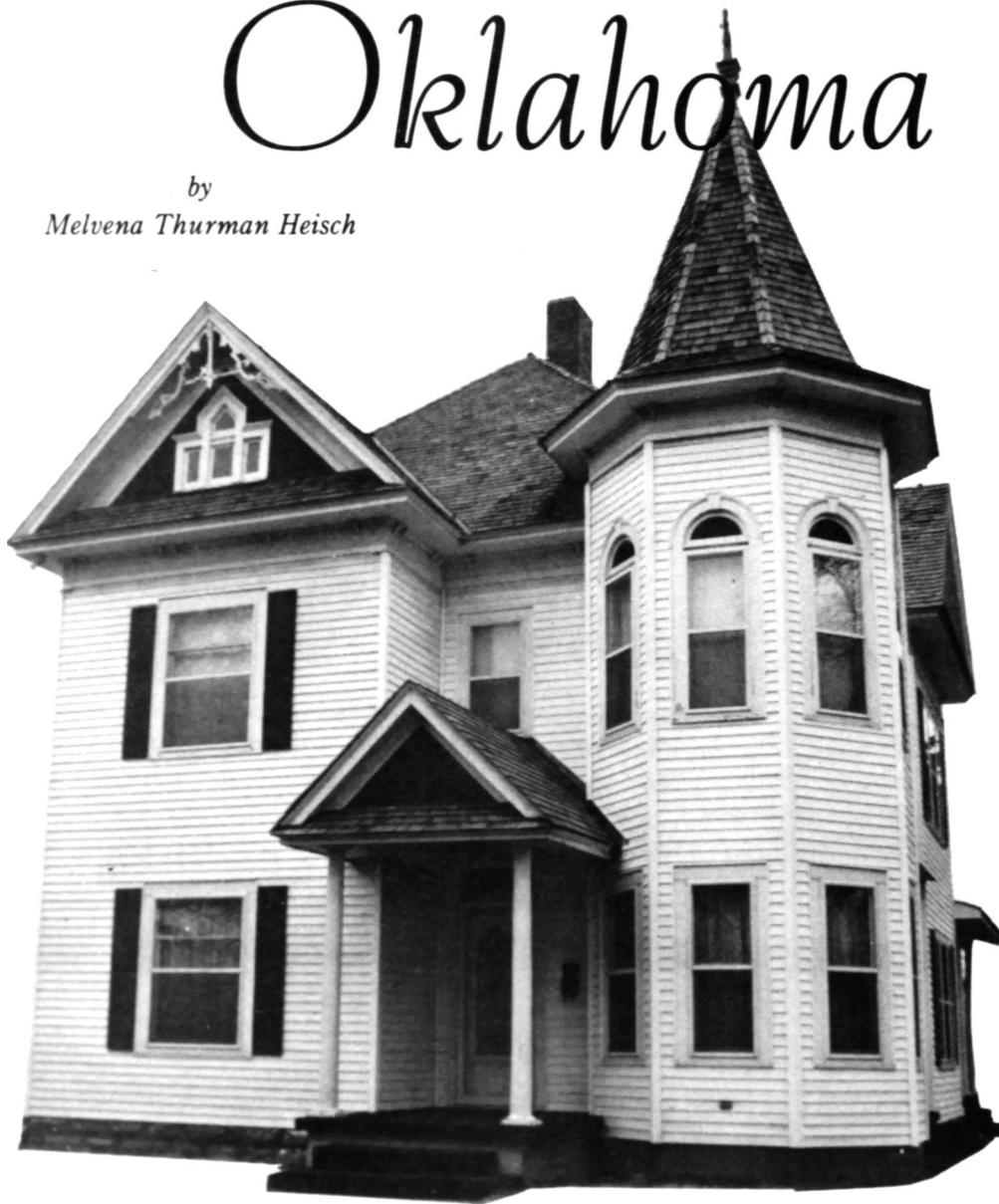
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# Historic Houses of Western Oklahoma

by  
Melvena Thurman Heisch



*The Wagoner House in Watonga is a fine example of the Victorian Queen Anne architectural style.*

Driving down a city street or along a country road in Western Oklahoma you will see houses that look like those in any other part of the state. But a closer look reveals many structures quite unique to the region. The cattlemen, sodbusters, and town builders who settled here brought ideas about what kind of house they wanted to build. Conditions, however, often dictated designs far different from the homes they had left behind.

Many of these houses are now listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Some are associated with outstanding persons, while others are recognized for their architectural style. The variety ranges from the modest soddy to the elegant mansion.

Many of the early settlers in Western Oklahoma had only the materials available on their land for construction. It was often too far to a commercial center for purchase of conventional building materials, or perhaps more importantly, the settler could not afford to buy them. However, the prairie sod made an excellent substitute. Brush and poles cut from trees on the property served for the roof structure. The very fortunate home builder might be able to acquire glass for window panes.

Interior finishes were as crude as the exterior, but lace curtains or an elegant chest from another home often helped make the soddy more home-like.

Three sod structures in Western Oklahoma are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. As the houses were intended for only temporary use, it is quite unusual to find any remaining intact. The Lane Cabin, Marshall McCulley's Sod House, and the Page Soddy all remain because of preservation measures (planned or inadvertent).

James Lane, a cowboy in "No Man's Land," built a sod building in an "L" shape for his home and trading post. It is located in Beaver City and was completed ca. 1880. Years later ad-

ditions were made to it. However, the original sod structure can still be detected. It was stuccoed, but now there is a distinct color difference giving away the position of the original sod building.

As Oklahoma was opened little by little to Euro-American settlement, thousands of newcomers found themselves on 160-acre tracts of land far from supply points and without much timber. Marshall McCully made the run on December 16, 1893 into the Cherokee Outlet and established claim to land near Cleo Springs. He constructed a sod house consisting of two rooms. The McCully family lived in the dwelling from 1894 until 1909 and then built a frame house, a pattern that was commonplace. The soddy was relegated to the status of a storage building. The locations of the new house and a large elm tree are probably responsible for protection of the McCulley soddy. In 1963 the property was transferred to the Oklahoma Historical Society. Some restoration work was done, and a metal protective structure was built over it. Today, the soddy is open to the public.

A most unusual sod house is located near Buffalo. In 1902 William Shaw



*The Ferguson Home in Watonga, the home of one of the Oklahoma Territorial Governors, today is a public museum.*

bought a relinquishment in the Cherokee Outlet. He constructed a sod house, but it had several departures from the typical design. It had a hipped roof covered with wood shingles. Both the interior and exterior walls were plastered. The plastering of the exterior walls at the time of construction accounts for the fact that it

did not significantly deteriorate over the years. Cap Page purchased the property in 1912. He and his family continued to use the soddy even after a frame house was built. It served as extra sleeping space, and in times of severe weather, it provided a storm shelter.

While the soddies were generally very crude in appearance and designed only as temporary shelters, the inhabitants made them as comfortable as possible. The interiors often had plastered or papered walls (using newspaper pages). Furnishings were sparse. But often a bed or chest was brought from the former home to help make the dark little earthen structure seem more like home. Packing boxes and scraps of wood were used to construct makeshift chairs, cabinets, and other pieces. Thick walls and only a few small windows made the interiors dark. Leaky roofs were almost always a problem, but the sod roofs did offer protection from the extreme temperatures of a Western Oklahoma summer or winter.

In August 1901, the Kiowa-Comanche lands were opened for settlement. Instead of the chaotic "run" a giant lottery was held to distribute



*The Mahoney-Clark House will serve non-profit organizations in Lawton when restoration is completed.*

the homesteads. The right to select the second piece of land was won by Mattie Beal, a young telephone operator from Wichita, Kansas. Demonstrating a real business sense, she selected 160 acres of land a quarter mile south of the boundary for the townsite of Lawton. She gained approval to auction off town lots prior to "proving up" her claim. She created the first subdivision for the city. During the early years in Lawton she lived in a two-room frame house. By statehood, she and her husband, Charles Warren Payne, could well afford a substantial house. At 5th Street and Smith Avenue, they had their Colonial Revival style home constructed. The fourteen-room mansion was one of the most elegant homes of Western Oklahoma. Today it is owned by the Lawton Heritage Association and is a house museum.

After the Civil War ended, the range cattle industry boomed on the Great Plains. Large herds of Texas cattle were driven across Indian Territory to railroad connections in Kansas. As homesteaders began drifting onto the Plains and establishing claims to choice pieces of land, the open range dwindled. Thus Indian Territory attracted the attention of



*The Mattie Beal House entryway is one of the most impressive in Southwestern Oklahoma.*

the large cattle ranchers. Investment groups operated enormous stock raising efforts with capital from the Eastern United States as well as foreign countries. During the 1880's Indian Territory was the scene of a very lucrative cattle industry.

It is difficult to find many intact structures associated with this exciting

chapter of present-day Oklahoma's history. Houses were built for the ranchers and the cowboys, but most of them have long since vanished altogether or been so altered that their historic appearance is gone. A few, however, do remain. Two excellent examples are the CCC Ranch House in the Oklahoma Panhandle and the Cronkite Ranch House situated in Western Blaine County.

In the Oklahoma Panhandle the familiar names of Anchor D. Hitch and CCC all bring to mind images of the cattle industry.

The CCC Ranch Headquarters, including the ranch house and a bunkhouse, is listed in the National Register. The house itself was constructed ca. 1880. It is a modest one-story affair built of a smooth white native stone laid in a running bond pattern. The house faces east toward the Beaver River. It is in almost original condition and is one of the finest remaining symbols of the once flourishing open-range era.

Another historic ranch house still in fine condition is that of William Cronkite. He established his stock-raising enterprise in what is today Western Blaine County. As did many



*The Ferguson House is constructed of small granite cobblestones, a common building material in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge.*



ranchers, when the area was opened to settlement, Cronkite claimed a 160-acre tract of land. Then later he expanded his range by leasing Indian allotments. Much of the land in this part of the territory was unsuited for cultivation and had been selected as the allotments for the Indian tribes. Thus larger ranches developed. Cronkite constructed his unusual house in 1906. North of his headquarters is one of the best-known deposits of gypsum. A part of the Cronkite business included the quarry of the mineral. Materials from this operation were used to make the building blocks for the two-story ranch house. Another house built of this unusual material has been identified in Watonga. The historical association with William Cronkite and the construction method used for his house both make this a very significant structure.

Two other ranch houses located in Southwestern Oklahoma are also of architectural significance. Both houses are now within the boundaries of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. Ben Ferguson, in 1927, and Earl Ingram, in 1928, built houses on their small ranches. During this period, many kinds of structures were built

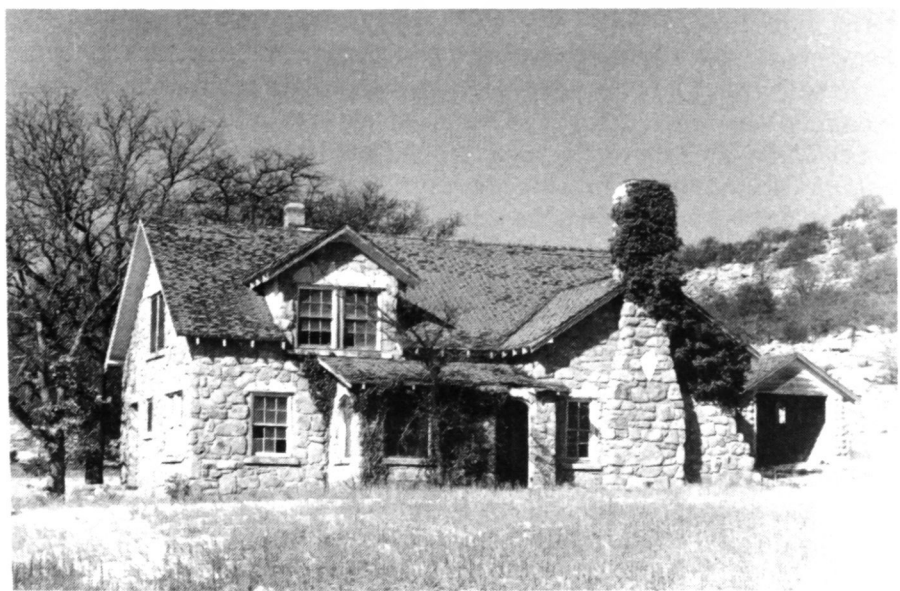


*The Patrick Hurley House is today the residence of Fort Sill's Commanding General.*

with the abundantly available granite. The Ingram House, sometimes referred to as the "Enchanted Cottage," was constructed of granite slabs on the north, south, and west elevations. The east elevation and main facade were built of cobblestones. Found in a wide range of sizes, the stones are round and smooth. Their use resulted

in a very distinctive appearance. Ferguson also used cobblestones. His house has all exterior walls built of the material, as well as a workshop garage adjacent to it. Today, the Fish and Wildlife Department owns the unique structures.

Homes of historically important government officials are found across Oklahoma. Three of these found in Western Oklahoma are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. One of the most architecturally unique is that of Abraham J. Seay, second territorial governor of Oklahoma Territory. Seay was a justice of the territorial Supreme Court, and in 1892 he was appointed to the gubernatorial post. Almost immediately he began construction of the large brick home in Kingfisher. Hopes of Kingfisher citizens were once again raised that by some chance their community might actually become the territorial capital. Of course this was not to be. Seay served in the position of territorial governor for only one year, but his home remains as one of the most impressive in Kingfisher. It was considered quite elegant, complete with a third-floor ballroom. The most interesting feature is the three-stories-



*The Ingram House is one of several old ranch houses in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Comanche County.*

tall domed tower on the northeast corner of the structure. It served as a library and retreat for Seay.

Another home of a territorial governor is located in Watonga, Blaine County. Thompson Benton Ferguson made the "Run of '89" and then later moved to the newly opened Cheyenne and Arapaho lands to establish a newspaper. He and his wife operated the WATONGA REPUBLICAN. In 1901 President Theodore Roosevelt appointed Ferguson the sixth governor of Oklahoma Territory. He served in that capacity until early 1906. In 1901 Ferguson began construction of a three-story frame structure demonstrating elements of the later Victorian period. Both the Ferguson House and the Seay Mansion are property of the Oklahoma Department of Tourism and Recreation and are operated as house museums.

Yet another of these important residences, the Hurley House, is found at Fort Sill. Just to the northwest of what is called the Old Post, construction began in 1909 on the "New Post" area. The Hurley House is an impressive residence in the Spanish Colonial Revival style. It contains over 6,900 square feet and is constructed of reinforced concrete. The exterior walls are stuccoed, and it has a tile roof. Some modifications have been made, but the building still retains its basic original exterior appearance. The quarters has housed numerous U.S. Army dignitaries. But, the most famous person to live in the structure was Patrick J. Hurley. He served as Secretary of War during the Hoover administration. Hurley visited Fort Sill in this capacity and designated it as the U.S. Army's Field Artillery School for Hoover. The Hurley House continues to serve as the residence of the post commander.

We sometimes tend to consider houses as significant only when they are large, elegant homes of well-known persons. Two small cottages have been found in Western Oklahoma that fit into the category of seemingly modest and insignificant. Each is

associated with a person who contributed greatly to the history of our state. The home of Isabel Crawford, a missionary, and the home of Lee Dorrah, a pioneer doctor, are listed in the National Register.

One of the first women missionaries to the Kiowa Indians in Oklahoma was Isabel Crawford. The daughter of Irish parents who had come to live in Canada, Isabel was educated at the American Baptist Missionary Training School in Chicago. Upon graduation in 1893, she came to Indian Territory to run the Saddle Mountain Mission (near present-day Hobart). She served in this way until 1906. At that time she continued to work for the American Baptist Home Mission Society through writing and other organizational activities. Today, the modest plains cottage constructed in 1906 remains as the only known structure associated with Isabel Crawford. She purchased it from her brother in 1916 and owned it until 1941. Many similar houses were once seen all across Western Oklahoma. Because they were quite modest and their significance seldom recognized, most have deteriorated, were altered, or were totally destroyed. The Crawford House, after a careful rehabilitation, retains its historic exterior appearance.

Somewhat larger than the Crawford House, the Dorrah-Trent House located in Hammon was constructed in 1909. Dr. Lee Dorrah came to the small Western Oklahoma community in that year and served the Red Moon Indian Agency as a physician. From that time on he became a strong supporter of the rights of the Cheyenne and Arapaho people. Because of ill health, Dr. Dorrah retired to Southern California in 1925. Today his home can still be seen. It is owned and maintained by the City of Hammon and houses a museum.

The first third of the twentieth century saw tremendous growth in Western Oklahoma, a growth which included the construction of many homes. Several of these were listed in the National Register because they

are a very significant part of the region's architectural history.

Elements of the Victorian and Queen Anne styles were popular for residential structures during this period. A good example of the application of these decorative features is found in the J. H. Wagner House in Watonga. Wagner came to the Cheyenne and Arapaho country just as it opened and established a merchantile in a tent in Watonga. In 1903, having married and become quite successful, he had his elegant three-story home built on North Prouty. Queen Anne influences are very much present. One of the outstanding features is a two-story, eight-sided tower at the northeast corner of the structure. The house has four gables in the roof and a total of fifty-two windows. Efforts to preserve this unique Watonga home have done much to increase public awareness of the importance of such structures in the community.

Constructed in 1904, the Montgomery-Liman house (home of a local successful merchant) is one of the most impressive in Marlow (Stephens County). Purchased in the 1970's by the Limans, the style of the house is clearly eclectic borrowing from several styles including Victorian, Queen Anne, Western Stick, and Prairie styles.

One of the most unusual residential structures in Lawton is the Mahoney-Clark House located on West Gore Avenue. Architect Guy Dale designed this Spanish Colonial Revival style structure, and the builder was Walter Spitler. The house was constructed in 1909 and was originally designed as a duplex. Only a few years ago the house was a target for demolition. However, the concern of several citizen groups for this unusual building has resulted in its preservation. In cooperation with the Clark family, restoration efforts by the Lawton Heritage Association are underway.

Yet another architecturally significant house constructed in 1911 is found in Buffalo, Harper County. About the time of statehood there was

great concern for building fire-proof commercial and residential structures in that community. The Appletown House, built by a local stone mason, H. A. Monhollon, was constructed of pressed concrete blocks (artificial stone). It is one of the few remaining structures built of this material during the period. It is also well preserved and illustrates the outstanding workmanship of Monhollon.

Unique design is found also in the house of John David Laney and his family, early settlers in present-day Tillman County. After living in a variety of structures, Laney had his one-story farmhouse constructed. It is a folk architecture adaptation of the bungalow style, and it is one of the most unusual houses found in Southwestern Oklahoma. Several kinds of native stone, including granite, were used in the construction. One of the most interesting features is that in each of the gables appears a letter.

The letters spell out "L" "A" "N" "E" "Y". Also, a four-foot-high fence built of stone is found on the property. The structure is truly a personal expression.

Still another architecturally significant house of Western Oklahoma is the Storm House on West Broadway in Elk City, Beckham County. Architect P. A. Engwall designed the house in the Spanish Colonial Revival style. Builder G. E. Martin completed construction of the house in 1930. The structure possesses many of the features characteristic of the architectural style so popular in the period 1915-1945. It has a tile roof and stuccoed exterior walls, for example. A most unusual oriel window (an ornamental bay window located above the first floor level) gives this two-story house a ship-like appearance.

In summary, Western Oklahoma is rich with a variety of residential structures. Design of these significant buildings ranges from the humble sod

house to elaborately decorated two- and three-story, masonry construction houses. Some reflect traditional ideas of design, while others are one-of-a-kind dwellings. We all are curious about older houses as we pass through a community or along a country road. One of the most popular places for tourists to visit is a historic house.

They are of value because they were once associated with persons important in our past or because of their design. Whatever the reason for the identification of certain structures as worthy of preservation, they do represent an irreplaceable historic resource. They tell the story of those who have shaped our history more than almost any other structure or building can. It is essential that such houses as those discussed above be treated sensitively and retained for future generations. ❧

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